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A Devoted Life

ST. BENEDICT'S model of prayerful community shaped Western monasticism—and changed the course of European history.



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Re-Monking the Church

Many Catholics and Protestants are looking back to Benedict for the community and spiritual intensity they can't find in modern culture.

Christians struggling for sanctity in a too-comfortable world should pay attention to this observation by Mark Noll: "For over a millennium, in the centuries between the reign of Constantine and the Protestant Reformation, almost everything in the church that approached the highest, noblest, and truest ideals of the gospel was done either by those who had chosen the monastic way or by those who had been inspired in their Christian life by the monks." Can Western monasticism's "father," Benedict, still give us an antidote to cultural compromise?

At first blush, this might seem unlikely, at least in the Western church. Between 1978 and 2004—nearly the en-

tire span of John Paul II's pontificate—the number of men in monastic and religious orders (not including priests) decreased by 46% in Europe and 30% in the Americas, while the number of women decreased by 39% and 27%, respectively. Compare this to the trend in the global South: During the same period, men in monastic and religious orders increased by 48% in Africa and 39% in Asia, with women increasing on those two continents by 62% and 64%.

A number of the Catholic writers in the 2006 volume *A Monastic Vision for the 21st Century* frankly wonder if "monasticism as we know it" is, in God's providential plan, destined for obsolescence in the West. Yet most suggest that new and powerful forms of the monastic

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impulse may even now be arising.

This is certainly the impression given by the 21st annual Monastic Institute, held in July 2006 at St. John's Seminary in Collegeville, Minnesota. There, Catholic Benedictines and members of established communities such as L'Arche and the Catholic Worker Movement joined with leaders of new Protestant communities with names like the Simple Way (Pennsylvania), Rutba House (North Carolina), and the Church of the Servant King (Oregon) to mine the riches of Benedict's Rule. This strikingly diverse group—50% Catholic, 50% Protestant—discussed the topic of “new communities” with high hopes that, indeed, God is still in the monastic impulse.

THE LURE OF TRADITION

Many signs buoy this hope. Even in the midst of declining numbers, Benedictine monasticism is still thriving on a wide spectrum from the modernized (seen at places like St. John's) to the traditional. In 2000, American monks reestablished a Benedictine monastic community in Benedict's Italian hometown of Nursia, now called Norcia. American Catholic monasticism has seen new life from an unexpected quarter: young men committing themselves to a very traditional form of Benedictine monasticism at the recently founded Clear Creek Monastery near Tulsa, Oklahoma. Clear Creek's monks celebrate the Latin Mass, cultivate Gregorian chant, and practice not only the gospel demands of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but also the distinctly Benedictine gift of hospitality. Many Americans, struck anew with the yearning for holy community rooted deep in the church's history, have come to visit—and a few to stay.

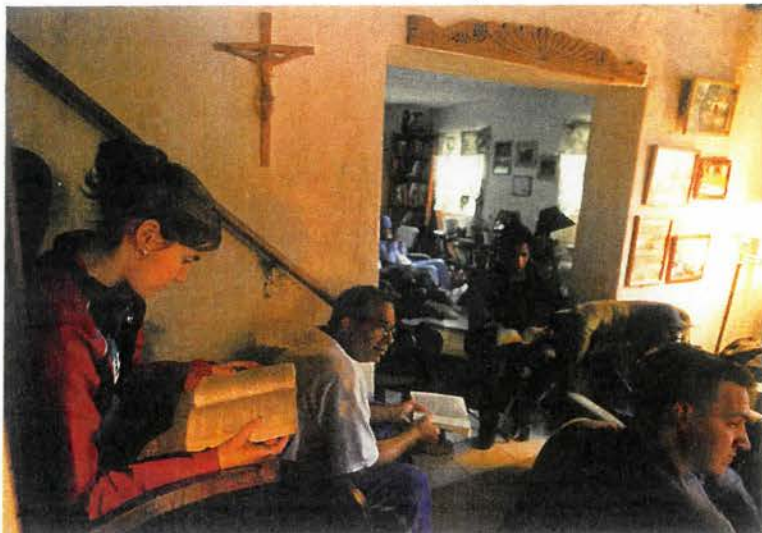
But what if someone does not desire—or does not sense God's call—to make the lifelong vows of celibacy, poverty, and obedience required of monastics? Do the spiritual resources of the monastic tradition have anything to offer to the person who has made commitments to spouse and family, or is pursuing a secular vocation? History gives a resounding “yes.” After all, monasticism was never intended to encompass a *different* set of spiritual values than those followed by all Christians. It offered a means of living the Christian life with more single-minded intensity.

For nearly a millennium, there have been people (one might call them “monastic groupies”) who have connected themselves to a monastery in a less formal way, committing to certain spiritual disciplines while remaining in the world. The option of becoming a monastic associate or oblate has enjoyed a recent surge of popularity as both Catholics and Protestants have sought in monastic spirituality something they feel is missing in their own lives.

THE LONGING FOR CONNECTEDNESS

Also more numerous within the Catholic fold—and arguably no less in the spirit of Benedict himself—are members of a cornucopia of mission-driven *ecclesial communities*, such as the Christian Life Movement, Chemin Neuf (A New Way), and the Emmanuel Community. In June 2006, the

THE OLD AND THE NEW. *Left:* Monks at Monte Cassino, Benedict's original monastery (rebuilt four times), carry on the monastery's undaunted legacy. *Below:* Members of the Simple Way, young evangelicals living together in semi-monastic fashion in Philadelphia, meet for Bible study with residents of New Jerusalem, an addiction recovery center founded on monastic principles.



same month that the Monastic Institute met in Minnesota, Pope Benedict XVI met with over 100 new ecclesial groups in St. Peter's Square.

Each is committed to following a disciplined pattern of life—some communally and some in the regular spheres of family and work—and to serving the world in its own way. Many include married couples along with priests and individuals who have taken vows of celibacy and poverty. Though the ecclesial communities are not deliberately “monastic,” they are meeting needs that in previous centuries could only have been met by joining a monastery.

Many of us yearn to be deeply rooted in Christ in a way that reflects his holiness, and to share this rooted, holy life with a community, but we find this hard to do in the modern West. Our culture pushes us to strive for individual fulfillment, to consume more and more, and to spend much of our lives working to pay for that consumption. The result has been a world of constant mobility, alienation, and loneliness. Quasi-monastic movements like the Catholic ecclesial communities reveal a deep desire for connectedness—a sense that we need to live a regular, disciplined life of devotion to God, and that we can't do it alone.

PROTESTANT “MONKS”?

In Protestant circles, this monastic impulse can be seen especially in the phenomenon of *intentional communities*. Among these, the self-described “new monastics” have taken their cue from philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. In his influential 1981 book *After Virtue*, MacIntyre compared the state of the West to the decadence of the late Roman Empire, and called for “another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.” In 1998 Jonathan R. Wilson picked up MacIntyre's ideas and put them into more explicitly Christian form in *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World*. He fleshed out a



call for a “new monasticism” that would allow the church to truly be the church in this troubling, fragmented age.

In a time when, it seems to Wilson and the new monastics, “many parts of the church are sinking with the culture and doing so without any resistance,” Benedict’s wisdom has again become a fount of inspiration and guidance. In *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism* (which emerged from a 2004 meeting of “new monastic” communities) leaders concluded that at least *some* Christians must engage in *some* form of separation—not only from the “culture at large,” but also from the increasingly compromised church—to model a life of true devotion and obedience to Christ.

But historically, of course, monastics have not stopped at separation—nor do these “new monastics.” Benedict founded a monastic way in which hospitality to the stranger and the needy is a prophetic witness to the world. Thus these new quasi-monastic communities have dedicated themselves not only to contemplative disciplines and submission to a communal rule, but also to solidarity with the poor, racial reconciliation, and peacemaking.

One Protestant who attended the St. John meeting, Bethel Seminary graduate Jan Bros, was driven by the difficulty she experienced pursuing true spiritual formation in her old megachurch to start a new monastic community in Minneapolis called *Abbey Way*, founded on Benedictine principles. When Bros asked a Benedictine sister what she thought of Protestants seeking to start such communities, to her delight the nun replied, “Benedict would approve.”

PASSING FAD OR PROMISING FUTURE?

Even in the midst of such celebration, members of new communities, both Catholic and Protestant, are aware that the current love affair with monastic forms of worship and

A COMMON LIFE. The ecumenical Community of Jesus on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, is a “Christian community in the Benedictine monastic tradition.” Its members include married couples with children and single men and women, as well as Brothers and Sisters who have taken vows of lifelong celibacy and poverty.

life can amount to another unhelpful “fad” as people run after books and retreats. A few candles and a few chanted prayers do not a prophetic community make.

Church of the Servant King’s Jon Stock says, “It’s awful hard for us Westerners not to approach Benedict as another technique, another consumable, another path to self-actualization.” Stock also admits that the new monasticism, focused as it often is on social activism, can lose its connection to the larger church and to worship practices anchored in the church—a concern shared by the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Asbury Seminary’s Christine Pohl admits that Benedict’s four pillars—“life under a rule, life lived in commitment to a particular people and place, obedience, and ongoing conversion”—present a challenge to modern Western Christians, with our “wariness of vows and commitments, and our individualistic and mobile lifestyles.”

Time will tell whether the “new monastic” communities will survive, whether the traditional Benedictine monasteries will continue to thrive, and what new forms of counter-cultural, prayerful, prophetic community will arise to inspire Christians and shake the culture. But for now, the future of Benedict seems as bright as his past.

CH&B

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