

Reflections: Monastic Wisdom for Everyday Life

I am working on an essay which summarizes my thoughts on asceticism in early monasticism ("Dying to Live: Reflections on Asceticism, Spiritual Disciplines and Everyday Life"). I thought I would try and write it before I left for the teaching trips, but it was a bigger project than I thought. Check the website in the next few weeks. Nevertheless, in preparation for my workshop at New College Berkeley on "Monastic Wisdom for Everyday Life," I did have occasion to consider one aspect of the topic: how monastic life can inform the daily life of ordinary believers. So here, without getting into asceticism (you'll have to wait for that), I want to say something about how we can apply the wisdom of early nuns and monks.

Let me start by sharing a couple of my convictions: I am convinced that we have a lot to learn from the monks and nuns of our Christian past. Furthermore, I believe that the Christian Church could be more vibrant and effective if it embodied more of the spirit and practices of these early monastics. But let me go one step further -- I am convinced that the practices which we see performed by the heroes of monasticism in bold relief actually point to features of spirituality lived in the midst of all our relationships, no matter how small. Consequently, by exploring the essential characteristics of monastic living, we can discover wise advice leading us toward authentic whole-hearted devotion in the midst of the details of our everyday lives. This is not just a matter of gleaning a bit from this or that monastic "habit" (pun intended). Rather I am speaking of the essential features of monastic--technically called "religious" life--itself.

Monastic life has a few fundamental characteristics: (1) it is an intentional endeavor to be increasingly formed into Christ, (2) it seeks to make a clear break with the ways of the "world," (3) it makes strong commitments to Christian values, (4) it attempts to live a rhythm of life and to consciously articulate its pattern of life, (5) it prays during the day. The early monks and nuns lived into these things to the extreme: fasting from many meals to facilitate their formation, moving to the wilderness to distance themselves from the world, taking solemn vows of poverty and chastity to express their commitment to Christian values, writing long and detailed Rules of Life to regulate their pattern of life, making room for many times each day for prayer, and so on. My point is that in doing these very activities, early nuns and monks draw attention to basic aspects of everybody's relationship with God. When we understand what is going on for them in their times, we can begin to see how we can go deeper in our walk with God using their wisdom in the context of our own ordinary lives.

Let me illustrate by talking about a couple of the characteristics.

(2) Early monasticism seeks to make a clear break with the world.

There's the tough question, eh? How to be "in the world," but not "of the world." We wrestle with that one. How do we identify in an authentically human way with our culture without compromising our Christian values? Indeed, could we even model a healthy alternative? That is the question. The first epistle of John urges us: "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world" (1 John 2:15-16). Again and again Jesus invited people to leave the world and follow him, but his invitation was different for each person he called. Think of the rich young ruler. Think of Zaccheus. Think of the man with Legion. Think of the lifestyle of the earliest church. The call to leave the world was the same; the forms of obedience changed. What might it mean for us to leave the world behind and follow Christ whole-heartedly?

Early monks and nuns were serious about their efforts to leave the world behind. Many literally moved away to the margins of civilization where they could experiment with new ways to live that were not dependent on the systems of their culture (economy, family, status, and so on). Early monasticism was a bit of a "counter-culture" really. Scholar Margaret Miles writes, "Monastic life, then, was a counter culture. In it, instincts of sex, power, and possession were consciously sacrificed in a rejection of secular culture. . . . In summary, the monastic Rules describe a new understanding of the failure of the secular world to orient human beings to "life" and provide an alternative community."

The focus, in much of my reading, is less on the protest against the world and more on simply freeing up the believer from the barrage of worldly influences that distract us from whole-hearted pursuit of God. But the point is really the same. The early monastics consciously separated themselves from the values and systems of the world in order to give themselves fully to values and systems that expressed Jesus.

And we can do the same today, in each of our varied, everyday, lives. It is not easy, but we can do it. Some of us are distracted and attracted by a media-saturated environment which thinks nothing of exposure to illicit sex and violence. What does it mean to renounce the world in this arena? Some of us are surrounded and confounded by products and producers that threaten the health of populations and environments. I don't know about you, but I feel inundated with consumer Christian concerns all the time. What might it mean for me to leave the world of acquisition behind? Where are the lines I should not cross? Others of us are caught in the trap of power struggles in our places of employment or even in our efforts to do good for humanity. How do I respond to the world of privilege and position with a Gospel of care and compassion?

There are no easy answers to these questions. Nonetheless, we are wise I think to consider the commitments of the nuns and monks of old. They met money, sex, and power, with the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. We might not be called to that extreme (though a few might) but I believe we would do well to become a little more distinct these days.

What if we distanced ourselves from the distractions of media by limiting our use to a certain amount each week, or to certain kinds of sources? What if we learned to create new forms of media and expression together with our friends? What if we avoided purchasing products whose production involves unnecessary harm to others or to nature? What if we produced our own instead? What if we stepped off the power ladder and learned to be satisfied with a simple life of worship to God and service to others? There are small steps that are available to each and every one of us. In some small fashion each of us can, in the midst of our everyday lives, leave the world behind and give ourselves to a fuller Christian life.

(4) Early monasticism attempts to live a rhythm of life.

The Bible never commands, or even recommends a particular rhythm of life. We do know that Jesus "often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:16). Jesus did provide some basic guidelines for those whom he sent into missions (Matthew 10:1-16; Luke 10:1-10). From these accounts we get a sense of the tasks and restrictions of the Jesus Rule of Life for his immediate followers. We do not, however, get a clear sense of their rhythm, outside of the fact that they offered ministry and stayed in people's homes.

1 Timothy 5:1-5 provides a few instructions for a group of widows who continue "night and day to

pray." Is this an early design for a contemplative convent? Later groups of widows (and then virgins and then monks) saw this passage as such, but we will never know for sure. We know that Paul and his apostolic teams combined times of ministry with times of occupational activity. In jail Paul simply studied, prayed, preached and wrote letters. Thus, those who devoted themselves most fully to the ministry of Christ seem to have carved out some blend of work, study, prayer, ministry, and "ordinary living" appropriate to each expression.

It is interesting to discover, then, that early monastic expressions seem to reflect these very forms of life. In Syria (and later with Francis of Assisi) devout believers imitated Jesus' pattern of wandering ministry, dividing their time primarily between prayer and proclamation. Hermits in Egypt mixed labor and prayer in their rhythm of life.

There is a story about Antony, a monastic pioneer in Egypt about his discovery of his rhythm of life. "Once when Antony was living in the desert his soul was troubled by boredom and irritation. He said to God, 'Lord, I want to be made whole and my thoughts do not let me. What am I to do about this trouble, how shall I be cured?' After a while he got up and went outside. He saw someone like himself sitting down and working, then standing up to pray; then sitting down again to make a plait of palm leaves, and standing up again to pray. It was an angel of the Lord sent to correct Antony and make him vigilant. He heard the voice of the angel saying, 'Do this and you will be cured.'"

William Harmless writes of Pachomius (an early founder of monastic communities) that, "Pachomius's achievement comes from the way he brought together a collection of monasteries into a tightly regulated whole, with a single head, a carefully ordered hierarchy of offices, and an intricate rhythm of work and prayer and spiritual formation."

It is one thing to say we want to grow in Christian maturity or to minister to others. It is another to order the rhythms of our life to facilitate that growth or ministry. But we can learn from the early monastic expressions. We *can* make intentional room for the Christ-follower rhythms that are appropriate for each of us as individuals and small communities of believers. It is as easy as A, B, C.

A - Account: Keep track of your use of time. What do you do and when?

B - Believe: Pray into your calling. Talk to others. Dream a bit. Then when you have a sense of who God wants you to be and how God wants you to get there, believe.

C - Covenant: Draw up a plan for your own rhythm. Make a few experiments. Then covenant with God (and perhaps a few others) to keep that rhythm for a certain period of time. Then review, revise and return.

This may sound harsh, but I honestly have problems with the "I don't have time" excuse for lack of whole-hearted devotion. There are moments (perhaps only a few moments) in each of our days just waiting to be given over to the Lord. And in the end--as it was with the early nuns and monks--it is not really the particulars of our rhythm or our fasting or our prayers that matter most. The trap of legalism was well-known long ago, and we can spot that same trap today. The point is to give our best--all our heart and mind and soul and strength--to the love of God in our own everyday lives.

May God the Father bless you with his riches in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit