

Our Vows – An Overview

The Community of the Gospel

The Charism of this Community is to live the monastic vows of prayer, study and service that lead to personal transformation at the hands of Christ. This results in our knowing, loving and serving the Lord in our own unique way, as God made us. Members become transformed by living what we value. Not that these things in themselves do the transforming, but they put us in a position whereby we can be transformed by the love of God.

Our vows do not improve our chances for, or lead us to, salvation. We already have that! Salvation is a gift from God through His unending and ever-enduring love for us. You need not prove yourself to Him, or worry about threats that your eternity is ever in danger. God loves you unconditionally, and salvation comes to you as part of that awesome Grace.

Rather, our vows are a *response* to this Love of God. They are an offering to Him of thanksgiving, and a willingness to be open to His transforming power. We live our vows as Monastics to empty ourselves of our ego-selves, to make room for His Presence and transforming power. We seek His Presence within us. It is a Presence that accepts whatever is inside us, and bonds with it in a sacred dance of love. As we spin and twirl through the troubles and beauty of life, we are forever embraced in His powerfully tender arms.

Our Core Vows

For thousands of years people have been striving to become aware of this enduring love of God. Frequently, these pathways rested in devotion, knowledge, and action. The vows we hold dearest reflect these three ancient, sacred pathways. When soul (devotion), mind (knowledge), and body (action) are in alignment and working together in harmony, focusing on the love of God for us, we begin to realize God's awesome presence in our lives. This is when a responsive transformation begins. This is the foundation of our monastic practice; this is what we do and who we are.

DAILY PRAYER: Prayer is how we express the Way of Devotion. We view this vow to mean spending time daily in the presence of God during prayer and meditation. Our Members will usually pray 1 to 4 times daily, using a format that suits their individual prayer temperament. Our prayer time is "spiritual breathing." It is a time when we take in His love and compassion for us and for the world, and then share this with others through thanksgiving, praise, intercessions and supplications. *The Gospel is our core reason for prayer.*

REFLECTIVE STUDY: This vow is our expression of the Way of Knowledge. We view this vow to be a commitment to learning about ourselves and our relation to God and His creation through both self-reflection and discovery, that is, through contemplation. In doing so, we always keep in mind God's love and compassion for us. We observe and reflect on our own behavior and reactions to others and to situations, and we also discover bits and pieces of who we are through the writings of others, both past and present. To know about things is to be knowledgeable; To know about people is to be wise; To know about yourself is to be enlightened. *The Gospel is our core resource for study.*

PERSONAL SERVICE: The third path to God is the Way of Action. We view this vow to mean the personal response we offer in service to others because of God's love. Balancing the contemplative side of our lives, this vow helps us to serve others in whatever way God has revealed to us through our special uniqueness. Our service can take many different forms. To God, even the littlest of service that furthers His love in this world is so very important to Him. *The Gospel is our core example for service.*

The visible, outward practices of prayer, study and service are supported by internal, spiritual attitudes which we call Spiritual Postures:

- Ego Awareness
- Present Moment Awareness
- Acceptance
- Detachment
- Presence of God

The Benedictine Connection

An article by Fr. Terrence G. Kardong, O.S.B., editor of *The American Benedictine Review* (December, 2011), sheds further insight into some common ground between our Community's vows of Prayer, Study, and Service and what St. Benedict stressed in his Rule. Fr. Terrence points out that even though Benedict did not actually use the phrase "ora et labora" (prayer and work) himself, the phrase has become a popular motto for Benedictines over the years. Fr. Terrence points out in his article, however, that Benedict actually emphasized a three-part structure to monastic practice, and not just two (chapter 48 of The Rule). "Benedict divides up the monastic day into three essential activities; prayer, work and biblical study." These three essentials correspond closely to our Community's vows of prayer, study and service!

Why are these three essentials important to monastics?

Down through the ages, emerging from most major religious philosophies, are some bits of wisdom that can guide us through life. These teachings come to us through God's prophets and especially God's Son, and they stress the need for balance and harmony between mind, body and soul. This is most evident in the Great Commandment which recognizes these aspects of the person: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your *heart*, and with all your *soul*, and with all your *strength*, and with all your *mind*; and your neighbor as yourself." Everything else rests on this Great Commandment.

Our monastic practice is built around the three essentials that can help us move closer to this harmony - we seek a balance of prayer (that feeds the soul), study (that feeds the mind), and service (which is often effected through action of the body). It's the 'ora et labora et lectio' taught by St. Benedict. We have adopted the vows of Prayer (ora), Study (lectio) and Service (labora) because they are the fundamental building blocks of a spiritual life.

How much of each should we strive for?

Benedict felt that about 3 hours per day should be spent in prayer, 5 hours per day devoted to manual labor (service), and 2-3 hours daily spent on biblically-related study. This schedule would be adjusted depending on the season and for Sabbath day, but the three parts were always there.

In today's culture, of course (perhaps unfortunately), many monastics have to make a living and generally can't do so on only 5 hours of work daily. Often this grows to 10-12 hours daily, squeezing out prayer and study time. Even "cloistered" monks and nuns in today's monasteries may have greater responsibilities to contribute to their own financial support, and therefore skew their daily schedules in favor of work.

So, for our vowed members who must still find and retain employment, the suggested guidelines remain flexible. Prayer time and study time are thoughtfully structured throughout the day, fueled by good intentions.

Perhaps in these cases we can grow to accept that sometimes our work can be prayer in action, or we can consider our work as study when we learn more about people, ourselves or life itself through what we do. Adjusting to our life situation while maintaining a spirit of truthful intention is sometimes the only thing we can do.

We can all strive to have a better balance of prayer, study, and service in our day, while holding our other brothers and sisters in prayer.

The Receiving and Holding of Vows

While the Community of the Gospel accepts members of various Christian faiths, and is therefore ecumenical in nature, it's still an Episcopal Christian Community in Communion with the See of Canterbury and will conduct its business with that intention.

The vows of our Professed Members may be received by any of the Guardians (Bishop Visitor, Chaplain, or the Brother/Sister Guardian), and are held by the Community. It is the Community (including its Guardian team) that affirms, supports, and nurtures the vows of its members.

And, while the promises and reception of Oblates and Novices is a Community matter that can be completed in a variety of ways, the offering of one's vows as a Professed Member is a public matter, and should be done in the context of an Episcopal Eucharistic Mass. It is also strongly preferred to conduct this celebration at a Community Convocation in the presence of the Community, and every effort will be made to do so. Special circumstances may arise that lead to other possibilities, but these will be discussed by Council before arrangements are made. Normally, these would be limited to the Profession occurring at an Episcopal Mass outside of Convocation, or one conducted by clergy in full communion with the Episcopal Church.

In Summary

In summary, we might say that our **prayer** life is being in the presence of God's kingdom, our **service** is bringing that kingdom into the kingdom of mankind, and that our reflective **study** is learning to know the difference between the two kingdoms. Once again, our vows are a *response* to the Love of God. They are an offering to Him of thanksgiving, and a willingness to be open to His transforming power.

Go in peace to Love and Serve the Lord!