
Graced in Silence: Gifts From a Monastic Community



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Is there anything more counter-cultural or counterintuitive than spending a day—or a few days—in a monastery? And yet, when I arrive and get settled in my spartan cell, I come to realize how much I actually yearn to be here. Why? Because my culture and my intuition continually pull me in opposite directions, toward priorities that are in conflict with what a monastery embodies.

Although much different from the rest of my activity-crazed workweek (which, ironically, involves leading a ministry focused on the spiritual formation of leaders and teams), setting apart full days—or multiple days—to care for my soul in this environment has become a regular discipline for the past fifteen years. Coming to the monastery is one of the most restorative disciplines I've discovered

for enriching the vitality of my soul . . . and one of the most difficult to maintain. With the daily demands of life clamoring for my attention—marriage and family, ministry and friendships, household and personal needs—the luring call of the monastery can easily get tuned out or replaced.

On this particular week, I found it incredibly challenging to break away from my routine and set apart the space and time

to be at my favorite monastery for a few days. The morning I left home included a crack-of-dawn meeting with a board member, a quick errand to the pharmacy for my sick daughter, a handful of important e-mails, a burning issue requiring my immediate attention, an urgent telephone call, retrieving a trash can that had blown down the street the night before, and a traffic jam en route to the city. Needless to say, when I finally checked into my room, I was

to bubble to the surface. I am no longer surprised, for the “timing” of my visits to the monastery generally coincides with my need to do some serious soul work surrounding significant relational and/or faith-stretching issues. This week was no exception.

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solitude and renewal. I’m fortunate. I’ve been affiliated with the Society of Saint John the Evangelist (SSJE) for more than a decade. My spiritual director is an Anglican monk in the Society, headquartered adjacent to Harvard University and along the Charles River in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Situated on Memorial Drive, the monastery is a cloister against the backdrop of one of the most secular cities in the world. It’s here that I come on a regular basis for contemplative prayer, liturgical worship, biblical reflection, silence, solitude, and spiritual conversation.

SSJE owns two properties, the monastery and chapel in Cambridge, and the Emery House, a rural retreat center with an eighteenth-century country house and several hermitages along the Merrimack River in West Newbury, Massachusetts. Both sites offer splendid accommodations for pilgrims who enter monastic settings with anticipation and expectancy that God’s still, small voice will indeed be recognized, affirmed, and heeded. Each time I arrive among others whom I get to know only in our silence, an amazing gift of the Spirit takes place. With very little verbal conversation, I feel united to others as fellow pilgrims.

The Society was founded in Oxford, England, and is the oldest Anglican religious order for men. The order established a work in Boston in 1870 and is a vibrant community of men today. The brothers live under a *Rule of Life* and, at profession, make vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience. Their life and ministry together are focused around praying the daily office, sprinkled by simple and quiet meals (most without conversation), the Eucharist, and open time slots

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immersed more in distraction than peaceful contemplation.

I thought I had packed light for this journey into silence. But I quickly came to realize how overstuffed my satchel was with unwanted internal baggage necessary for me to unpack. At a slower pace and in the quietness of the setting, I realize I needed to confront my anxiety about a hurtful extended family issue. My insecurity about a recent difficult conversation with a close ministry colleague also began

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The First Gift

The *first gift* the monastery offers me is a *community of hungry pilgrims* who are there to hop off their treadmill of activity and enter gracefully into

for quiet reflection and life-giving routines. Every guest is served well by their hospitality, so that little of the world, the flesh, and the devil will come in the way of opportunity to meet with and enjoy time alone with God.

The Second Gift

One of the primary disciplines practiced by the brothers is *silence and solitude*, the *second gift* gently offered while on retreat. As described in the Society's *Rule*, silence is the centerpiece of the monastic experience:

Our own strength is not sufficient for weaving silence into the fabric of daily life. For the hours of the day to be permeated by mindfulness of the divine life we must be engaged in constant struggle, depending on God's grace. Powerful forces are bent on separating us from God, our own souls, and one another through the din of noise and the whirl of preoccupation. Therefore, the gift of silence we seek to cherish is chiefly the silence of adoring love for the mystery of God which words cannot express. In silence we pass through the bounds of language to lose ourselves in wonder. True silence is an expression of love, unlike the taciturnity that arises from fear and avoidance of relationship."¹

My ability to tolerate silence for extended periods of time is proportional to what I will discover afresh about God, his Word, the beauty of his creation, and the amazing gift of his unending love for me. On this visit, I lingered among all of

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these blessings and rediscovered the inner renewal I was seeking. It's not always found by this pilgrim, for many times the silence is deafening or disturbing to my soul. But on this retreat the silence and solitude were placed before me, and I received them with a glad heart.

If one attribute marks this community more than any other, it's the respectful way in which they honor the gift of silence . . .

freely granted and generously received. By living most hours in silent prayer and reflection, they know that out of healthy silence a pilgrim will be led toward the loving embrace of God. On this occasion, I was stunned in the silence by the reminder of my heavenly Father's unconditional love for my estranged extended family members and a beloved ministry colleague. As a result, God's invitation for me was to join him in loving them in like fashion. Had I not entered the silence and listened carefully for the still, small voice of the Father, I would have chosen instead to cling to my hostilities and anxieties rather than consider being a channel of God's mercy and grace. I'm not fully at this place of obedience, but the clarity of God's heartfelt instructions certainly blossomed in the silence.

The Third Gift

The *third gift* generously offered by my friends at SSJE's monastery is the practice of *life-transforming prayer*. In this setting, the brothers are a living example of a busy ministry life permeated in prayer. They have become mentors to me on how to practice the presence of God amidst the ever-expanding demands of my family and ministry routines. They practice daily the service of hospitality and regularly go "on mission" to several corners of the city and the globe. In the midst of their full lives, they find their greatest fulfillment convening five times daily to pray the offices: morning prayer, the Eucharist, midday prayer, evening prayer, and compline.

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ing regularly to SSJE for spiritual refreshment unearths my desire to learn the meaning of “pray at all times.” I press the pause button of my busy, noisy life and quiet myself in God’s presence and embrace. I practice a variety of prayer methods that feed my soul and sharpen my attentiveness to God’s loving voice. On this particular occasion, I prayed through the Gospel accounts of the Last Supper, placing myself at the table with the other disciples, asking, “How would I respond to Jesus’ washing of my feet and serving me the bread and wine? Would I have been alert to the symbolic nature of this expression of the ‘fullest extent of his love’ for me?”

Alone and with the SSJE brothers, I experience richness of prayer that’s continuous, contemplative, creative, and challenging for my soul. When I leave the monastery after a day or more, I am ushered back into the rhythms of daily life with gladness of heart and a renewed earnestness to practice a lifestyle marked by praying without ceasing. Is it possible, and will I ever get to a place of satisfaction that I truly understand the meaning of these words? I wait for the answer. I trust it will occur.

The Fourth Gift

The *fourth gift* of the monastery is *spiritual guidance*, provided by a seasoned veteran in the ministry of spiritual direction. In my hour-long sessions with my spiritual director, David (one of the SSJE brothers) has encouraged me to honor and appreciate deeply the value of prayerful silence and solitude. He urges me to remain patiently open to engage fully in this central aspect of my retreat experience.

Spending large blocks of time alone and quiet before the Lord is both a potentially fear-inducing and a peace-producing experience. I find there are times I am forced to confront my fears, deep-seated feelings of inadequacy, and unwanted insecurities. Having time to process both the joys of my spiritual journey and the heartaches of my personal life with my spiritual director, in the context of confidentiality, has been life-giving for me.

The significance of my spiritual director cannot be underestimated. David has come alongside and encouraged my spiritual vitality for the past fifteen years. He knows me almost as well as my wife and my closest friends do. He has listened prayerfully and attentively to my story line each month and is able to suggest ways in which I can make sense of the red threads that tie together the major themes of my life. Most importantly, he points me back to the Scriptures, to God in prayer, and to my

reflective disciplines of journaling and contemplation. As a result, I am comforted by the unfailing love of the Father, who in prayer covers me with his peace, power, and protection. Like the psalmist, I am thrilled with praise and gratitude for the many gifts that come from his loving hand. And, like the prodigal son, I delight in seeing the Father running in my direction with arms outstretched, fully prepared to offer me his generous, welcoming embrace.

The Fifth Gift

The *fifth gift* of the monastery is the *freedom to reflect on the true state of my soul* in the safety net of a place filled with grace. It is here that I’m encouraged to learn how to identify my attachments (such as pride, selfishness, worldly possessions, and success in the eyes of others). I’m instructed lovingly and patiently how to relinquish them into the hands of God, peeling away my false sense of

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self, which so often is defined by the exterior motivations and actions of my life. I want more than anything to discover what is essential to the health and vitality of my soul, even when it's challenging and difficult. The fruit of honest reflection is a gift I treasure, not necessarily at the outset, but as I come out on the other side of maturing renewal.

In essence, I want to embrace the gift of being myself and know that my life is overflowing with gifts from the hand of the Master, who calls me his beloved child. In the silence I begin to hear more clearly the voice of the One who calls me blessed and invites me into the spaciousness of his communion. In times of solitude I rediscover places where I've resisted submission to his authority over my life and recommit to a life of obedience to his call. In conversation with my spiritual director, he helps me to reflect, encourages genuine confession. He invites me to candidly bring my joys, desires, struggles, and heart cries to the feet of Jesus.

During this particular Lenten season's visit to the monastery, the first day's liturgy included an old hymn with the words, "So daily dying to the way of self, so daily living to your way of love, we walk the road, Lord Jesus, that you trod. . . ." I was struck by the significance of these words, chanted so melodiously, yet lived out with such difficulty. Why was I there on that particular day during one of the holiest of seasons? Undoubtedly so that I could be reminded once more of how impossible it is to live victoriously as an unselfish servant of Christ without living daily in the resurrection way of love. I want more than anything to live out Jesus' way of love. Within the confines of the monastic com-

munity I recommit to that lifestyle so that as I leave the brothers and reenter a lost and hurting world, I go with their blessing and imprimatur of grace.

So why is it always so difficult to cease from the normalcy of my daily tasks and embrace a day (or more) of silence, solitude, prayer, and reflection? Especially when the place, the people, the pace, the prayers, the peace, and the provision of spaciousness for the soul provided in a monastery are so conducive to the spiritual benefits that we all seem to crave? Very simply, because my intuition is to lean on my own strength rather than practice what it means to depend on God. And because my culture teaches me to exegete the verbs *to do*, *to want*, and *to have*, rather than the more essential one, *to be*. In the hectic rhythms of daily life, I need to be reminded that who I am as a husband, father, brother, leader, and friend is more important than all of my accomplishments combined.

When presented with an option for how best to use my days, I tend to select activity instead of rest, striving over ceasing, demanding over relinquishing, and critique over celebration. Spending time in a monastery reminds me of what matters the most in life . . . learning a new way of being present with God, which ultimately will teach me how to be fully engaged in the stories of my fellow pilgrims. I long to point others in the same direction.

Taking time to live in a monastic community like SSJE is refreshing for the soul. The gifts I receive are fivefold: *a community of fellow pilgrims, silence and solitude, life-transforming prayer, spiritual guidance, and freedom to reflect on the*

true state of my soul. My challenge is to find and keep the time to rest and be renewed in a more attentive space of waiting, and then receive with open hands all God delights to give daily. Each time set apart for a visit to the monastery is different, and I have never regretted the effort to make this an ongoing and essential ingredient of my soul care routine. The grace I've rediscovered in the silence is alluring and captivating, fruitfully multiplied in relationships and ministry over and over and over again.

For more information on Society of Saint John the Evangelist, visit their website, www.ssje.org

Endnote

¹ See *The Rule of Life of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist*, chapter 27, page 32.

About the Author



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