

The NewesLetter Vol. 27, no. 2

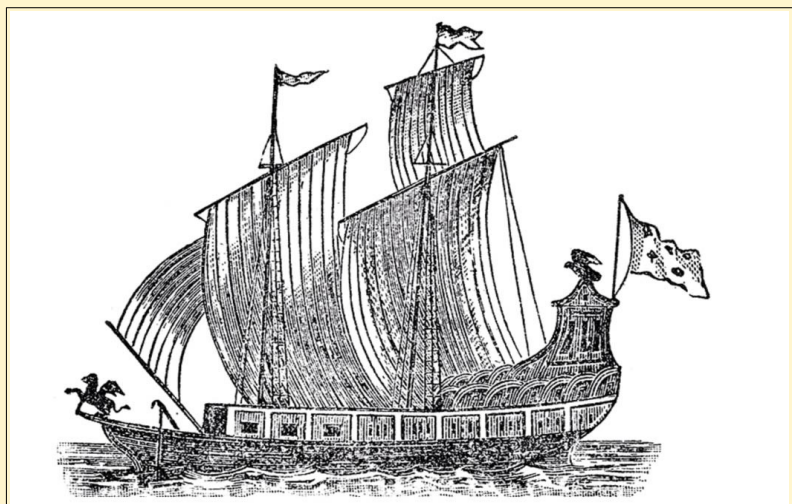
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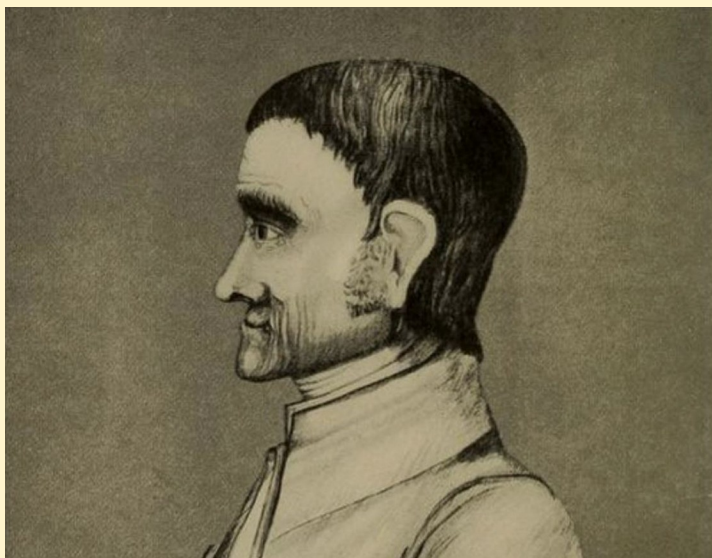
How can I possibly summarize all that has happened since my last NewesLetter (April 5)? We have taken seven trips this season: two of them for three weeks each and another for two weeks. I have had two books published and are now for sale. I have produced 9 videos and eight sound files to accompany one of the books (I did the videos for the other book earlier and someone else read the book for Audible). I have read over 4,000 pages of books and articles. I had the worst ankle sprain of my life. It goes on and on. Let me just give you a few relevant highlights here.

When the last NewesLetter went to press, I was pondering the idea of gathering a group of kindred spirits together to support one another in our lives and in our exploration of intentional Christian community, new monasticism, or whatever you might want to call it. We met on Zoom and the interest was high for creating some kind of face-to-face gathering. There was the question of money, but we “Explorers” decided to take a step forward. Soon after this meeting I began to wonder. I had registered to attend a gathering in Switzerland for a New Monastic Roundtable. Then Jill Weber, global convener for the 24/7 prayer communities asked me to visit the Waverley Abbey in England on my way back home. Furthermore, a friend from San Francisco (Tim Otto) was on sabbatical, was interested both in the Roundtable gathering and in visiting Waverley Abbey. Hey, why not see if we can create a pilot Explorers gathering in Waverley Abbey for all the UK folks, along with Tim and I?

So we did it—and more. We planned the gathering for two days with an extra day for some “young explorers”: folks who were not necessarily scholars or seasoned leaders of Christian communities, but who might be on their way. People submitted some expression of their life or thought in advance, which we all read before the gathering. The event



was held at the Abbey from September 1–3. We listened to one another's life stories. We prayed for one another. We offered feedback to the presentations submitted. We ate meals together and generally had a good time. After it was all over Jill, Tim, and I debriefed the gathering. We were all confident: this was a marvelous occasion for relationship building. We shared deeply at the gathering and have continued to touch base since. I think it was particularly valuable for the young explorers to discover that they were not alone in their pursuit of Christ. I think we could have, with a few minor changes in our schedule and in the instructions regarding the submissions, set the focus a little more clearly toward Christian community/new monasticism. Nevertheless, I think it is fair to say that the experiment was a success and we are set to make arrangements for a larger meeting in the USA. I donated some of my own personal money to Spirituality Shoppe to fund this experiment (grateful that it happened to be available at this time). And the folks at Waverley Abbey were more than kind in hosting the gathering. Now, we will need to investigate the possibility of grants or the like for the next meetings. If you have any ideas, feel free to let me know. When it is in place, it will be perhaps the first regular gathering of scholars and leaders of intentional Christian communities of its kind. I imagine with prayer and excitement the fruit of these relationships over the next ten years.



And yes, both *Deep and Wide: Reflections on Socio-Political Engagement, Monasticism(s) and the Christian Faith* and *Mission with Prophetic Power: The Journal of John Woolman* have now appeared in print. Todd Hunter, leader of the Church for the Sake of Others and author of many books writes about *Deep and Wide*: “if you are looking for a thoughtful, mature way to think about Christian participation in society, read *Deep and Wide*.” I am grateful for that statement, because it catches what I hoped to communicate with the book.

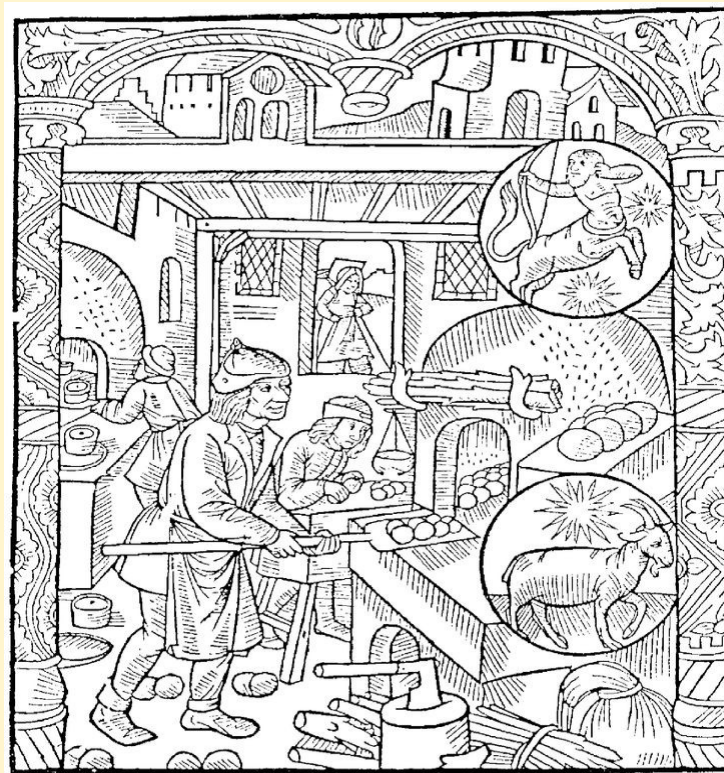
Likewise Christopher Hall, retired director of Renovaré and once Chancellor and Provost of Palmer seminary, writes of the edition of John Woolman's Journal that I edited: “There are some people we all should really get to know. John Woolman is one of the,. For modern readers, though, Woolman's language and time period may prevent an effective embrace and understanding of his life and practices. I'm pleased that Evan Howard's annotated edition of John Woolman's Journal is just what the inexperienced reader needs to become John Woolman's friend.”

Once again, Chris summarizes exactly what I had hoped to provide with this edition of Woolman's classic Journal. I have recorded video introductions to each chapter of both books and there are links to them on

the spiritualityshoppe.org website. I have also linked the audio files for both books on the website (though the audio file for the Woolman book is also available through Audible). Check it out!

In the previous NewsLetter, I named to aspect of my clear calling. One of these is research and writing. As I mentioned above, I have been doing a lot of reading. After the two book projects were complete, I knew where to go. If the Lord grants me the freedom, I have a three-volume theology of consecrated life to write and I have started the project [by the way, “consecrated life” is the phrase I, along with many other sisters, officials, and scholars use to describe monasticism, intentional Christian community or things like that]. Indeed, I submitted the first part of the first chapter of the first volume for the Explorer’s gathering in September. Since that time I have continued to research the first question of this project: “Why is there a need for a theology of consecrated life?” No Protestant [that I know of] has ever written one, so why me and why now? As I find words to explain this in a NewsLetter, I will give it a try. In the meantime, if you are interested in my reflections along the way, feel free to ask me for drafts.

And as you can see by my discussion of the Explorer’s gathering, I have also been involved in the other aspect of my clear calling mentioned in the previous NewsLetter: visiting, nurturing, and networking Christian communities. I am actively involved in a number of groups of communities.



I have visited in 2023 (either face-to-face or through zoom) nine distinct “networks” of Christian communities. I cannot begin to express how rich an experience it has been getting to know these devout sisters

and brothers in Christ. Cheri and I attended the New Monastic Roundtable at LeCamp in Vaumarcus, Switzerland, where I was asked to be one of the plenary speakers on New Monasticism as an Expression of Hope. Over twenty communities from Europe and beyond were represented there. I could go on and on. The point is this. I think the time has come for greater networking between Christians of all stripes who are interested in living a consecrated life. Indeed, I was asked to present on this very topic—from the perspective of history—for a Nurturing Communities Network zoom gathering a couple of weeks ago. Here is what I had to say:

Reflections: **Connecting Communities in History**

Christian communities have been connecting at a distance for a long time. I'm going to be reading my presentation here because if I got to talking off the cuff it would go way too long. You see, in the process of preparing for this talk I discovered a gold mine of material on how Christian monasteries and communities networked for the Gospel. Four examples will have to suffice:

1. The Apostle Paul (@ CE 50) and the Practice of Visitation

Sometimes when people ask me about “church”—and just to be obnoxious—I ask them “What church did the Apostle Paul attend? It’s not really a fair question because other apostles settled down in a single spot for the rest of their lives. But the point here is this – Paul traveled: it was his way of life. And his travels were not only about *planting* communities, but also visiting them, and *networking* them. In Acts 15:36 we hear Paul suggesting to Barnabas, “Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.” Sometimes Paul had traveling companions. Other times he sent his companions to do the visiting themselves. And of course we know that Paul followed-up his visits with letters. He was good at networking. He visited churches he founded—like the one at Corinth—writing them that “I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you” (1 Corinthians 16:7). He informs the church at Rome—a church he did not plant—of his desire to visit them: “I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith” (Romans 1:11–12). Paul was not alone in the ministry of visitation, for we read in the second epistle of John how the author has “much to write you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete” (2 John 1:12).

By the fourth-century Council of Chalcedon visitation became a standard and official practice among communities of faith. I have a *Guide for Visitations of Benedictine Monasteries* published in 1994. The practice of folks from one community—or of itinerant ministers—visiting other communities for mutual encouragement is as old as the Christian church itself.

2. Basil the Great (CE 330–379) and Gatherings

Basil “the Great”, following the lead of his elder sister Macrina, founded a monastic community in present day Turkey in 356. He had visited a variety of monastic expressions and decided to pioneer a monastery tailored for his own environment and culture. Over the years people asked about community life and Basil took notes on his responses. Collections of questions with his answers were ultimately published as *The Rule* (or responses) of Basil. In the longer collection of responses (Question 54), Basil speaks about gathering folks from different communities together. He urges: “It is a good plan that the heads of the communities should meet together occasionally at certain appointed times and places. At these assemblies they should lay before one another for consideration irregular situations, characters which are exceptionally difficult to deal with, and details of their administration, so that, if any of the leaders be delinquent in any respect fellow-superiors will point it out and that what has been rightly done may be confirmed by their collective testimony.” (Fathers of the Church edition, p. 330, with a couple of my own edits).



As with visitation, the practice of periodic gatherings for encouragement, mutual correction, and even decision-making became a common practice among Christian communities. Indeed, after the foundation of the Cistercians in the eleventh century, regular gatherings of members and/or leaders for a General Chapter—as it was called—was declared normative, influencing even the development of democracy in the centuries to follow.

3. The Early Jesuits (@1540 – 1565) and Letter-Writing

I have already mentioned letter-writing in my comments on Paul. Indeed, the practice of writing letters between circles of friends and connections was important throughout the history of the communities of Christ. Here I simply want to tell you about one classic example from the sixteenth century, the Jesuits (also known as the Society of Jesus). Ignatius of Loyola had a radical conversion and gathered a group of followers. Immediately upon official approval, they took off in all directions, scattering to serve Christ and the church throughout the globe. Exciting, yes, but also a problem. John O’Malley writes in his account of *The First Jesuits*, “If recruits were to be gained and members retained, they had to be instructed in what the Society was about. . . . Ignatius and his closest associates were keenly aware that the communication of the ideals, goals, and style of the Society did not occur automatically and that it had to be sustained on a consistent and ongoing basis.” O’Malley continues, “This situation accounts for the

extraordinary emphasis the Jesuit *Constitutions* placed on correspondence as a means of achieving “union of hearts.” (John W. O’Malley, *The First Jesuits*, 62). Correspondence. Letter-writing. The *Constitutions* declare that, “Another very special help [toward unity] will be **communication by letter** between subjects and superiors, and their learning frequently about one another and hearing the news and reports which come from the various regions.” [*Constitutions*, par. 673. Pars. 674–76 specify precisely how this is to be accomplished and who is responsible to see that it gets done]. The Jesuits practiced what they preached. Again, O’Malley writes, “By 1565 the Society numbered about thirty-five hundred members, who were exhorted or obliged to maintain regular correspondence with each other and especially with the Jesuit leadership in Rome. . . . The letters of Ignatius of Loyola alone fill 12 volumes [see p. 9: 7000 letters], constituting the largest correspondence extant of any sixteenth-century figure, none excepted” (John O’Malley, *The First Jesuits*, 2–3). Some of these letters were copied and sent to the entire membership, probably making them some of the first ministry newsletters in history.

4. The Sisters of Loretto (1970s to today) and Common Tasks

Seventy years ago “sisters” – Catholic women vowed to consecrated life and serving in schools, hospitals, Catholic charities and such – constituted more than 80% of all monks, nuns, friars, and so on in the United States. For reasons much too complicated to explore here, that situation has changed. The number of sisters decreased dramatically. Many had to sell their schools—and the convents/homes attached to them—and move to dispersed housing more conducive to their new ministries. How could they support one another in the midst of this crisis?

One method was to connect around common tasks, to network through ministry. The Sisters of Loretto are specialists in this kind of networking. A 2002 article in the *National Catholic Reporter* declares, If Loretto Sisters had a middle initial in common it wouldn’t be “M” for Mary, it would be “N” for Network. Just a couple of examples:



In the late 1970s Sr. Virginia Williams founded the Loretto Women's Network, a collection of sisters and friends "committed to act for the empowerment of women." (see the Loretto Sisters website) They have served as advocates regarding psychological abuse, human trafficking and other issues for many years. Similarly, in the early 1990s Srs. Mary Ann Coyle and Nancy Wittwer founded the Loretto Earth Network, "dedicated to re-establishing right relationships between the human community and the Earth community." They have developed an extensive collection of Earth Education Resources and are involved in a number of environmental causes.

The practice of inter-community cooperative networking for common cause is a standard practice among sisters today. Jung Eun Sophia Park writes in a 2019 discussion of the life of Catholic sisters, "Today, many communities are involved in cooperative ministries. For example, the Social Justice and Peace Network is composed of twelve congregations and works for social justice and peace on a global scale." (Jung Eun Sophia Park, *Conversations at the Well: Emerging Religious Life in the 21st Century Global World: Collaboration Networking, and Intercultural Living*, 67, again with my slight edits).

Celtic monastic settlements communicated and cooperated in the development of education systems in the middle Ages. Dominicans and Franciscans collaborated in evangelistic ministries. The modern Protestant mission movement provides ample testimony to the practice of communities working together for a common cause. Once again we see that throughout history Christians have joined together in creative ways for the sake of the Gospel.

Conclusion

I wish I could tell you about targeted introductions, gift-giving, sharing members or even leaders, and other common practices that contributed to the networking of Christian communities through history. Suffice it to say that inter-community networking is an old and central practice of the Christian faith. Indeed, one might go so far as to say that the Christian church is better understood not as a collection of buildings or institutions, but as a network of communities, connecting with each other in various forms to follow Christ. Hmmm. What might that mean for us today?