

Sermon

New Monasticism: Part 1Pastor Jerry Truex; Aug 21, 2011

A. Introduction

Something is wrong with American Christianity. To whomever you talk—liberals or conservatives, Muslims or Hindus, Christians or non-Christians—there seems to be a consensus that there is something wrong with institutional churches in America. Institutional churches are not living up to what they are supposed to, and everyone seems to know it.

There is a movement of Christians who are trying to change this. The new monasticism is a growing movement of Christians, who are committed to the radical discipleship of Jesus in the tradition of ancient monasticism. But unlike ancient monasticism, which was centered in monasteries, the new monasticism is missional, living in abandoned sections of society, committing to community, sharing incomes, serving the poor, and practicing spiritual disciplines.¹

Today, I'm going to describe traditional monasticism, then I'm going to describe and give examples of new monastic communities, and finally I'm going to draw some parallels between our church and the new monastic movement.

B. Tradition Monasticism**1. The Rise of Monasticism**

Two things happened in the fourth century that had a permanent impact on Christianity.

First, when Constantine became the emperor, he made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, which resulted in millions of people flooding the church, because if one wanted to be a Roman citizen, one had to be a Christian.²

The second thing that happened was that thousands of people left Roman controlled cities and went into the deserts of Egypt and Syria to form Christian communities.

¹ Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, "New Monasticism and the Resurrection of American Christianity," *Missiology* Vol. 38, No. 1 (Jan 2010) 13-19.

² Although Constantine issued the *Edict of Milan* (313), which granted tolerance to all religions, he never gave a decree making Christianity the official religion of Roman Empire. Rather, Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the Empire in 380s, because we find that the public worship of pagan gods was banned by 391. Nevertheless, the fact that Constantine participated in Christian matters (e.g., Council of Nicaea in 325) made Christianity the *de facto* religion of the empire.

Are these two events related? Yes. On the one hand, many Christians thought that Constantine had been chosen by God to bring the church and the Empire together in a grand victory for God.

On the other hand, some Christians took the opposite position. The fact that the emperors declared themselves Christians was not a blessing, but a sign that the church was headed for corruption. With Constantine, the church was no longer persecuted, but joined the powers of the world.

The church, which had been poor for centuries, now shared the luxury and wealth of the empire. The *narrow path* of Christ was turned into a *wide avenue* for the whole of society. How could a sincere Christian resist the enormous temptations of Roman power, pleasure, and luxury?

2. Monastic Life

Many sincere Christians found the answer in the monastic life. Monastic life meant fleeing from society, leaving everything behind, and practicing asceticism. Asceticism (ἄσκησις, *askēsis*) refers to spiritual training or exercise aimed at gaining personal freedom and spiritual power. Asceticism aims at controlling the passions, passions, which if not controlled, lead to self-destruction.

So, during the fourth century, we see an exodus of devoted Christians to the deserts of Egypt and Syria to practice asceticism. They sought to the narrow path of Jesus—the yoke or way of asceticism—by going to the abandoned places of the empire.

The word “monk” derives the Greek term, ***monachos***, which means “solitary”. One of the driving motivations for the earliest monks was solitude. Society was the problem with its temptations and distractions. So the first monks were hermits or “**anchorites**” (ἀναχωρέω, “to depart into the country”).

However, within a brief period of time the solitary monasticism gave way to a communal form; monks began living in small village communities in the desert and they became known as known as “**cenobites**” (a conflation of κοινός, “common,” and βίος, “life”). One of the early leaders of the monastic communities was **Pachomius**, who founded seven communities with several hundred monks.³ Pachomius’ sister, Mary, founded similar communities for women.

³ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1984) 145.

3. Monasteries

Each of the monasteries was encircled by a wall with a single entrance. Within the enclosure there were several buildings, including a church, storehouse, refectory, meeting hall, and living quarters. [Show slides of St. Catherine's Monastery and St. Anthony's]

Daily life in these communities included both work and devotion. They followed Paul's admonition to "pray without ceasing." So, when they kneaded their bread or picked their grain, they sang psalms, recited passages of Scripture, and prayed aloud or in silence. Twice a day they gathered to pray, sign psalms, or hear the reading of scripture. They generally lived in poverty and shared all goods and property in common. Within each monastery, monks were expected to obey his superiors—so there was strict hierarchical order. The head of each housing unit was the superior, called an "abbot," or father.

4. St. Benedict

St. Benedict (480-547) was one of the greatest monastic leaders. In the fifth century, he founded twelve monastic communities in Italy.

Benedict lived in a time like ours; at a time when civilization felt like it was crumbling. It was at the end of the classical age when Roman civilization was collapsing and the Dark Ages was rising. Benedictine monasticism provided stability and social coherence, which was centered in work, spiritual disciplines, and the relationships of the monastic community.

To strengthen monastic communities—communities which Benedict saw as an antidote to the collapse of society at that time—Benedict wrote what has become the most famous community rule, *St. Benedict's Rule*. *The Rule* contains 73 short chapters on the principles and practices of monastic life.

The Rule calls monks to eight commitments or vows.

(1) Covenanted Community

Monks and nuns commit themselves to a covenanted community—to live in a certain way and not some other. Living in community is the crucible for developing the character of Christ. Living in community requires some rules, organization, and agreements—a covenant. In community, we find God in relationship with one another. We learn to love God and serve others.

(2) Stability

Monks and nuns commit themselves to stability. Elizabeth Canham wrote: "Stability affirms a willingness to attend to the present moment, to the reality of this place,

these people, as God's gift to me and the setting where I live out my discipleship. We are discouraged from fantasizing [about] some ideal situation [or church] in which we will finally be able to pray and live as we should. Instead Benedict says, 'Be here; find Christ in the restless teenage, demanding parent, insensitive employer, dull preacher, lukewarm congregation.'⁴

(3) Obedience

Monks and nuns commit themselves to obedience. Obedience refers to listening and responding.⁵ Obedience is listening to God, to the community, the abbot, and to oneself. This type of listening-obedience is submission. It is surrendering the selfish ego or false self for something greater. This type of obedience requires humility, so Benedict included the first written 12-Step program in chapter 7, which he calls the twelve steps to humility.⁶

(4) Conversion

Monks and nuns commit themselves to conversion. Conversion refers to repenting, changing, and being open to transformation. Being committed to conversion means that the monks recognize that they are not yet fully the persons God created them to be.

(5) Praying the Divine Office

"The cornerstone of the Rule of Benedict is the Divine Office, also called the *Opus Dei*, 'the Work of God'."⁷ The Divine Office refers to corporate prayer eight times in a 24-hour period. Praying the Divine Office is the main work of each monk or nun.

(6) Hospitality

Monks and nuns commit themselves to hospitality. The word hospitality comes from the Latin word *hospes* or "guest". Hospitality is not about tea and lace napkins. Hospitality is about "making room inside yourself for another person."⁸ Of course, this includes welcoming—making space for—the "stranger, the marginalized, the immigrant."

⁴ Quoted by Jane Tomaine, *St. Benedicts Toolbox* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2005) 45

⁵⁵ Jane Tomaine, *St. Benedicts Toolbox* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2005) 61-62.

⁶ For a summary and comments, see Jane Tomaine, *St. Benedicts Toolbox* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2005) 68-70.

⁷ Jane Tomaine, *St. Benedicts Toolbox* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2005) 105.

⁸ Jane Tomaine, *St. Benedicts Toolbox* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2005) 120.

(7) Keeping holy, purgation

Monks and nuns commit themselves to the work of purgation or holy living. That is, they practice self-examination, prayer, fasting, and self-denial so they can free themselves from being controlled by attachment, aversions, and self-deception. In other words, they are committed to spiritual disciplines which free them to follow Christ.

(8) Labor/work

Monks and nuns commit themselves to work. In Benedict's time, that meant manual labor. Each person had to pull their own load. Of course, Benedict made exceptions for the weak and ill person, but generally Benedict saw work as one of the ways the monks and nuns served each other.

C. New Monastic Communities

1. Rutba Community

Rutba community is located in Durham, NC. It is "a Christian community of hospitality, peacemaking, and discipleship."⁹ They live together in a sprawling old house with creaky hardwood floors in a black section of the city called Walltown. Walltown has drug problems, is rundown, and is known for being a dangerous place.¹⁰

Rutba community shares meals and daily prayers from the Book of Common Prayer. Its members do not pool their money in a common treasury. Each person takes care of their own finances. However, they have a common fund—a sharing fund—that members to give to or take from as they have the need or ability.¹¹

Rutba house has only five members: Jonathan and Leah Wilson-Hartgrove, a seminary student, a 40-year old man, and a high school student that they have taken in as a foster child.

However, their community is much larger than the house, and Rutba house has a prominent place in the network of intentional communities in the US and now worldwide. They hosted a conference on New Monasticism in 2004 and out of that came the book, *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism* (Wiff and stock).

⁹ *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, Edited by The Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005) vii.

¹⁰ Jason Byassee, "The New Monastics: Alternative Christian Communities," *Christian Century*, Oct. 18, 2005.

¹¹ Jason Byassee, "The New Monastics: Alternative Christian Communities," *Christian Century*, Oct. 18, 2005.

Show their website at <http://www.newmonasticism.org>.

2. Reba Place Fellowship

Reba Place Fellowship in Evanston, Illinois, is an intentional community founded in the 1950s by a Mennonite professor from Goshen College. Reba's membership peaked in the 1970s at about 150. In January 2008, Reba Fellowship had 32 covenant members, six novice members, seventeen practicing members, and nine apprentices.¹²

Reba Place has been influenced by the Rule of St. Benedict. Like the Rule of St. Benedict, Reba Place chooses a senior member of the community to be the spiritual director for novices. Like the Rule of St. Benedict, Reba Place encourages daily work, contemplation, self-examination, study, accountability, and stability for its members. Like the Rule of St. Benedict itself, Reba Place has written a community rule or covenant that outlines their life together.¹³

Reba members pool their money. They draw from a common treasury to cover members' housing, food, transportation, and health care. For example, Doug Selph is a computer programmer who puts his \$100,000 salary into the common pot and he and his wife and two children receive \$762 per month back from the common treasury.

David Janzen, a leader at Reba Place and a contributor to the book, *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of the New Monasticism*,¹⁴ said that the members of Reba place hope to show the world what following Jesus' way of justice and peace might look like.¹⁵

Show their website at: <http://www.rebaplacefellowship.org/Home>.

D. Reflections

We are living in a time like Benedicts. Like Benedict's society, ours is also is a time where cultures are colliding and crumbling, where intellectual and moral chaos is rising, where

¹² Reba Fellowship website:

<http://www.rebaplacefellowship.org/Who%20We%20Are/History/From%202004%20to%20the%20Present>

¹³ David Janzen, "Mark 6: Intentional Formation in the Way of Christ and the Rule of the Community Along the Lines of the Old Novitiate," *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, Edited by The Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005) 88-91.

¹⁴ David Janzen, "Mark 6: Intentional Formation in the Way of Christ and the Rule of the Community Along the Lines of the Old Novitiate," *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, Edited by The Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005) 80-96.

¹⁵ David Janzen, "Mark 6: Intentional Formation in the Way of Christ and the Rule of the Community Along the Lines of the Old Novitiate," *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, Edited by The Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005) 95-96.

hundreds if not thousands of worldviews compete for supremacy, each relativizing the other with no solid ground.

Traditional, modern, and postmodern cultures stand side by side vying for loyalty through the global internet. We suffer from an avalanche of unorganized hyperlinked information, propaganda, and advertisement. Profound truth, trivial factoids, angry propaganda, and advertisement rest side-by-side each other on the internet, television, and text messages.

For these reasons, some have announced a new dark age is upon us, ironically caused by the increasing mass of information, data without coherence, fragments without form.

Early monasticism was a movement aimed at addressing the chaos of the first Dark Age; so also the practices and commitments of the monastics might help us address our own dark age.

We live in a post-Christian culture. Churches are everywhere, but there is something wrong. Churches are not living up to what they are supposed to, and everyone seems to know it.

During this time of emerging darkness, where the church seems to have lost its way, let us consider embracing a Monastic-Anabaptist response.