

SPIRITUALITY

by Esther de Waal

If you're bogged down by a busy modern lifestyle, the ancient Rule of St. Benedict still offers a path home. **Esther de Waal** pioneered the application of monastic spirituality to everyday life with her 1985 book, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict* (Liturgical Press). "I hadn't, at that point, met any monastics," she says. "If I had met real live monks, I wouldn't have had the audacity to write that book. I had to write it in six months, and it came out of all of the demands of family life. "I was a pretty busy mother-you can't have four little boys in five years without having quite a lot of family life-and had a husband in public life. I was also doing a bit of evening teaching when the children had finally gone to bed. This book was practical and unthreatening." Now a grandmother, de Waal lives in Herefordshire, England, near the Welsh border. A senior fellow of the Cathedral College in Washington, D.C., she is a sought-after retreat leader and speaker on spirituality. Her new book on Baptism, the August selection of the U.S. Catholic Book Club, mines ancient sources-including the Rule of Benedict and the impassioned words spoken to men and women preparing for Baptism at the Easter Vigil during the fourth century-finding there guidance for Christians today.

From your experience conducting retreats, what are people looking for in their spiritual lives?

It has changed over the years. I once had a group of people for a retreat who were on the whole in some demanding situation. I asked them this: Where is the center for you? How do you hold things together in a life that is increasingly distracted, where the likelihood is that you are being torn in all directions?

Twenty years ago, life wasn't as demanding and distracted and really burdened as it has become now. Twenty years ago people would be quite happy to think that they could have a short time that is set apart, but now I think that has become a very central question. It brings in this question of images, the use of the imagination.

On a retreat, for example, I set people with the task of trying to discover, during the week, the description of a place to which they could return to refresh themselves, a place that allows them to hold everything together. I like to use the parallel image of how the buildings of a monastery are arranged: There are places for all the activities of the monastery, and at the heart of the great complex of buildings, in the very centre -how audacious-they put empty space. The empty space is a garden, grass, flowers in very simple colours, white and blue, and at the very heart a fountain, a spring of living water. Compare that to a human being:

We have all the demands and the various activities, earning your living, making decisions, hospitality, maintaining property, all the rest of it. And in the centre, Christ is empty, uncluttered space. Around Christ is the busy walkway servicing the needs of daily life, but in the middle you can refresh yourself in the spring of living water. Do people today know that they need that? I think there's quite a danger because people are so busy going up the stepladder of success early in life. As you get older, when there's a time of dislocation-you lose your job, you go bankrupt-there may be a huge emptiness, which is not a spiritual centre at all. People can easily drift into emptiness unless they are aware that this is one of the vital, amazing things that Christianity can give us. **Unless you have a centre and a focus, you don't really have energy. And if you don't have energy, you aren't fully alive. People don't realize that the gift of Christian belief and the way of following Christ is a way into fullness of life.**

I love the American poet Mary Oliver, who says, "*Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*" There's an English novelist whom I think very highly of, A. S. Byatt, who talks about "*those who merely subsist, worrying or yawning.*"

There's such a danger of life passing people by unless we stop them in their tracks and say, what are you going to do with this incredible gift of God's absurd generosity, which makes each of us so different and so interesting? Many people just dismiss the church and religion because it seems irrelevant to them.

What makes people reconnect and see it as something that is life-giving? Probably inadvertently the church so often batters us with demands that we've become, as one friend said to me, brain-weary. I try to focus on helping people to see so they live, with amazement and astonishment, lives of praise and gratitude and thankfulness. There's nothing more life-giving than that. It's no good just saying these things if I don't also practice them.

To look at the world, I always carry this small magnifying glass. Look at anything under a magnifying glass, and the world explodes. A blade of grass, the smallest flower, anything. This brings back some of the excitement.

Why do many people think monastic spirituality doesn't apply to everyday life? They haven't realized that St. Benedict wouldn't want any of his followers to use the concepts Benedictine or monastic. He has such a good grasp of the human psyche. He realizes that being fully human, we have God-given spirit, intellect, mind, imagination, hands, physicality. We respect each of these as God-given, and if we pay attention to each of these daily, that brings balance into our life. Interestingly, balance is now what everybody in the secular world is talking about as well. Benedict also talks about having a framework, a discipline, a rhythm, a structure, boundaries. Now all of these things are what any psychologist will tell you are essential for getting the best out of life.

Christ had this gift of seeing somebody and saying, "Matthew, don't sit there any longer, stand, leave your safe life, follow me." **Christ is continually moving, saying, "Move with me."** Benedict has given us a way of actually living that out. He also shows such an extraordinary grasp of stability, essentially meaning not to run away but to live in this immediate moment and to find God there. At the same time, paradoxically, you're moving forward all the time. The point is not self-fulfillment but obedience: to listen, to go out and find what the voice of God is, what God's will is for you. In my own mind and imagination, I'm standing in my place with the fountain, which is the Word constantly bubbling up. I'm able to hear that because I try to have some structure in my own daily life. Do you have a regular schedule similar to a monastic schedule?

There is one thing that is, I think, really essential and that is to begin the day with prayer, however simplified it may have to be. I say the psalms for the day, which in itself brings a great source of strength. Knowing that throughout the world the same psalms are being said brings me a sense of connectedness. That in itself is wonderful. Then always in the psalms, there is something that just takes your breath away, a little phrase that stops you in your tracks. I hold it in my hand, as it were, and think, this is a gift that has been given to me for today. I'm thoroughly practical about this. Because on a very busy day I might so easily forget that phrase, I scribble it on a Post-it note. Then I can stick it up in the car as I'm driving or on the kitchen table and return to it during the day. Even if my morning prayer time is very short, it is an undercurrent of the day.

When your children were younger, did Benedictine spirituality find its way into family life?

It found its way very naturally into the family life. Benedict, again, is not dictating or threatening-Benedict is shaping the disposition of the heart. So there was always a structure and a rhythm to the day, and most significant is that we all sat around the table for the evening meal, lit a candle, and began consciously with grace. The job that my husband had when my children were growing up meant endless hospitality. So welcoming the stranger, whoever they were, and sharing enjoyment of differences as vast numbers of people came through the house was a practical way of living out of the Benedictine rule. What is the Benedictine approach to hospitality? I love the tiny portraits in the Rule of Benedict, especially the portrait of the porter who is placed at the gate. It's a great way for any of us to model ourselves because metaphorically he has one foot in the enclosure,

anchored in the life of prayer, and the other on the threshold of the world outside. If anyone comes, he says, "Deo gratias, thank God that you have come," and he welcomes the stranger as Christ. This is so countercultural and so absolutely at the core of our Christian belief: You don't see social background, economic status, color, race; you see the true self, the risen self in Christ. That is the heart of hospitality. Then of course you welcome the guest in to feed them. The food is an expression of shared love and enjoyment. You have written that the Rule of Benedict sees spirituality as anchored in a community. What does that mean in the age of "I'm spiritual but I'm not religious"?

We live in a world where there are fewer traditional communities. Many people don't want to go to a parish church. The family is not likely to be simply the accepted nuclear family. I have the greatest respect for family life, but I'm trying to be sensitive to recognizing that we also have to help people to develop and strengthen other relationships. I think it's urgent for the church to recognize friendship as the primary relationship. Remember Christ said, "I have called you friends."

When the church always equates the family as the God-given ideal, that is quite hard for a lot of people who are, whether or not by choice, not in a conventional family or a marriage. In fact when you look at Christ in his life, he was pretty hard on his mother—running away from home at 12 is thoughtless. He calls on people to leave their poor old parents, and off they go. Friendship is the primary relationship. I think marriage and family life and parish life would be the stronger if we were consciously developing the art of friendship. St. Aelred says when two friends are talking, there's never just the two because Christ is always there as the third. That's a wonderful picture of friendship, isn't it?

You've also written about the growing importance of the nonverbal in your faith. What does that mean?

I was educated—I sometimes think overeducated—and I had a very neat card-index mind when I did my doctoral thesis in history. I have been moving quite consciously to shed that very analytical approach without rejecting the integrity that I want to bring to the evidence. I still want to have a very critical mind, but more and more I refresh myself by the visual. For example, when I enter a church or a cathedral, the font arrests my attention first of all. I notice what shape it is, and what that means. When I was in Syria I had an extraordinary experience of learning about the history of the baptistry. The font was octagonal; eight is the number of harmony and perfection, the five human senses and the three members of the Trinity. I look at an arch: Leonardo DaVinci says an arch is two weaknesses holding another up, which again is an image of relationship. Then if it's a Gothic building, I look at the pillars, the base and the pillar and the capital and the rip and the vaults and all meeting in the keystone, and there I find the analogy of the Body of Christ, every element being totally different and separate, having its individual part to play and yet growing up together into the building of the whole Body of Christ.

Do you think that people's appreciation for the nonverbal is impoverished?

I really think so. You see, we spend so much time educating children, quite rightly, but sometimes we educate without teaching them how to see. When you see, you stay still and you gaze, you look into the heart of something, into its essence. Now those steps of seeing are not generally spelled out for any of us. So on the whole we glance, and it washes off our Teflon suit. It hasn't penetrated. Teaching a child to see sounds absurd. But it's very interesting how icons are increasingly widely accepted, and icons after all depend on the gaze. We're invited in, and it's the gaze of those eyes that is so important. A friend of mine who is Orthodox and a therapist uses this extraordinary phrase "listening eyes." It's so wonderful that I thought I would share it because that may help people to realize the totality of how we should be using our eyes.

So we can teach children how to see, and grown-ups, too?

Yes, children have the gift to see and then it's lost. Do you think our Christian visual culture can compete with our popular visual culture, which is so incredibly powerful? It may not be very deep but it's certainly very loud. It's got to compete because so much of our visual culture is, if I can say so,

rather tawdry and second-rate, and it moves at such speed. Here we have a challenge and a corrective because we're actually asking people to take time. It's very countercultural that you have to take time to see.

So how would I convince a young mother and father to take time to do that with their child?

Why don't you just give them a magnifying glass, and that will change the world for them at a cost of about \$5 or \$6? Make them look at a daisy under it, and they will see it for the first time in their life. The daisy, at its center, has got hundreds of extraordinary golden points, so that it is really rather like seeing the entire star-studded heaven caught in the head of a daisy. You realize something about pattern and structure and the delight of variety and creativity, which is always around. If you've got a small boy to educate, actually bird excrement or sheep excrement is quite extraordinary, you can see what the animal ate recently and even there the pattern and shape of the whole interweaving of things is quite startling. Don't think too much. I think you have to begin by beginning, just begin with whatever is appropriate to whoever you are with. For more sophisticated people, you might invite them to use Thomas Merton's photographs which he took in those hermitage years. His photographs allow you to see the way Merton sees the world and how he prays. With the most ordinary things-his log basket or a battered can on his front porch-he shares the monastic reverence for the material: seeing it, not altering it, not trying to organize or dispose or control, but just seeing all things that cross his path. What do you see next on your own spiritual path? I have to be open and receptive to the different strands that flow in. Benedict at the very end of the Rule tells us both to listen to others and to go on reading. They are in some ways contradictory, one emphasizing the solitary aspect, the other emphasizing community. That means we must bring a critical mind or an open mind so we never feel we have the answers. I think that is possibly the greatest step into freedom-to know I don't have the answers. I need to go on asking questions, exploring, I hope, until the day of my death, and that will keep me alive. - See more at: <http://www.uscatholic.org/life/2009/09/return-center-esther-de-waal-leads-us-home#sthash.cG4NayYn.dpuf>