
Saint Benedict in the City

BY BRYAN HOLLON

The Church's outreach to abandoned urban centers must go beyond soup kitchens, child care facilities, and social service programs. A new kind of monasticism, or ascetic simplicity, is emerging among Christians who are gathering in intentional urban communities. What are these "new monastics" teaching us about faithful discipleship?

We can learn an important lesson from the fifth-century Christians who survived the fall of Rome, suggests moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. As the western territories of the Roman Empire were conquered by successive waves of barbarian invaders, Christians did not pour their energies into preserving the Empire's crumbling culture and institutions as though they were of ultimate value. Instead, he notes, they turned their attention to creating new forms of community that could sustain moral and civil life in an age of uncertainty. What they created in large numbers were monasteries – intentional communities gathered around a shared vision of the good life and governed by a common moral rule, like the influential *Rule of Benedict*. Because MacIntyre believes we desperately need new "local forms of community" today, he concludes his groundbreaking study, *After Virtue* (1981), with the provocative idea that we are waiting for "another – doubtless very different – St. Benedict."¹

MacIntyre believes that contemporary western civilization has not been overrun by barbarian invaders, of course, but by a thoroughgoing moral and intellectual fragmentation. We have become, in large measure, morally illiterate because we have rejected the "conceptual scheme" – of human nature, virtue and vice, and the common good – that once made our moral language comprehensible.² It is not simply that we now live in a pluralistic age where various moral and intellectual traditions coexist and compete

with one another. Rather, more and more of us consciously reject the need for any long-standing moral or intellectual tradition at all.

We share no authoritative vision of what constitutes a good life. No grand narrative signifies where we have come from and where we are headed in the end. Consequently, we have reduced issues of morality and truth to personal preferences and our public debates have become intractable.³

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This fragmentation has not spared Christian institutions, which often merely reflect rather than transform the surrounding culture. Thus, we need a new kind of monasticism, or ascetic simplicity, which enables us to minister faithfully to society while preserving our distinctive identity as a people “called out” and “set apart.” Just

such a movement is gaining momentum in urban centers across America. Indeed, a gathering of intentional urban Christian communities recently formed an informal network called “the new monasticism.”⁴

WHO ARE THE NEW MONASTICS?

The first New Monasticism Gathering in June 2004 drew a varied crowd. There were young and old, celibate and married participants. Several young married couples brought their children. Some participants came from intentional Christian communities with long histories, such as the traditional Catholic religious orders and the Catholic Worker movement, or the Bruderhof Communities in New York and Reba Place Fellowship in Evanston and Chicago. Others represented newer communities like The Simple Way in Philadelphia, New Jerusalem community in North Philadelphia, and Rutba House in Durham, North Carolina, which hosted the event. All of the “new monastics” were from communities that live among the poor and oppressed in the center of American cities where the fragmentation and moral decline of western civilization is felt with the greatest intensity.⁵

These new monastics hope both to serve the Church and to shape society at large. With the origin of western Christian monasticism in the fourth through sixth centuries as their model, members of this emerging movement aim not only to serve the urban poor, but also to reinvigorate traditional church institutions and become salt and light to a civilization in moral and spiritual disarray. To this end, they have adopted a kind of contemporary monastic rule, or statement of “twelve marks,” that all communities associated within the movement share:

- ❖ Relocation to the abandoned places of Empire
- ❖ Sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us
- ❖ Hospitality to the stranger
- ❖ Lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation
- ❖ Humble submission to Christ's body, the church
- ❖ Intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate
- ❖ Nurturing common life among members of intentional community
- ❖ Support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children
- ❖ Geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life
- ❖ Care for the plot of God's earth given to us along with support of our local economies
- ❖ Peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew 18
- ❖ Commitment to a disciplined contemplative life⁶

SERVING THE CHURCH

Will the new monasticism, with its communal rule and self-understanding informed by the history of traditional monastic communities, succeed in reshaping the Church and American society for good? Even asking this question may seem grandiose, for it is doubtful that many Christians will embrace the movement's radical commitments. History shows, however, that movements with relatively small numbers have had a major influence within the Church. The monastic communities that spread across Europe during the medieval era are again instructive.

Though monks and nuns were never more than a small percentage of the total population of Christians, they had a major influence on the development of the Church and European civilization as a whole. The monastic communities carried the gospel into non-Christian lands. They served as hotels and hospitals making Europe safer for travelers and more humane for the sick and elderly. As is well known, they played a significant role in preserving the philosophy and literature of the great thinkers of Greece and Rome. Monastic communities served as schools and some eventually managed large estates, employing hundreds of people and providing the economic base around which cities developed.

Importantly, the medieval monasteries were an integral part of the Catholic Church and maintained strong institutional connections to its hierarchy.⁷ Thus, although the majority of Catholic priests, bishops, and laypeople were not directly involved in the monastic life, the Catholic Church as a

whole counted the ministries taking place within and around the monasteries as her own and drew much inspiration from them. The monastic life provided an ideal of Christian spirituality that medieval laypeople, priests, bishops, and even popes aspired to. Because monks and nuns were totally devoted to God and neighbor, their communal lives signified, even if imperfectly, the ultimate consummation of God's redemptive work when humans

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will once again live at peace with each other and praise God without ceasing. The monastic ideal helped to provide medieval Europe with a distinctively Christian vision of the goal of human existence.

Thus, the intentional communities that make up the new monastic movement will do well to nurture their ties with local congregations, denominations, and other church groups. It

is very encouraging that one of the movement's "twelve marks" prescribes submission to wider Christian communities. This rule indicates the movement's desire to serve the Church and to be accountable to it.

REFORMING OUR DESIRES

These new monastic communities can help us reform Christian practices that have been diluted by accommodation to the surrounding culture. They are a fresh witness to what it means to be the Church—the *ekklesia*—a people "called out" of captivity to a fallen world in order to serve those who suffer under the weight of its broken systems. Sister Margaret McKenna of Philadelphia's New Jerusalem community compares the urban centers of American cities to deserts: "abandoned" largely by the powers of this world, they are some of the "loneliest places on earth."⁸ By choosing to live and minister in these urban deserts, new monastic communities are explicitly rejecting the consumerism and materialism that is so characteristic of suburban life.

In the process, the new monastics are restoring the theological language that has been corrupted by our eager accommodation to a consumerist culture. Many congregations do not proclaim a gospel that challenges the culture and transforms people morally and intellectually; instead, they accommodate the wider culture by packaging themselves in ways that will appeal to personal preferences and disordered desires. They are "seeker-sensitive" rather than seeker-transformative. Within a therapeutic culture where people are obsessed with emotional and physical well-being, their

worship services resemble “a kind of mass therapy session” and their church buildings offer the same resources as health clubs and strip malls.⁹ Too many people come to church desiring comfortable and prosperous lives, and too many congregations respond with a gospel of health and wealth that does not probe how those consumerist desires should be challenged and transformed by the Christian faith.

In a society that revolves around material consumption, we too often present the gospel as though it were one more product that people can acquire and add to their busy lives. By moving into the abandoned inner cities, the new monastic communities show us a deeper understanding of following Jesus – giving up our lives of self-interest so that God can create something new in and through us. With the biblical metaphor of the potter’s wheel, McKenna describes the new monasticism’s commitment to redeeming community life in America’s inner cities as “a no-saying and a yes-saying: No to an old way of life and Yes to the search for a new one.... It gives up on patching the pot thrown off balance on the whirling wheel, re-kneads and throws again the clay, centers it carefully this time, and realizes afresh the reworked clay’s potential for beauty and service.”¹⁰

As McKenna’s rich metaphor suggests, not only must we say “No” to materialism and disentangle ourselves from consumerist yearning, but also we must say “Yes” to a new life in Christ guided by rightly ordered desires. Jesus tells us that the law and the prophets are summed up in the commandments to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:34-40). Our other desires are legitimate when they do not contradict or distort these first loves.

The medieval monasteries were communities where human desires could be disciplined and properly directed toward communion with God and neighbor. Monastic practices – prayer, singing psalms, confession, penance, fasting, celebration, manual labor, mutual service, and more – ordered daily life in a way that continually challenged and redirected inordinate desires. Monasteries called people *out of* inordinate worldly attachments and *into* a fellowship of communal love in Christ. In describing themselves as “schools for conversion,” therefore, the communities associated with the new monasticism are not attempting to be novel. They are embracing the need to discipline and direct human desires in the hope that communities of Christian friendship and service will be birthed by the Spirit of God.

CONCLUSION

The Church’s outreach to abandoned urban centers must go beyond soup kitchens, child care facilities, and other social service programs. America’s inner cities need Christians who are willing to offer themselves completely in the hope that God will create vibrant faith communities in long-abandoned places. Why shouldn’t all Christian church organizations sponsor new monastic orders committed to inner cities as a mission field?

During my years as a student at Fuller Theological Seminary, I was privileged to serve as a pastoral intern in a Mennonite church that sponsored several intentional Christian communities in poor urban neighborhoods of Los Angeles. While no more than twenty of our congregation's 120 members lived in these communities, they had a profound influence on the rest of us through their preaching, leading worship, organizing neighborhood events, and educating us on the difficulties of inner-city life. Those members who lived among the poor were a kind of monastic community for our congregation. Their faithfulness, commitment to one another, and service to their inner-city neighbors gave all of us a better sense of what it means to be "called out" of a life of self-interest in order to love God and neighbor.

The new monastics have much to offer to the poor neighborhoods where they live and minister. And they have much to offer the Church that is sorely tempted to conform to the materialist and consumerist spirit of the age.

Perhaps a new St. Benedict is in our cities.

NOTES

1 Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, second edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 263.

2 *Ibid.*, 2.

3 *Ibid.*, 6-13.

4 The designation "New Monasticism" comes from Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre's AFTER VIRTUE* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 68-78.

5 Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, in the "Report on New Monasticism Gathering: The Unveiling of a Contemporary School for Conversion," describes the 2004 conference (online at www.newmonasticism.org, accessed May 23, 2006).

6 For essays on each of the twelve marks of the new monasticism, see Rutba House, ed., *Schools for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005).

7 The nature of these institutional connections changed over the years and became much stronger with the papal reforms begun by Gregory VII, who served from 1073 to 1085. For an interesting yet accessible history of medieval monasticism, see C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages*, third edition (New York, NY: Longman, 2001).

8 Sr. Margaret M. McKenna, "Mark 1: Relocation to Abandoned Places of Empire," in *Schools for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, edited by Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005), 16.

9 Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World*, 34.

10 McKenna, "Mark 1: Relocation," 16.



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