



Cloister Flowers:
Benedictine Spirituality for Presbyterians

*Monastic Gifts, Cloister Flowers:
Benedictine Spirituality
for Presbyterians*

by David Robinson

A monk was there in the breezeway to welcome me, as though he was expecting me. I had just driven two hours from the General Assembly in Long Beach down to Oceanside, California, to Prince of Peace Benedictine Abbey, to get away for a day and enjoy some time in the cloister. I don't mind entering freeways, crowds, convention centers, church politics, or the business of religion.

They just don't nurture my spirit.

Like most Benedictine abbeys, Prince of Peace sits like Mary of Bethany, quietly removed from the Martha world below, at the end of a long drive, on a contemplative hilltop overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Stepping out of a borrowed 1982 Mercedes, I step backward 1,500 years into the embrace of the cloister.

Not surprisingly, a monk is there to welcome me and offer a place at the table as a member of his family. This man, Father Charles, happens to be the abbot. "Some people seem to think I'm the one in charge here," he quips. "Please join us for lunch after midday worship."

The cloister sanctuary offers vistas out to the Pacific, and into the inner ocean of the spirit, through the liturgy of Psalm and chant. Stained glass artwork spirals with an artistic vision of creation and redemption while my spirit journeys deeper into the re-creative presence of Christ. It takes some effort and re-focusing to remove my mind from the busy, crowded world of the General Assembly and truly enter the quiet of this place.

I'm not Roman Catholic. Sometimes, worshipers will ask me why we recite those words in the Apostle's Creed, "I believe in the holy catholic church." I tell them they are catholic and just didn't know it. Quizzical looks are followed by brief lessons on ecclesiology. "Catholic" means universal, or world-wide. I believe in the whole of the Body of Christ, not just in Presbyterianism. Somehow, this abstract truth comes to life as I kneel at Prince of Peace Abbey to pray the Psalms.

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Editor's Reflections

In Kentucky, this is one of those times of year that remind us that there are natural rhythms to life. Lately I have noticed there is a different slant of light, and less of it. The cicadas have warmed up through the summer, growing almost imperceptibly from day to day, but now I am aware that their "song" has increased from *pianissimo* to *forte*. Soon the leaves will be losing their greenness, the nights will be cool, and earth will turn through autumn, drawing toward its winter sabbath.

And there are other rhythms on my mind as well. David Robinson's article on Benedictine spirituality calls us to a fresh appreciation of the rhythms implicit in the monastic life — including the rhythms of speech and silence, and of patterned daily worship.

There are rhythms in our vocational lives also. Now, after five years of editing *Hungryhearts news*, the changing scope of work in the Office of Spiritual Formation calls me to set aside my editor's blue pencil so that I might put more of my energies into other tasks that have taken on more compelling urgency in recent years. It has been great fun putting together *Hungryhearts news* and I now look forward to turning over this rewarding task to someone else. On page 6 you will find a position description for a new Associate for Spiritual Formation. Perhaps you might see yourself in it, and consider whether you are hearing God's call to this work. Or you may recognize someone else with the gifts and experience we are looking for.

This is a wonderful time in the life of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), despite or perhaps even because of our persistent theological differences and polity wars, which are inviting us to seek answers that lie deep in the heart of our faith. There has never been a greater interest in spiritual formation, nor a richer expression of Reformed spirituality in the lives of individuals, congregations, and governing bodies.

As we are ministered to by our ecumenical partners in other Christian traditions who have opened their retreat houses to us and welcomed us into their practices of spiritual direction, we gain a clearer sense of our spiritual identity as Presbyterians and simultaneously are drawn into a renewed awareness of our part in the whole Body of Christ.

As the days shorten in these waning weeks of late summer, may you be held in the power and love of the Holy Mystery who carries you through all the seasons of living.

Kris

Spiritual formation is the activity of the Holy Spirit which molds our lives into the likeness of Jesus Christ. This likeness is one of deep intimacy with God and genuine compassion for all of creation. The Spirit works not only in the lives of individuals but also in the church, shaping it into the Body of Christ. We cooperate with this work of the Spirit through certain practices that make us more open and responsive to the Spirit's touch, disciplines such as sabbath keeping, works of compassion and justice, discernment, worship, hospitality, spiritual friendships, and contemplative silence.

Office of Spiritual Formation, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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The Gift of Praying the Psalms

Following instructions from Benedict (480-547 A.D.), monks pray through the Psalms daily at every service of worship. This spiritual work is “the Opus Dei” — the work of God — the heart of the cloister life.

The full complement of one hundred and fifty psalms is by all means carefully maintained every week. ... We read, after all, that our holy ancestors, energetic as they were, did all this in a single day. Let us hope that we, lukewarm as we are, can achieve it in a whole week.

— Rule of St. Benedict, 18

These days, Benedictines make it through the Psalter twice a month. Times have changed. Presbyterians often neglect the Psalms altogether, both in corporate worship and in private devotions, though I’m certain John Calvin wouldn’t be happy with this oversight. Until recently, the Psalms have always been a centerpiece of Reformed worship.

After the midday mass, I get a tour of the cloister and enjoy lunch together with other guests and monks. Talking is allowed at Prince of Peace during lunch. Other monasteries bring God’s gift of silence right into the dining room.

Monks invite us to refocus our lives and daily habits. Eating and sleeping, speaking and silence, working and praying, life together and life alone: these are the flower beds in which Benedictine spiritual seeds are planted. I choose a table where I can both be silent and look out to the cloister flower garden.

The Gift of Silence

Most fellow Presbyterian pastors I know are word-weary people. Like cows in the flower beds, we trample on God’s gift of silence with our words, until our words lose their ability to bless, nurture, or build-up, let alone lovingly correct or discipline. Benedict wisely instructs us,

There are times when good words are to be left unsaid out of esteem for silence. Indeed, so important is silence that permission to speak should seldom be granted even to mature disciples, no matter how good or holy or constructive their talk.

— The Rule of St. Benedict, 6

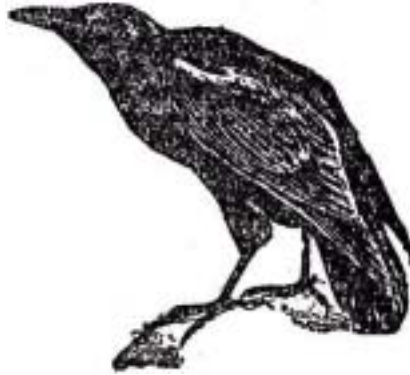
Imagine what our General Assembly would look like with this kind of spiritual life as a regular part of our annual gathering. I do appreciate those rare moments of prayerful silence at presbytery and General Assembly meetings, when we wait together upon the Lord, seeking God’s wisdom, grace and truth in the midst of our differing viewpoints.

Daily, our Benedictine brothers wait on the Word of God in silence. Every evening at vespers, a monk reads a chapter of Scripture then takes his seat. Then, Mary-like, we sit at Jesus’ feet and listen. My mind tends to race away with distractions as my spirit creeps up to the edge of this abyss of silence and peers over for what seems like an eternity. After the first few prayer retreats to the monastery, I timed this period. Five minutes. Monks and guests sit in silence, meditating on Scripture.

Everyone who journeys along the contemplative paths must wrestle with distractions. Monasteries are no different. As I sat in the cloister courtyard at Prince of Peace Abbey enjoying some time for *lectio divina* (sacred reading), crows gathered in the palm treetops and began boisterously discussing whatever crows discuss. I had to pick up and move to a quieter location on the monastic property where I wouldn’t be so distracted.

My favorite five minutes at General Assembly was spent away from the noise and crowds, in a makeshift prayer chapel. I'm not a fan of generic convention centers. The architecture of the corporate-business culture is anti-spirit: dull colored carpets, windowless spaces lit with recessed fluorescent lights, gray retractable walls. This picture is monotonously repeated city after city with no thought to nurturing the human spirit.

Thankfully, in the General Assembly prayer chapel, some alert planners brought in fabrics, symbols, and objects to focus our attention back upon our roots in Christ. Most welcoming though was the silence. A mere five minutes in silent meditation, with my Bible open to one of the Psalms of the day, and I was refreshed, ready to enter once again the world of religious business to welcome others in Christ's love.



The Gift of Hospitality

The reason I attended General Assembly was to sign copies of my recently published book on Benedictine parenting, *The Family Cloister: Benedictine Wisdom for the Home*. At the book-signing table, I enjoyed welcoming fellow spiritual travelers and sharing stories about our common life in Christ.

One of the most revolutionary sentences in all Western civilization since the canonization of the Scriptures may be found in “The Rule of St. Benedict.”

All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me (Matthew 25:35).

— The Rule of St. Benedict, 53

As a first time “stranger” to General Assembly, I felt out of place, over my head, and unwelcome. This occurred not by any fault of the planners, nor was it due to any intentional oversight of our denomination. We are simply too busy and too distracted by the business of managing a bureaucratic system of religion to welcome Christ who daily comes walking through our doors. As a Presbyterian pastor, I'm part of this same religious system and regularly overlook my Lord in the face of strangers who have come to our resort village of Cannon Beach, Oregon.

Chapter 53 of the Rule of St. Benedict has revolutionized my approach to “visitors” — on Sunday mornings at worship, at my front door, in our village. How many opportunities am I missing every day to spend time with Christ in the life of a stranger? Since I encountered the Benedictine spirituality of Christ-centered hospitality, I've adopted a more open-hearted, adventurous approach to guests and visitors, especially *poor people* and *pilgrims*, two classes of people who Benedict especially welcomed. Benedict lived in a time of overwhelming societal distress and upheaval, yet he called his monks to take the risk and welcome the stranger as Christ.

True hospitality requires taking a risk — walking the Emmaus road with the stranger who is Christ, welcoming the homeless traveler to spend the night, sitting at table to break bread with the hungry of this world. As we take this Benedictine risk, Christ is revealed to our eyes, to our families, to our world.

As we open the simple gifts of Benedictine spirituality, including the gifts of praying the Psalms, silence, and hospitality, we receive God's grace of a deeper, more joyful spiritual life together in Christ. We don't need to drive one hundred miles to the nearest Benedictine monastery, although I've accepted this as a monthly discipline. We need only find little corners in our busy days where we can sit in silence, meditating on God's Word in the Psalms, and then arise to meet Christ in the face of our children, our spouse, our neighbor, and welcome them with love.

Welcome them as Abbot Charles welcomed me — invite them to worship, have them in for lunch, and take them on a tour of God's growing cloister garden, the garden of your spiritual life in Christ.

David Robinson, married with three teenage sons, serves as pastor of Community Presbyterian Church in Cannon Beach, Oregon. David enjoys monthly retreat days at the Trappist Abbey near Lafayette, Oregon. He is the author of *The Family Cloister: Benedictine Wisdom for the Home* (Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000) and *The Christian Family Toolbox: 52 Benedictine Activities for the Home* (Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001).

For further reading

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Hugh Feiss, *Essential Monastic Wisdom: Writings on the Contemplative Life*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1999.

Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life*. New York, NY: Farrar, Staus & Cudahy, 1957.

Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 1996.

David Robinson, *The Family Cloister: Benedictine Wisdom for the Home*. New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000.

To find a retreat house

Jack & Marcia Kelly, *Sanctuaries: A Guide to Lodgings in Monasteries, Abbeys, and Retreats*. New York, NY: Random House, 1996.

Robert J. Regalbuto, *A Guide to Monastic Guest Houses*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1998.

Retreats International. <http://www.nd.edu/~retreats/> Wonderful web site with listings of retreat houses in the United States and Canada.

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