

why
MONKS
matter



Br. James Koester, SSJE
& Br. Jim Woodrum, SSJE

MONASTIC WISDOM
for everyday living

why MONKS matter

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In the chapter of SSJE's Rule of Life on "The Witness of Life in Community," we read one vision for the purpose of our Society: "In an era of fragmentation and the breakdown of family and community, our Society, though small, can be a beacon drawing people to live in COMMUNION." This vision draws on the teachings of our founder, Father Richard

People are hungry for communion – not a superficial connection, but real intimacy. I think that the men who make their way here to the Monastery are desiring a kind of connection that goes beyond just friends or housemates. Monastics live in intentional community in holy intimacy with God and one another. This sounds nice and neat – like it's in a pretty package, doesn't it? But the reality is that it's difficult, it's messy, and it takes a lot of guts.

Meux Benson, who believed that the small body of our monastic brotherhood could realize and intensify the gifts belonging to the whole Church. This life was never intended to benefit only those of us within the Monastery, or even those individuals who can directly participate in our life of worship, hospitality, and teaching. The monastic way of life has always had a far broader goal: to strengthen the common life of the whole body of Christ.

It's an ambitious thing, to dream that you can actually influence the macro from the micro; that one person or one community can stop pollution or influence systemic racism, or inspire the Church. As monastics we commit our lives to this broad, ambitious claim: we want to help change the world. We want to join Jesus' mission to change the world and to bring about his Kingdom.

This **AMBITIOUS** goal hints toward one answer to that fundamental question every way of life should pose to itself: out of all the things we could do, why do this? Why become a monk? (Why stay a monk?) Ultimately, why do monks matter?

Here, then, is one answer: monks matter because we are a sign, a symbol – even a sacrament – to the whole Church, calling the whole Church toward the larger life of God. As we live for God, we model to the Church its own purpose; we beckon it toward its true calling: to be a communion of the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ, and the company of Christ's friends.



Br. James Koester, SSJE was born in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. Br. James has served in a wide range of leadership posts and currently serves as the community's Superior.

One of the most distinctive features of monasticism is that it is a life lived in community. We wanted to reflect this truth by making this discussion of monastic life into a conversation. Look for Br. Jim's comments *in blue* throughout Br. James' text.



Br. Jim Woodrum, SSJE serves the community as the Director of Vocations. He's launched a campaign to help others learn more about monastic vocations, called "Catch the Life." Visit: catchthelife.org



This answer to why monks matter derives directly from the Scriptures' teaching around the Christian's calling to be a witness. A witness is somebody who sees something and says something. From the very first chapter of the book of Acts, Jesus says to his disciples, "You are my witnesses. You are my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." As Christians, we are called to be witnesses to Jesus: witnesses of his life, his ministry, his teaching, his death, his resurrection. In the New Testament, the witnesses not only see something, they say something. Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, "Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" And she, the first witness to the Resurrection, does: "I have seen the Lord!"

Monks matter because we act as a witness to the whole Church. A community like ours, dedicated to Saint John the Evangelist, cannot help but refer constantly to the writings of John, both the Gospel and the Epistles. An Evangelist is primarily a witness. So perhaps it's not a surprise that the word "witness" appears no fewer than thirty-eight times in our Rule of Life. One of the passages of John's writings that keeps coming back to us over and over again is that section from the first chapter of the First Letter of John: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us – we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete."

True confession: while I experience joy in many aspects of the monastic life, I tend to think of this life primarily in a Johannine way, as "abundant" or "full." It's the whole bag. It's the good, the bad, the sad, the ouch. It's the ways in which you have to grow, encounter your shame, confront your demons. The Desert Fathers actually went out into the desert, and they spoke of fighting demons out there. We fight them in here. Somehow I think it's that very struggle which makes this a life of abundance for me. Living a happy life doesn't mean that I don't experience things that are unpleasant, but it means that I can face them, I can handle them. Experiencing the fullness of life, even in its darkness and difficulty, makes life more vivid. Fullness of life vibrates in a different way. Life is not always about dopamine, you know. Monastic life is perhaps sometimes not joyful in a traditional way, but it's full, abundant, rich.

People don't tend to use words like "adventure" to describe the monastic life, but it truly is a life of adventure. You put your life in someone else's hands – and that is a thrill! I think that men who come to us are driven by this need for adventure, to live a life of purpose and intensity. They see something in us that resonates with their own need. This isn't a passive life. Even when it's mundane – and it can be – it's exciting because you never know what you're going to be asked to do.

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At the heart of the monastic life is enclosure. When people think of monastic communities, even though they may not know the word "enclosure," they do tend to think of walls, towers, cloisters – a life that is physically 'set apart' from the world. This stereotype begins to inch us toward the true meaning of enclosure.

I first discovered what enclosure means not by being a monk, but by being a gardener. A number of years ago I was living at Emery House, a 150-acre colonial farm about an hour north of Boston, which had been entrusted to our Society by the Emery family in 1952. As I was living there, I had the wonderful opportunity to discover the 'inner farmer' in me. It was a life-long dream come true! If you'd asked me when I was five what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would have answered, "a farmer!" Well now I had chickens and

A witness is somebody who not only sees something, but says something, and the reason why they say it is so that their JOY may be complete. That, for me, is what Christian witness is all about: seeing, saying, and joy. And ultimately, this is the fullest explanation of why monks matter: because through our life, we've not only seen something, but we also say something, so that our joy may be complete in showing it, sharing it, and spreading it, to the whole Church.

So what are some of these things that we have seen? What are some of these things that we say? How is our joy made complete? In the following pages, I want to share with you a glimpse of some of the distinctive values, disciplines, and principles of the monastic life, as we live it, and which shape our witness and embody our discipleship. I hope that in these core monastic practices and beliefs, you might find fodder for your own ADVENTURE with God. What sparks here might be fanned into flame in your own life?

pigs and ducks and geese and bees to take care of, and a huge kitchen garden.

One year, in the fall, I planted garlic. The ducks and geese were out there with me, keeping me company while I planted. That all seemed fine until the next spring, when I noticed that – despite my care in spacing the garlic – there were great gaps in my rows! That’s when I realized that the ducks and geese had been following me, eating the garlic as I planted it. That spring we also returned one day from the nursery with a bunch of pepper starts, which we planted in the garden, and then we went inside for lunch. When we came back, all of the leaves from the new pepper plants had been nibbled off by the ducks! I finally got it. “We need a fence.” That’s when I discovered what enclosure is really about.

An enclosure is partly about keeping things out – in this case, keeping the ducks and geese outside the garden. But enclosure is also about protecting what is inside, which is valuable. By creating a boundary, enclosure does not say that what is outside the boundary is necessarily bad, but rather that what is within the boundary is worth protecting.



When I first came here as an inquirer, the life behind the enclosure was a mystery to me. I remember staying in the Guesthouse and wondering, “What do they do over there all day?” Like many, I had this unrealistic vision of monks somehow floating above the floor, reading spiritual classics all day long! Now that I am a monk, I know that on most days, I’m not doing anything spectacular. I might cook a meal or clean the toilet; I might sing the Office as cantor. The truth is that the monastic life is nothing very supernatural. We Brothers just live our life in this slow, methodical, regular way, punctuated by prayer. And people come along and sit beside us in this. And somehow, that encounter changes them. When they arrive, their faces are often stressed out. But by the end of their stay, something’s happened. And we haven’t done anything extraordinary. We’ve just been working out our salvation, our conversion with Jesus. The Holy Spirit uses the example of our lives to create momentum in other people in ways that we can’t possibly imagine or control. It’s beautiful and very humbling, how God can do so much with so little.

An enclosure, like a fence, is a sign: it declares that something is special, of particular value, and worth protecting. As monks, we model enclosure in our physical space. Within our Monastery, there are distinct areas that are marked “Monastic Enclosure,” into which only monks can go. This physical SEPARATION reminds us about a broader application of enclosure: there are parts of our life which are precious, which are private, which need to be protected. By marking off certain hallways, floors, and rooms as private, worthy of protection, we remember those hidden and harder-to-see parts of our selves and our common life, which are precious and might need protection. An enclosure is

not about secrecy, it is about PROTECTION; protecting what is precious. Monastic life itself is a sort of enclosure, into which we enter in order to focus on and foster our life with God, because that life is precious and needs protecting.

So the question for you is: what parts of your life need to be protected? What parts of your life are precious enough to need a boundary? By practicing enclosure, you can help that which is most precious to grow and thrive.

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Another value which has proven helpful to us, as it has to centuries of monastics before us, is the gift of silence. Silence is at the heart of our life. And that’s not because there is nothing worth saying, but because there is so much worth hearing.

None of us are saints. We’re rough around the edges. We wrestle with the same struggles we had outside the Monastery. We don’t just put on the habit and magically our lives become easy! I think of the old story from the Desert Fathers: someone asks a monk, “What do you do in the monastery all day?” The monk answers, “We fall down. We get up.” We fall down and get up, over and over again. The falling down doesn’t mean we’re failing at this life; it is this life. You just show up for the day and say, “Alright, what is this day going to be?” Some days, you’re going to perform the task with flying colors. Some days, you’re not. Both days are a success. Because as long as you get back up, you’re learning. You’re becoming. You’re beginning to know yourself a bit more as God knows you. The Rule says that “we too are mysteries that cannot be fathomed until we come to know as we are known.” There’s so much to learn.

I remember a number of years ago, we hosted a group retreat at Emery House. During the first night's talking meal, I asked the woman next to me, "Are you looking forward to the silence?" She was shocked to hear that following the meal, the entire rest of the retreat would be in silence. She said, "Oh my God, if I'd known this was going to be a silent retreat, I never would've come!" After that reaction, I expected to see her leave; I was surprised to see that she stuck around for the whole weekend. When Sunday lunch rolled around, and we once again welcomed the retreatants to a talking meal, I made a point to sit beside her and ask her how it had gone.

I feel like that every single day! "Okay. Alright. I made it through today. I'll stay a little bit longer." Father Benson says that truly we are novices for the whole of our lives. As in any life, of course, there are days when I think, "Oh man, the grass is greener over there." Or, "Wow life would be easier if I didn't have to deal with X... if I were doing Y... etcetera, etcetera." But we keep showing up. God keeps drawing us back.



She replied, "When you told me on Friday that this was going to be a silent retreat, I PANICKED. I decided that I was going to leave right after supper and go home." But she said that then the evening session approached, and she thought, "Well I might as well stay for the evening meditation, and then I'll leave after that." And then she said, "And then it was Compline, so I thought, 'I may as well stay for Compline.' And then it was 9:30 and I thought 'Well, I'll leave tomorrow morning after breakfast.' And then after breakfast," she said, "Well it's kind of a nice day, I'll go for a walk before I leave." And so on, for the rest of the weekend. It was what she said next that really struck me: "This morning, after the Eucharist, I made some coffee and sat on the porch of my hermitage." And then she said, "and I heard the birds. I can't tell you the last time I heard birds singing. So I spent an hour just listening to the birds."

For monks, silence is not about preventing or stopping talking. It isn't about living under a strict and rigid regimen of silence. Silence is about enabling something else to happen. In this woman's case, silence was about enabling her to hear the birds for the first time in years.

Our Rule's teaching on silence is particularly rich. "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. In this silence we learn to revere ourselves also; since Christ dwells in us we too are mysteries that cannot be fathomed, before which we must be silent until the day we come to know as we are known. In silence, we honor the MYSTERY present in the hearts of our brothers and sisters, strangers, and enemies. Only God knows them as they truly are, and in silence we learn to let go of the curiosity, presumption, and condemnation that pretend to penetrate the mystery of their hearts."

The Rule goes on, "True silence is an expression of love, unlike the taciturnity that arises from fear and avoidance of relationship." True silence is an expression of love. So what happens when we enter into this mystery of silence? We enter into relationship. We enter into relationship with the other, and with the Other.

Where in your life, and in your loves, could silence help you to hear what is most important?

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Silence is one of the chief ways that we enter into another value that dominates our life together as monastics: the mystery of friendship. We say, "no honor exists that could be greater than Jesus calling us his friends. The more we enter into the fullness of our friendship with him, the more he will move us to be friends for one another, and to cherish friendship itself as a means of grace."

Friendship is one of the values we hold dear as monks because it helps to sustain our community. As monks, we are called not only to be friends of God, but also to be friends of one another. While the word "monk" comes from the Latin word "monos," meaning "solitary," our community derives from the cenobitic, or communal monastic tradition, which arose when solitary monks began to cluster together into loose communities.

As monks committed to a common life, we consider friendship to be important enough that our Rule teaches us "we must devote time, energy and prayer to the fostering of friendship." Friendship takes a lot of work. We have to work to be friends with somebody. It's not because that person is difficult to be friends with, but because friendship requires an investment of time. You can't leave them on a shelf and come back twenty years later thinking you're still going to be friends. So we Brothers recognize that even though we live and work closely alongside one another, we must devote time, energy,

When everyone's talking, no one's listening; it's just noise. So many people these days are burned out because they're constantly going, and so life feels like this constant noise. Every battery needs to be recharged eventually. Drawing back into silence, we aim to rediscover the silence and stillness in our inner core, so that no matter what storm is raging outside us, we can face it with clarity of mind. We actually have to practice that. We have to take time to go into ourselves and practice being still and quiet. This is a skill – as is learning to listen to our brothers and sisters with an open heart.



and prayer to the fostering of friendship among ourselves. It will not simply happen on its own.

On the other hand, something can happen in friendship without our even trying; friendships can break down. Sooner or later, you not only need to say “I love you” to a friend; sooner or later you’re going to need to say “I’m sorry.” Sooner or later you’re going to need to say “I forgive you.” That is part of what being a friend is all about. And paradoxically, it seems that the better the friend, the more likely we are to hurt them – and be hurt by them.

Our commitment to friendship is another one of the reasons why monks matter. We matter because we model what it looks like to live in intense community. And trust me,

Our Rule envisions the Monastery as a school for reconciliation, and I think that’s so important. To “reconcile” is to come back together, to re-member. The first step in reconciliation is to recognize that you’re not all together. First you have to see how you actually are broken. To be a monk in the school for reconciliation asks you first to be in touch with how you’re broken. Yet this is not about shame. There’s so much in our world that tries to shame us: the world tells us “you have to look a certain way, you have to model a certain behavior, and if you don’t then you’re not worthy or you’re an outcast.” But in the shame of the cross, Jesus has put all that to rest. Putting us in touch with our own brokenness is one way in which Christ is healing us and raising us to new life.

while we might model this goal, we also model its challenges; we have not got it all figured out! It’s far from easy, to live with a dozen other guys 24-hours a day. Some people might look at our community and see a homogenous mass of similar men. (The black habits help with this illusion.) Yet each man in our community is an individual, different from all the others. And I’ve promised to live with them – even to love them – until death do us part. Sooner or later – and mostly sooner – I’m going to need to say “I’m sorry. I forgive you. I love you.” In a monastery, RECONCILIATION isn’t just a theory, it’s a necessity, a lived reality. Without ongoing reconciliation, a monastic community can become a vision not of heaven, but of that other place!

How do you devote yourselves to fostering those relationships that matter to you? Where do you need to speak those essential words: “I’m sorry. I forgive you. Please forgive me. I love you.”

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Another key reason why monks matter is because we model what it looks like to live lives of limitation. Everyone, in a sense, lives a life of limitation simply by having a physical body. We’re limited to being in one body, this one; and as much as we might like to try, we can’t be in two places at one time.

Yet a monk’s sense of limitation is a bit different from the sense of limitation that simply comes with being embodied. We choose a life of specific limitations through our vows. We live under baptismal vows. Some of us live under ordination vows. These vows we share with many Christians. Yet at our Profession, we take three specifically monastic vows: poverty, celibacy, and obedience.

About our vow of poverty we say, “If our religious poverty is to be authentic we must stay soberly aware of the essential difference between the deprivation of those whose poverty is forced on them, and the way of life we choose by vow.” Professing a vow of poverty isn’t about destitution or deprivation; it’s really a vow of simplicity. “This simplicity of life finds expression in the way we enjoy and value the goodness of ordinary things and the beauty of creation.”

“The movement towards simplicity puts us at odd with our culture, which defines human beings primarily as consumers, and gives prestige to those who have the power to indulge themselves in luxury and waste.” Our vow of poverty helps us to remember that our primary identity is not as consumers. The call of God is to be a saint, not a consumer, just as our role in society is to be a citizen, and not just a taxpayer.

The vow of poverty is a vow to live within our limits. “As a community and as individuals we shall have to struggle continually to resist the pressure to conform. Our vow of poverty inevitably commits us to conscientious participation in the movement to establish just stewardship of the environment and earth’s resources.” In the words of that bumper sticker from twenty years ago, “Live simply so that others may simply live.”

As monks we share a common goal, and that goal is union with God. We want to give our life to God. Our vows are not some ascetic weights that God puts on us to punish us, or to make an example out of us. The monastic vows, at their core, are about relationship (just as a marriage vow is about relationship). The vows are what help us to live together in intentional community with God as our shared focus.

Celibacy, then, isn’t about renouncing sex or sexuality; instead, it’s about adhering to fidelity. And in our case, we give our vow of fidelity to God, who is the joy of our hearts. By doing so, we hope to function as witnesses to others who have also taken vows of fidelity, like marriage vows, which are in truth also vows of limitation.

Our vow of celibacy is also a vow of limitation. Through our vow of celibacy, we offer ourselves, as members of the community, to be completely available to Christ. You could say that’s also true about marriage: through a vow of marriage, you offer yourself as a spouse, as a partner, to be completely available to the other. The vow of celibacy, like the vow of marriage or partnership, is really about **FIDELITY**: it’s a vow of fidelity to the one joy of our hearts.

Like poverty and celibacy, our third vow, of obedience, is also about limitation. “The vow has many facets. It is a pledge to unite in a common response to God by embracing and fulfilling the Rule of the Society. It is a promise to work together to discern God’s will as a body and act in concert to God’s glory. The vow binds us to cooperate with the Superior in carrying out our mission. It is a pledge to listen to the voice of the Spirit speaking within the heart and to respond to God’s invitations to self-surrender.”

Obedience, as you probably know, is not so much about rule-following as it is about **LISTENING**. The word “obedience” comes to us from a Latin word meaning “to listen.” It’s no coincidence that the very first words in Benedict’s famous monastic Rule are “Listen my son, listen my daughter, with the ears of your heart to the teaching of a loving Father.” It’s interesting that the word “listen” appears in our Rule twelve times. The word “obey” never appears in the Rule. Obedience is about listening. Obedience is about listening to the wisdom of somebody else – somebody else who (I hate to admit this) frequently knows what’s better for me than I do. That’s certainly been my experience, living this particular life.

You can’t be obedient with your mouth open. Obedience at its core has to do with listening – especially listening with an ear to respect and cooperation with one another. That’s how obedience helps us to live together and do the jobs we are called to do. Our devotion to listening is another way the monastic life is very counter-cultural, because in today’s political and cultural climate, everyone’s talking; few people are listening.

The limitations that the vows place upon us are not just restrictions. Limitations aim to help us to find rhythm and balance in our life. So many people who come to our Monastery mention they suddenly realize how unbalanced, undisciplined, uncontrollable their life is. Limitation can actually be an experience of liberation.

On our “Catch the Life” site for monastic vocations, we ask: “Do you have a truth you’re willing to give your life to?” Our life-long conversion to Christ is really about passion: about finding what you want to strive for, what you love, what change you want to see in yourself and in the world. What sparks might be ready to be fanned into flames in your own life? Monastics find inspiration in the witness of the martyrs. “Losing your life” doesn’t always mean dying. It also means the gifting of your life. Giving of your means, your talents, your whole self to something much bigger. “You’re going to have to lose your life to gain it,” Jesus says. How will you lose your life for love?

How might embracing limitation help you to find balance in your life – a balance that, paradoxically, could help you to enjoy more of the goodness of life?

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Finally, I think monks matter because we offer another way to live in the world today, a way that we are seeing once again in the lives of so many. During this season in the history of the world we are seeing once again women and men from many walks of life living lives of **SELF-OFFERING**. It is a way of life which is deeply embedded in the monastic tradition. The monastic life as a life of self-offering is counter-cultural.



In our Rule of Life, we remind ourselves that the source of a life of self-offering is, of course, the life of Christ. In it we say, “Jesus’ offering of his life on the cross was the supreme expression of his love for the Father, made in perfect freedom through the Spirit. ‘No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.’ This free self-offering is expressed anew in our lives when, abiding in Christ, we find in him the power to surrender ourselves entirely to God, by taking the vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience for life.” However, like all humans we often find ourselves seeking “fulfillment without self-offering.” As monastics, we seek to offer our lives to God so that God in turn can take them and use them in any way God sees fit. A life of self-offering, modeled after the life of Jesus, is a life rooted in obedience, grounded in humility, and overflowing with charity.

During this time when the world is wracked with a global pandemic, we are discovering our mutual interdependence, as each one of us renews our own self-offering in order that by our actions others may remain safe and well. We see this especially through the witness of our health care professionals and other essential workers, such as grocery store employees, truckers, and postal workers.

This life is not something I would have picked for myself. (A lot of people find themselves surprised by this!) Yet this life was the way that God got in touch with me. I think it’s been God’s way of saying, “I have something that’s just for you and I want to give it to you. Will you come and see?” We still have to say “Yes.” For me, that’s what being a monk is all about. And my answer reveals why I’m a monk: because this is the expression of life in which I find love and fulfillment and abundance and everything that I most deeply desire. Yet it’s not easy. It’s not always fun. I skin my knees a lot. But I also have entered into relationships that are enriching and have shown me so much about myself. The Desert Fathers taught, “If you want to know God, learn about yourself.” Or as we read in Scripture: “the Kingdom of God is within.” Over and over we discover that we are these mysteries whom God has created. Being a monk has helped me – is helping me day by day – to know more fully who Jim Woodrum’ is. I’m learning how it is that God made me and why God made me and why I have the resilience I do. It’s an ongoing conversion. I’m just trying my best to become ever more who God is calling me to be today.

At a time when it has once again become clear that our safety and health depend on the actions of others, how might you renew your own self-offering, following the pattern of Jesus’ life, live a life of obedience, humility, and charity?

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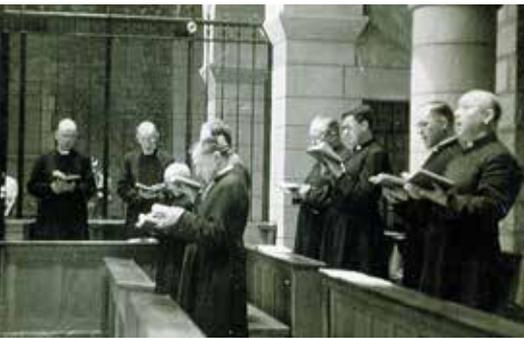
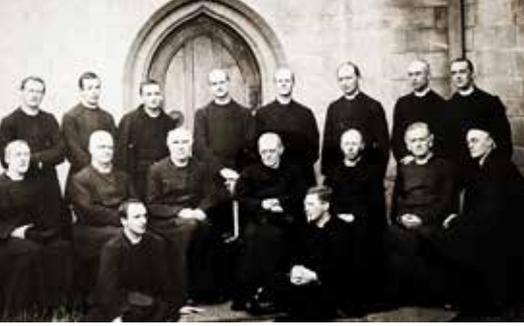
Of course, I *have* to say that monks matter, because I’m a monk. (If I didn’t think monks mattered, I wouldn’t be here.) But I also recognize that the fact that I matter isn’t primarily due to me, or to my gifts or my own goodness. Monks aren’t particularly holy or special or significant, as individuals. Monks matter because we are witnesses to the truth that we all **BELONG** to God. If we matter, it’s not in ourselves or for ourselves, but because we can help to remind someone else, or the Church – or maybe even you – who you truly are: a child of God, a member of Christ, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.



You matter because you belong to God. How might monastic practices and values help you to embrace your life on its own best terms as a **BELoved CHILD OF GOD**? How could enclosure help you to protect what is precious? How could silence help you to hear what is essential? How could living a life of friendship help you to grow into the body of Christ? How could embracing limitations give you freedom? How might a life of self-offering be truly rewarding?

I hope that embracing one or more of these monastic values might convince you not just that *monks* matter, but that *you* matter, “so that [y]our joy may be complete.”

One of my favorite passages of Scripture is Psalm 26:8, “O Lord, I love the house in which you dwell, and the place where your glory abides.” Well, where does God dwell? Where does God’s glory abide? In the heart. God dwells inside the human being – and not just once in the Incarnation. Every day, in every one of us! God’s abiding glory is in me – and in you– and over there – and over there. It’s in all of us.



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