

Monastic Scribe LXII: November 10, 2023

ALONE BUT TOGETHER

Our experience here at the Abbey is that people are often intrigued by monks. Who are they and what do they do? The media usually have us looking like Franciscan Friars in brown habits and with rosary and cords, for that is what they are more accustomed to. In America monks are less well known except for the German and Swiss monks who followed immigrants, principally in the mid-west. So let me tell you how I understand Benedictine monasticism.

The basic reason for monasticism is a love affair with God and the search to embrace this God. The monk knows (s)he is loved by God and is eager to return that love. How is this done? One writer wrote a book about monks and entitled it, "Living Alone Together." This is the heart of monastic life – firstly, silence, solitude, reading and studying the Word (the practice of *Lectio Divina*). This requires detachment, patience and surrender to God's love. But it is essential. The dangers to this life lie in being too busy to spend the empty time with God, as well as the choosing of distractions such as smart phones and radios and other devices. What might happen if you are faithful to the silence? Self-knowledge emerges as you face your own struggles and distractions. Self-knowledge leads to self-acceptance, vulnerability and being imperfect. It all opens up to the acceptance of God's love. In God's love we come into the heart of all of God's creation, humans as well as everything that exists. We find we are one with all.

Thus, if you can't live alone in silence and solitude, or at least be growing in the comfort of that life, you shouldn't be a monk. But the reverse is also true. If you can't live in community, with people you do not choose as your house-mates, you shouldn't be a monk either. Living together is the check on how real our self-knowledge truly is, as confreres with whom we live daily expose to us what we are really like. Saint Basil, who did not appreciate hermit monks, asked such monks, "Whose feet will you wash?" Following Jesus means not only loving God but loving each other. We may love silence and solitude but we may be running away from people. In the same way we may feel good about helping people and serving people, but the heart is empty and still is called to seek oneness with God. It is the ego that we often satisfy, not God.

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The practice of *Lectio Divina* is expressed, in community life, in the Liturgy of the Hours four or five times a day. We sing God's praises, live in the history of the Word which speaks to our hearts, and express how we have found this God. But this too can be empty and busy words if we do not have an interior life of love and silence.

Work is an essential part of a monk's day. Benedictines do not have any specific work such as care of the poor or sick, or being ready to go where the church needs them. Humanly we need to find work that is satisfying and challenging and is related to our purpose in life. Over the centuries monks provided schools, hospitals, universities as well as retreat houses and liturgical experiences.

A distinguishing mark of Benedictine life is stability which we promise as part of our profession. We don't move around but belong here, in this place, attached to the soil, attached to our neighbors. Sharing with others in various forms of hospitality flows from monastic life. We reach out to share the Word, our faith, our care for each other. In today's church this means welcoming lay men and women to share our monastic life with us. As long as we are faithful to our primal search for God and the silence and solitude needed to seek God, our shared life can take many forms. A balanced living of action and contemplation preserves us in our monastic ways. Our way of life is above all a presence where God is the center and the human search can be felt and shared.

Does this all seem like we are avoiding life and fleeing from it? Some indeed believe that. But there is another way to look at it. Writers, lay and monastic alike, have seen the monastic life as a reminder of their own search. Some have spoken of the "Monastic archetype" that is present in everyone's soul. It may not emerge fully until after the work of the first half of life is fulfilled – raising a family, doing creative work, etc. Do you sense this at all? I am open to hearing from you at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

I close with a quote from the late Thomas Keating, ocsa, a proponent for contemplative prayer for everyone.

A contemplative monastery is a visible expression of the fact that a state or place of interior silence is available to all, and that everyone is invited. Such a place possesses a mysterious fascination. People do not come merely to look at

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the liturgy. They do not come just to sniff incense or pick up religious vibrations in the church. They feel intuitively that a contemplative monastery has something they are looking for. The building suggests it; the solitude suggests it; the silence suggests it. A group of people seeking interior silence as a life's work is a call to others to do something similar in their lives. This call is a significant service in our day; one, however, that is impossible to measure.

from: "The Heart of the World: An introduction to Contemplative Christianity"

Fr. Timothy Joyce, OSB, STL

Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.