

Are We Monastics?

Our Community makes the claim that we are a non-residential *monastic* community. Occasionally the question arises as to whether or not this is a legitimate statement to make, particularly with reference to monasticism.

The word "monastic" is based on the root word, *monos* usually meaning "alone" or "solo." Sometimes the definition is extended to include the implication that monastics renounce worldly pursuits, withdrawing from the world and society, to devote their entire life solely to spiritual work. Other definitions add that they live in a monastery under religious vows and are subject to a fixed Rule, and are also under the guidance of a "Superior."

Some definitions of monasticism appear to center on physical characteristics. St. Benedict, for example, identified four types of monks in the first chapter of his Rule:

- 1) Cenobites: those who live in monasteries [already straining the definition of *monos*], and serve under a rule and an Abbot (or Abbess).
- 2) Anchorites (or Hermits): having been trained in a monastery, go out to a place of solitude to live and fulfill their vows.
- 3) Sarabaites: those lacking any training that live alone or small groups, and have poor guidance and direction.
- 4) Gyrovagues: basically wanderers, going from monastery to monastery, staying for several days; always on the move, no stability, and basically mooch off of others.

The qualifications for what a good monastic is, versus what a bad monastic is, seem to rest on membership within a monastery, relationship to a rule, and subjection to some authority. But this was not the true focus of what monasticism was for St. Benedict, nor should it be ours today.

The true meaning of *monos* is that the most important thing about discovering our true selves, the way to bring out our natural goodness and love, and the way to dissolve the barriers that keep us apart from God, *is to be alone with Him in solitude.*

As Henri Nouwen so adeptly put it, " One of the reasons that solitude is such an important aspect of the spiritual life is that it keeps us focused on God. In solitude we do not receive human acclamation, admiration, support, or encouragement. In solitude we have to go to God with our sorrows and joys and trust that God will give us what we most need. In our society we are inclined to avoid solitude. We want to be seen and acknowledged. We want to be useful to others and influence the course of events. But as we become visible and popular, we quickly grow dependent on people and their responses and easily lose touch with God, the true source of our being. Solitude is the place of purification. In solitude we find our true selves."

The ultimate purpose for monasticism is undermined if the monk or nun never leaves solitude, because the sole purpose of *monos* is to grow in God so that we can serve Him better in the real world. Even Jesus modeled this for us – he would frequently seek refuge in solitude *monos* style to re-energize, to grow in strength, to learn from his Father; but he would always come back to the people to serve them. If this is not the true purpose for monasticism, then no one is a monastic.

Another way to look at this is that a monastic is "*single-minded* in seeking the presence of God in all things and in every place. This transcends all matters of place and time and the human concept of 'order'." (The Rt. Rev. Chilton Knudsen, 2nd Bishop Visitor to the Community of the Gospel)

So, even though our Community members live alone or with a small number of others in various parts of the country, we follow a common rule, and are (usually) obedient to the Community's guardians, all this is not what makes us monastic. What makes us monastic is that we know that our spiritual development, the growth in our relationship with God, will usually come in our alone times with Him and our single-minded in pursuit of Him – during prayer, meditation, contemplation, walks in nature, and searching our hearts as we lay in bed at night in a dark room.

But at some point we have to leave solitude and engage the world – and we can even find God there, too. This is the balance we seek in our vows – not just our Baptismal vows which point us to worldly things, but our vows of prayer, reflective study, and service, which shape us as tools of God. It is the cycle of action versus contemplation that results, and that's what makes us whole and useful. Monastic walls are nice, but not needed to get this done. If we follow our vows, we are monastics.

- Addendum -

In an article in the *American Benedictine Review*(63:4 – December 2012), Gerard Jacobitz, assistant professor of systematic theology at Saint Joseph's university, Philadelphia, writes about St. Augustine's view on monasticism:

"For Augustine, it is friends – members of the body of Christ – who first and foremost provide the image of God necessary for conversion. Any insight starts with an image and ends with an expression in a form of life. There is no knowledge of the love of God apart from this same love in practice, a practice human beings are inspired to undertake... The "body" for Augustine is always the solidarity. Human beings, therefore, properly transcend themselves by way of a transformation from *solitary* to *solidary*.

"Nowhere is this better attested than in Augustine's treatment of the term *monachos*, the Greek basis for the words *monk* and *monastery*. Where Jerome consistently uses the term in its traditional sense, denoting a solitary individual on an ascetic quest, Augustine understands *monachos* as a corporate term."

Augustine himself writes in his *Psalms*, "Since the Psalm says, 'Behold how good and how pleasant it is that brothers should dwell together in unity,' why then should we not call monks by this name? For *monos*, is 'one.' Not one in just any way, for an individual in a crowd is 'one,' but, though he can be called one when he is with others, he cannot be *monos*, that is 'alone,' for *monos* means 'one alone.' Hence, those who live together so as to form one person, so that they really possess, as the Scripture says, 'one mind and one heart,' who have many bodies but not many minds, many bodies but not many hearts, can properly be called *monos*, that is, 'one alone.'"

It has also been pointed out by Christopher Joest in his article in the *American Benedictine Review* (61:2 – June, 2010), p.164, that "The verb that belongs to this adjective, *monachoun*, means not only "being alone," but also "being united."

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Blessings,

Br. Daniel-Joseph
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