

Experience confirms that humility is a very slow business if it is authentic. A realistic estimate of the time needed to get to the summit would be forty or fifty years. This is partly because progress is rarely unqualified. In most people's lives, there are periods of backsliding, false starts are made, blind alleys entered. . . . Even if we do not suffer wastage of effort, much time is needed for the restoration of God's image in us. Anyone who zooms up the ladder without pause or hindrance is probably going to die young. For the rest of us, it will be a lifelong journey.—Michael Casey, *A Guide to Living the Truth*

Therefore, in a word, I interpret repentance as regeneration, whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God that had been disfigured and all but obliterated through Adam's transgression. . . . And indeed, this restoration does not take place in one moment or one day or one year; but through continual and sometimes even slow advances God wipes out in his elect the corruptions of the flesh, cleanses them of guilt, consecrates them to himself as temples renewing all their minds to true purity that they may practice repentance throughout their lives and know that this warfare will end only at death. . . . The closer any man comes to the likeness of God, the more the image of God shines in him.

—John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.3.9

Do not aspire to be called holy before you really are, but first be holy that you may more truly be called so.

—*Rule of Benedict* 4.62

## I

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### WHAT'S A GOOD (PROTESTANT EVANGELICAL) BOY DOIN' IN A MONASTERY?

The crash awoke us at 5:00 a.m. in our Wheaton townhouse. My first thought was "Not even the monks are up *this* early!" It turned out my wife's eighty-year-old aunt had awakened long before the rest of us and, in her legally blind condition, bumped into a large wooden painting that hung above the landing on our staircase. She sent it crashing to the floor but kept on course as she felt her way along the wall.

She was fine and as cheerful as ever. But I was stunned. In just three short years from the time I first encountered a Benedictine monastery, my life had been so altered that my first waking thoughts were about monks. And on those usual occasions when a relative was not stumbling through our townhouse, my first morning words were "Open my lips, O Lord, and my mouth shall declare your praise" (Ps.

51:16). To paraphrase the 1960s Christian rock artist Larry Norman, “What’s a good Protestant boy—reared as a Pentecostal and Baptist and taught to be suspicious of Roman Catholics—doin’ in a monastic frame of mind?”

The answer has to do with a providential array of circumstances. The sequence begins in the fall of 1985, early in the fourth year of my first teaching position—a tenure-track post at Western Kentucky University. As a result of academic politics, our department hired a new chair whose degree was from one of the few remaining bastions of Enlightenment modernism. (This will put in context his announcement.) He wanted to meet each of us individually over lunch. Mine was one of the last appointments, and we were having a delightful conversation until, about an hour into our meal, he informed me that my doctorate in theology from Princeton Theological Seminary was not appropriate at a public university and that I would no longer be teaching at the university after the academic year was over.

Needless to say, I stumbled home in shell shock that afternoon, and our lives were immediately disoriented. We eventually rallied and trusted God to lead. But this was an occasion when one did not want to be reminded that a thousand human years equals one God year. God was very slow to give signals. As the end of the academic year and my paychecks came within sight, the search for a new position was not yielding results. In a perpetual state of angst, that year I worked to complete my dissertation while teaching full time, preached at two churches, oversaw a youth group program, took ordination exams, and joined my wife in the financial responsibility for our two preschoolers and my cancer-stricken mother-in-law, who lived with us in a recently purchased house. A ministerial colleague in our Presbyterian church took a stress test for me (apparently he

didn’t want to burden me with one more task) and told me I was “off the chart.”

By God’s grace and strength we never succumbed to our record-breaking achievement, but as we spent humid Kentucky evenings on our porch swing sipping daiquiris after the kids were in bed and mulling over our lack of options, little did we know that by the end of June our course would be set for North Dakota, where I would wear the hats of philosophy professor and chaplain at Jamestown College.

It came as a surprise to us because in our deliberations we had made two lists of states—those where we preferred to reside and those where we did not—and North Dakota was on neither list. But a phone call had come months after I had submitted my application to Jamestown and hours before I was to call a church in Lexington responding to its offer of a pastorate: the college wanted us to visit—immediately. After protests that focused on climatic conditions and geographical location, and after a trip that left us feeling that we had gone through a time warp, my wife, Trevecca, and I sat down before our dinner with the dean after a day of interviews at the college and felt peace overwhelm us: amazingly, this is where God wanted us.

Moving and establishing a new home, followed by eighteen months of hitting the ground running with ecclesiastical and academic responsibilities, left me desperately needing a retreat. Since our student body included many Roman Catholics (though it was a Presbyterian college, it was located in “Lake Wobegon”—the land of Lutherans and Catholics), a delightful Benedictine sister named Michaelene Jantzer had been assigned to the local parish primarily to minister to our Catholic students. This sincere, jovial, and wise woman, who would soon celebrate fifty years in the order, quickly became a dear friend. And since she was a native to

the frozen tundra, I asked her advice for a place of retreat. Her response was the most unusual advice this Pentecostal-born, Baptist-bred, Presbyterian Protestant had ever heard: "Call Blue Cloud Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in South Dakota, ask to speak to the guestmaster, and request accommodations for a retreat."

Years before, we had given a formerly cloistered nun a ride to a Bread for the World meeting while at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Illinois. And two classmates in doctoral studies at Princeton had been nuns. And there had been a monastery near us in Bowling Green, Kentucky, where we had had a man with the title Prior as a guest at our dinner table one Easter. (Why he was on the guest list I don't remember.) But given that in these three encounters monks had entered into *my* world, I still knew virtually nothing about what I considered to be a relic of the Middle Ages. I certainly had never darkened the door of a monastery, let alone a Roman Catholic haven. Michaelene might as well have been recommending a completely foreign country, especially since this was several years before Kathleen Norris's first book *Dakota* and the best-selling CD *Chant* would reintroduce contemporaries to a group of celibates who were off most folks' radar screen.

So I started out on March 11, 1987, heading straight south for almost two hours before turning left and heading straight east for another two hours. (Traveling on Dakota highways doesn't require making too many turns.) As I drove up the steep driveway to the monastery, I had second thoughts. Fortunately, it was too cold and too far from home for me to contemplate turning around. I would stay the two nights and two days, joining the monks in four times of prayer each day, eating with them in their refectory, and carrying on long conversations about their experiences and the mo-

nastic way of life. (My nervousness was exposed one night during dinner: it was evident that I had become a source of amusement for two other guests at the table, and finally I figured out why. I was eating a piece of shortbread as if it were a dry biscuit, not realizing that it was meant to be the foundation for strawberries and whipped cream that I had missed on the buffet table. It had never occurred to me that monks might indulge in strawberry shortcake.)

When I left I knew I had experienced something profound and I would have to visit again. On the way home, when I made a stop at the Fargo mall for a pair of tennis shoes, I found myself feeling out of place in the consumer culture that had shaped me. No forty-eight-hour experience had ever left such a huge crater in my life.

In fact, I returned to the monastery a few months later to plan a ten-day January-term class on monasticism, titled "The Habits of Monks." Six Protestant college students joined me for the class, entering the strange new world that I had encountered a winter earlier. It changed some of their lives, and it led me further down the path to become an oblate of Blue Cloud the following year, a participant in the biannual American Benedictine Academy meetings a year later, and the first nonmonastic (and non-Catholic) board member of the academy a few years after that.<sup>1</sup> In the meantime Benedictine monasticism has become the object of a good share of my academic studies, some of my course teaching, and a bit of my speaking and writing. But, even more, its spirituality has enriched my Christian life so much so that, as I tell my Benedictine friends, I am glad to be their evangelist to my Protestant brothers and sisters.

That's the reason for this book. Though there have been a growing number of books on Benedictine spirituality for the layperson since the 1984 publication of Esther deWaal's

*Seeking God*, only a few books have aimed specifically at sharing the wealth with Protestants *by* Protestants, particularly of the evangelical persuasion. Some of that is understandable, as I will elucidate. But I have read, seen, and heard too much to continue doling it out in bits of articles and speaking engagements. With some spice from a few sources outside Benedictine circles, I hope to entice Protestant readers (especially those like me whose pedigree includes Baptist and conservative evangelical strains), and others who care to join the circle, to include a helping of Benedictine tofu on their spiritual platter. My daughter, a vegetarian, tells me that tofu, when properly prepared, takes on the flavor of foods with which it is cooked. I hope that Protestants will find the Benedictine tradition similarly compatible with the savory portions that already occupy their spiritual plate. At the least it is healthier than much of the spiritual junk food that permeates our culture and satiates the appetites of folks who would do better to graze on something more nutritious.

In sharing the wealth, then, this book will hopefully serve as an *apologia* to my Protestant brothers and sisters who often understandably have misconceptions about monasticism, as well as objections to Roman Catholicism more generally. And the misunderstanding is not confined to the person in the pew. A prominent university professor and Protestant author of books on spirituality from which I have benefited gave an address at Wheaton College one year; afterward, when I posed a question, he simply dismissed any positive contribution that could come from the monastic tradition. I knew better, and I chalked up his comment to a lack of sympathetic acquaintance with the tradition.

Though my primary agenda is to commend Benedictine spirituality to heirs of the Protestant Reformers, I fully realize

why this speaker rejected my appeal, given the repudiation of monasticism by the magisterial Reformers (e.g., Luther and Zwingli) and given the "semi-Pelagian" (translate "semi-heretical") label affixed to John Cassian, whose theology undergirds Benedict's *Rule*.<sup>2</sup> And because I have experienced this rejection or suspicion of monastic spirituality from evangelical Protestants more than from mainliners, this *apologia* is aimed especially, though not exclusively, at the former.

My intention is not to glamorize or idealize Benedictine monastic spirituality. One of my students recently covered his ears when I began to list examples of how contemporary monks do not live up to the ideals of Benedict's *Rule*. But my monastic friends would be the first to admit they do not measure up. And because I lack their humility, I would be the *second* to admit that I live nowhere close to the insights I will sketch in this book. (My little monastery of a nuclear family will vouch for that!)

In fact, Benedictine spirituality is not glamorous. It is *extraordinarily ordinary*. A few years ago, shortly after Kathleen Norris's second bestseller appeared (*The Cloister Walk*), I asked a monk who was traveling with me what he thought of her writing. He commended it, with one caveat: "She makes our life sound so interesting, but it's so d—n tedious." Benedict surely would have applauded, for his conception of monastic life rejected the goal of forming spiritual gold medalists or religious superstars. With no pun intended, it is a life of habits that, in turn, develop virtues (character traits) and muscles of the soul. Indeed, it aims at developing a healthy *whole* person.

Protestants do not usually go for the habitual when it comes to spirituality. For some reason we grow up with the bias that spiritual practice is "real" only if it is spontaneous. Habits (whether garments worn or behaviors cultivated) and



read prayers often strike us as a fake spirituality. That was the reaction of one of my students the first time she heard the monks read psalms in a monotone during our ten-day adventure at Blue Cloud. She later learned that the lack of inflection facilitated hearing the words that were coming from the surround-sound choir rather than focusing on how well one was articulating the psalm in a cacophony of individual performances.

It is strange that we take the advice of our dentist and floss regularly to maintain healthy gums or follow doctor's orders to exercise on schedule to enhance our physical well-being, while we often spurn the counsel of spiritual physicians and trainers to develop habits that will maintain and enhance our spiritual life. It's not a bad thing to wake up every morning reciting the Psalmist's words "Open my lips, O Lord" as if it were second nature, any more than it is a bad thing to go through a morning ritual of showering, shaving, and brushing teeth.

I suppose that is why it has taken me nearly two decades to write this book. If I had written it a decade ago, it would have been as presumptuous as writing a manual on preparing to run the Boston marathon the year after I ran my first and only marathon—in flat Chicago. Even now I hesitate. I'm a spiritual adolescent. But like the typical adolescent, I dare to charge ahead.

## WHY BENEDICTINE SPIRITUALITY FOR PROTESTANTS?

Richard Foster has said, "The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people or gifted people, but for deep people."<sup>1</sup> In many respects we live shallow lives, easily entertained by celebrities, trivial pursuits, and consumer products. A deeply rooted spiritual life is desired by many, but its cultivation seems to escape just as many. What does such a life look like? To what or to whom can we turn for guidance?

We are tempted to turn to the latest cleverly marketed book or to join the crowds that flock to hear a prominent Christian celebrity. We're modernists at heart: the latest is best and progress lies in going forward. But there are books and teachers that have proved effective by the long-term