



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 A Vision So Old It Looks New
(*Monasticism Old and New*, pp. 11-18)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 "We Need Each Other and We Need God"
(*Monasticism Old and New*, pp. 88-93)
- 📖 Learning from Monks
(*Monasticism Old and New*, pp. 83-87)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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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.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 14:25-33

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)

Reflection

"Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple," Jesus told the crowds that "were travelling with him" (Luke 14:25, 27). He did not say these hard words to people with only a casual interest in his work or to those who rejected him. Yet if being Jesus' disciple is really as difficult as building a skyscraper or launching a war, then it is much harder than most of us ever expected or are prepared to take on. We would need a committed team, and a plan, to follow Jesus.

This insight into the true cost of discipleship is the heart of the monastic impulse, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove believes. Whenever Christians are greatly tempted to reduce discipleship to merely fitting into the surrounding culture and embracing its rules for success – which happens just about everywhere and all the time – God begins to draw them to create, or join, or just learn from intentional Christian communities that can maintain a more radical, counter-cultural vision of discipleship.

Wilson-Hartgrove outlines three creative and defining moments in the rich history of communal monasticism.

- ▶ *Antony's revival.* Though monks existed from the earliest days, they were better known and their numbers increased when Athanasius wrote *Life of Antony* soon after the great monk's death. This ancient bestseller tells how the young Antony (c. 251-356) sold his property, resolved to learn from hermits, retired to the desert to fight demons and the temptations of the Roman Empire, and became the most sought-after Christian in Egypt. When he returned to the city of Alexandria, a revival broke out. "And so, from then on, there were monasteries in the mountains," Athanasius writes, "and the desert was made a city by the monks, who left their own people and registered themselves for the citizenship in the heavens." Wilson-Hartgrove observes that fourth-century desert Christians like Antony "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



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this world are in transition. They introduced the monastic impulse to relocate and re-imagine our role from the margins of society.”

- ▶ *Benedict’s “school for the lord’s service.”* After the Visigoths sacked Rome in 410, a social crisis gripped the Empire: its forms of life were not sustainable. In this context, Benedict of Nursia (480-547) crafted a Christian model of community and mutual service in his *Regula*, or *Rule of Life*, around the idea “to pray and to work.” In Benedictine communities, “Rich and poor were treated as equals under the Rule, serving one another out of reverence for Christ,” notes Wilson-Hartgrove. “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.”
- ▶ *Radical Protestant monasticism.* “We forget that much of the so-called Protestant Reformation was driven by the monastic impulse,” Wilson-Hartgrove says. When Michael Sattler (c. 1490-1527) was dissatisfied with efforts to reform the Benedictine monastery where he lived, he joined the Anabaptists and became the main author of the *Schleitheim Confession* (1527). This defining document called for “voluntary membership in community, a common way of life, the disciplined pursuit of holiness, and leadership elected by the community,” he notes. “In other words, they wanted a church that looked like Benedict’s monastery.” The monastic impulse gave rise to reform movements from Quakers, Shakers, and Baptists to Pentecostals, evangelicals, and other radical Christian groups, like the slave churches that formed in the “hush harbors” of nineteenth-century southern plantations.

Study Questions

1. What is the heart of the monastic impulse, according to Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove? Discuss a major contribution from each defining moment of monasticism that he sketches.
2. In “Learning from Monks” Warren Smith notes that scholars are removing “old caricatures of early Christian ascetics and the significance of monasticism in the history of our common past.” What are some of these “old caricatures”?
3. Review the twelve “marks” of the New Monasticism movement (www.newmonasticism.org). Which are most appealing? Which seem most difficult to achieve? Why would you need a community to focus on those marks in your discipleship?
4. In “We Need Each Other and We Need God” Elizabeth Sands Wise says, “the Church as a whole can learn from the new monastic commitment to genuine community, though Wilson-Hartgrove importantly reminds us that the new monastics need the Church, too.” How do congregations and monastic communities, old and new, strengthen each other?

Departing Hymn: “Gather Now around His Teachings”

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

A Vision So Old It Looks New

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the monastic impulse as a desire for the sort of community we need in order to embrace the radical demands of Christian discipleship and resist the distortions of culture.
2. To give an overview of the history of Christian monasticism by sketching three of its defining moments.
3. To articulate how monastic communities and congregations need one another.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Monasticism Old and New (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. The departing hymn “Gather Now around His Teachings” can be found on pp. 41-43 of *Monasticism Old and New*.

Begin with a Story

Unlike many American young people who grew up in the 1980s with a sense of living in a post-Christian era, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove was raised in a pious Southern Baptist family in rural North Carolina. “Where I grew up we talked about Jesus like he lived just over the next hill,” he writes. “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.” So, he moved to Washington, DC, to serve as a Senator’s page. “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,” Wilson-Hartgrove remembers. “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.” (*Monasticism Old and New*, pp. 11-12)

Reflecting on that encounter and later experiences, Wilson-Hartgrove felt the call to costly, radical discipleship – not to become a spiritual Lone Ranger, but to live out his faith within intentional Christian community. He experienced the lure of a new monasticism.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for grace and insight for group members to boldly serve the kingdom of God together with their gifts.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 14:25-33 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

In this study Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, a leader in the New Monasticism movement, offers an overview of the history of Christian monasticism. He counters the resistance to the monastic impulse, especially among his fellow evangelicals, by interpreting monastic communities, both classic and new, as redemptive, counter-cultural experiments in radical Christian discipleship.

Two studies will explore in detail themes Wilson-Hartgrove only mentions: the twentieth-century context of new monastic communities (“The Finkenwalde Project”) and historical similarities between monasticism and evangelical reform movements (“Evangelicals and Monastics”). How we can appropriate monastic lessons into congregational life is the topic of two concluding studies, “Ties That Bind: Sharing a Common Rule of Life” and “Snapshots from Home.”

Study Questions

1. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove endorses theologian Walter Capps’s view that “Monasticism [is the West’s] most powerful and enduring instance of counter-culture.” Monasticism has lasted longer and is “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.” Monastic communities, at their best, enable their members to encourage and correct one another as they embrace the demands of radical Christian discipleship.

Divide members into three groups to explore the contributions of key moments in monastic history sketched by Wilson-Hartgrove. Antony and other fourth-century desert Christians encouraged many other Christians to resist the lure of late ancient culture; the great theologian Augustine, for example, was inspired by *Life of Antony*. Antony was a solitary, but other desert Christians lived in forms of community. Benedict of Nursia, who was deeply formed by stories of the desert Christians, established the pattern for communal monasticism in the West. Radical reformers adapted his monastic ideals for their congregations.

2. Warren Smith addresses the caricature that monastics fled the world to avoid its temptations and cultivate their own virtues. “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.”

Other caricatures are that monastics are all the same; are “old world” and do not exist today; live in impoverished (or inordinately wealthy) communities; read books all day; are not involved in ministries; are self-centered (or other-worldly); never marry [many “new monastics” do]; live in the country and wear distinctive clothes [some do]; and so on. Encourage members to watch for corrective information in these studies. Perhaps they will want a follow-up study of some of the books reviewed by Warren Smith or Elizabeth Sands Wise.

3. The twelve “marks” are common emphases of Christian discipleship of the various new monastic communities in North America. Each community has a distinctive rule of life that defines how members support one another in living the Christian life together.
4. Elizabeth Sands Wise believes that many congregations need be inspired by and learn from the visions of genuine Christian community in the monastic groups. The monastics need the instruction and correction of the Church as a whole, for many gifted Christians serve the kingdom of God through the teaching, preaching, and ministries of congregations.

Departing Hymn

“Gather Now around His Teachings” can be found on pp. 41-43 of *Monasticism Old and New*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.