

“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.

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

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.

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 for more information about scheduling a weekend-long retreat that uses this book as a primary text to learn about New Monasticism.



ELIZABETH D. SANDS WISE

is a writer and editor in Georgetown, Kentucky.