

On a Monastic Day I

Something is always out of balance in our lives here in the world. We ought to have a good spiritual life (full of sacraments, prayer, devotion), an intellectual life (good books, intelligent conversation, reflection), a recreational life (play, the creation of beauty, physical exercise), a cultural life (music, painting, literature), a physical life (sleep, food), and a social life (the nourishment of friendships). While the spiritual life should be at the top, the other kinds of life are important too. I didn't list them in any particular order, since at any one time sleep might be a much higher priority than looking at good paintings. But one or several of these seems always out of order, or neglected.

One of the things that struck me most on my retreat at the monastery in Clear Creek, was how balanced the monastic day is. In one day, each of these "lives" is well attended to; I would say even perfectly. For example, there is just the right amount of prayer for their life, and the right amount of food, silence, clothing, beauty, exercise, contact with nature, music, etc. What St. Benedict put together is perfect. What follows is a description of my day; the times are approximate.

0430 Rise.

I get up at this time each day anyway, so it is not a problem. But I must confess that not having immediate access to coffee is rather penitential. The church is quite cold. "Cold and chill, bless the Lord. Dew and rain, bless the Lord. Frost and cold, bless the Lord. Ice and snow, bless the Lord. Light and darkness, bless the Lord...." That Canticle of the Three Young Men in the book of Daniel sums up the ambience of Matins quite nicely. I don't know if we can live in heaven, until we learn how to bless the Lord with cold and ice and darkness, with which one begins the day at the monastery, at least in the morning.

0500 Matins.

Time to realize that God is faithful, and Israel is not. The Divine Office begins in church with the singing of Matins. Imagine your first real task in the day is to sing to God the Psalms. And sing them perfectly. That's one of the things the monks do, is to try and sing perfectly. The Gregorian Chant is perfect, though their voices are human. The text is perfect, though the pronunciation of the monks is human. When they make a mistake with the music or the text, they rise, put back the cowl of the habit, get on both knees, bow the head, stand up, and then sit back down and put the cowl back on going right on with their prayer. That immediate reparation is a wonderful gift to God. The old Jewish notion of not offering to God what is blemished is there in the monastic choir, but tempered with the Christian notion of a God's merciful view of human frailty.

0630 Lauds.

Time to praise God. Lauds is a wonderful office, coming from the word which means "praise." It follows immediately after Matins. The working brothers do not sing Matins, but process into choir at the end of Matins. The whole monastery is there for Lauds.

0700 Low Mass.

Each of the priests moves quickly to celebrate their Mass, and the brother's move quickly to serve Mass. The church is filled with silent low Masses up and down its length. This is a very moving sight to the laity; I remember well seeing it for the first time at Fontgombault in France. After the Masses, everything is put away, the chasubles carefully folded. A short thanksgiving is made.

0800 Prime.

This office is to beg God for the graces needed for the day. The day will be a battle. Coupled with the Psalms, is the reading of the Martyrology for the day; a recounting of the heroes of the spiritual life who have gone before us.

0815 Breakfast.

Simple monastic food, plenty of whole grains, vegetables, fruit, fish, etc., is the fare in the monastery. The food is good and tasty, but plain at the same time. The absence of luxury is a blessing to the virtues of chastity and humility. It's warm in the refectory, and there's hot coffee too (to the great relief of this priest). This is a welcome break, since you've been going for almost four hours of continual prayer. No breakfast is as refreshing as a monastic one!

0830 Study.

Back to the cell for the study of Sacred Scripture, and theology. The monks might have other work to do (their life is summed up in the phrase "Ora et Labora," "prayer and work"). This study is appropriate for a priest. The morning is given entirely over to God; private affairs are not yet treated in the day. The silence of the day is wonderful. All I could hear was the wind in the oaks and the pines, the sheep and guard dogs in the field, and some monk sawing wood.

1000 Tierce and High Mass.

Every day the Mass is sung. The working brothers don't attend this Mass, they're out in the fields or in the shops. But the Choir monks are at their work, which is the praise of God. I hope you don't mind my putting their schedule in the 24 hour clock like the military, but their life is rather military. It has all the best aspects of the military, and none of the bad. The monks move right along. They're not in a rush, not frantic like our Denver traffic, but they don't dilly-dally either. This day is a battle, and they fight the good fight with their prayer and work, creating at least one place where Christ is truly a King. The monastic life is not for the faint of heart, or for the effeminate. A good monk is a man's man, a priest's priest. They fight laziness as well or better than anyone I've known. And unlike soldiers or marines, the monks do their work in constant good cheer, and without complaint.

1100 Study.

Back to the cell for more study. If the temptations hit hard (this was the hour I was really pounded in my retreat for some reason), one can always take a little walk, and just look at creation; the sky and the trees and the wind and the cold do wonders to dissipate temptation. At this hour, I took the opportunity to write letters. A lamp, a simple wood desk, paper and a pen was a welcome break from the computer screen.

The Monastic Day II

1250 Sext.

Back to church to pray the Office of Sext. Each of the liturgical hours is sung in the best music in the world, Gregorian Chant. When your day is filled with that music, it's very hard to drift away from the joy of God. If the day is filled with secular music, you'll find it is very difficult to remain in the presence of God, or be friends with Him.

1300 Lunch.

Back to the refectory for a good meal. This is the largest meal of the day. I should mention that breakfast is in silence. Lunch and supper are in silence, but there is a reader who reads in a recto tono voice; not a monotone, but a kind of singing anyway. It's just right, and has the tendency to draw you to the text, and not to the one reading. The text is carefully chosen. The monks like to listen to history when they eat, and enjoy an edifying account of a missionary or a military chaplain, or a good woman in the home or hospital.

1330 Recreation.

They split up into small groups after lunch, and go for a walk; there's plenty of laughter, stories, reminiscing about various characters that show up at the monastery, or the trading of news about what's going on in the world. In one recreation I recall hearing about the correspondence carried on between John Lennon and the televangelist Oral Roberts. It was fascinating. The conversation is humane, balanced, serious, informative and humorous all at once. They don't shirk from a serious subject if necessary, but this walk is for fun.

1415 Nones.

After the fun, it's back to church to sing the Office again. The noonday devil is lurking, so the prayer is most necessary at this time to fight the good fight.

1430 Manual labor.

They work hard. I borrowed a work habit (a rough old tunic with an old belt), and worked hard with my hands as they do. The work is anything but monotonous...it's even somewhat adventurous at times. One day was fixing fence, another was cutting and stacking firewood, another was planting trees, another was mechanical work on a trailer, and the other tending the blackberry vines for the next spring. The manual labor does wonders for the soul, by consecrating the body to God. Prayer before labor, and a short prayer giving thanks for it when it is over.

1700 Coffee.

Back to the refectory for some refreshment; water, coffee, a little bread if you need it. I sure did.

1715 Study.

Back to the cell for some more study, reading, writing. The noonday devil makes his appearance at this time...the tendency to relax too much and be lazy had to be fought. Holy water is kept in the cell for this fight, sacred images are on the wall, and you're quite conscious of the monks – your brethren – who are fighting the same fight. You're especially conscious of Christ, who resides just down the hall...

1800 Vespers.

Back to the church for Vespers. What a wonderful Office this is. The body has that excellent tiredness that comes from a good work-out. It's primed for more prayer. The hands, feet and back are sore, but totally at peace. This way of living is the contemplative life, but by now it should be obvious that monks don't sit around having deep thoughts about things and staring at their toes; the praise of God in the words that God wrote is what they are especially keen to accomplish. They sing all day long. At the end of each psalm is a doxology to the Trinity, and they stand up and bow profoundly for each doxology.

1830 Meditation.

The body and the mind are so relaxed that the meditation comes naturally. I was using the Diary of St. Faustina for my meditation; a very simple yet profound private revelation of the burning love, deep interest in, and mercy for us poor human beings. The book is rather amazing.

1900 Supper.

Back in the refectory for this. Each monk has his place, and it is so ordered, unhurried, calm, and refreshing, that only a dolt would change the way they eat (or the way they do about anything...they've been working on this life since the 6th century).

1930 Study.

More reading, writing or study back in the cell. This is also a good time to go for a little walk and pray the Rosary.

2030 Compline.

The last Office of the day, and preparation for that mysterious little death called sleep. The monks make private devotions at this time, especially to Mary. After Compline, it's time to sleep. I would flop into the bed with the body humbled by exercise, but not exhausted; the mind worked and stimulated, but not overwrought; the spirit tested, but not crushed.

After only the first day there, I lay down and said to God, "My Lord, I have been in your presence all day long, and have not left it. I got just the right amount of prayer, study, fun, exercise, food, rest, friendship, and work that I needed. Thank you."