

**Monk Habits for Everyday People:
Benedictine Spirituality for Protestants**

by Dennis Okholm (Brazos Press, 2007 ISBN
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At the end of *After Virtue*, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre writes that a new Dark Ages has descended upon Western culture, and that what matters is the construction of local forms of community in which the moral and intellectual life can be sustained. He argues how, to survive this new dark time, we will need to cultivate “the tradition of the virtues” and to become “aware of our true predicament,” as the barbarians are not simply waiting beyond our frontier but have been governing us for some time. Indeed, our true situation in the West, with all its fragmentation and meaninglessness, has now become one of waiting: We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St. Benedict (1984, p. 263).

MacIntyre’s pessimism is not entirely misplaced. We could indeed construe the present age as a new dark ages, with genocide, terror, war, corruption, poverty all pointing to a growing dis-ease about the future. There is a kind of pessimism that speaks to what we must do to survive, let alone thrive, amid the current crises. Here, our waiting may not simply be for a St. Benedict as for the One who can make all things new (Rev. 21:5). Our hope in Christ is what will encourage

us to live as faithful witnesses, in season and out (2 Tim. 4:2). It is what will call us to practice the Gospel in the bonds of peace (Eph. 4:3). This is the power that will truly sustain us over time.

In many ways, MacIntyre's *After Virtue* in 1984 marked a turning point in late twentieth century theology (and philosophy): No longer can theology avoid the importance of how the practices of a community shape the moral and spiritual life; no longer can theology remain aloof from the importance of community in providing moral and spiritual guidance. While the debate over the years may have taken different forms among various schools of theology, the trajectory of the debate in terms of its communal impact is no longer disputed.

All of this is to say that St. Benedict may be closer to us than we might think! Ever since Esther deWaal's *Seeking God* in 1986, and Kathleen Norris' *The Cloister Walk* in 1996, a whole new monastic movement, influenced by Benedict's Rule, has swept through the churches. Call it a part of the "new monasticism," Dennis Okholm's work *Monk Habits for Everyday People* is a great way to introduce persons to the literature of a field rapidly becoming saturated with monk-like features and practices. In fact, *Monk Habits* is a good place to start the conversation about the importance of Benedictine spirituality and practice for the life of faith. It is a book clergy and laity in the Protestant community will want to explore, as they address spiritual hunger and moral confusion. Indeed, *Monk Habits* is a work specifically addressed to a Protestant (i.e., Evangelical) audience as it shares the wealth of insight from Benedict's rule and tradition (p. 20).

One of the main purposes of Okholm's *Monk Habits*, then, is to serve as a helpful apologia to folks in the Protestant churches. Opening chapters on "What's a Good (Protestant Evangelical) Boy Doin' in a Monastery?" and "Why Benedictine Spirituality for Protestants?" make the case that Okholm states throughout the book: that Benedictine spirituality helps to deepen our walk with Christ. In fact, in the "Afterword," Okholm has a thoughtful commentary about the Protestant Reformers' historical opposition to monasticism and to the misunderstandings about monasticism that have taken place between Protestants and Roman Catholics since the Reformation (p 115 ff). In this sense, Okholm's work is a breath of ecumenical fresh air.

This is not to distract from the rest of the book. In addition to the opening chapters, Okholm provides a "Suggested Reading" list of Benedictine literature, along with "Suggestions for Practicing

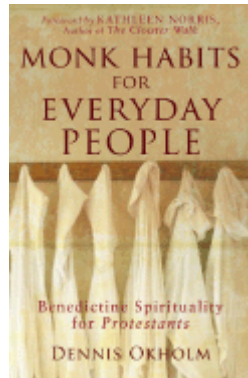
Benedictine Spirituality.” These complement the well-written chapters on silence and listening, poverty, obedience, humility, hospitality, stability, balance, and mission. Throughout, we as readers come see more fully how “scripture is the original rule” and how “good spiritual habits are good for spiritual health” (p. 9). Okholm’s ability to weave The Rule into the fabric of the text provides a meaningful account to what many in the Protestant/Evangelical community may want to dismiss as “irrelevant,” or even “ancient.” This is unfortunate.

As someone who has used Monk Habits in the local church, I can say that The Rule was both ancient and relevant and that there was a fascination among the laity with what Okholm was describing. There was questioning, to be sure, but there was also a hunger for the kind of spirituality Okholm was sharing. Persons genuinely wanted to understand what Benedictine spirituality was about and what formative influence the monastic community (i.e., the church) can have in their lives: What are these practices that shape and form? What is this silence that speaks to the longings of the heart? What is the role of scripture in guiding the mind and soul? What is this Rule that can discipline and comfort? Thoughtful inquiry gave rise to earnest conversation.

Monk Habits is a book in a growing list of literature on monasticism. Upon a recent stay at St. John’s in Collegeville, Minnesota, for example, I came away with similar stirrings about The Rule and about Benedictine spirituality, not to mention a suitcase full of books and pamphlets! How to be a Monastic and Not Leave Your Day Job, School(s) of Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism, Inhabiting the Church: Biblical Wisdom for a New Monasticism, Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today, The Rule of Benedict for Beginners: Spirituality for Daily Life – all address the breadth and depth of Benedictine spirituality. All speak to the way Benedict’s wisdom might speak to the church today. And I haven’t mentioned The Rule itself, which invites prayerful reading!

With the growing literature on “emergent church,” “missional church,” and “ancient-future church,” and with the increasing concentration on the importance of practices for the “concrete church,” Okholm’s book offers a welcomed voice. His work can definitely serve as a necessary counter-balance to what can easily become another consumer “fad” or “trend.” Indeed, in a consumerist society, the temptation can all too easily become one of making the monastic option one more commodity in a line of spiritual experiences. This is certainly not what The Rule is about, but it is a

danger nonetheless. Thankfully, Okholm's *Monk Habits* points us all in the direction we need to go and helps us to realize that the light still shines.



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