

Evangelical embraces vows of St. Benedict

*Spiritual discipline
fills dimension missing
in previous faith*

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How is it that an evangelical church lifer, involved for the past 20 years as Sunday school teacher, deacon and elder, has come to embrace the monastic teachings of St. Benedict?

It was no convulsive shift. It was an evolution, a journey now of some eight years. And while it was not a rejection of evangelicalism, embarking on this path nevertheless came by way of a perceived lack within traditional evangelicalism.

This "missing dimension" finally gave way to a magnetic pull toward Christian antiquity; namely, a pull toward a sacramental view of life that happened to be monastic.

In discovering St. Benedict, I not only found myself opening up to the notion of life as sacrament, I also found my faith joined to a time before and beyond the sad splits of Christendom.

All this captivated me to the point where four years ago I found myself in the chapel of a Benedictine monastery, as a novitiate candidate, promising to live out the Rule of St. Benedict.

In a simple ceremony, in front of a small crowd of monks, other Oblates and my family, I was asked by the abbot, "What do you seek?" I responded, "I seek to serve God through the Oblate

way of life." One year and a few months later, at a similar ceremony, I received "final oblation."

The word oblate means offering. As an Oblate of St. Benedict, I have promised to offer myself to my particular community through living out the spirit of the Rule of St. Benedict.

The rule, originally written for cloistered monks, is a sixth-century piece of literature that is, at its heart, a practical fleshing out of the Gospels and a guide for moving through life attentively, in humility and delight.

Growing up in the evangelical church, I was conditioned to a disembodied and an ahistorical faith, that is, a faith for my head and a faith that emphasized my future security. But Benedictine spirituality befriends earth and time. It sees the physical and the spiritual as indivisible, and it honours the unfolding of human history.

In this way it takes seriously the full implications of the Incarnation.

Matter matters, here and now, and it matters profoundly. A wonderful example of this in the Rule of St. Benedict is the request that "all utensils and materials of the monastery be treated as sacred vessels of the altar." For Benedict there is no split between the sacred and profane.

That the ordinary is infused by the holy is particularly critical and evident in the way we are to treat one another. Whether stranger or friend, rich or poor, we are to see Christ in everyone — not theoretically, but corporally, incarnately — and receive them in the "warmth of love."

However, this turn of mind and heart is not easy. My experience is that it is one thing to be awakened to the schisms in my life that have misshaped me, and quite another to pluck up and promise to do something about it. In fact, St. Benedict warns that the way is narrow at the outset, but he quickly adds that for anyone truly desiring an "expanded heart," there is a way.

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This spaciousness for life, this relaxing into the rhythm of life germinates in the daily recollection of vows made and grows through the daily disciplines.

One such discipline is *lectio divina*, a contemplative form of reading, usually of the Psalms or Gospels. Here you read not for information; the words are not mined for meaning, but instead are taken in, mouthed, tasted and absorbed. Over time they leach down and reshape you.

The vows of (*stabilitas, oboedire, conversatio morum*) stability, listening and being open to conversion, act as compass points for the Benedictine walk.

The vow of stability calls me to stand still, and, without attempting escape, face my inner fractures. The second vow asks me to search for and listen to the deep truth planted within my heart. Finally, the vow that Thomas Merton described as most mysterious, shows me that life is a series of conversions, and that today is opportunity for another.

One monastic, when asked what the monks did in the monastery all day, said, "We fall and we get up, we fall and we get up." This rings true for me. I don't know if Benedictine spirituality is making me a better person; this is not mine to measure in any case.

What it is doing is calling me to daily embrace this injured, but still buzzing and blooming world. And through this I am shown that because time and creation are gifts, a truly spiritual life is really a secular life, fully lived.

In this sacramental understanding, the curtains are drawn open to the inclusive character of Christ and the interconnectedness of all things, not least of all the interconnectedness of other faith traditions.

Perhaps this hospitable and ecumenical spirit is St. Benedict's greatest legacy. And because this spirit, this way of life, can never be an over-and-against-position, it holds the possibility of conversation, reorientation and peace.