

# Monasticism Old and New

Christian Reflection  
A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS

BAYLOR  
UNIVERSITY

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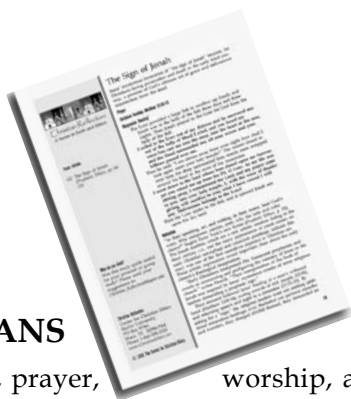
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## STUDY GUIDES & LESSON PLANS

These five study guides integrate Bible study, prayer, worship, and reflection on themes in the *Monasticism Old and New* issue.

### A VISION SO OLD IT LOOKS NEW

It is hard to be a Christian in America today. But that can be good news, the new monastics are discovering. If the cost of discipleship pushes us to go back and listen to Jesus again, it may open us to costly grace and the transformative power of resurrection life. In every era God has raised up new monastics to remind the Church of its true vocation.

### THE FINKENWALDE PROJECT

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's project at Finkenwalde Seminary to recover for congregations the deep Christian tradition is a prominent model for young twenty-first-century Christians. Weary of the false dichotomy between right belief and right practice, they seek the wholeness of discipleship in what Bonhoeffer called "a kind of new monasticism."

### EVANGELICALS AND MONASTICS

Could any two groups of Christians—evangelicals and monastics—be more different? But the New Monasticism movement has opened a new chapter in the relations of these previously estranged groups. Nothing is more characteristic of monastics and evangelicals than their unshakable belief that one cannot be truly spiritual without putting one's faith into practice, and one cannot sustain Christian discipleship without a prayerful spirituality.

### TIES THAT BIND: SHARING A COMMON RULE OF LIFE

If we are going to live the Christ-like life in American society today, then we had better do it as a body or else we will never make it. Yet growing a shared life in Christ out of our frantically busy lives is quite a challenge. How can a common rule of life—a salient feature of monasticism, old and new—help us to covenant with others in Christian community?

### SNAPSHOTS FROM HOME

Through the Benedictine oblate program at Saint Meinrad Archabbey, membership in Reba Place Fellowship, and intensive study in L'Abri Fellowship houses, many Christians are learning new patterns of discipleship in life together. Will their stories of community—snapshots from home—reshape American Christianity?

# Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

**Through the centuries monasticism has offered a powerful critique of mainstream culture. How do the intentional communities of the New Monasticism movement offer transforming possibilities for our discipleship?**

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**B**eing a disciple of Christ—perhaps it is clearer to us today than in recent decades—requires a critical distancing from the dominant culture that none of us can accomplish on our own. So, we hunger to relearn the historic practices of prayer and worship, service and hospitality, spiritual friendship and correction that can mold our hearts and minds in faithfulness, yet we harbor a lingering suspicion of mere tradition, uncritically appropriated. How shall we proceed?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer foresaw our dilemma when he wrote, “The restoration of the church will surely come from a sort of new monasticism which has in common with the old only the uncompromising attitude of a life lived according to the Sermon on the Mount in the following of Christ.” Our contributors explore new social forms of intentional Christian community in the New Monasticism movement, sifting both their continuity with historic monasticism and their transforming possibilities for our discipleship.

In *A Vision So Old It Looks New* (p. 11), Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove explores how monasticism over the centuries has offered a powerful critique of mainstream culture. Tracing its origins from Antony and the fourth-century desert Christians, through the medieval monasteries inspired by Benedict of Nursia, to the intentional communities of radical Protestant Reformers, he shows, “In every era God has raised up new monastics to pledge their allegiance to God alone and remind the Church of its true vocation.”

Ivan Kauffman commends the New Monasticism movement, emerging from the heart of evangelicalism in North America, for helping to restore the relationship between the previously estranged groups in his title, *Evangelicals and Monastics* (p. 26). These two streams of intentional Christianity have many



similarities, he suggests, since “Nothing is more characteristic of monastic and evangelical groups than their unshakable belief that one cannot be truly spiritual without putting one’s faith into practice, and one cannot sustain Christian discipleship without a prayerful spirituality.”

A prominent model for many new monastics is Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s effort in the 1930s to create an intentional community where seminarians could recover the deep Christian tradition, William Samson explains in *The Finkenwalde Project* (p. 19). Weary of the false dichotomy between right belief and right practice, young twenty-first-century Christians are drawn to the life and writings of this martyr who “was fully committed to Jesus, as understood through the Bible interpreted by the Church, and to justice,” Samson writes. “He thought and lived outside of the categories that currently divide Christians into opposing political and theological camps.”

Terry York celebrates the contributions of monasticism to the whole Church in “Gather Now around His Teachings” (p. 41), a new hymn with music by David Bolin. Monastics’ faithful and creative discipleship in community remind us of the “rule of life, to all, life giving: / Christ—the truth, the life, the way.” The worship service (p. 44) by Amber Inscore Essick highlights the centrality of prayer and obedience to God’s leading in monastic experience. Would that we all should answer God’s call to “the desert places of this world”; she prays: “Show us how to seek you in the forgotten places. Lead us to those the world has neglected, and connect us to them in friendship.”

The distinctive and fruitful form of city-planning that emerged within classic monasticism—with every element of space being ordered for beauty and fittingness to the community’s way of life—is the theme of Heidi Hornik’s *Old World Monasteries for New Generations* (p. 52). She examines the St. Gall, Switzerland, ground plan—the oldest surviving complete, but idealized, plan for a monastic community—and explores distinguished examples of a cloister and a chapter house reconstructed in *The Cloisters*, a branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. In *A Queen’s Gift* (p. 60), Hornik describes an exquisite fourteenth-century reliquary shrine given by Queen Elizabeth of Hungary to the Poor Clares convent that she founded to honor the Virgin Mary, “the Queen of heaven.”

In *Ties that Bind: Sharing a Common Rule of Life* (p. 33), Kyle Childress describes the importance of doing Christian life together in community: “If we are going to live the Christ-like life in American society today, then we had better do it as a body or else we will never make it.” That is why he encourages congregations to develop a common life that is articulated in a rule or covenant. Ironically, “a church needs a covenant to better order the communal life of the congregation, but it takes a rich and vibrant communal life to produce a covenant,” Childress notes. “Even more, it takes a good common life to even understand the need for sharing a common rule.”

Three articles reflect on the ways of life in particular Christian communities—St. Meinrad Archabbey, Reba Place Fellowship, and The Landing—to show

us how they provide opportunities for discipleship and patterns of living for local congregations. In *Saint Meinrad Archabbey: Portrait of a Historic Monastic Community* (p. 62), Matthew Mattingly introduces the abbey's extensive Benedictine oblate program for lay persons. "Oblates are living witnesses that centuries-old traditions of monastic prayer, contemplation, and practice can transform the world at a practical level," he observes. Celina Varela's *Reba Place Fellowship: Portrait of a New Monastic Community* (p. 69) explains how members of the oldest urban Christian community in America frame their daily lives around "honest and loving relationships, the full sharing of resources, active witness to God's justice and peace, practical service to those around us, and a visible common life." In *From L'Abri to The Landing* (p. 77), Emily Rodgers relates how a group of Christian friends, inspired in part by L'Abri communities and New Monasticism, are creating an urban house of "true fellowship, peace, storytelling, and ultimately, unity."

As "scholars have reexamined old caricatures of early Christian ascetics and the significance of monasticism in our common past," Warren Smith reports in *Learning from Monks* (p. 83), "they have discovered a resource for contemporary Christians." He reviews three winsome examinations of the fourth-century desert Christians—Roberta Bondi's *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church*, Jason Byassee's *An Introduction to the Desert Fathers*, and Rowan Williams's *Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another*—and two collections of the powerful sayings and stories they inspired—Benedicta Ward's *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* and Laura Swan's *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women*. For a scholarly, yet wonderfully accessible overview of these early monastics, Smith recommends William Harmless's *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*.

In "*We Need Each Other and We Need God*" (p. 88), Elizabeth Sands Wise reviews four introductions to New Monasticism—Scott A. Bessenecker's *The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World's Poor*, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove's *New Monasticism: What It Has to Say to Today's Church*, Jon Stock, Tim Otto, and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove's *Inhabiting the Church: Biblical Wisdom for a New Monasticism*, and *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, edited by Rutba House. These books emphasize not only how the new intentional communities need the Church as a whole, but also how they help it decipher Christ's call to community. "This much is clear: we are not all going to be radicals," Sands Wise concludes from her study of this movement. "But we do have a calling, and as the Church, we need to rethink our very notions of community—how we can support, love, and admit our need for each other as members of Christ's body, how we can 'make a life together, tending to a culture of grace.'" ❖

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# A Vision So Old It Looks New

BY JONATHAN WILSON - HARTGROVE

**It is hard to be a Christian in America today. Yet even if the Church is the dead and broken body of Christ, God can resurrect it. In every era God has raised up new monastics to pledge their allegiance to God alone and remind the Church of its true vocation.**

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**A**lmost everywhere I go these days, people agree that something is wrong in American Christianity. Whether I am talking to Pentecostals or Presbyterians, Democrats or Republicans, Muslim friends or secular neighbors, there seems to be a consensus on this: the church in America is not living up to what it claims to be. Somehow we have lost our way.

Some Christians get defensive when others point out the irony of Crusades fought in the name of the Prince of Peace or anti-gay preachers getting caught for soliciting gay sex. We are a little embarrassed by reports that suggest battered women are at greater risk if they talk to their pastors or that people are more likely to be racist if they are members of a church. But I think we may have reached a point of clarity here at the dawn of a new millennium. It is hard to be a Christian in America.

Much of my generation has grown up with this sense that we are living in a post-Christian era. But I have to admit that I did not. I was raised the son of Southern Baptists in King, North Carolina, one of those last bastions of Christendom between the ever-expanding holes in America's Bible Belt. Born in 1980, I was born again while Reagan was still in the White House. Where I grew up we talked about Jesus like he lived just over the next hill. My people taught me to love Jesus and memorize Scripture, and I did as I was told. By the time I was in high school, I was certain the God had called me to become President of the United States...for Jesus. While still a student

in high school, I made my way to D.C. to work as a page for Strom Thurmond, then President Pro Tempore of the U.S. Senate.

That is where I learned firsthand that it is hard to be Christian in America. Just outside the doors of Union Station, as I was walking to get lunch one day, I saw a man crouched down, holding a Styrofoam cup. He asked if I could spare some change, and I looked at him without saying a word. I remembered what I had heard back in King about how poor folks in the city were lazy and begged money to buy drugs and booze. A country boy in the city, I was dressed in my Sunday best, doing everything I knew to fit in. I did not want to look naïve. So I looked straight through the man and kept walking.

But about the time I stepped through those glass doors into Union Station, I recalled a memory verse from Vacation Bible School. They were the words of Jesus, ringing in my head: "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (Matthew 25:40). If those words were true I had not only just ignored a fellow a human being, I had completely missed the Lord I was trying to serve. In my rush to follow Jesus to the White House, I had almost tripped over him outside Union Station. Following Jesus was not as simple as chasing after my dreams. I began to see that it is hard to be Christian in America.

Yet learning the cost of discipleship turned out to be good news. It opened my eyes to the deeper and truer reality of God's work in the world through Jesus Christ. Yes, it is hard to be a Christian in America. Indeed, the Church we know is fraught with contradictions. But the same God who raised Jesus from the dead is able to restore life-giving warmth to limbs that were frozen in death. Even if the church in America is the dead and broken body of Christ, God can resurrect it.

Throughout the history of God's people, prophetic voices have arisen to remind us that our life depends on the power of resurrection—on God's ability to make dry bones live. This is an ancient vision, though ever new because it calls us to a deeper and truer life in the here and now. Peter Maurin of the Catholic Worker movement used to say that he believed in a vision for society that was "so old it looked like new." Since the third and fourth centuries of the church, monastic movements have served to bring us back to this truth. They show us in fresh and often dramatic ways a vision so old that it looks new.

In his book *The Monastic Impulse*, theologian Walter Capps summarizes the legacy of monastic history. "Monasticism," he says, is the West's "most powerful and enduring instance of counter-culture."<sup>1</sup> When I think counter-cultural, I usually think punk rocker with a nose ring, not nun in a cloister. This is a pretty incredible claim that Capps makes: not only does monasticism last longer, it is also more powerful than any other form of resistance to mainstream society we have seen in the West. If that is true, then the real radicals are not quoting Che Guevara or listening to Rage Against the Machine on their iPods. The true revolutionaries are learning to pray. If Capps is right, they always have been.

## ANTONY AND THE FIRST MONASTICS

When we think about the early church, we often think about how Christians were a persecuted minority, eaten by lions and burnt at the stake by Roman emperors. Even though that kind of persecution was not constant in the early church, it is true that it cost a lot to follow Jesus for most of Christianity's first three centuries. But by the middle of the third century, Christianity had spread to people in power and the world started changing for Christians.

In the midst of this transition, an eighteen-year-old Egyptian Christian named Antony lost both of his parents and suddenly became responsible for his family's household. In 251 AD, after reading Jesus' command to "sell what you have and give it to the poor," Antony gave his parents' land to their neighbors and sold all their possessions. After he had given all the money away, he started trying to figure out what God wanted him to do with his life.

At that time in Egypt there was the occasional hermit who devoted himself to prayer and fasting. Antony made the rounds from one hermit to the next, learning the disciplines of a godly life and developing quite a reputation for holiness, even among his peers. But then something happened to Antony. He started to lose his resolve, to remember the life he had left behind, and to wonder if he was really getting anywhere. When he tried to sleep at night, Antony dreamed of lavish meals and seductive women. He said his mind was filled with "a great dust cloud of considerations."<sup>2</sup>

But Antony continued the prayer and fasting that his mentors had taught him. He cried out to God for help. Then one day he heard a human voice speaking to him. He asked who it was, and the voice answered that he was "the friend of fornication." Antony saw a small, dark demon, and listened to him complain about how Antony had resisted all of his schemes. "From now on," Antony said to him, "you cause me no anxiety, for the Lord is my helper, and I shall look upon my enemies." When he said this, the demon ran away.

Antony's experience with the demon opened his eyes to the spiritual battle that was going on in the third-century world. The devil, he saw, was using the power and favors of the Roman Empire to entice Christians. Though at first they had just seemed like a "dust cloud," Antony realized that these were powers he could not understand, even less resist. Still, if God was his helper, Antony knew he could face the devil and his schemes head on. He

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**"Monasticism," theologian Walter Capps observes, is the West's "most powerful and enduring instance of counter-culture." It has lasted longer and is more powerful than any other form of resistance to mainstream society in the West.**

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could fight on the Lord's side in the battle against evil. And he could do it best, Antony decided, by leaving society and going out into the desert.

"Nearly twenty years he spent in this manner, pursuing the ascetic life by himself," Athanasius says. But somehow word spread about this holy man who had gone off to do battle with the devil. So after twenty years, some of his friends went to find him. They tore the door of his hermitage down and asked Antony to come back to the city with them. Antony agreed, and when he came back to the city he brought the power of God with him. "Through him the Lord healed many of those present who suffered from bodily ailments; others he purged of demons, and to Antony he gave grace in speech. Thus he consoled many who mourned, and others hostile to each other he reconciled in friendship, urging everyone to prefer nothing in the world above the love of Christ." A revival like no one had ever seen swept through the Egyptian church with a power to change lives and renew broken relationships. All the bishops of the church could not have organized such a movement. But the witness of Antony, who trusted the Lord and fought the devil face to face, literally moved thousands to give themselves over to the way of Jesus. "And so, from then on, there were monasteries in the mountains," Athanasius says, "and the desert was made a city by the monks, who left their own people and registered themselves for the citizenship in the heavens."

Thus monasticism was born. During a time when Christianity was transitioning from the persecuted faith of a minority to the state-sponsored religion of the powerful, the monastic impulse drove Desert Abbas and Ammas out into abandoned places to learn God's power by fighting the devil face to face. They helped the Church discover new forms of faithfulness for a new time. But even more than that, they set a precedent for how the Church remembers the power of God when the powers of this world are in transition. They introduced the monastic impulse to relocate and reimagine our role from the margins of society.

### **BENEDICT AND A "SCHOOL FOR THE LORD'S SERVICE"**

By the end of the fourth century, it was clear that the imperial project of Rome had failed. Caesar Augustus had brought the whole Mediterranean world under Rome's power, but the Romans had not been able to figure out a way of life that was sustainable for all those diverse peoples. The sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410 was more traumatic for Romans than September 11, 2001, was for us in America. Afterward there were no illusions that life could go on as before. Europe was in the midst of a social crisis.

Augustine of Hippo wrote *The City of God* at the beginning of the fifth century to argue that Rome had fallen because it was built on the worship of false gods. Christians could continue to make a life in the ruins of the Empire, Augustine said, because they were citizens of another city, a people on their way to God's kingdom. As it turned out, Augustine not only had his theology right, but he described well what would happen throughout

the fifth century. Christian communities sheltered people from the economic fallout of a crumbling Empire and offered the hope of a different kingdom, “on earth as it is in heaven.”

This is the situation that Benedict of Nursia was born into. Though he is now remembered as the father of Western monasticism, we do not know very much about Benedict’s life. We would not know anything at all were it not for the fact that a fellow named Gregory, who became a monk at a monastery that Benedict started in Rome, went on to become Pope Gregory the Great. He wrote a biography of Benedict and, more importantly, held up Benedict’s *Regula*, or *Rule of Life*, as a model for community life. After that, new monastic communities spread across all of Europe.

In his *Rule*, Benedict said that monastic community is to be a “school for the Lord’s service.”<sup>3</sup> In the midst of society, as people struggled to get by in the world, Benedictine communities were to be islands where people could learn a different way of doing life. That way of living was summarized in the Latin phrase *ora et labora*—“to pray and to work.” Benedict’s *Rule* offered a model for communities where people could live a life of prayer together, serving one another and the community around them. They were able, as Gandhi later said, to “be the change they seek” in the world. And through the practice of hospitality, they would welcome others into their life with God.

In our democratic world of supposedly endless possibility, it is hard to imagine the radical alternative that Benedict offered people in the so-called “Dark Ages.” In early European society, there was little to no social mobility. Peasants had children who grew up to be peasants. People with power passed it down to their children. There was no such thing as a middle class. The one long shot at possibly moving up from the lower classes was the military, and this option was only available to men.

But all of this changed when monastic communities started popping up. Benedictine life was literally an alternative society. Rich and poor were treated as equals under the *Rule*, serving one another out of reverence for Christ. What is more, women could choose not to remain in their father’s house or marry into another man’s house. They could choose to share life and even have the possibility to lead in a house of fellow sisters. These little societies within society became like leaven in a lump of dough, creating pockets of freedom where people could imagine alternatives to the violence and grinding poverty of the world around them. As leaven tends to do, they spread among the peoples they touched.

## **PROTESTANT MONASTICISM**

The language of monasticism makes sense to Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. It can sound strange, however, to Protestant ears. Even so, it is no secret to Protestants that the sixteenth-century church in Europe was in serious need of reform. Though it was not happening everywhere, there really were people selling salvation as if it were a commodity. (If you think this was just

a sixteenth-century problem, try watching a little late-night Christian TV.) Protestants often look back to Martin Luther as the herald of true Christian faith to a church that had become corrupt, and there is some truth to that. But we just as often forget that Martin Luther was a monk who learned the gospel he preached from his confessor in a monastery. We forget that much of the so-called Protestant Reformation was driven by the monastic impulse.

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**Much of the Protestant Reformation was driven by the monastic impulse. Nowhere is this clearer than in the radical Reformation that gave rise to Quakers, Shakers, Baptists, Pentecostals, evangelicals, and other radical Christian groups.**

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Nowhere is this clearer than in the Radical Reformation. After Luther's Ninety-Five Theses (1517) stirred up popular disagreement with some of the doctrine and practices of the Catholic Church, some political rulers in Germany found it advantageous to declare their territory Protestant, take control of the church's coffers and landholdings in their jurisdiction, and expand their rule in the name of religious difference. In this way, both

Catholic and Protestant churches were equally state-sponsored institutions. But the Radical Reformation emerged when people within this tumultuous environment insisted that church was really about allegiance to Jesus, not to a Protestant or Catholic ruler. They focused their witness on believer's baptism, thus winning the moniker "Anabaptists" — the re-baptizers.

It is important to note that re-baptism was ultimately about allegiance. In the so-called Christian culture of sixteenth-century Europe, where infants were baptized into church and state citizenship at the same time, the monastic impulse drove some Christians to "give themselves to the Lord" by choosing to go once more under the baptismal waters. At a time when Catholics and Protestants could agree on almost nothing else, they agreed that it was best to kill these Radical Reformers.

Michael Sattler (c. 1490-1527) was one of the Anabaptists who counted the cost and chose a path that would lead to martyrdom. For Sattler, that journey started at St. Peter's in the Black Forest, a Benedictine monastery. There he helped lead a reform movement in the early sixteenth century, calling the brothers to return to the true spirit of Benedict's *Rule*. But Sattler was ultimately dissatisfied with the brothers and left the monastery in search of a new community. He found this among the Anabaptists and cast his lot with them.

Though he only survived for a few years, Sattler was the main author of the seven articles of the *Schleitheim Confession* (1527), a statement of the Radical Reformation's vision that numerous independent groups came to rally around.



In his biography of Sattler, C. Arnold Snyder notes the parallels between the articles and Benedict's *Rule*. What these radicals were calling for, he observes, was voluntary membership in community, a common way of life, the disciplined pursuit of holiness, and leadership elected by the community. In other words, they wanted a church that looked like Benedict's monastery.<sup>4</sup>

Though Protestants have not called their reform movements "monastic," it is worth noting that this impulse has continued through the past five centuries, giving rise to Quakers, Shakers, Baptists, Pentecostals, evangelicals, and all sorts of other radical Christian groups. I am convinced that the most significant new monastic movement in America was the slave church that arose from the "hush harbors" of plantations in the South. In the face of a white Christianity that justified the ownership of black people, black Christians founded an underground community in which holiness was stressed, citizenship in heaven defined allegiance, economic sharing and hospitality were practiced, and church was understood to be "first family," where God alone is Father. For years scholars argued that little could be known about the theology and practice of slave churches because there were no historical documents. But thankfully Albert J. Raboteau saw that the theology of the slave church was in its songs and the practices of its members were recorded in the personal narratives of emancipated slaves from the late nineteenth century. In my book *Free to Be Bound*, I have tried to show how the hope of the church in America depends on us learning from the black church tradition what it means to follow Jesus.<sup>5</sup> I often tell people that I know the black church was born of the monastic impulse because the folks at our church in Walltown call one another brother and sister, just like they always have in monasteries.

## **GETTING BACK TO OUR ROOTS**

Trying to sum up the history of monasticism, I feel like the author of Hebrews, who came to the end of the roll call of faith and asked, "What more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of..." (Hebrews 11:32). I do not have time to write about Francis and Clare of Assisi, Patrick of Ireland, Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Ignatius of Loyola, the Waldensians, the Brethren of the Common Life, the Pietists, and the Puritans, just to name a few. I do hope, however, that by putting a few of monasticism's best known stories into context, we can begin to get a sense of the story we find ourselves in. In the history of the Church, it is nothing new to look around and find our institutions severely compromised. Ours is a tragic story.

But it is also a story of hope. In every era God has raised up new monastics to pledge their allegiance to God alone and remind the Church of its true vocation. These people have not been perfect. Like the Apostle Paul, they often considered themselves chief among sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). But, one way or another, they found hope in the story of God's people and strove to get back to the roots of that story. For this they were often called radicals

(*radix* is Latin for “root”). Sometimes they were even killed. But they knew the life they found in Christ was worth more than anything else this world could offer.

These saints who have called us back to our roots generation after generation remind us that the roots of God’s kingdom are rhizomes. They spread beneath the surface, effecting change from below. It is a quiet revolution — one that is often ignored by the newspapers and usually missed by the historians. But, in the end, it is how God plans to save the world. Like the rhizome called kudzu that covers so much of the South where I live, God’s kingdom just won’t go away. It is, as the book of Daniel says, a mountain that grows to fill the whole earth (Daniel 2:35).

Yes, it is hard to be a Christian in America. But even that can be good news. If the cost of discipleship pushes us to go back and listen to Jesus again, it may just open us to costly grace and the transformative power of resurrection life. With God, all things are possible. May we slip God’s kingdom in the cracks of this world’s broken systems. And may it spread like kudzu.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

1 Walter H. Capps, *The Monastic Impulse* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 7.

2 We know Antony’s story because Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, visited him and wrote a “life of Antony.” This quote and all others are taken from *Athanasius: The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellus*, translated by Robert Gregg, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), 32-43.

3 Timothy Fry, O.S.B., “Preface,” *The Rule of St. Benedict in English* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981), 12.

4 C. Arnold Snyder, *The Life and Thought of Michael Sattler*, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984).

5 Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Free to Be Bound: Church beyond the Color Line* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2008).

6 This article is adapted from Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism: What It Has to Say to Today’s Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008). For more information, see [jonathanwilsonhartgrove.com](http://jonathanwilsonhartgrove.com).



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# The Finkenwalde Project

BY WILLIAM SAMSON

**Dietrich Bonhoeffer's project at Finkenwalde Seminary to recover for congregations the deep Christian tradition is a prominent model for young twenty-first-century Christians. Weary of the false dichotomy between right belief and right practice, they seek the wholeness of discipleship in "a kind of new monasticism."**

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**A**s he was helping to shape the radical community at Finkenwalde Seminary, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his older brother Karl-Friedrich, "The restoration of the church will surely come from a sort of new monasticism which has in common with the old only the uncompromising attitude of a life lived according to the Sermon on the Mount in the following of Christ. I believe it is now time to call people to this."<sup>1</sup> These words remain true today.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) stands as one of the great saints of the Church in recent memory, a saint who died at the hands of the Nazi government. One of his crimes, it would seem, was the formation of a community that sought to live out his conception of a *new monasticism*. To understand what he meant by that, it is helpful to briefly revisit his life.

Bonhoeffer did not come from a religious family, and church attendance was not a significant component in his formative years. Indeed, nothing in his family background indicates the kind of pioneering Christian life he would later lead. However, clues to his radical turn can be found in his academic life.

After studying philosophy for a year at the University of Tübingen, the young Bonhoeffer traveled to Rome where he became convinced that the Christian Church was bigger and broader than what he had known. In a letter to his parents he describes how "the Protestant church often seems like a small sect" when compared to the Roman Catholic Church with its richer

liturgy and community life more integrated with the society.<sup>2</sup>

Returning to study theology at the University of Berlin, Bonhoeffer encountered important debates about the relationship of theology to social practice. Adolf von Harnack, one of his professors at Berlin, and Walter Rauschenbusch in America were advocating for a social gospel, a conception of Christianity that was less bound to doctrinal purity and more closely connected to Christ-like practice. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth, by contrast, chose a fidelity to notions of truth as revealed in Scripture over the practical fidelity advocated by Harnack. Barth's rejection of the more liberal theology was due, at least in part, to Harnack's early support of the German aggression in the First World War. Although he leaned more heavily in the direction of Barth, especially with regard to Barth's conception of grace balanced against the justice of God, Bonhoeffer's writings and life would convey a deepening desire to be faithful in both practice and orthodox doctrine.

For example, in *Sanctorum Communio* (or, *Communion of Saints*), his dissertation completed at Berlin at the age of twenty-one, he relies heavily on sociology to argue that our conceptions of God, especially as revealed through Christ and the Holy Spirit, should shape our view of the Church. In this work he refers to the Church as "the physical manifestation of Christ on earth" and "Christ existing as church-community."<sup>3</sup>

Bonhoeffer continued to work out some of the sociological and philosophical issues raised by conceptions of God in his second dissertation (which qualified him to teach at the University of Berlin) and in his postgraduate work at Union Theological Seminary in New York. During his time in New York he was exposed to the spirituality of the African American church and came to love its spiritual songs. Upon his return to Germany, he became deeply involved in global ecumenical conversations. During this time as he reflected on the character of God, Bonhoeffer began to recognize the need for the Church to directly engage the great issues of the day. But, it was not until the Nazi Party came to power with the majority support of German Protestants that he moved from radical academics to radical action.

### **A SECRET SEMINARY**

The Nazis quickly exercised their power over congregations. They created a new national church, the German Evangelical Church, prohibited Jewish and non-Aryan clergy, sought to purge all non-German elements from the liturgy, and even went so far as to remove the Old Testament from the Bible. Bonhoeffer was particularly troubled by the theological implications of Nazi control: by seeking control over every aspect of the German church, the regime took on an authority that rightly belongs to God. With a group of leaders from a federation of Confessing Churches that opposed the Nazis, Bonhoeffer helped to develop the *Barmen Declaration* (1934). This influential statement of faith, written largely by Karl Barth, declares that the Church is not "an organ of the state."<sup>4</sup>

Bonhoeffer did not naturally gravitate to the fight for the purity of the German church in light of the Nazi takeover. After the *Barmen Declaration*, he left his homeland to lead a German-speaking congregation in London, a time he would later refer to as his “time in the desert.” His work with the ecumenical movement strengthened during this time, and he received an invitation to study nonviolence with Gandhi. But this was not to be.

The Confessing Church realized that the weak response of many German congregations to Hitler signaled the need for a new generation of church leaders. These new pastors must be trained not only in orthodox doctrine, but also in orthodox practices that respond to Jesus’ call for disciples to “deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23b). Thus, in 1935 the Confessing Church created an underground school, Finkenwalde Seminary, and invited the still-young Dietrich Bonhoeffer to be its first director. In accepting the position, he chose equipping the church in Germany over training in nonviolence from Gandhi.

The concept of “a sort of new monasticism” took form during the first months in the new seminary community. We glimpse an important component of Bonhoeffer’s emerging thought in *Discipleship*, which he wrote during the two years Finkenwalde operated. In this work he contrasts cheap grace and costly grace. Cheap grace “is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross.” Costly grace is the grace of the gospel: it costs people their lives. “Nothing can be cheap to us,” he emphasizes, “which is costly to God.”<sup>5</sup>

The creation of Finkenwalde Seminary and the outworking of Bonhoeffer’s new monasticism can be seen as rebuilding the church from the ground up. The German Evangelical Church was by this point a subsidiary of the Nazi regime. It could provide no assistance to Finkenwalde and the work of the young, confessing churches. Consequently, the new seminarians could not simply study Scripture – although all accounts indicate it was a place of academic rigor – they had to physically construct the school’s buildings. In this training ground to “take the Sermon on the Mount seriously,” students and faculty engaged their hands as well as their minds in the service of the gospel.

Other distinctive features of the school reflect the direction of Bonhoeffer’s thought about the intersection of belief and practice in the new monasticism. For instance, rather than accepting the more formal title of *Herr Director*, he chose to be called *Brother Bonhoeffer*. “Blessed are the meek” (Matthew 5:5).

Like the classic monastic orders, Finkenwalde developed a strong musical tradition. In addition to teaching members the great hymns of the Church, Bonhoeffer mixed in the African American spirituals he had learned in Harlem. Reportedly he possessed a whole stack of recordings of spirituals from his time in New York, treasuring this music as a link between the oppression of African Americans and the oppression of the Jews. Thus, even the choice of music helped the seminarians to link belief and practice. While many in the confessing churches remained silent as the oppression of the Jews steadily increased, Bonhoeffer sought to bring the seminary into soli-

darity with the suffering of the Jewish people. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” or justice (Matthew 5:6).<sup>6</sup>

Finkenwalde lived on the contributions of the community. The resources of the official state church were not available to the Confessing Church. Built into the project of training new pastors for the work of the gospel was the notion of being “poor in spirit” as well as poor in pocket (Matthew 5:3; cf. Luke 6:20).

Seminarians appreciated the power and conviction of Bonhoeffer’s preaching, for “He was caught by what he was saying,” as one observer noted years later.<sup>7</sup> His genuine passion for the gospel moved beyond academics and toward a holistic, integrated connection between heart and mind. He truly desired to be caught up in the grace of Christ, a costly grace that would eventually claim his life and the lives of students at Finkenwalde.

The Gestapo, the secret state police, finally closed the seminary in September of 1937. Fearing the radical gospel advocated at Finkenwalde, the Chief of German Police Heinrich Himmler declared the seminary illegal and arrested more than two dozen of its former students. Bonhoeffer was arrested in 1943 and executed in 1945, a few weeks before the end of the war. He was only thirty-nine years old.

## **A MODEL FOR THE NEW MONASTICS**

The Finkenwalde Seminary’s project to recover for congregations the deep and rich Christian tradition is not a remote historical event with little bearing on the life of faith today. Rather, it serves as a prominent model for an increasing number of young twenty-first-century Christians who are motivated by the same impulses as those German seminarians. I have in mind the wonderful members of The Simple Way in Philadelphia, headed by Shane Claiborne, Rutba House in Durham, North Carolina, headed by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Camden House in Camden, New Jersey, headed by Chris and Cassie Haw, as three examples of this movement toward a new monasticism. The similarity of these small but growing Christian communities to Finkenwalde Seminary is due, in part, to the fact that they are engaged in similar debates about Christian belief and practice, and participation in the public sphere. These young contemporary Christians, like the seminarians at Finkenwalde, have grown weary of the false dichotomy between orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right practice); they seek the wholeness and integrity of Christian faith and practice in a kind of new monasticism.

They resist their Christian friends today – on the right of current political and theological spectrums – who would have them cleave to orthodoxy with little regard for the orthopraxy of the Church. For without that deep longing of the Church to “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” or justice, how will congregations serve as the “hermeneutic of the gospel” in our culture? How will they interpret for our day the story of the Christ who calls us to transcend categories of race, ethnicity, and gender?<sup>8</sup>

They also resist Christian friends—on the political and theological left—who embrace a social gospel that has, over time, lost touch with the rich theological heart of the Christian message. Certainly, when social action is understood through and motivated by the orthodox witness of the Church, congregations can engage the culture in response to Christ’s call to lay down our lives. But when they lose this theological foundation, how will they maintain their commitment to live in radical service to others?

This is where the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is so helpful in the contemporary conversation. He did not see a divide between social justice and fidelity to Scripture. Under the influence of Karl Barth, Bonhoeffer was fully committed to Jesus, as understood through the Bible interpreted by the Church, and to justice. He thought and lived outside of the categories that currently divide Christians into opposing political and theological camps. He did not check out from the hard work of redeeming society. Neither did he bless activities that clearly violated Christ’s call to justice. He believed the Sermon on the Mount was not given to make us feel incapable, but to inspire us to respond redemptively to the inherent conflicts brought about by society. For him and the Finkenwalde seminarians, the Sermon on the Mount articulated a way of life together that is a very real goal for the Christ-follower.

The evidence linking the Confessing Church and the New Monastic movement is striking. Martin Niemöller (1892-1984), a leading pastor in the Confessing Church, preached a sermon entitled “God is my Führer” (1940), in which he advanced the claim

that God is never content to be a subject under the control of any human nation-state. In a similar fashion, Shane Claiborne, Chris Haw, and friends launched the *Jesus for President* tour in the summer of 2008. In a veggie-grease powered bus they drove to twenty-one cities across the United States to advance the dream of “a world with no kings (or presidents) but Jesus.”<sup>9</sup>

Just as Bonhoeffer’s discipleship was informed by his visits to Rome, Harlem, and London, so these new monastics’ views are being shaped by their experiences of the global church. Shane Claiborne’s internship with Mother Teresa continues to be a major factor in his thinking about the formation of Christian communities.<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove’s visit to war-torn Iraq deeply influenced his desire to create an intentional community in which to live out the principles

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**Bonhoeffer was fully committed to Jesus, as understood through the Bible interpreted by the Church, and to justice. He thought and lived outside of the categories that currently divide Christians into opposing political and theological camps.**

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of nonviolent engagement informed by the model of Christ. The name of his community, Rutba House, pays homage to the radical grace that he and other members of a Christian Peacemaker Team received from an Iraqi physician in Rutba, Iraq.<sup>11</sup>

Often the founders of the new monastic communities are reflective scholars, like Bonhoeffer. Wilson-Hartgrove is a bright young academic who could have made a name for himself in higher education. Haw is a part-time academic who also chooses to engage in carpentry, pottery, and other community-based activities. And Claiborne, a star pupil of Tony Campolo at Eastern University, could easily have followed Campolo's lead into the classroom. Yet each has chosen to have their primary identity connected with their community, much like Bonhoeffer decided to dive headlong into the Finkenwalde project.

And, finally, Finkenwalde Seminary can be seen as the inspiration for the School(s) for Conversion founded by Wilson-Hartgrove.<sup>12</sup> Traveling across the country and being held in congregations and communities that identify with the ideals of New Monasticism, School(s) for Conversion successfully involve a variety of Christ-followers in exploring the relationship of New Monasticism to the orthodox mission of the Church and discovering ways of practical faithfulness that integrate a group's commitments to the Church and to service in their local context. The new monastic spirit is popping up in some quite surprising places. Englewood Christian Church in Indianapolis, Indiana, is just such an example. This over one-hundred-year-old inner-city congregation was once one of the largest in America. After suffering from urban flight in the 1970s and 80s, it responded by developing a new monastic community that operates as a pod within the larger congregation. The community's ministries include the nonprofit Englewood Community Development Corporation and shared living arrangements, with common growing space for community gardens and beekeeping. Despite these changes, the congregation maintains its historic commitment to its Christian denomination and the larger Church.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, it is worth noting the number of people who are reading the works of new monastic leaders.<sup>14</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*, a theological account of the daily life in the seminary at Finkenwalde, is a minor classic of this genre.<sup>15</sup> The books by Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Chris Haw, and others are influencing a broad group of people, some of whom are pastors simply asking how they can stay committed to orthodoxy within congregations in North America that seem so deeply accommodated to the broader culture.

New Monasticism, from its earlier manifestation at Finkenwalde to the present experiments across North America, holds the great possibility of equipping the Church to move beyond the divide that exists between fidelity to belief and fidelity to practice. Time alone will prove the permanent shape this movement will take within the body of Christ.



## NOTES

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Letter to Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer (January 14, 1935)," in Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, eds., *A Testament of Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, revised edition (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 423-424, here citing 424.

2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "To His Parents (Holy Saturday, April 19 [1924])," in *The Young Bonhoeffer: 1918-1927*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 9 (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003), 110-111, here citing 111.

3 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 1 (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1998).

4 The *Theological Declaration of Barmen* is available online at [www.sacred-texts.com/chr/barmen.htm](http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/barmen.htm) (accessed May 7, 2010).

5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4 (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001), 44-45.

6 *Dikaiosunē*, the Greek word translated "righteousness" in this beatitude, is often translated "justice" or "right order" in ancient literature.

7 For a collection of Bonhoeffer's most memorable sermons of this era in the recollection of seminarians, family members, and friends, see Kelly and Nelson, eds., *A Testament of Freedom*, 252-302.

8 The missionary writer Lesslie Newbigin coins this phrase in "The Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel," in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987), 222-231.

9 Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw tell the story of this tour in *Jesus for President: Politics for Ordinary Radicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), and online at [www.jesusforpresident.org](http://www.jesusforpresident.org).

10 Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006).

11 Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove has told the story of Rutba often. See, for instance, his article "Beatitudes in the Desert," *The Sermon on the Mount*, Christian Reflection, 26 (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2008), 60-67. Available online at [www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws).

12 For more information, see *School(s) For Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, ed. by The Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005), and the Web site [www.newmonasticism.org](http://www.newmonasticism.org).

13 For more information about this historic congregation, see [www.inglewoodcc.com](http://www.inglewoodcc.com).

14 Particularly noteworthy is the book series, *The New Monastic Library: Resources for Radical Discipleship*, launched in 2005 by Cascade Books, an imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. For a current list of books in this series, see [www.wipfandstock.com/cascade\\_books](http://www.wipfandstock.com/cascade_books).

15 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 5 (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1996).



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# Evangelicals and Monastics

BY IVAN J. KAUFFMAN

**At first the connection seems far-fetched. Could any two groups of Christians—evangelicals and monastics—be more different? But the New Monasticism movement has opened a new chapter in the relations of these previously estranged groups.**

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**A**t first the connection seems far-fetched. Could any two groups of Christians be more different? Evangelicals have their origins in the Protestant Reformation; Catholic and Orthodox monks have their origins in the pre-Reformation medieval era. Monks live lives of ordered submission to established tradition; evangelicals live their lives devoted to more individual pursuits, always open to the new. But the New Monasticism movement has opened a new chapter in the relations of these previously estranged groups.

On the one hand the New Monasticism movement has emerged from the very heart of the American evangelical community. But on the other hand it is, as its name indicates, deeply connected to the pre-Reformation monastic movement, and to roots that reach back to the very earliest centuries of Christianity.

For me this connection is a deeply personal one. I grew up in the evangelical community in the 1940s and 50s. My father was a revivalist, as were many of his friends and colleagues who were constantly in and out of our home. We were part of a Mennonite community that was just emerging from an Amish past, but our theology and beliefs were evangelical. Our leaders had been trained in Baptist seminaries.

But there was something different about us. As my wife has often said, “The house you lived in, the job you had, the clothes you wore, the car you drove, all were determined by the church you belonged to.” I have often told my non-Mennonite friends that it was like growing up in a non-celibate Protestant monastery.

So when Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove invited me to write a short history of the monastic movement for the New Monastic Library being published by Cascade Books I was glad to accept.<sup>†</sup> For more than forty-five years I had researched and studied evangelical origins, and this convinced me that there is a larger pattern in church history which we miss by studying only one Christian community at a time. We have come to know a great deal about the individual trees, but we have missed the forest they grow in.



What this lifetime of historical research and reflection has taught me is to see Christianity as a whole. That is the way Christ sees, I am convinced. I have come to believe Christ sees the many churches based on his life and teachings as a very large forest, extending through two thousand years of history, and now covering the entire globe – more thickly in some places than others, but nonetheless now present in some way everywhere.

Flowing through this forest is a very wide river, one that constantly grows wider as it flows toward its destination. On one side of the river Christians have erected large hierarchical institutions, and equally large and powerful buildings to house them. This I have suggested we might call the institutional church. Historically its center has been in Rome and Constantinople.

On the other side of the river Christians have formed what we might call communities of intentional Christians. These communities are equally as Christian as the much larger and more powerful communities on the other side, but they are very different. Rather than being governed by hierarchies, they are self-governing. Rather than including everyone in their boundaries, they include only those who have voluntarily chosen to join. And rather than being defined by past tradition, they are governed by their members' religious experiences and their study of Scripture.

These communities of intentional Christians are in turn divided into two rather different groups. One is celibate, what we refer to as monastic, and the other is formed by married persons with families, what we have come to call intentional evangelical communities.

The story of the Christian monastic communities has been told by historians, and although there is much still to be learned, that story is well known and available to anyone. The story of the non-celibate evangelical communities, however, has been studied by few historians – most of them unfriendly and disapproving of these communities. The result has been a rather serious blind spot in our understanding of our common past.

This blind spot is not something that matters only to a few historians. It matters to all Christians because these small intentional communities have played a profound, formative role in making the Christian community what it is today. If we erase them from our memory we rob ourselves of important information we need to move into the future.

These intentional Christians have been those who throughout history have asked not “What must I do to be a Christian?” but “How can I be more Christian?” Although only a small percentage of Christians have asked that question, especially after Christianity became the dominant religion in Europe, these persons and the communities they have formed have influenced the development of Western civilization to an extent completely out of proportion to their numbers.

Up until the Reformation, celibate monastic communities had the greatest impact. They were the people who converted the pagan inhabitants of Europe to Christianity. They were the people who copied the Scriptures, and kept the learning of the past alive. They were the people who founded schools and hospitals. And they were the people who introduced the basic principles of democracy into society by electing their own leaders. They were the people who made manual labor respectable by including it in their daily lives. They were the people who taught us the meaning of time, by living disciplined lives governed by a schedule, and by inventing the clock that made such lives possible. Even the beginnings of the modern business corporation can be traced back to the medieval monasteries. Our whole way of life depends on things we now take for granted, things that were first introduced into society by the pre-Reformation monastic communities – especially the Benedictine monastic communities.

After the Reformation, the lay evangelical communities have been the great innovative force in Western civilization. These are the persons who wanted to go all the way, whatever the cost, who wanted to live as the apostles and the early Christians had – completely committed to following Christ in daily life, without compromise. These are the people whose stories I have studied, and in the process I have become convinced they are the ones who invented the future. They were the prophetic minority that opened the way forward into the world we now live in – a very different world than the one our ancestors lived in five hundred years ago.

Perhaps the greatest contribution these communities have made is evangelism. Wherever and whenever we encounter evangelicals, from the first century to the twenty-first, we find them preaching. We first find them traveling throughout the Roman Empire preaching wherever people would listen to them. In the centuries following we find them preaching to the indigenous peoples of northern Europe, once again wherever and whenever they could gather a crowd. In the medieval era we find them preaching in the churches – until they are expelled from the pulpit, and then we find them preaching in the streets, in the marketplaces, in the fields and in homes, in jails and in taverns. After the Reformation we find them preaching to huge crowds in the open fields.

To this day the vast majority of persons who enter the Christian community from outside do so through the efforts of evangelical Christians. This fact requires members of the institutional churches to ask who would

make membership in the Christian community possible for those now outside its boundaries if members of the evangelical churches did not do so? And, it forces all members of Western societies to ask what would have happened if the Christian community had not developed in a way that included persons from all social groups and all economic classes? Would our civilization have come to hold the egalitarian values that now characterize it if we had not learned those values from evangelical communities?

On the same level of importance is the role that evangelical communities have played in making the Scriptures available to everyone. This effort goes back to the centuries before the Reformation when the Waldensians in France, the Lollards in England, and the Brethren of the Common Life in the Netherlands first took steps to rescue the Scriptures from the clericalism of the priestly establishment. This devotion to the Scriptures has had an impact far beyond the religious realm. The increase in literacy that it has produced, and the empowerment of the Christian laity that has resulted from it, have both played a major role in the development of Western civilization. The fact that the first book printed with movable type in Europe was an edition of the Bible indicates the role that the demand for affordable copies of the Scriptures has played in the development of today's publishing industry.

Connected to this devotion to Scripture, and a direct result of it, has been a gradual but massive increase in the level of education available to members of Western societies. Throughout history, virtually every evangelical movement has offered education opportunities to people who would otherwise have remained illiterate, especially poor people. Today this process continues throughout the world. Thousands of evangelical Christians, both indigenous and those sent from other nations, are today patiently educating the poorest of the poor – which is often the same group they themselves came from.

We need to remember that the great majority of the most prestigious universities in Europe and the United States were originally founded as seminaries, or as schools intended to educate Christians to read and understand the Scriptures. These include Oxford and Cambridge in England, and Harvard, Yale, and Princeton in the United States.

These great institutions are an example of another major contribution that the evangelical movements have made. Although these movements have typically placed the individual before the communal, they have in fact created large numbers of institutions – many of which are now important parts of the institutional church, as well as secular society. Evangelicals have quite likely produced more institutions per capita than the churches in the institutional tradition. The evangelical institutions tend to be smaller and more voluntary than those in the institutional churches, but what they lack in size or authority is often made up for in vitality and in the commitment of their members.

Finally, the role evangelical communities have played in making social justice and compassion major components of Western civilization is also

greatly underappreciated, both by present-day evangelicals and secular and religious historians. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, evangelical Christians in England took the lead in abolishing slavery. William Wilberforce, an English evangelical and political leader, introduced the first bill in the British Parliament to abolish slavery. A former slave ship captain who was converted and became an evangelical Anglican pastor – the author of *Amazing Grace* – also

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**Nothing is more characteristic of monastic and evangelical groups than their unshakable belief that one cannot be truly spiritual without putting one's faith into practice, and one cannot sustain Christian discipleship without a prayerful spirituality.**

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played a major role in enacting this great monument to human rights. In the United States evangelicals played a similar and equally significant role in the abolition of slavery.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, evangelical Christians were in the forefront of political reform in the United States. An evangelical Christian, William Jennings Bryan, played a major role

in forming the present Democratic Party and in enacting several measures that have been essential to its success, including the direct election of senators and the establishment of an income tax.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s was led by a Baptist pastor, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and will always stand as a monument to the major role that social justice has played in the African American churches, which tend to be overwhelmingly evangelical in their origins.

Equally significant, and equally ignored by most historians, is the role that evangelical Christians have played in the development of democracy. Just as the monastic movement introduced the ideas of elected leadership and elected representative government in the pre-Reformation period, evangelicals have been pioneers in introducing the principle of human rights into the Western political tradition. The exact role that evangelical beliefs regarding religious liberty and freedom of association have played in the development of democracy remains to be explored by historians, but these beliefs have surely played a significant and perhaps decisive role. Only a few highly motivated people will risk their lives, and the well-being of their families, to challenge deeply entrenched social and political structures. Had a significant number of people in Western Europe not been willing to do so in the sixteenth century, it is difficult to imagine how democracy could have emerged as the dominant political belief throughout the Western world. And the people who did so were the evangelical Christians of their time – the Anabaptists of northern Europe and the Puritans of England.



What can we learn from our evangelical past that will enable us to make these same kind of contributions in the conditions we and our children and our grandchildren will experience in the century (and the millennium) just begun? During the more than forty years I have studied these groups, both monastic and evangelical, I have come to the conclusion that there are a few basic features which all these groups have in common and which have permanent relevance.

*A sense of calling:* These people did not ask what would make them popular, but what they believed God, through the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit, was calling them to do.

*A willingness to act without support:* These people did not ask for permission. Since they were motivated by the belief that they were called by a divine power, they began to act immediately. They did things everyone else believed were either impossible or misguided, but which often turned out to be prophetic, and thus beneficial to the entire society.

*A willingness to suffer:* These were people who did not ask what was easy. They asked instead what needed to be done, and were willing to undergo all sorts of pain, ridicule, loneliness, and even outright persecution to get it done.

*Persistence:* Often these persons and their communities' greatest impact has come decades and even centuries later. They did not need to be rewarded by immediate and observable success. Their reward was their sense that they were doing God's will.

*Community formation:* Although these groups always originated in the personal experiences of the individuals who founded them, they usually ended up forming communities that outlasted founding members and thrived later on.

*A combination of spirituality and discipleship:* Nothing is more characteristic of these groups than their unshakable belief that spirituality and discipleship are two sides of a single coin – that one cannot be truly spiritual in the Christian sense without putting one's faith into practice, and that one cannot sustain real Christian discipleship without a deep and prayerful spirituality.

*Culture formation:* Since these groups saw Christianity as a way of life, not merely a formal religion, they eventually became involved in every aspect of human life. As a result, they changed the societies around them, as well as the cultures that transmit the fundamental values of any society.



So long as the gospel is preached, more or less faithfully, there will be those who find themselves wanting to act on what they have heard – who will want to go all the way, who will want to follow Christ without compromise, who will find themselves asking, "What can I do to be a more faithful follower

of Christ? I don't want to hold anything back." Of course, not everyone who hears the gospel proclaimed will ask these questions. But, even those who do not will be challenged by their sisters and brothers in Christ who do ask and will become better Christians by being challenged by their more fervent fellow believers.

Just as we all sing better when led by someone whose musical gifts are greater than our own, and who has spent years learning and practicing, so we find our sense of what it means to be a Christian enriched when we see other Christians living at levels of discipleship and spirituality that we had not thought possible. Many of us have heard the question, "If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" and wondered secretly what the answer would be. And so, when we see other Christians living at a higher degree of intentionality than we had thought possible we react with hope. "If they can, why can't we?" we ask.

There is a reason there are Christian communities on both sides of the river, this river of grace which feeds us all. We need large institutional churches because the vast majority of Christians will not be able to live highly intentional lives. And we need celibate monasteries both to keep us connected to our pre-Reformation heritage and to provide an honored place for those not called to marriage.

Above all we need something that does not now exist – places where those called to greater intentionality can connect with others who have received the same call, and where together they can give each other the support needed to carry out that call.

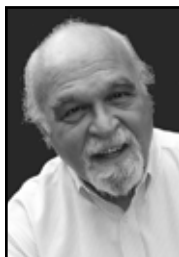
My experience writing *Follow Me* was one of great grace, and when I neared the end these words came to me. I share them with all my fellow Christians, of all traditions, as my deepest conviction:

The Church needs its Evangelicals.  
The Evangelicals need their Church.  
The world needs both.

## NOTE

† Ivan J. Kauffman, *Follow Me: A History of Christian Intentionality*, New Monastic Library: Resources for Radical Discipleship (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009). This article is adapted from my book.

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### IVAN J. KAUFFMAN

*a co-founder of the grassroots Mennonite/Catholic dialogue, Bridgefolk, lives in Washington, D.C.*



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# Ties that Bind: Sharing a Common Rule of Life

BY KYLE CHILDRESS

**If we are going to live the Christ-like life in American society today, then we had better do it as a body or else we will never make it. Yet growing a shared life in Christ out of our frantically busy lives is quite a challenge.**

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**I**n September 2005, Hurricane Rita blew through east Texas about a month after Hurricane Katrina had blown through New Orleans and Mississippi. The 30,000 population of Nacogdoches swelled to 45,000 with the evacuees from Houston and the lower Texas Gulf Coast. The storm did not hit us as hard as had been feared, but most of Nacogdoches was without power due to all the downed trees and limbs and debris. One of the first places to have power restored was our church building, so it naturally became a central clearing-house for our church work crews going out sawing limbs and clearing debris.

We were already housing several evacuee families and it was not long before members of the congregation moved in as well. Probably thirty to thirty-five folks moved into the church building while another twenty-five or so cleaned out their refrigerators and freezers and brought the food to the church for us to share common meals. During the day, some church members hosted the evacuee families or did child care while others did debris clean-up or volunteered at one of the other evacuee shelters in town. At the end of the day, folks would shower at home and then gather at the church for extraordinary shared meals of trout, chicken cordon-bleu, and steaks. Each night after clearing the dishes from the tables and cleaning up, some folks brought out the dominos for games of 42, while others sat around tables and carried on long conversations. You could walk down the hall and peek into a Sunday school room and see fathers reading stories with four or five little boys on pallets; in another room, a bunch of little girls were getting ready for bed. It was a good time of sharing life in Christ.

That is not all I witnessed that week. Later, after most of the people from Houston had left town, I went down to put gas in my car. By this time, the lines were short and I waited behind a man and his wife in their one-ton pickup with a dual-wheel rear-end. Guns were hanging prominently in the truck as they got out. She glared at everyone and kept the door open on the truck with the guns in easy reach, while he proceeded to fill up his two twenty-two-gallon tanks on the pickup and then fill up his many gas cans and two fifty-five-gallon drums in the back-end. I watched them, gave them a wide berth, and I felt a shiver. I was not only looking at American society in microcosm, I was also witnessing what the Church is up against. Here was an apocalyptic moment, when our society's pretense, politeness, and orderliness were blown aside. Clearly, this couple believed they were on their own; they did not need anyone or want anyone to interfere with their individual lives, and they were going to make sure they got what they wanted or needed, by any means, including the use of violence. Meanwhile, down the street was a church full of people who believed that the good life was found in sharing a common life in Jesus Christ.

For most of us, day-to-day experience does not allow us to see or know such widely divergent embodiments of life. The storm heightened the stark differences that are usually muted and covered over by our affluence, busy routines, and focus upon our own individual and family responsibilities. Most of our congregations do not live such a shared life; at the same time, the contrasting life of armed, independent autonomy usually is not so blatantly displayed as by that couple at the gas station. Nevertheless, I believe that the call of Jesus Christ is to a shared and common life in him much like what I saw our local church embody the week following the hurricane. Since it is rare to see local congregations share such a common life, and most church members have no idea such a life exists, much less is desirable, it is imperative that we look around for other glimpses and models of what a common life might look like. One of those places is among the communities of the New Monasticism movement. As a local church pastor I am interested in what the new monastics might teach us.



In *After Virtue* (1981), philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre draws several loose parallels between the current time and the decline of the Roman Empire. "A crucial turning point in that earlier history," he notes, "occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman *imperium* and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that *imperium*." Instead, under the leadership of visionaries like Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-c. 547) and others, they instituted creative new forms of monastic community that would change the face of Europe. MacIntyre concludes his study,

If my account of our moral condition is correct, we ought also to conclude that for some time now we too have reached that turning point. What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time, however, the barbarians are not waiting on the frontiers; they have already been among us for some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St. Benedict.<sup>1</sup>

Over the last three decades Christians in various places around the United States, mostly unbeknownst to one another, reached the conclusion that a new kind of Christianity was needed. They sought a Christian faith that embodied the life of Jesus through intentional community in the places of poverty and blight. Some of these Christians resonated with MacIntyre’s call for a new St. Benedict and formed new monastic communities. The “New Monasticism” name was coined because of the central notion of building an intentional community around a common rule of faith, much like the classic monastic communities built their common life around the *Rule of St. Benedict* or its variations through the centuries.<sup>2</sup>

I am not suggesting that the entire New Monasticism movement was a response to MacIntyre’s analysis of our situation, or that these communities grew at the same time from a common source. But a number of them responded to MacIntyre’s call by interpreting their own intentional community and rule, or covenant, in light of St. Benedict.

Most new monastic communities place themselves within the long and rich Christian tradition stretching from St. Benedict through the sixteenth century Anabaptists and the Amish to pre-World War II groups like the Bruderhof and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s seminary community at Finkenwalde, Germany, and post-World War II communities like Koinonia Farm near Americus, Georgia.

My own journey as a Christian and pastor has been influenced by many of these same groups. I grew up in a conventional county-seat-town First

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**Jesus Christ calls us to a shared and common life in him. Since most church members have no idea such a life exists, much less is desirable, it is imperative that we look for models of what it could be—as in new monastic communities.**

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Baptist Church in west Texas in the 1960s. It was a good church and I am grateful to God for the formation and faith I received in that congregation. I went off to college planning to become a lawyer, but I was called into the ministry along the way and never for a moment doubted that my vocation was to pastor a local congregation. The question was, what kind of local congregation? During these years in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, I kept looking at the witness and work of the African American church while at the same time wondering about the lack of witness and work of the white church. I also began to learn about the Anabaptist movement as well as contemporary intentional communities that were influenced by the Anabaptist and Roman Catholic traditions. I learned about Church of the Savior, formed by Gordon and Mary Cosby in Washington, D.C., in the years following World War II, and Koinonia Farm in Georgia led by Clarence and Florence Jordan. Through reading *The Post-American*, later renamed *Sojourners Magazine*, I learned of the Sojourners community in Washington, D.C., Jubilee Partners in Georgia, and many others. Eventually, I left seminary for a couple of years and moved to Atlanta, Georgia, to work with the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America and live in a small intentional community called the Community of Hospitality that was closely associated with Oakhurst Baptist Church and their ministry with homeless men. It was there that I was introduced to a rule of life.

A rule of life in a Christian intentional community might go by any number of names – rule, covenant, document of commitment, oath, vows, and so on. It usually represents the foundational vision of the community, or identity statement, that all members subscribe and submit to. Whether it is multiple pages in length or can fit on one sheet of paper, it is practice-oriented. It is not confessional, creedal, or doctrinal (for their orientation to right belief, these communities have the historic Christian creeds), but it makes plain how the members live and serve together. The rule describes their roles and responsibilities in the community, including such things as their common commitment to daily prayer and worship, service to the poor, either sharing resources or holding one another accountable for their personal finances, sharing meals together, and often things such as child care, gardening, cooking, and cleaning. Sometimes the rule is read and reaffirmed by members of the community on an annual basis in order to help them remember their identity and calling.

Whenever there is conflict or misunderstanding – and living in close proximity to others, there always is conflict – the rule is part of the conversation among the members. Over time the rule is often clarified or modified with other interpretations and commentaries. What is essential is that the rule is used in service to sharing their common life in Christ and not as a form of domination. Members of an intentional community come together as a joyful response to the call of Christ. The rule is a means to ordering that joy-filled life.



I left the Community of Hospitality to return to seminary and proceed with my vocation of being a local church pastor. It did not take long for me to notice that in Baptist history and polity we had a rich tradition of church covenants that were nothing more than a rule for particular congregations. Under the leadership of Henry Jacob the first Baptist church in England, organized in London, made a covenant in 1616.

Standing together, they joined hands, and solemnly covenanted with each other in the presence of Almighty God: To walk together in all Gods ways and ordinances, according as he had already revealed, or should further make known to them.<sup>3</sup>

Churches like Jacob's that came out of English Puritanism and the Separatist movement practiced congregational forms of church government. Covenant was the "theological dynamic" for separating from the state-established church and the basis for church membership and governance.<sup>4</sup>

Puritan and Baptist colonists brought these ideas of covenant to America. Historian Charles DeWeese says, "New England Baptists were the first Baptists in America to use church covenants." It became common after 1650 for Baptist churches to be organized around covenants; they became the basis for constituting new congregations and receiving new members, and the means for maintaining the integrity of church membership.<sup>5</sup>

These covenants were written by the local congregations and reflected their particular effort to embody the New Testament vocation of following Jesus Christ in that place and time. Like the rule of a monastic community, these covenants were practical, not doctrinal or creedal, and they spelled out the congregation's practices of prayer, service, worship, and education. However, in 1833 the New Hampshire Baptist Convention approved a covenant that was to be

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**The rule of life is not confessional, creedal, or doctrinal (to orient right belief, these new monastic communities have the historic Christian creeds), but it makes plain how the members live and serve together.**

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used as a model for churches writing their own covenants.<sup>6</sup> After modifications, this covenant was published widely in the hymnals and educational materials produced by the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board. By the 1850s, many local congregations adopted this generic covenant, one that was abstracted from the particular location, time, and people making up each local congregation. Ironically, when particular covenants were

removed from local congregations and the denomination sought to standardize churches' covenants, the sense of covenantalism, of a shared common life among the members of a congregation, declined and practically disappeared. This same generic covenant was included in the hymnal of the Baptist church of my childhood. Most members considered it an historical oddity and it certainly made no difference in the life of the congregation.



So how do you integrate the new monastics' insights and use of a rule into a local Baptist congregation? Baptist churches are the heirs to a rich history of covenantal ecclesiology but many are ignorant of it. Interestingly, many Baptist churches can be hostile to the notion of covenants, as well.

I think there is little doubt that most hostility to covenantal ecclesiology, or a common life ordered by a rule, arises from American individualism. Most modern church goers see the congregation as a gathering of individual Christian believers rather than a single body with various members. Individualism is so pervasive that it taints almost everything we say and do in the Church; therefore, almost everything we say or do is an opportunity and challenge to teach about a more communal understanding of who we are and what we do and say.

I remember, early in my present place of ministry, I was teaching on the Lord's Supper (or Holy Communion, the Eucharist). The standard method of receiving the Lord's Supper in our church, like many Baptist churches, had been for the deacons to pass out plates containing individually pre-cut pieces of unleavened bread and trays with individual cups to the seated congregation. I was attempting to get the congregation to come forward to the Communion Table in groups, where they would be served together by the deacons before proceeding back to their seats so the next group of members could come forward. Knowing there was resistance, we were having a dialogue and teaching session. One of the church members spoke up, "When I sit here and receive the Lord's Supper I can block out every one else from view and I can worship the Lord in peace and quiet by myself." I responded that he made my point for me; that was exactly what we wanted to avoid. He still didn't get it.

In our individualized – some would say hyper-individualized – society, to participate in the body of Christ takes extraordinary time and effort. What compounds the difficulty is that people in congregations have less and less time to devote to God and to each other, much less serving others outside of their congregation. Busyness seems to be the number one obstacle in people's lives to following Jesus. In a conventional home (and there are fewer and fewer of those) both parents are working outside of the home for longer hours, while children run from school to soccer to choir to piano practice to baseball. Everyone eats on the run, scattered and separated from one another.

Eventually, when they reach home, they fall exhausted in front of the television before going through it all the next day. Trying to grow a common and shared life in Christ out of such frantically busy lives is quite a challenge.

Even ten years ago in our own congregation there seemed to be more time to build a common life. Some church members did not work outside of the home while others got off work around 5:00 p.m. Many of us would gather for shared meals and coordinate sharing child care; we shared gardening and construction projects, and common ministries. Now more members work outside of the home and they do not get off work until 7:00 or 8:00 p.m. When we call for volunteers for a Saturday work day at a Habitat for Humanity worksite, we find ourselves short-handed because church members are at their regular jobs. Some have to work even on Sundays.

Overcoming such obstacles to grow a common life takes daily teaching and reinforcement, paying attention and making connections, and just plain old persistence. It takes working and serving together in community, sharing meals together in community, and worshipping together in community. But it also takes the willingness to make sacrifices, to simplify our lifestyles, and give up some of our desires and expectations of “having it all.”

Every Sunday for over twenty years we have ended worship with a benediction I first learned from an African American pastor. “Let’s take each other’s hands,” it begins. “Now look who you’re holding hands with, and hold on tight! Because we’re going to need each other this week.”

Several times over these years, church members in unexpected crisis have told me later, “When I first heard the news, I didn’t know what to do or who to call. Then it hit me, who was I holding hands with Sunday? And that is who I called.”

I want my people to think in terms of God and each other, each other and God – that we cannot have one without the other – and to think like this so much that it becomes habitual. It becomes so natural that it is an automatic way of thinking. It becomes instinctive.

Now, there is a very practical aspect to this. If our people are going to live the Christ-like life, then they had better do it as a body or else they will never make it. Lone individuals trying to live faithfully cannot stand against sin, death, the Powers, and the overwhelming pressure of society. Church members, as individuals, are easy pickings for the Powers of Death; they will separate us, isolate us, *dismember* us, pick us off one at a time, and grind us down into the dust. Classic monasticism knew this; old

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**I want my people to think in terms of God and each other, each other and God—that we cannot have one without the other—and to think like this so much that it becomes habitual.**

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Baptist churches that came together in covenant knew this; and New Monasticism knows this.

A new church, like a new intentional community, can put together a common covenant as a foundational document that defines its identity and mission. But a good rule of thumb is that an existing congregation has to grow a community first and let the covenant come out of that. Strange but true, a church needs a covenant to better order the communal life of the congregation, but it takes a rich and vibrant communal life to produce a covenant. Even more, it takes a good common life to even understand the need for sharing a common rule.

## NOTES

1 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 244-245.

2 Jonathan R. Wilson, "Introduction," in *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, edited by The Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005), 1-3.

3 Champlain Burrage, *The Church Covenant Idea, Its Origins and Development* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1904), 79.

4 B. R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition: From the Marian Martyrs to the Pilgrim Fathers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 54-56.

5 Charles W. DeWeese, *The Origin, Development, and Use of Church Covenants in Baptist History* (Ph.D. dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, 1973), 118-122.

6 *Ibid.*, 317.



### KYLE CHILDRESS

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# Gather Now around His Teachings

BY TERRY W. YORK

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Gather now around his teachings,  
gather now around the Word.  
Hear him calling from the margin,  
drawing us to be his own.

Hear the Master's hillside sermon:  
peace and justice, mercy, love.  
Will we let his teachings shape us?  
Will his way become our prayer?

Quiet call heard through the shouting,  
straight his path through culture's maze;  
rule of life, to all, life giving:  
Christ – the truth, the life, the way.

Common bread and wine and water,  
common brother, savior, hope  
bring uncommon transformation,  
changing church to Christ on earth.

# Gather Now around His Teachings

TERRY W. YORK (ASCAP)

G. DAVID BOLIN

Ga - ther now a - round his teach - ings,  
Hear the Mas - ter's hill - side ser - mon:  
Qui - et call heard through the shout - ing,  
Com - mon bread and wine and wa - ter,

3  
ga - ther now a - round the Word.  
peace and jus - tice, mer - cy, love.  
straight his path through cul - ture's maze;  
3  
com - mon bro - ther, sa - vior, hope

5

Hear him call - ing from the mar - gin,  
Will we let his teach - ings shape us?  
rule of life, to all, life giv - ing;  
bring un - com - mon trans - for - ma - tion,

7

draw - ing us to be his own.  
Will his way be - come our prayer?  
Christ - the truth, the life, the way.  
chang - ing church to Christ on earth.

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Tune: TRUETT SEMINARY  
8.7.8.7.

# Worship Service

BY AMBER INSCORE ESSICK

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## *Call to Worship*<sup>1</sup>

Listen, listen, my children! Incline your ears to hear.

**Show us your ways, O Lord.**

Attend to the advice of the one who loves you.

**Teach us your paths, O God.**

There is a path to follow, a work to do,

if you would return to him from whom you have strayed.

**Good and upright are you, O Lord, for you instruct sinners in the way.**

Let us awake, then, for this is the hour to rise from our sleep.

**We open our eyes to the light of God.**

Hear now the sweetest sound, the holy invitation.

**We wait for the voice of the Lord.**

See how the loving God shows us the way of salvation.

**To You, O Lord, we lift up our souls.**

(All) **Show us your ways, O Lord. Amen.**

## *Chiming of the Hour*

## *Silent Meditation*

When the path needs clearing come away;

when a call needs hearing, come away.

Come away with me, to a place where you'll receive

a wisdom that will guide you,

a truth that lives inside you.

Come away with me and rest now, come away.

*Burt L. Burlison*<sup>2</sup>

## *Introit Hymn*

“Come, All Who Bear the Name of Christ”

Come, all who bear the name of Christ,  
the work of prayer is ours to do;  
God’s image borne in each of us  
shines brighter, working to renew.

We praise the Holy Three in One,  
our God, who sits enthroned on high;  
the Lord draws near to hear our praise,  
and moves our hearts t’ward unity.

*Amber Inscore Essick* (2010)

*Tune:* OLD 100TH

## *Prayers of the People*

O God, we are your people. You made us in love, and you sustain us with every good word that comes from your lips. You know our struggles because you have walked in our midst. We are children of weakness, and we need your strength. We stumble through this life until we learn to live by the light of your law. We wander from the path until your discipline calls us back and shows us the way. You know us, and you give us the strength we need to stand, the light for us to walk the path, and the gift of your presence to guide us in the way.

Teach us, O Lord, what the psalmist knows so well: that your law does not restrain, but enlivens. Give us hearts that pant for your commandments, ears that strain for every word from you. We are simple people, Lord; grant us understanding. We are your people, O God; help us to be found in you.

This world is a place of your activity, a place where your light shines. But there are barren places, too, O Lord. There are places where your image, which once shined like the sun, is obscured and eclipsed by those you created. War, hatred, and fear make deserts in your world; but so do our neglect, ignorance, and complacency. Though you came to bring light, we often sit in darkness; though you came to give life, we often walk in the shadow of death.

We hear your call to the deserts of this world. Help us to answer. Show us how to seek you in the forgotten places. Lead us to those the world has neglected, and connect us to them in friendship. You have burned your image deep into every human; teach us to see it. May we learn to love you by loving one another, and may we receive your love at the hands of those around us.

We pray to you, Father, through Jesus the Christ, in the power of your Spirit. Amen.

### *Unison Reponse: Deuteronomy 6:4-9*

**Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.**

**You shall love the LORD your God**

**with all your heart,**

**and with all your soul,**

**and with all your might.**

**Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.**

**Recite them to your children**

**and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away,  
when you lie down and when you rise.**

**Bind them as a sign on your hand,**

**fix them as an emblem on your forehead,**

**and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.**

### *Children's Sermon*

When we use the word "monasticism," we are talking about monks and nuns. However, we are also talking about other Christians who have chosen to live in community by some sort of rule of life, or agreed Christian practices.

An important practice of the monastic life is prayer. Monks, nuns, and other monastics order their lives by prayer. Often they chant prayers from the Bible, the psalms. Can you imagine praying or chanting all one-hundred-fifty psalms every week of your life? Many monastics do that!

Psalms help us praise and thank God. They also help us say difficult things to God. When we need to confess sin, ask for help, or express anger, psalms help us say things we may be afraid for God to know about us. We may need to say, "Lord, I feel forgotten! I look, but I cannot see your love anywhere. I come to you and ask you to help me. I keep calling you and lift my hands up to you. Please help me." No one likes to think about sad things. But when we are sad, we can use the psalms as our own prayers to God—just like the monastics!

The psalmist reminds us that God really listens to us. Let us pray together like the psalmist prays:

**I love the LORD,  
because he heard my prayers.  
God listened to me and delivered me,  
so I will pray to God as long as I live.  
Praise the LORD!**

Now, stand with me while the whole congregation reads together from the Book of Psalms.

*Responsive Reading: Psalm 119:161-168*

Princes persecute me without cause,  
**but my heart stands in awe of your words.**  
I rejoice at your word  
**like one who finds great spoil.**  
I hate and abhor falsehood,  
**but I love your law.**  
Seven times a day I praise you  
**for your righteous ordinances.**  
Great peace have those who love your law;  
**nothing can make them stumble.**  
I hope for your salvation, O LORD,  
**and I fulfill your commandments.**  
My soul keeps your decrees;  
**I love them exceedingly.**  
I keep your precepts and decrees,  
**for all my ways are before you.**

*Hymn of Petition*

“Break Now the Bread of Life” (v. 1)

Break now the bread of life, dear Lord, to me,  
as you did break the bread beside the sea;  
beyond the sacred page I seek you, Lord;  
my spirit pants for you, O Living Word.

*Mary A. Lathbury (1877), alt.*

*Tune: BREAD OF LIFE*

*Gospel Reading: Matthew 5:1-12*

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

The Word of the Lord for God’s people.

**Thanks be to God.**

*Hymn of Preparation*

“Gather Now around His Teachings”

Gather now around his teachings,  
gather now around the Word.  
Hear him calling from the margin,  
drawing us to be his own.

Hear the Master’s hillside sermon:  
peace and justice, mercy, love.  
Will we let his teachings shape us?  
Will his way become our prayer?

Quiet call heard through the shouting,  
straight his path through culture’s maze;  
rule of life, to all, life giving:  
Christ – the truth, the life, the way.



Common bread and wine and water,  
common brother, savior, hope  
bring uncommon transformation,  
changing church to Christ on earth.

*Terry W. York, ASCAP (2010)*  
TRUETT SEMINARY  
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(pp. 41-43 of this volume)

### *Sermon*

### *Silent Meditation*

I beg you to keep me in this silence so that I may learn from it the word of your peace and the word of your mercy and the word of your gentleness to the world: and that through me perhaps your word of peace may make itself heard where it has not been possible for anyone to hear it for a long time.

*Thomas Merton (1915-1968)*<sup>3</sup>

### *Hymn of Response*

“Master, We Your Footsteps Follow” (vv. 1, 2, and 3)

Master, we your footsteps follow,  
we your word obey;  
hear us, your dear name confessing,  
while we pray.

Now into your death baptizèd,  
we ourselves would be  
dead to all the sin that made  
your Calvary.

Rising with you, make us like you,  
in your love and care,  
in your zeal, and in your labor,  
and your prayer.

*Frederick A. Jackson (1867-1942)*  
Tune: STEPHANOS

### *Litany of Confession*

Most Holy God, who created us to love and serve you,  
we bow before you with broken hearts.

We have sinned against you, O Lord.  
Though your love for us is perfect,  
our love for you has been half-hearted and self-serving.  
**Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy.**

We have sinned against our neighbors, O Lord.  
Though you have loved us,  
we have shown no eagerness to love our neighbors as ourselves.  
**Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy.**

Thus, we, your beloved creatures,  
have left your work in the world undone.  
*(silent prayers of confession)*

Yet your love calls out to us even now,  
drawing us into repentance.  
*(silent prayers of contrition)*

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, we pray.  
**Amen.**

### *Assurance of Pardon*

In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, through the love of God our  
Father, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are forgiven our sins.  
May the Lord who walks before us, beside us, and among us keep us  
on the path that leads to life and cheer us along the way.

### *Words of Institution: Luke 22:14-23*

When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles  
with him. He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover  
with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled  
in the kingdom of God." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he  
said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from  
now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God  
comes." Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he  
broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given  
for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the  
cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new  
covenant in my blood."

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### *Prayer for the Bread and Cup*

Now, O Lord, who walked among us,  
consecrate this bread and this cup, your body and blood,  
that we may dine with you as your guests.  
May your body, though broken and scattered,  
be made one in the sharing of this meal.  
May your blood, though poured out for many,  
be the spiritual drink that nourishes us, your children. Amen.

Christ has sacrificed himself for us.  
Come let us feast together with him.

*(The congregation will come forward to partake of the Lord's Supper by intinction.)*

### *Passing the Peace of Christ*

#### *Benediction: 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24*

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. Amen.

#### **NOTES**

1 The leader's words are drawn from St. Benedict's *Regula* or *Rule of Life* (seventh century), and the responses are based on words from the Psalms which have been central to the worship of both classic and new monastics.

2 Burt L. Burlison, "Come Away," verse 3 (2003). Used with permission. This text was written for DaySpring Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, on the occasion of its moving to a new campus. The congregation sings it to a tune written by Kurt Kaiser.

3 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, 1965, 1989), 178.



**AMBER INSCORE ESSICK**

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This image is available  
in the print version of  
*Christian Reflection.*

**This twelfth-century tower and cloister, originally at the foot of Mount Canigou in the Pyrenees, today introduces medieval architecture and art to new generations at The Cloisters in New York City.**

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# Old World Monasteries for New Generations

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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The popular image of a medieval monastery – a fortress-like structure isolated on the top of a mountain, with its tower piercing the blue sky and its verdant courtyard garden filled with monks walking to exercise as they meditate on the word of God – comes to mind when one sees the tower and cloister of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa (illustrated on the cover and p. 52). With a covered walkway surrounding a large open courtyard, the cloister was the focal point and heart of the monastery. It was not only used for meditation and reading aloud, but also for the monks' washing.

These medieval buildings of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa were originally located at the foot of Mount Canigou in the Pyrenees of southern France. In 1938, they were reconstructed and opened to the public on upper Manhattan Island, within Fort Tryon Park, as part of The Cloisters, a branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.<sup>1</sup>

The Cloisters' primary creators – George Grey Barnard (1863-1938), the collector and entrepreneur who in 1914 created the first "Cloisters;" John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (1874-1960), the benefactor of the land, complex design, and additional object acquisitions for the collection; and James J. Rorimer (1905-1966), the curator who presided over the construction and would become director of the Metropolitan Museum – viewed The Cloisters as a branch of the museum to educate the new world about the old.<sup>2</sup>

The Cloisters museum is composed of five different cloisters, a series of chapels, and exhibition halls arranged within a rampart wall crowned by a tower. In three of the cloisters there are gardens patterned after those found in manuscripts, paintings, and tapestries from the Middle Ages. The museum complex contains an original chapter house, a reconstructed Romanesque chapel, a Gothic style chapel, and eight exhibition galleries for medieval sculpture, tapestries (including the renowned *Unicorn Tapestries*), stained glass, paintings, and furniture.<sup>3</sup>

The reconstructed cloister from the Abbey of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa, a Benedictine monastery founded in 878, is the central and largest unit of The Cloisters museum.

According to archeological evidence, the cloister building constructed during the twelfth century measured 156' x 128', but it is only half that size

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*CLOISTER AND LOMBARDO-ROMANESQUE BELL TOWER, RUINS OF THE ABBEY OF SAINT-MICHEL-DE-CUXA, FRANCE (founded in 878). Photo: © Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.*

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at The Cloisters today. Elements of the original structure were purchased by George Grey Bernard and brought to the United States, but much of the building materials at The Cloisters are modern. The new building materials and architectural design were kept simple. Millstone granite, quarried and cut by hand near New London, Connecticut, was used for the exterior of the building. The warm tones of the stones recall those found in southern France but are more durable and better suited for the climate in New York. The dimensions of the individual blocks were patterned after Romanesque buildings. The red roof tiles were copied from examples excavated at Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa to give it an effect similar to the original.<sup>4</sup>

In its design, the reconstructed tower in The Cloisters incorporates some of the features of a tower still standing at Cuxa in Prades, France (see p. 54). The original tower was part of the monastic rebuilding program of Abbot Oliva (c. 971-1046), an important religious leader of the day. After his travels in Italy, the abbot established several Benedictine monasteries and added architectural features to Cuxa based on northern Italian (Lombardic) and Romanesque design.<sup>5</sup>

When the Abbey of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa was founded, it was a small city with fifty monks, twenty-servants, thirty manuscripts, five hundred sheep, fifty mares, forty pigs, two horses, five donkeys, twenty oxen, and a hundred other large animals. The community began to decline after the twelfth century.<sup>6</sup> During the suppression of Catholic monastic orders and convents in 1791, the remaining monks of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa departed and much of the stonework was dispersed. However, part of the Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa cloister still survives in its original location and it is, once again, a monastic community.<sup>7</sup>



Just as we use “church” to refer to a local congregation or parish and to the buildings that support its shared activities, so we use “monastery” to refer both to an intentional religious community that lives differently from the world and to the complex of buildings that serve its common life. The term comes from the Greek word *monastērion* for a hermit’s abode. Originally, in fourth-century Egypt, many Christian monks (from *monachos* for a person who is one – i.e., single-minded or focused) chose to live alone. But soon Abba Pachomius (c. 292-346) organized more than five thousand of these monks into the *Koinonia*, a federation of small monastic cities where monks lived in communal houses of forty members, and shared buildings such as a church, refectory (dining hall), and infirmary for the sick.<sup>8</sup> However, the ground plan and architecture of most medieval European monasteries, like Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa, were not inspired by Pachomius’ cities, but by the monastic community Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-c. 547) founded at Monte Cassino, Italy, two hundred years later.

The earliest surviving complete, but idealized, plan for a monastery comes from St. Gall, Switzerland (see p. 57). Ordered by Abbot Heito of Reichenau for Abbot Gozbert as he prepared to rebuild St. Gall Abbey after 830,<sup>9</sup> this schematic ground plan (44” x 30.5”) is drawn in red ink on five sheets of calf vellum that are sewn together and inscribed with black ink in Carolingian miniscule.<sup>10</sup>

The size and complexity of the plan reflect the importance of monasteries as centers of learning and self-sufficiency throughout the Carolingian period, when medieval culture flourished during and after the reign of the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne (742-814).<sup>11</sup> In its geometric regularity and orderliness (created by a network of parallel and perpendicular axes), the layout resembles a small Roman town or military camp. This resemblance

cannot be coincidental and must be the result of the study of the architectural treatise of Vitruvius and ancient surveying manuals that were copied in the Carolingian scriptoria.<sup>12</sup>

The nucleus of the St. Gall plan is the grouping of principal buildings around a fully enclosed cloister, with the great church on its north side. The longitudinal nave (C) and high altar in the eastern apse (D) of the church are identified on the illustrated plan. At the other end of the nave, a western apse is surrounded by a semicircular porch with two freestanding towers placed in front of it to form the entrance.

The function of the other monastic buildings determines their arrangement around the great church. To the south is the monks' cloister surrounded by the dormitory (L), refectory (M), and cellar (N). The bakery, kitchen, brewery, mill, press, drying kiln, barn, and workshops (P) are further south, while the animal sheds and servants' quarters (B) and guest house for the pilgrims/poor (O) are to the west at the bottom of the plan and adjacent to the entrance (A). The guesthouse (E) and the school (F) are in close proximity of the Abbot's house (G) on the north side of the community. The poultry sheds, garden and gardener's house (K), cemetery (J), and the cloisters for the novices (I) and the sick (H) occupy the eastern edge of the plan.

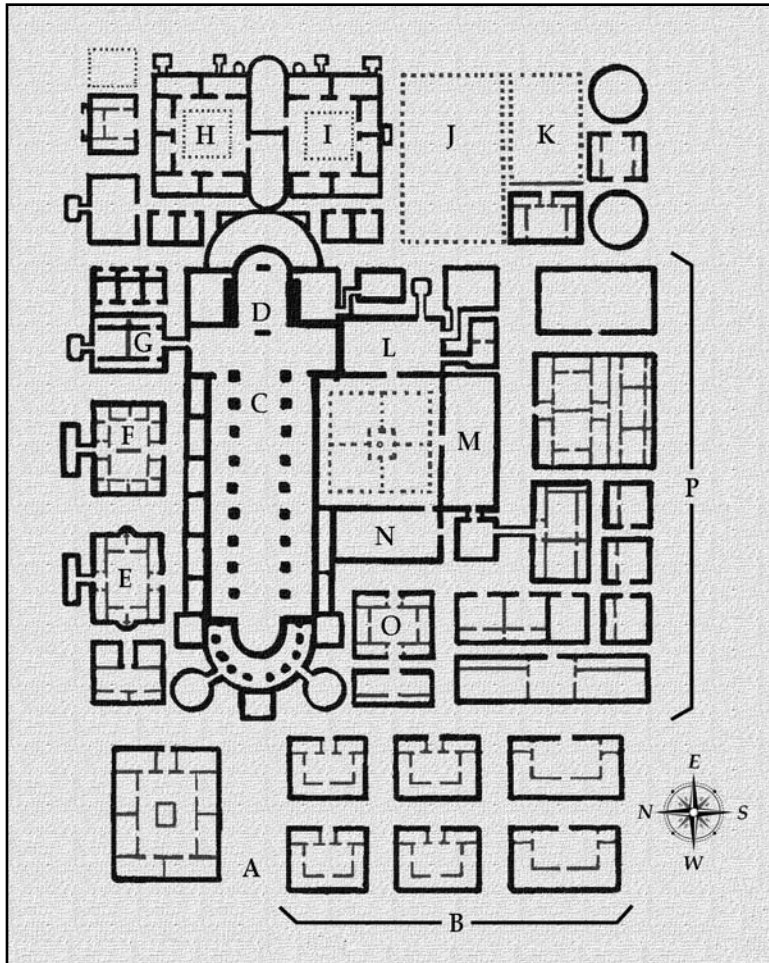


The only significant addition to the plan of St. Gall Abbey in later monasteries was the chapter house, or daily meeting room, which was usually placed on the east side of the cloister. The chapter house provided a location for the monks to carry out the communal discernment prescribed in the third chapter of Saint Benedict's *Rule*: "Whenever any important business has to be done in the monastery, let the Abbot call together the whole community and state the matter to be acted upon."

The Cloisters museum contains the chapter house from Notre-Dame-de-Pontaut in Aquitaine, France. In the chapter house, the Abbott would sit on a raised, separate seat, while the monks sat on stone benches encircling the room. The illustration here (see p. 58) shows an arcade of three arches at the entrance to the chapter house. The room had natural light from windows on the rear wall – which was plastered and may have been painted. Some paint can still be seen on the ribbing of the interior vaults which provide structural support and decoration. The four converging ribs of each vault are supported by columns; the capitals of these columns feature various patterns, including rosettes, palmettes, and basket-weave as well as carvings of birds and animals.

Before the chapter house from Notre-Dame-de-Pontaut was purchased in the early 1930s and carefully restored in The Cloisters, it had fallen into a dilapidated condition. A victim of the Wars of Religion in 1569 and abandoned in 1791 in the aftermath of the French Revolution, it had been used as a stable during the nineteenth century. At the time of its purchase, the





*Drawing based on the PLAN OF ST. GALL, SWITZERLAND (c. 820).*

plans for The Cloisters were progressing nicely. Numerous other Romanesque and Gothic architectural elements had been acquired, including thirty doorways, windows, and stained glass. Mr. Rockefeller presented this chapter house and the famous *Hunt of the Unicorn* tapestries to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for The Cloisters.<sup>13</sup>



The Cloisters, which celebrates its seventy-fifth anniversary in 2013, provides a harmonious and evocative space in which visitors of all ages can experience the many medieval traditions of artistic production. The complex design of passageways and galleries shelter the museum visitor in much the

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CHAPTER HOUSE FROM NOTRE-DAME-DE-PONTAUT, FRANCE (Twelfth Century).  
*The Cloisters*, 35.50. Photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource,  
NY. Used by permission.

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same way as the cloisters sheltered the monks walking from one building to another. One can only imagine that these old spaces will provide new generations with a place of rest, contemplation, and conversation just as they did for their original monastic inhabitants.

I first experienced *The Cloisters* as an assignment for Dr. Robert Calkins' medieval art history course my sophomore year at Cornell University. Although I had grown up and lived only twenty-five miles from *The Cloisters*, it was that assignment which brought me to this wonderful museum to experience art history and enjoy a sense of serenity I still remember today.

## NOTES

1 James J. Rorimer, "The Opening of the Cloisters," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 33:4 (April 1938), 89-97.

2 Mary Rebecca Leuchak, "'The Old World for the New': Developing the Design for the Cloisters," *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, 23 (1988), 257-277. For information on the initial

collection of George Grey Barnard, see Joseph Breck, "The Cloisters," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 20:7 (July 1925), 166-177.

3 Rorimer, 92.

4 Ibid.

5 David A. Hanser, *Architecture of France, Reference Guides to National Architecture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 242.

6 Ibid., 241-242.

7 Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa Cloister, Collection Database (accessed April 6, 2010), [www.metmuseum.org/works\\_of\\_art/collection\\_database](http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/collection_database).

8 For more information on this period, see William Harmless, S.J., *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), especially chapter 5.

9 Ulrich Kuder, et al., "Carolingian art," *Grove Art Online* (*Oxford Art Online*, accessed April 6, 2010), [www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T014211](http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T014211).

10 Werner Jacobsen, "St. Gall Abbey," *Grove Art Online* (*Oxford Art Online*, accessed April 6, 2010) [www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T075102](http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T075102).

11 At the Synod of Aachen (817), through the efforts of Benedict of Aniane (747-821), the *Rule of St. Benedict* gained acceptance as a way of common life and the Monte Cassino buildings became a widely accepted plan for monastic communities. See Richard Fawcett, et al., "Monastery," *Grove Art Online* (*Oxford Art Online*, accessed April 6, 2010), [www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T059008](http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T059008).

12 Kuder, "Carolingian art."

13 Chapter House from Notre-Dame-de-Pontaut, Collection Database (accessed April 6, 2010), [www.metmuseum.org/works\\_of\\_art/collection\\_database](http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/collection_database).



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This image is available  
in the print version of  
*Christian Reflection.*

**This reliquary shrine was a beautiful gift from a queen  
to the women who dedicated their lives to Christ in the  
community of Poor Clares in Old Buda, Hungary.**

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# A Queen's Gift

BY HEIDI J. HORNİK

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The royal families that founded and financially supported convents and monasteries in the medieval period were often allowed to worship within these monastic complexes. The reliquary shrine illustrated here—of French origin and attributed to Jean de Touyl (d. 1349)—may be evidence of this practice. Art historians believe this silver-gilt enameled shrine, which appears in the inventory of the Poor Clares in Old Buda, Hungary, in 1781, originally belonged to Queen Elizabeth of Hungary. She founded this Franciscan convent in 1334 “in honor of the blessed Virgin,” claiming that it was the “largest for nuns in all of Hungary” and that “more than one hundred nuns and many girls of noble origin” were educated there.<sup>1</sup>

This miniature altarpiece was intended for private devotion in a domestic setting. Yet its characteristic trefoil arches recall the elements of an enormous Gothic cathedral—the gables are decorated with crockets (ornaments in the shape of bent foliage) and topped by finials with pinnacles reaching upwards. The central scene contains the Virgin and Child flanked by angels. Mary is depicted as both the enthroned Queen of Heaven and the nursing Mother of Christ.<sup>2</sup> Each angel carries a reliquary of crystal. These figures exhibit one of the most exquisite techniques of the period, *bassetaille*, which is translucent enamel on silver or gold that has been chiseled and engraved in low relief.<sup>3</sup>

Two wings, which are shown open in this photograph, enfold the gilded central scene when they are closed. The wings contain thirty-six enameled plaques, each with a deeply tooled background in a luxurious aquamarine evoking stained glass. Enameling, the fusing of powdered glass on a metal surface at red-hot heat, was one of the great arts of the period. Each plaque depicts a scene from the infancy of Christ and the life of the Virgin.

Queen Elizabeth's reliquary shrine was a beautiful gift, but her most significant contribution to the Order of the Franciscans was to bring the Poor Clares to the country of Hungary.

## NOTES

1 Margaret B. Freeman, “A Shrine for a Queen,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, New Series, 21:10 (June, 1963), 327-339, here quoting 330.

2 The popularity of the nursing Madonna (*Maria Lactans*) during the medieval period is partially due to a thirteenth-century Franciscan writer, Pseudo-Bonaventura, who addresses his work of mystical visions, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, to a nun of the Poor Clares.

3 Freeman, 335.

# Saint Meinrad Archabbey: Portrait of a Historic Monastic Community

BY MATTHEW MATTINGLY, O.S.B.

**Through its Benedictine oblate program, Saint Meinrad Archabbey builds bridges between the cloister and Christians living in the world. Oblates are living witnesses that centuries-old traditions of monastic prayer, contemplation, and practice can transform the world at a practical level.**

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**S**aint Meinrad Archabbey, a Benedictine monastic community of about one hundred men situated in the wooded hills of rural southern Indiana, is a destination for several thousand visitors who come here seeking God each year. Many arrive as retreatants or pilgrims, some as students of the abbey's School of Theology, others just to visit. Many weekends the abbey church is packed for worship. There might be several large retreats going on at the same time, the seminarians in the school may be joining the monks for Vespers, a group of high school students preparing for Confirmation perhaps is visiting, or it could be a weekend of pilgrimage to the Marian shrine on nearby Monte Cassino hill. On other weekends, by contrast, the church is not so crowded, just a few individuals scattered throughout the guest section: a religious sister here on sabbatical, one of the monastery's many lay coworkers, a young man making a "come and see" visit to discern if the monastic life may be for him, and always a handful of largely anonymous persons here on private visits, probably just looking for a quiet place to get away and find renewal. Many guests, many reasons for being here, but all of them, whoever they are and whatever their background, find themselves gladly welcomed here as Christ, just as the *Rule of Saint Benedict* prescribes.

People are attracted to Saint Meinrad on account of the restful silence, the beauty of the grounds, the peaceful isolation, the mystery of the monastic cloister, the rhythm and pace of the daily schedule, and the simplicity of life to be found here. But all of these, however much they are to be enjoyed for their own sake, are nonetheless ultimately for the sake of something much larger. People come to Saint Meinrad because it is a place of prayer. They come here seeking God, desiring to experience Christ more deeply in their lives, and they hope that they might somehow be able to tap into the life of prayer and contemplation cultivated so diligently by the monks who live here.



Many who visit Saint Meinrad come away wishing that they could somehow preserve or keep alive the peace and closeness to God they sense when they are here. Of these, a few may perceive that they are being called to become monks themselves. For the great majority, however, that is not a realistic or desirable option; most visitors have already established lives and families back home. At the same time, however, they find themselves attracted to the values of monastic life and wish that they could somehow integrate these into their own lives away from the monastery. It is for this reason that many choose to affiliate themselves to Saint Meinrad in a special way, by joining the monastery's chapter of Benedictine oblates.

"I was first drawn by the beauty and peacefulness of Saint Meinrad, as well as by the joy and happiness of the monks [my husband and I] came to know," recalls Pat Dorn, a long-time oblate from Cincinnati. "I [later] came to realize the opportunity for spiritual growth provided through the structure of the oblate program." Diane Rivera, an oblate from Bloomington, Indiana, recalls that "prior to knowing that the Benedictine oblate program existed, a friend and I had made a couple of weekend retreats to St. Meinrad and liked returning to the abbey for spiritual refreshment. We were taken by the possibility of something beyond regular church attendance, Bible study, and private prayer."

A Benedictine oblate, to quote the official oblate manual, is a "Christian who yearns for a spiritual life deeply rooted in God, and who chooses to attach his or herself to a specific Benedictine community and strives to live the spirit of the *Rule of St. Benedict* in response to this yearning." It is a structured program of spirituality that helps those who commit themselves to it to live as closely as possible the life of a monk outside of the cloister in the world. Although many oblates are attracted to the communal aspects of the program, being an oblate is not so much about being part of a group (like belonging to a parish or to a club, for instance) as it is about embracing a way of living that informs and deepens their understanding of the relationships and activities to which they are already committed.

The oblate program at Saint Meinrad is nearly as old as the abbey itself, and it is closely related to the monastery's overall mission of "seeking God

and serving the Church." In 1854, two monks from the ancient Swiss monastery of Einsiedeln arrived in southern Indiana and settled near the banks of the Anderson River. They purchased a large tract of land and established a new monastic community. Their arrival here was prompted by two coinciding factors. Back home in Switzerland, the government at that time had enacted a policy of closing down all religious houses that could not prove their usefulness to society. Monasteries with their focus on prayer and contemplation were especially affected by this, and so Einsiedeln was looking at the possibility of making a foundation in the United States in case the monks should be forced out of their native land. At the same time, the diocese in which the new monastery would eventually be founded was actively looking for a German-speaking

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**Although Benedictine oblates do not take formal vows that are ecclesiastically binding as monks do, they do make commitments to stability of heart, obedience to the will of God, and fidelity to the spirit of the monastic life.**

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monastery from Europe to make a foundation in Indiana. Large numbers of German-Catholic immigrants had recently settled in the area, but there were virtually no native clergy able to serve their spiritual needs on account of the language barrier. In addition to providing priests who could help fill the immediate void in pastoral ministry, monasteries were also known traditionally to operate schools and seminaries for the training of new priests. The Abbey of Einsiedeln, fortunately, was never suppressed, but they did respond to the request for a monastic foundation in Indiana by sending over two monks to found what was first known as Saint Meinrad Priory, named after the ninth-century founder of the motherhouse. More monks from Einsiedeln would follow, and many locals joined the new foundation as well. By 1870, Saint Meinrad had grown large enough to be raised to the status of an abbey, independent from the motherhouse in Switzerland. The seminary was successfully up and running, and many monks from Saint Meinrad served as pastors in local parishes.

In addition to serving the needs of the local church through their outward ministries, Saint Meinrad had also striven to cultivate a strong inner life of prayer and contemplation, which is the foundation of the monastic life. Devotion to the liturgy and a strong commitment to developing and promoting the Church's rich tradition of liturgical music, particularly Gregorian chant, have been a part of the monastery's mission from the very beginning. Even on the day in 1887 when a devastating fire destroyed most of the newly constructed buildings at Saint Meinrad, the monks still made it a point to come



together and celebrate each of the prescribed hours of the Divine Office. This great common prayer of the universal Church has been offered here on the “Holy Hill” – as many visitors are fond of calling it – uninterrupted now for over 156 years. Today, the monks of Saint Meinrad come together in the choir of their church five times a day to offer their praise to God, once for the celebration of the Mass, and also for the morning, midday, evening, and nighttime offices of the Liturgy of the Hours. In addition, time is set aside each day for private Scripture reading, following an ancient practice known as *lectio divina* (literally, “divine reading”). All the other works of the monastery – the School of Theology, the Guest House/Retreat Center, the Abbey Press, Abbey Caskets, parish ministry, and the many other works and ministries that individual monks are involved in – all flow out of this deeply cultivated life of prayer, worship, and contemplation.

It is natural that others would be attracted to the monastery on account of the spiritual life to be found here, and that some might want to attach themselves to Saint Meinrad in a deeper and more committed way. On that account, the oblate program at Saint Meinrad was founded in 1879, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the abbey’s founding. At first it was limited mostly to students and alumni of the school and to a few locals, but following the Second World War, and a nationwide resurgence of interest in monastic spirituality, Saint Meinrad’s oblate program experienced exponential growth. Today Saint Meinrad Archabbey boasts of having over 1,200 oblates active in the program, many of whom are members in one of the twenty affiliated local chapters scattered across the country. There are oblate chapters in places as large as New York City, population seven million, and as tiny as the town of St. Meinrad itself, population five hundred.



Oblates are attracted and committed to the program for a variety of reasons. Many cite the order and structure that it has given to their personal spiritual life. “I needed to find more order in my life – structure without the ruts or potholes that tend to develop over time,” recalls George Thompson of Louisville, Kentucky. “The oblate program has provided a good centering device for me. The [chapter] meetings in Louisville and the gatherings at Saint Meinrad help to bring me back in line, to refocus on what is important.” “They [fellow oblates] help to pull me back to the center of the path of my journey.”

Although oblates do not take formal vows that are ecclesiastically binding as monks do, they do make three commitments that mirror the formal monastic vows of *stability* of place to one’s monastery, *obedience* to one’s abbot, and *fidelity* to the monastic way of life. The oblate promises *stability of heart*, *obedience to the will of God*, and *fidelity to the spirit of the monastic life*. Stability of heart means, on the one hand, that the oblate promises to be faithful to the values and culture of their affiliated monastery, and, on the other, faithful to the way of life that they are already committed to, especially their family and

faith community. Obedience to the will of God is fostered through prayer and Scripture reading that sharpens the ability to see the presence of the Word in the needs of one's family and community. Fidelity to the spirit of the monastic life means that the oblate works to integrate the principles and values of the *Rule of Saint Benedict* into their daily lives.

Out of these general promises flows the program of specific duties that

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**In a society increasingly obsessed with doing and achieving and solving problems, monasticism is a powerful witness that the outcome of our world, its successes and failures, does not lie ultimately in our human efforts, but rather belongs to God.**

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an oblate commits him- or herself to following faithfully. These include: praying daily at least the morning and evening office of the Liturgy of the Hours; practicing *lectio divina* regularly, including a daily reading from the *Rule of Saint Benedict*; being active members of their own church community (oblates do not have to be Catholics; the program is open to committed Christians of any denomination); and being actively attentive

of God's presence in his or her ordinary daily life. "I know that by disciplining myself to follow the *Rule*, saying the Liturgy of the Hours, *lectio divina*, and attending the periodic meetings, I am slowly growing in holiness. I feel certain that my life has more meaning now as I strive for daily renewal and perseverance," says Carl Schneider about his experience.

Apart from the structure that the program provides, others find that being part of a larger community, wider than their own local church, is the most meaningful aspect of being an oblate. Diane Rivera finds that "the community aspect of coming together with otheroblates to learn, to share, and to pray is very satisfying and faith-building." "It fulfills a longing I have to give myself to God, and to be spiritually nourished outside of, and in addition to, my parish life." For Sharon Ogden, of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the most important thing is the spiritual friendship that has been fostered within her chapter. "We are a diverse group, many different ages, but we all feel connected. We pray for one another and care about one another."

In addition to several general oblate meetings and retreats conducted at Saint Meinrad each year, the local chapters typically hold their own meetings about once a month. Occasionally, perhaps several times a year, a monk from Saint Meinrad will be present to give a talk. The Oblate Director and his assistants try to give focus to these meetings by having a specific monastic topic that serves as the theme to build discussion and reflection around for the entire year.

Finally, others see the connection with the abbey itself and its monks as the most important aspect of being an oblate. "The monks are like family," says Pat Dorn. "They pray for us and we for them." "When [my husband and I] go to Saint Meinrad, I experience the same sense of joy and excitement that I felt as a child when my parents took us to Indiana to visit my grandparents. It is a homecoming." Suzy Kalmar from Dayton, Ohio, is "comforted by the idea that the monks are praying for me and for all the oblates, as I am praying for them. I am also edified by the experience of belonging to something so much larger than myself. There is a timelessness about it all; like the Church itself."

The spiritual benefits of the Benedictine oblate program are not just limited to the oblates themselves. They add something real and valuable to the monastic life itself as lived at Saint Meinrad. "Our oblates are an important reflection of our prayer and work as monks in the monastery," offers Brother Francis Wagner, O.S.B. "They are very committed to [Saint Benedict's] vision – even more so than I sometimes am – and their own fidelity strengthens mine." Father Meinrad Brune, O.S.B., Director of Oblates at Saint Meinrad, echoes this when he says that "the witness of the oblates living the Benedictine values in the world strengthens the monks' love and appreciation for our spiritual life as Benedictines." He adds that "the oblates remind the monks of their own goodness and uniqueness."



The relationship between a monastery and its oblates, however, runs deeper than just the mutual support they provide for one another's spiritual lives. Monasteries serve a real and vital need within the life of the institutional Church as well as the world at large, and Benedictine oblates contribute in an essential way to the fulfillment of this mission. In a society that is increasingly obsessed with doing and achieving and solving problems, monasticism remains a powerful witness that the outcome of our world, its successes and failures, does not lie ultimately in our own human efforts and intentions, but rather belongs to God. The monastic life, through its commitment to prayer and contemplation, helps to keep a line of communication open and a space free for the Word of God to do its work in the world. In many ways, the oblates might be seen as the agents of the monastery working silently in the world. As Edward L. Shaughnessy puts it in his history of the oblate program at Saint Meinrad, "Benedictine oblates are men and women who strive to live a contemplative life in the world. The vocation calls forth no deep commitment to move the Catholic Church's social or liturgical agenda."<sup>1</sup> Benedictine spirituality is not about changing the outward structures of the world, but about renewing them from within by allowing God to transform the interior lives of the individuals who participate in them.

People often ask, what is the difference between a monk and a layperson in the Church? How does the spirituality of someone living in the cloister differ from that of those living in the world? Ultimately, nothing. All Christians are

called to pursue the same goal of building up the kingdom of God here on earth in preparation for the eternal kingdom of the life to come. The difference is in how each way of life contributes to this.

A monk or a nun is someone who has been called out of the world to live a Christian life at a level of intensity impossible for someone living in it who has to be concerned with running a household, raising a family, managing a career, and other practicalities of daily living. The lay Christian, on the other hand, is called to be a follower of Christ in the world and a witness to it of the truth of the Christian faith. Lay Christians are often able to find inspiration and spiritual guidance from those who have dedicated their lives fully to pursuing a life of prayer. The role of the Benedictine oblate, perhaps, is that of a bridge between the life of the cloister and that of the ordinary Christian living in the world. Oblates are living witnesses that centuries-old traditions of monastic prayer, contemplation, and practice truly are capable of transforming the world at a practical level. Their lives can serve as an example and an inspiration for all those who will never have the opportunity to pray and worship with the monks here on the “Holy Hill” at Saint Meinrad Archabbey.<sup>2</sup>

## NOTES

1 Edward L. Shaughnessy, *The Benedictine Oblates of Saint Meinrad Archabbey: A Brief History, 1879-1999* (Saint Meinrad, IN: Abbey Press, 2000), 55.

2 For more information about the Benedictine oblate program at Saint Meinrad Archabbey, see [www.saintmeinrad.edu/monastery\\_oblates.aspx](http://www.saintmeinrad.edu/monastery_oblates.aspx).

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# Reba Place Fellowship: Portrait of a New Monastic Community

BY CELINA VARELA

**Members of the oldest urban Christian community in America frame their daily lives around honest and loving relationships, the full sharing of resources, active witness to God's justice and peace, practical service to those around them, and a visible common life.**

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**I**n the summer of 2007, over five hundred former and current members of Reba Place Fellowship (RPF) gathered to celebrate God's faithfulness over the community's fifty years of existence. Memories unfolded through stories organized by decade, songs written by members of the community, and liturgical dances, new and old.

Among those celebrating were many young people. Our participation in the community spanned only one to three years, yet we were invited to welcome these old stories as part of our own stories. As we heard the history of the oldest urban Christian community in America, we marveled at the longevity and determination of those among us whose commitment contributed to five decades of community.

RPF's history reveals a community that has experienced periods of trouble and instability mixed with stretches of excitement, peace, and sustained ministry. In 1957, when the community began, the desire to take seriously the words of Jesus and the practices of the early church formed the early members' driving vision to live out a life of radical Christian discipleship. That desire remains unchanged, bringing unifying focus to a community whose changing makeup demands continual adjustments to the rhythms of their common life together.

The members of RPF are not so unique in their Christian confession. That is, we believe essentially what all Christians believe.<sup>1</sup> What can be surprising to people is the framing of our daily lives. We believe that radical discipleship includes honest and loving relationships, the full sharing of resources, active witness to God's justice and peace, practical service to those around us, and a visible common life.

For Jesus, the disciples, and the early church, the fruits of radical discipleship grew from their daily life together. The common practices we develop come from our efforts to seek God's guidance and the power of God's spirit in forming a Christian community.

### **OUR COMMON LIFE**

The mission of RPF is "to extend the mission of Jesus by being a community of love, and discipleship, and by nurturing other such communities as God gives us grace."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we welcome all people to share life with us. The invitation can be overwhelming since increasing interest in the life of RPF brings people with different desires and needs.

Some people come with a desire to be observers and learners in the community. Others come to discern vocation, a relationship, or a calling within the context of community. Many come seeking emotional healing from past wounds. Different needs arise in the varying stages of life that are represented in the community: young adults recently out of college or pursuing post-college degrees, single adults, married adults, young families, full- and part-time workers, retired adults with lots of energy to work, and elderly adults needing to slow down.

We discover that these differences are significant when we attempt to form a daily life together. The community's needs challenge our leaders to consider our diversity and develop healthy, inclusive rhythms. In response to the variety of needs, members created categories to clarify levels of commitment. Currently, sixty-seven members are formally participating in the life of the community. That number includes thirty-eight covenant members, eight novice members, eighteen practicing members, and three apprentices.

Covenant members are those who commit to stay in the community until it is discerned that God is calling them elsewhere. They are committed to participate in all community processes and activities, regular prayer and devotions, shared decision making, accountability, and the common treasury. Novice members are those who are testing and discerning a call to covenant membership. The practicing member category is for people who want to learn from the community and discern their future in the context of community for a term of nine to twelve months. Lastly, the apprentice category involves people accepted into a nine-month program to grow in Christian discipleship, community, and service. Novices, practicing members, and apprentices commit to the same practices as covenant members, but do not participate in the common treasury.

Certainly, our life together is not limited to those who fit neatly into these categories. Outside of the sixty-seven regular participants there are many neighbors, relatives, church members, housemates, and past members with whom we have close, ongoing relationships. These friends support us in many ways and occasionally attend our social and worship events even if they do not take on a categorical label.

Four charisms, or guiding gifts of the Holy Spirit, form the spiritual heritage of RPF: worship, accountability or mutual correction, spiritual direction, and ministry and witness. As members and friends receive these gifts, and live together through them, they become part of this distinctive urban Christian community.

### **THE CHARISM OF WORSHIP**

In his book, *Community and Growth*, Jean Vanier speaks about how “the littleness and ordinariness of our lives” can become an act of worship.<sup>3</sup> When we desire to do the simplest task in love, he says, our mundane actions become ways to commune with one another and with God. The language is inspiring and many newcomers arrive with the beauty of this sentiment in mind. The challenge, however, is to conform our thoughts and actions to this ideal.

Sometimes the people with whom we work are as lacking in splendor as the ordinary tasks we share with them, and our desire for something spectacular is disappointed. The attempt to discover God’s communion with us in daily tasks must include an equal persistence to work through disappointment. By committing to stay together through the joyful, mundane, and painful realities of loving one another, our acts of worship can go beyond Sunday morning meetings. We worship together as we share meals, celebrate significant life events, and take breaks from our regular routines. Still, it is important to establish intentional time and space for hearing God together.

RPF members reside in the wider communities of Evanston and the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago. Our meeting spaces for worship include Reba Place Church in Evanston and Living Water Community Church in Rogers Park. While both congregations belong to the Mennonite denomination and draw strength from the Anabaptist tradition, RPF members come from a variety of denominational backgrounds. Many of us worship together regularly on Sunday mornings, and some members participate in other congregations as well.

In addition to Sunday mornings, members from Rogers Park and Evanston meet on the second Tuesday of every month, alternating locations. We gather to sing, pray, hear updates, and discuss business matters. Shorter versions of these meetings happen weekly in small groups.

We often have Saturday work mornings, celebrating life together by helping with “Reba-moves.” As much as we speak about commitment and stability, we are not without transitions: young people switching households and apartments, newcomers moving in, friends moving away. In fact we do

it so regularly, we sometimes joke that we could start a new moving business. We have the process down to an art, forming lines from one spot to another so that you only need to hand the box, chair, or lamp to the next person in line. On good days we even break into song, reminding ourselves that our common work is a way we respond in gratitude to the gifts of God.

Other forms of common work serve to financially support members of the Fellowship. These businesses include an Amish furniture store, a property management service, and a business office offering bookkeeping and payroll administration.

### **THE CHARISM OF ACCOUNTABILITY**

When I help lead tours for groups of visitors, typical questions are: “Are you allowed to smoke or drink?”; “How does it work to have single men and women in one house—do you separate floors by gender?”; “Are you allowed to go out whenever you want?” When we mention words like accountability and mutual correction to outsiders, many assume that we mean strict rules and guidelines. While there may be times when we depend too much on rules, what we hope to create is a space where people are known and cared for, so that accountability stems from a loving relationship. I remember my friend and fellow community member Greg Clark’s half-joking response to the question about drinking and smoking: “We don’t really have the money to sustain our vices.”

RPF members desire to lead lives of simplicity. The call to simplicity may look different from one member to the next, but all RPF members live well. They are not lacking in any need. Still, with a personal allowance of sixty-one dollars each month, it is difficult to support an expensive recreational habit. Entertainment often takes the form of our households hosting movie nights, craft nights, meals together, or game nights. Interactions of this nature facilitate relationships. Greg’s amusing response invited the visitors to ponder a more significant detail: there are ways in which the established practices of the community facilitate accountability in themselves.

Living arrangements differ among community members. Some of us live in households sharing common space, chores, meals, and belongings. Other buildings are divided into flats so that families share a house, but have their own space. Many people live in apartment units, with some families intentionally choosing the same building to help one another through the challenges of raising children. Both in Evanston and in Rogers Park, we live in close proximity to one another. In our little villages, we can walk to one another’s houses, to the meetinghouse, and to other meeting spaces. In this way, we are easily available to one another and can share resources when needed.

Likewise, fellowship with one another happens through small groups made up of six to twelve people. While some of the people in each small group may live together, not everyone is a member of the household. Small groups provide a much-needed way for friendships to develop across gen-



erational and gender lines. As varied as they may be, each group desires to meet weekly in order to hear about current struggles or victories and pray for one another.

In our efforts to know each other and to be known, we open ourselves to a life of honesty and mutual correction. Certainly, someone can still hide sin and unbecoming behavior, but this requires dishonesty and probable absenteeism from communal events. It would ultimately become too difficult to sustain a lie. Likewise, such behavior is hopefully noticed and questioned by other community members. It is important for us to approach someone with noticeably disturbing behavior in a way resembling Christ's love. We must not give in to the temptation to avoid someone and allow judgmental thoughts to reside with us. The early members of RPF recognized the importance of resisting this temptation.

John Miller, a founding member, said that the only solution was to follow the instructions of Jesus found in Matthew: "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one" (18:15). It is only in beginning with genuine openness and moving toward confession and forgiveness that we can overcome our sin and deception.<sup>4</sup> We seek to cultivate relationships that embody God's peace by confronting and correcting one another in love.

## **THE CHARISM OF SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT**

Forming a daily community of love also challenges the way we make decisions. We reject the idea of individual freedom that requires a person to work through a decision alone. Such thinking promotes the belief that the individual knows best what she needs. The decision, then, is made based on what makes her happy, even at the expense of others' needs. Within our community, we desire to make decisions together as we listen to and discern God's will. The decision-making process happens in many ways.

For example, major decisions that affect our life together – the selecting of community leaders, receiving others into membership, purchasing land or buildings – require a consensus from members. The process can be slow, particularly when there is disagreement and the decision must be voted on at several different meetings. If consensus cannot be reached by the third meeting, there is a way for a decision to pass with no more than fifteen percent of opposition. However,

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**Forming a daily community of love challenges us in the way we make decisions. We reject the idea of individual freedom that requires a person to work through a decision alone.**

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members of RPF have never needed to use the allotment. We trust that it is God's spirit among us that brings us to a place of agreement and unity.

Other decisions do not require consensus of the entire group, but are decided by a trusted leadership team. The team meets regularly to pray about the needs of our community and how best to respond. Decisions are then made with the community's input. We are grateful for those who put in the energy to be a part of this team, taking on the great responsibility of intensely seeking God's will for our life together.

We also recognize decisions that cannot be made by members of the Fellowship alone. Sometimes it helps to have the perspective of an outsider who understands our commitment and calling. For this reason, visitations are regularly scheduled. Members from other communities form a visitation team and meet with RPF to discuss important aspects of our life together. Our friends outside the community can encourage us by expressing where they see the Spirit moving and working. They can challenge us by speaking honestly about areas needing more attention. With their help, we acknowledge the community's current stage of life and discern the direction to which God is calling us.

Beyond decisions concerning the whole community, there are personal decisions that one encounters in community. Vocational changes, unusual family needs, mission opportunities, and category changes in the Fellowship all involve significant resources from the community, but do not necessarily need to be decided on by all members. These decisions are often considered in our small group time together, where members prayerfully listen through the decision-making process. At times, it may be necessary to form special discernment groups. With this practice, we remember that we are not meant to hear God's voice in isolation, but in a common search, supporting one another.

Many people completing a novitiate period, a term as a practicing member, or the apprentice program, need support as they discern their next steps. The question they face is not whether all our theories about community are alike, but whether God is calling them to share life with us.<sup>5</sup> It is important, then, that community members support them without pressure to join the group. A strong commitment to finding God's will allows all involved to bless departures and new members.

When newcomers are seriously considering a commitment to community life, their excitement can remind others why they made the decision long ago. Vanier calls this trait "the gift of wonderment," a gift that can renew and restore a sense of wonder in the community.<sup>6</sup> As we affirm one another's gifts throughout the discernment process, we discover a mutual encouragement to both the seeker and the long-term community member.

## **THE CHARISM OF MINISTRY AND WITNESS**

In the Gospel of John, Jesus commands his disciples, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (13:34). The gift of love that he extended to his followers provided an example of how to love one another.

Our communal life is a practical way to respond to Jesus' call. It is only by God's grace that our efforts become ways of blessing one another and those whom we encounter, allowing us to see that our life together can indeed be a witness to the world.

Visitors to RPF are interested in hearing more about our daily practices. When we explain the normal activities of RPF members — turning in paychecks to the common treasury, living on a prescribed budget so that everyone has equal care, sharing cars and tools, living with other people to help care for one another, practicing active pacifism — their response is often encouraging. When their visit causes them to hear the words of Jesus with fresh ears, we trust that God's spirit is moving them to a new way of living. Many people leave wanting to be in more honest, loving relationships with those around them. We know that it is not by our own acts that they leave with some conviction.

For years, RPF has hosted a potluck meal followed by a seminar on Monday nights. Students from North Park University who are enrolled in a course on intentional Christian community join us. By the spring of 2007, numbers were high enough to demand that meals be separated into five different Reba households before regrouping for the seminar. During discussion time, students often hear stories from RPF members on topics like food practices, kingdom economics, and spiritual practices.

The ways we show love to people around us stem from relationships formed by individual members as they see needs in surrounding neighborhoods. For example, many community members participate in a bimonthly meal with the Sunshine group, which began meeting about twenty years ago when members felt called to reach out to a nearby residence for people with mental disabilities and illnesses.

We share food through the "House of Manna," a garage where community members receive and distribute food donated by bakeries and grocery stores. A few years ago community members organized Community Supported Agriculture shares with our sister community Plow Creek Farm and Fellowship in rural Tiskilwa, Illinois.<sup>7</sup> Now, during the summer, the same garage distributes fruits and vegetables. Across the alley you can walk down some steps to "The Pick," a store full of free, donated clothing and household items.

The list of RPF-related ministries ranges from an affordable housing ministry in Evanston to international outreach in places like Santa Marta, El Salvador. In between, there are ministries that tell the story of people committed to serve their neighbors.

Our attempt to love one another as we follow the teachings of Jesus is not easy, and we often fail. Our failure may cause us to wonder if we are effective witnesses to God's kingdom and action in our world. During those times, we must say honestly, as Wendell Berry does, that we may never be able to know the results of our "local affection" in ways that would satisfy the realms of academia or business. "The ways of love tend to be secretive,"

he writes, “and, even to the lovers themselves, somewhat inscrutable.”<sup>8</sup> Many times, living faithfully and joyfully in Christian community necessitates standing in the mystery of inscrutable love.

## NOTES

1 Heather Munn, “What Do We Believe?” *Reba Place Fellowship Handbook* (Evanston, IL: Reba Place Fellowship, 2003). “We believe all the basics of what Christians believe; the Apostles’ Creed pretty much sums it up,” Munn begins. Available online at [www.rebaplacefellowship.org/Resources/Belief%20Statements/Munn%20%20What%20We%20Believe](http://www.rebaplacefellowship.org/Resources/Belief%20Statements/Munn%20%20What%20We%20Believe) (accessed May 19, 2010).

2 David Janzen and Allan Howe, “RPF Mission Statement,” *Reba Place Fellowship Handbook* (Evanston, IL: Reba Place Fellowship, February 2, 2005). Available online at [www.rebaplacefellowship.org/Who\\_We\\_Are/Mission\\_Statement](http://www.rebaplacefellowship.org/Who_We_Are/Mission_Statement) (accessed May 19, 2010).

3 Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, second revised edition (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 298.

4 John Miller, *The Way of Love*, revised edition (1960; reprinted in *Reba Place Fellowship Handbook*, [Evanston, IL: Reba Place Fellowship, 2000]).

5 *School(s) For Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, edited by Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005), 87.

6 Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 255.

7 For more information on Plow Creek Farm and Fellowship, see [www.plowcreek.org](http://www.plowcreek.org).

8 Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 24.

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# From L'Abri to The Landing

BY EMILY RODGERS

None of us intended to build a Christian community house. Some were still in school while others were navigating first jobs, but all of us needed a place to live mid-semester. After moving into The Landing, however, we discovered that we were becoming more like brothers and sisters to one another.

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Passersby may see nothing remarkable about the boxy structure—a two-story, red-brick duplex at the end of the block. “The Landing,” as we like to call it, looks a bit forlorn, like the last piece of cherry cobbler in the corner of a rectangular baking dish. Yet it has become dear to us—five quarter-lifers who established an intentional community in this urban setting—in a way that none of us expected, much less planned.

The name of our house was inspired by the flock of doves and several owls nesting in the pecan trees beside the upper apartment’s balcony. This domestic menagerie reminded us of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem “Peace,” in which he characterizes the spiritual gift as a “wild wooddove.” Hopkins concludes:

...And when Peace here does house  
he comes with work to do, he does not come to coo,  
he comes to brood and sit.<sup>1</sup>

In the spirit of this poem, we christened our home a place of active peace and determined to create a haven of it for ourselves and anyone else in need of restoration.

Recently, the deep importance of our little brick house became clear to us when we hosted a friend from Minneapolis for “house dinner”—our daily practice of munching on a hearty evening meal that one of us has prepared. “I told some of my neighbors in Minneapolis about what you do here at The

Landing, taking turns to cook dinner each weeknight,” our guest began. “They felt inspired by the idea; so now my neighborhood hosts weekly ‘community dinners’ in our homes, based upon a monthly rotation. We all love it! We are finally starting to know one another. And the idea came directly from you guys.” It dawned on us: by the simple steps of sharing a meal each night, forming the *Landing Literary Society* to discuss one another’s art, cultivating a backyard garden complete with chickens, and adhering to the liturgical church calendar, we are discovering a communal pattern of living that enriches our lives and, as our guest revealed, the lives of others. We are pushing back the culture’s unrelenting press toward individualism and independence that leaves little room for what Dietrich Bonhoeffer aptly calls “life together.”<sup>2</sup>

None of us initially intended to build a Christian community house. Some were still in school while others were navigating first jobs, but all of us needed to find a place to live at an odd time mid-semester. Though we came from different family backgrounds, parts of the country, and Christian denominations, we had similar longings for community. After moving into The Landing, we began sharing our stories and, through that experience, became more like brothers and sisters to one another. We began to forge the sort of common memory that, Wendell Berry warns, is often lacking today:

[W]hen a community loses its memory, its members no longer know one another. How can they know one another if they have forgotten or have never learned one another’s stories? If they do not know one another’s stories, how can they know whether or not to trust one another? People who do not trust one another do not help one another, and moreover they fear one another.<sup>3</sup>

Though our dinner talk might range from the local water filtration system to Victorian English literature to indie song lyrics and beyond, the fabric of each conversation is storytelling. Our common memory informs our self-reflection and decision making, and engenders mutual trust and respect.

While the members of The Landing do not claim to be adherents of New Monasticism in its totality, our common way of life adheres to several marks of the movement. Four concepts – hospitality to the stranger (Mark 3), humble submission to Christ’s body, the Church (Mark 5), nurturing common life among members of an intentional community (Mark 7), and care for the plot of God’s earth given to us (Mark 10) – serve as pillars of our small community.<sup>4</sup>



My appreciation for a common life in a Christian community developed around another dinner table. Or, I should say, a picnic blanket, surrounded by individuals of various ages from all over the world who had gathered at a sprawling manor house in Greatham, England. English wildflowers bloomed against the old wall that borders the property, the exclamations of children could be heard as they played amidst the gardens, and the clatter of dishes

emanated from an open kitchen window nearby. My companions—a teenage girl from Scotland, an artist from Cambridge, a college student from Mississippi, and a married couple from Brazil—talked between themselves as I observed the scene. Although I do not recall the points of their discussion, I realized then that people everywhere long for the opportunity to express themselves authentically without fear of judgment. To return to Berry's phrase, they long to "know one another's stories." This is why they come to the Manor House.

The Manor House sits on the campus of English L'Abri, a branch of the original L'Abri Fellowship founded by Francis and Edith Schaeffer in Switzerland during the early 1950s.<sup>5</sup> Although the Schaeffers' teaching remains an integral thread among the many strands of dialogue that take place within these communities, workers and tutors engage all genuine questions seriously regardless of the theological or philosophical leanings of the questioner. The beauty of the L'Abri model emerges as intellectual pursuits and discussions intertwine seamlessly with practical chores and activities. For L'Abri workers and students, everything is spiritual; integration remains central. "You could say that [L'Abri] is a community built around homes that offers hospitality through the act of welcoming strangers," the English L'Abri Web site explains.<sup>6</sup> Students engage in daily morning prayers, discussion lunches, tutorials with workers, laundry duty, and playing volleyball during afternoon tea, among other things. Some guests remain for only a week while others stay for an entire three-month term. The liturgy of daily life paces forward as individuals come and go, bringing refreshment and remembrances of the good, the true, and the beautiful.

Small vases of fresh flowers greet students as they gather at the breakfast table, demonstrating that we have been given life anew and that the God who clothes the grass of the field will provide abundantly for us as well. Edith Schaeffer called this restorative attention to detail the "hidden art" of cultivating a home.<sup>7</sup> Art, along with

storytelling and spiritual formation, breathes life into the L'Abri community. If you were to ask me why L'Abri has not only flourished for over sixty years but has branched out into nine countries, this would be my reply: L'Abri (which translates "the shelter") advances a vision of life as something sacred and communal, a vision of art as something beautiful and worshipful, a vision of story as something valuable and essential, and a vision of peace as something "that comes with work to do."

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**L'Abri ("the shelter") advances a vision of life as sacred and communal, a vision of art as beautiful and worshipful, a vision of story as valuable and essential, and a vision of peace as something "that comes with work to do."**

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Roll the tape forward a year or two, and look at where some of the individuals who sat around the picnic blanket now serve. The artist from Cambridge returned to school to finish her degree before spending time as L'Abri's artist in residence. The college student from Mississippi left graduate school to become a teacher in a classical Christian academy, following a dream that was born during her time at L'Abri. The husband and wife from Brazil returned to their country to help establish one of the newest branches of L'Abri outside the city of Belo Horizonte.

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**The unity of new monastic communities transcends physical location. Although some are blessed to remain together for many years, others dissipate as members recognize that they have been equipped to serve elsewhere.**

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As for me, I decided to pursue a Masters degree in higher education administration so that I could be positioned to establish L'Abri-like communities on university campuses. The opportunities for translating the L'Abri experience to university settings are endless. The Collegiate Way, for example, is a movement

in higher education to reclaim the Oxford and Cambridge (and Harvard and Yale) tradition of building residential colleges in lieu of the modern college dormitory.<sup>8</sup> Residential colleges foster community life with distinctive architectural elements, including a college library, classrooms, a quad for fellowship, a great hall for dining, and junior and senior common rooms, to name a few. I returned to Baylor University after my summer at L'Abri to live in Brooks Residential College as a senior.

When my friends (who fully embraced life off-campus) asked why I wanted to live in the College, I explained that I valued the commitment of faculty and administrators to cultivate an intimate community where students could develop those disciplines of body, mind, and soul that increase the capacity for human flourishing. Daily morning and evening prayers, Tuesday teas with the faculty master, Sunday community dinners, and annual traditions and ceremonies all contribute to a sense of fellowship under the Word at Brooks.

Colleges and universities across the country are adopting this residential model because they have seen the significant positive effects on the scholarship and personal development of students living in residential colleges. This can also be accomplished on a smaller scale in independent homes on or near campus. Hill House, a Christian study center located near the University of Texas at Austin, serves the local academic community by providing a place for quiet study, reflection, and conversation on topics of faith and learning within a culture of care.<sup>9</sup> Headed by Greg and Mary Jane Grooms, a couple



who worked at Swiss L'Abri, Hill House hosts film nights, lectures, and community meals throughout the year. Much like The Landing, Hill House provides peaceful shelter from the urban rush to undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty while providing resources that equip them to treat all of life as spiritual.

Since the fifth mark of New Monasticism sets forth the importance of communal submission to Christ's body, the Church, it seems appropriate that local congregations should participate in creating intentional communities where people can gather to share their stories and adopt a common rule of life. Multiple congregations around the country are partnering with the Fellows Initiative to financially support intentional communities where recent college graduates train to lead lives of faithfulness and excellence in the professional world.<sup>10</sup> For instance, at the Trinity Fellows Program in Charlottesville, Virginia, twelve fellows receive theological training and mentorship from mature Christian men and women while applying their learning in the community and marketplace. The fellows live with a host family rather than in a community house, but participate together in seminar classes and service projects.

Congregations can cultivate similar initiatives among their membership. My own church recently established LifeTogether groups (based on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's text by that name) that meet weekly to practice contemplative prayer, discuss a common reading, and occasionally share a meal. Ultimately, these groups exist to provide sanctuary and accountability for those who desire to rediscover the integration of mind, body, and spirit within a faithful community built upon the teachings of the early Christians. Although these groups are not residentially-based by design, members might choose to find homes in the same neighborhood in order to nurture a common life and be well-positioned to offer hospitality to strangers.



At the beginning of *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer quotes the Psalmist: "Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1).<sup>11</sup> The importance of dwelling with one another cannot be emphasized enough. The Psalmist is careful to add, however, that we must dwell together *in unity* if we wish to attain the good. Thus a LifeTogether neighborhood, a residential college, a L'Abri, or a Landing should not be considered mere dwellings, but places of true fellowship, peace, storytelling, and unity.

This unity transcends physical location. Although some communities are blessed to remain together for many years, others dissipate as the various members recognize that they have been equipped to serve elsewhere. This is not an occasion for sadness but for rejoicing. As we experience the changing of seasons at The Landing, we see many of our wood doves and other fowl come and go and are reminded that our time here is temporary. We will finish graduate school or find a new job, and will need to leave The

Landing. Life together shapes and prepares us for life apart. If community teaches us to cultivate the disciplines of mind, body, and spirit that increase our capacity to flourish as disciples, then we should be prepared to share this vision with others when given the opportunity.

New monastic communities are not cloistered communities; they extend into the world with transformative and restorative strength. Bonhoeffer expressed so well the great blessing of life together in intentional Christian communities:

It is easily forgotten that the community of Christians is a gift of grace from the kingdom of God, a gift that can be taken from us any day – that the time still separating us from the most profound loneliness may be brief indeed. Therefore, let those who until now have had the privilege of living a Christian life together with other Christians praise God’s grace from the bottom of their hearts. Let them thank God on their knees and realize: it is grace, nothing but grace, that we are still permitted to live in the community of Christians today.<sup>12</sup>

## NOTES

1 Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Peace,” *Hopkins: Poems and Prose* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 75, lines 9-11.

2 Bonhoeffer coins this phrase to describe daily life at the Finkewalde Seminary. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* and *Prayerbook of the Bible*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 5 (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1996).

3 Wendell Berry, “The Work of a Local Culture,” *What Are People For?* (San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1990), 157.

4 For more information, see *School(s) For Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, edited by The Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005), and the Web site [www.newmonasticism.org](http://www.newmonasticism.org).

5 Edith Schaeffer, *L’Abri* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1969).

6 See [www.labri.org/england](http://www.labri.org/england) (accessed June 8, 2010).

7 Edith Schaeffer, *The Hidden Art of Homemaking* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971).

8 More information, see [collegiateway.org](http://collegiateway.org) (accessed June 8, 2010).

9 More information, see [hillhouseaustin.org](http://hillhouseaustin.org) (accessed June 8, 2010).

10 More information, see [www.thefellowsinitiative.com](http://www.thefellowsinitiative.com) (accessed June 8, 2010).

11 Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 27.

12 *Ibid.*, 30.



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# Learning from Monks

BY J. WARREN SMITH

**Scholars have reexamined old caricatures of early Christian ascetics and the significance of monasticism in our common past. In the ancient wisdom of the desert mothers and fathers, they have discovered a resource for contemporary Christians.**

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**R**eflecting the anti-Catholic character of much Protestant scholarship in the early twentieth century (and anti-Protestant polemic of Catholic scholars), historian Hans Lietzmann in his analysis of early Christian monasticism quipped that the *only* thing Christian about the monastic tradition was its focus on sin. Over the last twenty to thirty years, in a new ecumenical spirit, Catholic and Protestant scholars have reexamined old caricatures of early Christian ascetics and the significance of monasticism in the history of our common past. The fruit of this scholarship has begun to flow beyond the academy to pastors and lay people through books that present the writings of the desert mothers and fathers as ancient wisdom that is a resource for contemporary Christians.



One of the first scholars to popularize the desert mothers and fathers was Roberta C. Bondi, who taught church history in the Candler School of Theology at Emory University. In *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987, 112 pp., \$15.00), Bondi introduces the wisdom of the desert to an audience suspicious of asceticism. As one highly educated friend confessed, “Before I read *To Love as God Loves*, I thought monks were just a bunch of body haters.” Bondi’s pedagogical brilliance lies in her anticipation of modern prejudices against ascetics – misperceptions she dispels – and in her use of the mothers and fathers’ sayings to illustrate how these fourth-century Christians experienced

essentially the same struggles that modern Christians face. Imitating the spiritual mentors of the desert whom she studies, Bondi writes in complete sympathy with her readers, speaking not from the lofty position of the professor's podium, but as a fellow struggling Christian who simply relates the insights she has learned from these monks over the years. She describes the

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**The insight of the fourth-century desert monks, says Roberta Bondi, is that Christ-like love and humility “provide human beings with a realistic and powerful way of disarming such a violent society as theirs and ours.”**

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challenge that we contemporary American Christians face: Christ's example of self-emptying love is in conflict with our culture's focus on “individual self-development” – what Ayn Rand famously called “the virtue of selfishness.”

The insight of the monks, says Bondi, is that Christ-like love and humility “provide human beings with a realistic and powerful way of

disarming such a violent society as theirs and ours. For without love and humility life dissipates and the self fails to achieve true self-development” (p. 10). There is no human flourishing in the fullest sense except where we love and submit to the God for whose companionship we were made. Once we understand that the ascetic life is nothing other than learning to love as God loves then we can understand the disciplines of the monk – e.g., fasting, selling off possessions, foregoing sleep, living in the desert – not as the heroic pursuit of virtue for its own sake and for one's own glorification, but as the means for learning how to love God and neighbor rightly. The disciplines of the desert teach us to love because they open us to moments of grace in which God gives us knowledge of ourselves, of others, and of his own divinity – knowledge that arouses longing for God, humility in the face of our own sins, and compassion for fellow sinners whom we find difficult to love.

Bondi astutely recognizes that one of the challenges for modern readers of the desert mothers and fathers is their idiosyncratic language. Words like “perfection” and “humility,” common in the parlance of monks, are frequently stumbling stones for contemporary readers because we misunderstand their meaning. For example, we have equated “humility” with “selfless love” in which an individual feels compelled to sacrifice her desires, aspirations, and sense of self-worth for the sake of serving parents, spouse, and children. This perverted sense of humility renders the family an idol supplanting God as the sole object of unconditional devotion. Rather, humility is the fruit of grace that grows out of the recognition of our sin and the need for repentance and healing.



In *An Introduction to the Desert Fathers*, Cascade Companions (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007, 117 pp., \$16.00), Jason Byassee, a contributing editor of *The Christian Century* and the executive director of *Leadership Education at Duke Divinity School* (LE@DD), provides a guide for laity and clergy who have just begun to study monastic literature. He explains the modern interest in asceticism as a longing among many American Christians for a form of church that has not been co-opted by a consumerist culture, for a form of Christian community whose simplicity of life provides a space to encounter the transcendent God in the midst of one's daily routine. Byassee relates how he found this sort of community in a Trappist monastery in Moncks Corner, South Carolina. There the worship was "as exquisite as any I could imagine." The effect was transformative; "It made me love the psalms anew, and to want to memorize and chant Scripture and ancient prayers. It made me, in short, a better Protestant (!), if by that we mean someone committed to a love of Scripture and personal piety" (p. 5). Byassee's description of the monks of Moncks Corner orients readers to these ancient texts by reminding us that monks are not artifacts of the exotic and arcane world of late antiquity, but a living tradition practiced today on the banks of the Ashley and Cooper Rivers just outside of Charleston.

An ideal text for readers of Bondi who want to explore further the wisdom of the desert, Byassee's *Introduction* examines topics such as quiet, non-judgment, unceasing prayer, and charity. With probing questions at the end of each chapter, the book is designed for church discussion groups. Byassee writes with the grace of a journalist who is ever mindful of his reader. He is upfront about elements of monastic life that are strange; yet writing in a familiar idiom, he allows modern readers to make connections between their own spiritual questions and those of ancient monastics.



*Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another* (Boston, MA: New Seeds, 2005, 192 pp., \$14.00) by Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, is a true gift for the building up of the body of Christ. In the logic of monastic community, Williams finds a compelling refutation of modern individualistic spirituality that suffers from the delusion that we can grow in holiness and love "in abstraction from the actual business of living the body of Christ, living in concrete community" (p. 11). He opposes the caricature of monasticism as a form of escapism that flees temptation by fleeing the world. Monks who went to the desert were not escaping the temptations of the real world but seeking to be more attentive to the disordered and uncharitable impulses of the soul by removing the distractions that divert our attention from stirrings of our own soul. They did this by entering into the messy situation of living in the close quarters of a monastery so that they might come to know and

imitate God's forbearing love. For life in the desert monastery is not mere co-existence achieved through learning to grit one's teeth and bite one's tongue. Rather, it is discovering how intertwined our lives are with fellow sinners in Christ's body. Williams' thesis is that the wisdom of the desert the Church needs to recover is that there is no salvation for me as an individual apart from the salvation of my sister or brother. As Antony, the fourth-century pioneer of desert monasticism, taught, "Our life and our death is with our neighbor. If we win our brother, we win God. If we cause our brother to stumble, we have sinned against Christ" (p. 13).

The greatest challenge facing monks was self-righteousness. After all, they gave up all the goods of home to seek perfection and holiness. Having made this sacrifice, they had to live with other monks who brought their emotional and spiritual baggage from the world into the monastery. Their temptation was to respond to the sins of their brother with indignation and judgment. Yet in our judgment and sense of moral superiority, the monks recognized, we lose both our own life and that of our brother. Williams finds the alternative in the insight of Moses the Black, "The monk must die to his neighbor," meaning the monk renounces the power to judge his brother (p. 14). For, when we judge others, Williams explains, we try to manage our brother's life rather than our own and so fall into the sin of "inattentiveness," that is, a failure to be conscious of our own sins. Inattentiveness born of judging others was antithetical to their reason for going to the desert in the first place. By contrast, when we are open and honest about our sins, we become a place where God happens. The disclosure of our sin reveals to our sister God's mercy toward us, thereby offering her the same hope of God's gracious forgiveness.



No scholarly account of the desert mothers and fathers is as engaging as reading the sayings for oneself. Fortunately, today there are a number of excellent translations that make the primary texts of the desert eminently accessible to modern readers. Benedicta Ward's translation in the *Penguin Classics* series, *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, revised edition (New York: Penguin Books, 2003, 240 pp., \$14.00), is an anthology of the sayings divided thematically into chapters on topics such as progress in perfection, lust, nothing done for show, charity, and visions. Every fall I assign my first year Church History students a sampling of the sayings from Ward's translation. When I later ask students which readings they liked best that semester, they almost universally point to Ward's as the text they found most accessible and that spoke most clearly to issues that challenge them in their journey.

Laura Swan's *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001, 224 pp., \$13.95) provides a collection of sayings by the ammas, or mothers, who led communities for female ascetics. After providing an overview of the setting of female monasticism, Swan gives translations and commentary on sayings of ammas such

as the obscure Matrona and the well-educated and beautiful Syncletica, who after her parents' deaths took her blind sister to the family tomb where together they embarked upon the ascetic life. (Beauty and intelligence are commonly attributed to female ascetics to make the point that these women could have married and entered into a comfortable life as the mistress of a socially prominent family, but freely chose to give up such illusory, worldly goods in order to seek heavenly treasure in the desert.) In later chapters, Swan provides a veritable encyclopedia of female ascetics, well-known and obscure, making this volume indispensable for scholars as well as interested laity.



For readers who are stimulated spiritually and intellectually by the sayings of early Christian ascetics and want to study further, William Harmless' *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 512 pp., \$39.95) provides a survey of Egyptian asceticism from the pioneering figures, Paul and Antony, to the later theologians, Evagrius Ponticus and John Cassian, who explained the theological rationale foundational to the movement.

The book is divided into three sections. The first part recounts the social, political, and ecclesial background of Egyptian monasticism, giving the reader a picture of life in Alexandria, the center of urban Egyptian culture that the monks rejected. It also offers an overview of the theological and ecclesial disputes that dominated the fourth and fifth centuries and influenced ascetic theology that developed around monasteries. Part two focuses on the classic texts about famous monks, such as Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, or by the monks themselves, such as the sayings preserved in the *Apophthegmata* (the Sayings) or the monastic rule Pachomius wrote to order the corporate life in his monasteries. The final part turns to the ascetic theology of Evagrius and Cassian. How was the character of monastic life influenced by monks' beliefs about sin, human nature, the work of Christ, and salvation? How did asceticism enable monks to enter more fully into the life of holiness made possible by Christ's triumph over death and sin? Harmless saves for the end his discussion of contemporary scholarly opinion about Egyptian monasticism. This volume is as assessable to the novice as it is insightful for the professional.



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# “We Need Each Other and We Need God”

BY ELIZABETH D. SANDS WISE

If we fail to explore what monasticism, old and new, has to say to the Church and to us in particular, we are not taking our Christian calling seriously. These four books, written by radicals and about radicals, help us decipher Christ’s call to community.

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When reading about monasticism, we may be tempted to make excuses for ourselves. We think, “That’s really great for *them*—those *radicals*, those *young people*. But we have jobs, families, and houses, and it would be really impractical to live differently. God is not calling us to be radical.”

We make our excuses and go back to life as we knew it. But when we put the books back on the shelf, we miss an opportunity. If we do not ask what monasticism in its traditional and new manifestations might have to say to the Church generally and to *us* in particular, then we are not taking our Christian calling seriously. The goal of these four books, written by radicals and about radicals, is to help the Church decipher Christ’s call to community.

## **A CALLING TO THE SLUMS**

An increasing number of young Christians—single, married, and some with children—are leaving material and physical security to move into slum neighborhoods around the globe. Does God call people to make this crazy leap of faith? How does this “movement” fit in with the testimony of Scripture and ecclesial history? These are the questions behind Scott A. Bessenecker’s *The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World’s Poor* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006, 199 pp., \$16.00).

*The New Friars* does more than retell touching and tragic stories of poverty; it calls the Church, the whole Church, to action, even if we are not called to



the slums. "While the qualities that are emerging among new friar communities seem radical, they are ones all of us would do well to embrace," Bessenecker writes (p. 172). The heart of the book focuses on five radical "qualities" of the new friar movement: incarnation, devotion, community, mission, and marginalization (pp. 20-22). Primarily using first-hand accounts of life in slum communities, Bessenecker sprinkles in his own encounters with poverty (through Global Urban Trek, a program he helped found to offer college students the opportunity to dwell in the slums as a nontraditional break between semesters), as well as historic monastic lives and biblical examples. A discussion of the devotional life, for instance, incorporates Christ's parable of the goats and the sheep, and histories of St. Patrick and St. Brigid of Kildare. When he discusses poverty, which, not surprisingly, plays a central role in the book, Bessenecker reviews contemporary theories of the push and pull forces that make the poverty cycle so difficult to break; yet he also connects poverty to the life of Jesus and his disciples and recounts the histories of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Clare, who traded material and social privilege in exchange for downward mobility.

Bessenecker captures the ordinariness of those involved in the new friar movement: "For those of you feeling like you could never be so noble, radical and spiritual, let me assure you that [the new friars] are made of flesh and blood and carry in them the same tendencies to mess up as you or I do" (p. 97). Such direct addresses to the reader are not uncommon, and Bessenecker does not shy away from the painful nature of his message. He makes us uncomfortable, for example, when he calls his readers "those of us who can afford to spend fifteen dollars on a book" (p. 30) and describes a task as "even more intense than can be appreciated by someone reading this in comfort" (p. 48).

Bessenecker's chapter organization and format – which features attractive break-out quotes, photographs, and artwork, as well as scholarly citations moved to the thorough endnotes – make the book an easy read, appropriate for Sunday school or leisure reading. Bessenecker does not forget the pragmatic either: Appendix A covers "How to Join the New Friars."

Maybe vocational poverty is a particular, rather than universal, calling. But after reading this book, do not be surprised if you find yourself standing at the coffee counter, feeling a little convicted: that hot drink you just ordered cost more than what half the world's 2.8 billion workers each earned today. *The New Friars* will make you think in those terms.

## **REAL COMMUNITY AND THE CHURCH**

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove's *New Monasticism: What It Has to Say to Today's Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008, pp. 147, \$14.99) is, as claimed on the cover, "an insider's perspective." Wilson-Hartgrove opens by confessing, "I'm part of a movement called new monasticism" (p. 9). As a radical concerned about the Church, he begins where Bessenecker leaves off:

the times we are now living in are difficult ones. Wherever Wilson-Hartgrove travels, “people agree that something is wrong in American Christianity” (p. 9), but “once we realize that it’s hard to be Christian in America, it’s easier to remember that none of us can do it on our own. We need each other, and we need God” (p. 21).

Wilson-Hartgrove uncovers the potential for genuine community in a not-so-distant Christian past: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s underground seminary at Finkenwalde, Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement, Clarence Jordan and Koinonia Farms, the Bruderhof communities, and John Perkins working in the civil rights movement. These stories of community form the backdrop for a variety of new monastic communities, like Wilson-Hartgrove’s, that are attempting to discover what it means “to follow the Prince of Peace—to be his body” in a world that is broken and at war (p. 35). Sometimes that might look radical, as it does when we learn that Jonathan, his wife Leah, and others participated in the Christian Peacemaker Teams in Bagdad in 2003. And sometimes it means simply coming together to brainstorm new ways of doing community; that is how the “twelve marks of new monasticism” were first articulated.

What does New Monasticism have to say to congregations today? The main message of Wilson-Hartgrove’s book is community, community, community. When discussing the story of creation, God’s chosen people, and God’s plan of salvation, Wilson-Hartgrove interprets them all through the lens of community. He takes to heart his college professor’s wisdom that “most of the you’s in scripture are ya’lls.... The Bible isn’t addressed to a person but to a people” (pp. 57-58). How do we learn to be the people of God that we are created and called to be? The last five chapters glean practices from the New Monasticism movement to help congregations answer that question.

For example, Wilson-Hartgrove suggests that “sometimes you have to relocate in order to really see the world and reimagine your role within it” (p. 77). New monastics’ literal relocation of their households to urban or rural abandoned spaces brings into focus the margins of society, broken social systems, and systemic evils, “teaching us that God is at work in the people and places that society has given up on” (p. 85). But many congregations cannot relocate literally and, as Wilson-Hartgrove repeatedly states, not everyone is called to live in a new monastic community. Still, small steps can be taken along the “relocation” lines. Don’t be afraid “to learn with and from” those on the margins, he encourages us. Be renewed in the desert.

Or consider the principle of shared economic resources: how could a more generous approach to personal resources change the American church? Why are we unaware of each other’s financial situations, especially our needs? The best way for a congregation to “get the love of God deep in its bones,” according to Wilson-Hartgrove, is to start “paying more attention to church members.” He offers a new slogan: “Fewer Services, More Service” (p. 138).

What might be most surprising to skeptics of new monasticism is Wilson-Hartgrove's final principle: *we need each other*. Calling congregations to walk alongside this movement echoes Bessenecker's charge, but Wilson-Hartgrove makes it more explicit: "Maybe the most important thing new monasticism has to say to the church, is that we need it" (p. 141). New Monasticism is not offering an alternative to congregational life. Nor is it a church within the Church. Wilson-Hartgrove articulates what the Church as a whole can learn from the new monastic commitment to genuine community, though he importantly reminds us that the new monastics need the Church, too. "We need each other, and we need God" (p. 21).

### LIFE IN COMMUNITY

Rutba House, a "Christian community of hospitality, peacemaking, and discipleship" (p. vii) in Durham, North Carolina, was founded in 2003 by young, idealistic Christians, including Jonathan and Leah Wilson-Hartgrove. The next year Rutba House hosted a conversation about life in community and about what it means to be the church gathered. The "12 Marks" were articulated during that conversation, and the book that would eventually result — *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005, 173 pp., \$22.00) — was edited by Rutba House. Most of the fourteen contributors to the collection who "[root] the convictions [of the twelve marks] in our Scriptures and the history of the church, and [provide] stories that display the kinds of faithfulness the marks describe" (p. x), are members of new

monastic communities; some are writers, theologians, or academics (like *Christian Reflection* review editor, Norman Wirzba); some are farmers or teachers; all attempt to define in concrete ways the potential for genuine Christian community in the new monastic setting.

What are the twelve "marks"?† Many are expected: relocation, generosity,

hospitality, and the like. A few will not surprise readers familiar with the New Monasticism movement: commitments to the Church, to peacemaking and nonviolence, to caring for the earth, to spiritual disciplines. But some of the marks, like "Lament for Racial Divisions Within the Church and Our Communities Combined with the Active Pursuit of a Just Reconciliation" or "Support for Celibate Singles Alongside Monogamous Married Couples and

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**What might be most surprising to skeptics of New Monasticism is Wilson-Hartgrove's final principle: *we need each other*. New Monasticism is not offering an alternative to congregational life. Nor is it a church within the Church.**

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Their Children,” might surprise readers. Wisdom is offered from lived experience—stories from the authors’ own lives in new monastic communities or from others’—and, of course, from quite a bit of Scripture.

“Who should read this book?” is a less easy question to answer. Is it primarily geared for people who do not know about New Monasticism but are interested in it, sort of like a textbook? Not really. Is it an instruction manual for those who want to start their own new monastic community? Not exactly. And it certainly is not an idealized snapshot of life in community, trying to convince readers that this is the only or, even, the best way to be a Christian. (The contributors confess the difficulties and struggles of life in community, alongside their testimonies of hope and faithfulness.) Rutba House suggests that New Monasticism, and hence each essay in this book, “hopes to spark ecumenical conversation in churches across the country about how we should live together as a pilgrim people of God sojourning in a place and time where the powers of darkness still struggle to maintain their fading dominion” (p. x). In this sense, it is very similar to both Bessenecker’s and Wilson-Hartgrove’s books. *School(s) for Conversion* does not attempt to make practical suggestions for integrating the twelve marks into congregations, so it reads less like Sunday school material than the first two books, but it is thought-provoking. And if you are curious to learn the ins and outs of a few new monastic communities, *School(s) for Conversion* is a good place to start.

Similar to *School(s) for Conversion*, a more recent collection of essays by Jon Stock, Tim Otto, and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove is organized around general monastic principles aimed at articulating what life in community does, can, or should look like. Rather than “marks,” *Inhabiting the Church: Biblical Wisdom for a New Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007, 129 pp., \$18.00) uses Benedict’s *Rule of Life* as a springboard to address vows, conversion, obedience, and stability. Stock, Otto, and Wilson-Hartgrove introduce the essays by suggesting that it is their “hope that new monastic communities will benefit from Benedictine wisdom” (p. 5), but their conclusion hints that they do “trust [the essays] have something to say to the church as a whole” (p. 121). And, potentially, they do. But unlike *The New Friars* and *New Monasticism*, *Inhabiting the Church* does not offer many practical ways to rethink the roles of vows, conversion, obedience, or stability in a more general congregational setting. Though Stock wonders about a communion table shared by church members who barely know each other (“How can a place offer authentic welcome to the stranger and the pilgrim if all are strangers to one another?” [p. 109]), in general, practical concerns are absent from this book.

A short book packed full of Scripture and story, all organized around the potential of Benedict’s work, *Inhabiting the Church* convincingly argues that we could all use a little more of the *Rule* in our lives. As the church in America, we shy away from commitment and obedience, afraid of the infringement on our personal space, time, and comfort. Certainly we need

to hear these words. Though not a book of practical suggestions, *Inhabiting the Church* can help modern-day Christians both inside and outside new monastic communities wonder together how church life could be different. It can prompt conversations about how we can add a little more habit, or discipleship-forming practice, to the church. And that might not be such a bad thing.

### **TENDING TO A CULTURE OF GRACE**

Though they all call us to action, these four books do not suggest that moving into the inner cities or living in monastic communities are universal callings. Wilson-Hartgrove challenges, "The church is called to be a people who love one another and make a life together, tending to a culture of grace in a world broken by sin. The truth is that when we fail to do that, we fail to be the church" (*New Monasticism*, p. 146).

This much is clear: we are not all going to be radicals. But we do have a calling, and as the Church, we need to rethink our very notions of community – how we can support, love, and admit our need for each other as members of Christ's body, how we can "make a life together, tending to a culture of grace." After all, how can we expect to be the Church if we do not know what community is?

The answer is obvious: we can't.

### **NOTE**

† Visit [www.newmonasticism.org](http://www.newmonasticism.org) for more information about scheduling a weekend-long retreat that uses this book as a primary text to learn about New Monasticism.



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