

We Are All Monks

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Since my early youth I have seen myself as a monk, but one without a monastery or at least without walls other than those of the entire planet. And even these, it seemed to me, had to be transcended—probably by immanence—without a habit, or at least without vestments other than those worn by the human family. Yet even these vestments had to be discarded, because all cultural cloths are only partial revelations of what they conceal: the pure nakedness of total transparency only visible to the simple eye of the pure of heart. ~Raimon Panikkar

Raimon Panikkar reminds us that we need—perhaps more than ever—to rediscover the wisdom of monasticism for our time. While most of us will never live in a monastery or take monastic vows, we can learn to master the spiritual virtues and qualities of being that flourish in solitude and silence. As we walk through the imaginative doors of the monastery, and figuratively enter its enclosure, we are immediately struck by the absence of superfluous noise. There arises an intuitive recognition that much unhappiness in life is the result of never experiencing one's own silence or the freedom of solitude. In crossing the threshold between worlds, we discover a desire that is deeper and more fundamental than the attractions of material things. We discover that passion for truth is the force or intention that leads us to practice spiritual disciplines and to uncover ancient structures of consciousness that purify our hearts and deepen our minds.

We have a rare opportunity to cultivate this contemplative dimension outside the monastic enclosure, and even outside a religious or denominational form. We are blessed to be able to draw upon the wisdom of the world's spiritual traditions and the thought of great contemplative masters. It is as if the doors of our imaginative monastery were flung open and we were granted access to the collective storehouse of human spiritual possibility. This development in spiritual consciousness, that offers us a new monastic form for the uncloistered and the religiously unattached, grows out of silence itself. For in meditative awareness, we find a radical emptiness that is more primordial than religious identity, and more nameless, writes Panikkar, than the qualification of being Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and so forth.

Fr. Zossima, in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, says that monks are not a special sort of person, but only what all persons ought to be. While to some this may be a startling claim, it is nonetheless true that the monk is not a separate kind of person from the rest of us. Rather the monk symbolizes one dimension of the core of our natures, and the possibility that every one of us can reach this dimension. Although not everyone is suited to the formal monastic life, we all have a contemplative dimension that is worthy of cultivation. We all have the capacity to experience something of the silence that precedes religious forms. Inherent in the human person, contemplation is essential to our natures and to discovering who we are. It is a reality of which we are made and for which we yearn.

The challenge of being modern, uncloaked monks consists in the attempt to integrate “what every person ought to be” into the wider social and personal circle of our lives. Not content with the historical isolation of the monk, or with extreme forms of ascetical renunciation, the contemporary seeker desires to return to the original simplicity of the contemplative ideal. As we push open the monastic doors we discover that these ancient resources can assist us in integrating all aspects of contemporary life—work, family, friendship, and sexuality—into the holy dimension of being.

It is intrinsic to human nature to be better, more holy. To find the deep source of meaning and the quality of being that are essential to live authentically, we must be willing to be new. The image that Panikkar offers—that we all have a

monastic dimension—upholds a certain quality of life and a certain freedom of being that flourish in stillness, detachment, and rest. For the monastic heart is solitude, and grace. ~Beverly Lanzetta

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