

Take Aways from a Monastery: Applying Observations from A Mini-Monastic Stay to Daily Life

Springtime in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains- sign me up! Due to an unexpected change in direction, extra time came knocking on the door of my heart. I could spare three nights and four days away. “You could go somewhere else. What would mean the most for you now? What would be the most helpful time away experience you could take?” The answer- unequivocally- with no dissension in my soul- “Go back to the monastery!”

I prayed that if this was the thing to do, that the doors would open, one after another so I could get there. Since I am a double caregiver both for my 92 year old Mother in another city and my husband in a care center, a lot could potentially come up to reroute my plans. Primarily, I wanted to ensure that the phone communication in and out of the mountains worked. After some delving for detail it worked that I could give out a direct number in case there was an emergency with either of them. Then I found I and enough free air miles, secured a direct flight to Albuquerque, booked a shuttle to Santa Fe and arranged transportation to Our Lady of Guadalupe Monastery in Pecos, New Mexico. Check! Check! Check! Check!

Since I had not been to my soul place for a few years, I knew it would be different. I was happy to find familiar faces for the Sacrament of Reconciliation and spiritual direction. The property looked well tended and the Sagres shown with springtime splendor. The multi-acre spiritual refuge included an active river propelled by melting from the high county and a marsh bursting with new bird inhabitants.

My first inclination was to photograph as much as I could so I could keep the experience. I wanted to make sure I could bring it home with me. However, I realized that there are ways to bring home an experience beyond having over 100 photos! The key for me was to find ways to apply what I saw and did there to my life back here in Minnesota. Following are three ideas for anyone interested in integrating monastic practice into daily life.

1. New Eating Habits- (This does not mean changing into monastic attire to eat!) While there I had the opportunity to experience meals in silence. That brought me to a new awareness of the thoughts passing through the mind, a sense of connection with others without using words, and an appreciation for speaking clearly, simply and to the point. By the way, focus on taste and texture of good food comes with it as well.

Since I live alone, my meals fall into the silent category anyway. During this time I turn off the radio and sometimes read a spiritual book to enrich the silence.

2. Cut Down on TV- My room at the guesthouse was clean, simple and quiet. Grand silence began at a specified time and this set the tone for the evening. Clearly the blare of a TV was out of place there. I had no computer either. Quiet listening and reading, replaced the intensity of televised news personalities and commercials competing for my attention.

Now that I am back, I have lost the taste for the amount of TV and radio that had held my attention and impacted my emotional life. I am stepping back some from social media as well. The presence of real time people and their presence trumps computer conversations.

3. Create a Prayer Space- I had once had an area designated for prayer. It had been unused for months. I prayed but with less focus. Now though, recalling how stopping for prayer four times daily really settled and renewed me, I decided to clear it out and rearrange the space for more consistent use. I purchased a breviary there that I could follow easily and now have integrated a couple pauses for prayer in a formal way throughout the day. When I am not home I find a way to worship and refresh in this way.

Years back during my Catholic school training I had heard the term “recollect”. Now, stopping to catch the breath and reading the designated Benedictine prayers and Scriptures helps to collect the scattered parts of my being over and over according to monastic rhythm.

I have to admit that the ride back to the airport by shuttle was a bit of a culture shock. The young woman next to me was hooked up to music. Cell phones signaled the urgent need for conversation from outside the van. Did anyone notice the barren mountains as we passed? Where was the quiet?

Now back to the normal busy days of my life, I find the few days I had at the monastery to be a continuous gift. I was allowed to stop, look and listen to the God’s world and to my inner world as well. These await all of us daily when we pause to reconnect with our God and ourselves.

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