



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 St. Benedict in the City
(*Cities and Towns*,
pp. 37-42)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to
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Christian Reflection

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St. Benedict in the City

A new kind of monasticism, or ascetic simplicity, is emerging among Christians gathering in intentional urban communities. What are these “new monastics” teaching us about faithful discipleship?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:1, 13-16

Response to the Scripture†

I told Jesus it would be all right
if he changed my name.
Jesus told me I would have to live humble
if he changed my name.
Jesus told me that the world would be against me
if he changed my name.
But I told Jesus it would be all right
if he changed my name.

Reflection

“You-all (plural) are the salt and light of the world,” Jesus tells his disciples (Matthew 5:13-14). It’s an image St. Benedict understood perfectly in the fifth century. As the social order of the Roman Empire crumbled around them, he and others began creating intentional communities based on a vision of the common good. Benedict realized that following Jesus is not for “Lone Ranger” disciples; it requires a new form of community.

Recently moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre surveyed the moral disarray of western culture. The problem, he concluded, is not that we desire different things and disagree, but that we reject all traditions that would allow us to settle our differences and aim for a common good. MacIntyre reached this provocative conclusion: “We are waiting...for another – doubtless very different – St. Benedict.” He meant that since the chaos is rooted in our individualistic approach to morality, we need new forms of community to sustain our thinking and living into goodness.

This moral and spiritual disorder too often reaches into Christian institutions that “merely reflect rather than transform the surrounding culture,” Bryan Hollon observes. “Thus, we need a new kind of monasticism, or ascetic simplicity, which enables us to minister faithfully to society while preserving our distinctive identity as a people ‘called out’ and ‘set apart.’”

He commends the New Monasticism movement that “is gaining momentum in urban centers across America,” because it

- ▶ *brings together intentional Christian communities that serve the urban poor.* New monastics may be young or old, celibate or married. They live in groups with long histories (e.g., Catholic religious orders, Catholic Worker movement, Bruderhof Communities, and Reba Place Fellowship) or newer communities (e.g., The Simple Way in Philadelphia, New Jerusalem in North Philadelphia, and Rutba House in Durham). They are united around “twelve marks” of Christian community.
- ▶ *serves wider Christian communities.* Not everyone will embrace the movement’s radical vows. Yet when Hollon’s Mennonite congregation sponsored several intentional communities in Los Angeles,



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the monastics' "faithfulness, commitment to one another, and service to their inner-city neighbors gave all of us a better sense of what it means to be 'called out' of a life of self-interest in order to love God and neighbor."

- ▶ *can reform our desires.* "By moving into the abandoned inner cities," new monastics "are explicitly rejecting the consumerism and materialism that is so characteristic of suburban life." By reforming worship and practices distorted by seeker-sensitive rather than seeker-transformative churches, they show us how to be called "out of inordinate worldly attachments and into a fellowship of communal love in Christ."

"The Church's outreach to abandoned urban centers must go beyond soup kitchens, child care facilities, and other social service programs," Hollon concludes. Cities "need Christians who are willing to offer themselves completely in the hope that God will create vibrant faith communities in long-abandoned places. Why shouldn't all Christian church organizations sponsor new monastic orders committed to inner cities as a mission field?"

Study Questions

1. Review the "twelve marks" of the New Monasticism (p. 39). Which one is most radical? Which is most attractive?
2. Christian individuals and families face many problems in relocating to urban neighborhoods. How could a new monastic community alleviate some of these problems?
3. Some think that monastics *retreat from* rather than *deal with* the real world. Does this describe the New Monasticism?
4. Explore the websites of some communities mentioned in Hollon's article. How are they helping their neighborhoods?
5. If your congregation sponsored a new monastic community, what could be the benefits to your city? To the congregation?

Departing Hymn: "The Voice of God Is Calling"

The voice of God is calling its summons in our day;
Isaiah heard in Zion and we now hear God say:
"Whom shall I send to succor my people in their need?
Whom shall I send to loosen the bonds of shame and greed?"

"I hear my people crying in slum and mine and mill;
no field or mart is silent, no city street is still.
I see my people falling in darkness and despair.
Whom shall I send to shatter the fetters which they bear?"

We heed, O Lord, your summons, and answer: Here are we!
Send us upon your errand; let us your servants be.
Our strength is dust and ashes, our years a passing hour;
but you can use our weakness to magnify your power.

From ease and plenty save us; from pride of place absolve;
Purge us of low desire; lift us to high resolve;
take us, and make us holy; teach us your will and way.
Speak, and behold, we answer; command, and we obey!

John H. Holmes (1913)

Suggested Tunes: ST. THEODULPH or NYLAND

† Based on a traditional African-American spiritual.

St. Benedict in the City

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Response to Scripture	Response to Scripture
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 5	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To introduce the intentional Christian communities in the “New Monasticism” movement.
2. To discuss how the new monastic communities serve the urban poor and witness to the wider Christian community about what it means to be the *ekklesia*, the “called out.”
3. To discuss how intentional communities can encourage and support Christian individuals and families who are called by God to move back into urban neighborhoods.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Cities and Towns (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “The Voice of God Is Calling” locate one of the familiar tunes ST. THEODULPH or NYLAND in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Comment

“One of the most interesting developments to emerge over the last 20 years has been an increasing number of ‘intentional’ communities, especially in poor urban areas. These initiatives enable people of faith to express a lifestyle which some call a ‘new monasticism,’” observes the Commission on Urban Life and Faith, an interfaith group initiated by the Church of England. “They have a structure that enables a deeper commitment (a total lifestyle informed by gospel values) than is usually expressed by membership of a local church; are responsive to local challenges; emphasize both devotion and active involvement; have flexible arrangements to enable people both to join and to leave; build an ‘esprit-de-corps’; maintain a positive relationship to a local church, although the vocation of the group is not necessarily expressed through the church.... The challenge to long-standing local churches is to rejoice in the exceptional commitment that is emerging in so many diverse expressions” (*Faithful Cities: A Call for Celebration, Vision and Justice* (2006), 8.25-27).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that members will grow in Christian community, bound together by their love for God, one another, and their neighbors.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 5:1, 13-16 from a modern translation.

Response to the Scripture

Ask the group to read together the text of the traditional African-American spiritual, “I Told Jesus It Would Be All Right If He Changed My Name.”

Reflection

This study introduces the informal network of intentional urban Christian communities that dubs itself the “New Monasticism Project” (see www.newmonasticism.org). These communities are exploring ways for Christian individuals and families to follow Lee Hardy’s advice (in “Dysfunctional Cities: Where Did We Go Wrong?”) to

“rediscover urban neighborhoods, live in them if possible, and try to make them once again good places for others to live.” They not only are serving the urban poor, Bryan Hollon writes, but also are helping to reform the wider Christian community by revealing how our consumerist desires must be challenged and transformed by Christian communal practices. Finally, simply by calling themselves “new monastics,” they are challenging us to rethink the contributions of monasticism to the Church over the centuries.

Study Questions

1. Distribute copies of the “twelve marks” to group members who do not have them. You can reprint p. 39 from “The New Monasticism” article (online at www.ChristianEthics.ws) or the appropriate webpage from the New Monasticism Project’s site, www.newmonasticism.org. This list of twelve marks is not supposed to be novel; it is prefaced by a “wish to acknowledge a movement of radical rebirth, grounded in God’s love and drawing on the rich tradition of Christian practices that have long formed disciples in the simple Way of Christ.”

Do some of the twelve marks describe every healthy congregation? Which marks would be embraced by your study group and congregation? Which ones would be controversial? Which ones require more mutual trust and commitment than members have known?

2. Ask members to brainstorm the problems that their families would face in relocating to an urban neighborhood. These might relate to changes in church membership, jobs or educational opportunities, neighborhood friendships and community, or personal lifestyle. Is the urban neighborhood safe, affordable, and attractive? (Members may have developed this list previously in response to question 2 in the “Salt in the City” study guide.) How would some of these problems be alleviated or overcome within an intentional urban Christian community, which would provide a new home for worship, friendship, and mutual support?
3. “Monastic communities called people *out of* inordinate worldly attachments and *into* a fellowship of communal love in Christ,” Hollon says. Sister Margaret McKenna likens the new monasticism’s commitment to redeeming community life in America’s cities to a potter reworking clay: “It gives up on patching the pot thrown off balance on the whirling wheel, re-kneads and throws again the clay, centers it carefully this time, and realizes afresh the reworked clay’s potential for beauty and service.” So, in this sense, the new monastics are withdrawing from individualistic suburban life. Yet, many groups encourage marriage and family life, and they support these through the resources of the community. Rather than retreating from urban problems, Hollon thinks, the new monastics are tackling them in creative ways.
4. Members might review some of these websites: Rutba House Community in Durham, NC, and the New Monasticism Project (www.newmonasticism.org); Camden House Community in Camden, NJ (www.camdenhouse.org); Reba Place Community Church in Evanston and Chicago, IL (www.rebaplacefellowship.org); Common Ground Community in Shreveport, LA (www.lvoe.org); Bruderhof Communities (www.bruderhof.org); and Catholic Worker Communities (www.catholicworker.org). Ask members to describe similar Christian communities with which they are familiar.
5. Discuss specific urban neighborhoods to encourage or problems to address with an intentional urban Christian community. What support could your congregation provide—legal, real-estate, ministry, or other expertise in setting up the community; office or living space in your church buildings; volunteers to help with specific programs; on-going financial support; or a place of worship for community members, and so on? Hollon was a pastoral intern in a church that sponsored intentional communities in Los Angeles. “While no more than twenty of our congregation’s 120 members lived in these communities,” he reports, “they had a profound influence on the rest of us through their preaching, leading worship, organizing neighborhood events, and educating us on the difficulties of inner-city life.”

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.