

The Value of Community and Prayer in Lutheran Monasticism

By Devin Ames

Monasticism may seem to be a term associated with practices of the past. In modern monasticism, the most thought of are the Catholic and Orthodox monks that are scattered across the world. What most people would not expect is that there is one Lutheran, Benedictine monastic community right here in the United States. What is the purpose of this community, and why do men decide to become Lutheran monks in the United States today?

I am approaching this question with my own experiences after spending a month (January, 2017) at St. Augustine's House, the Lutheran, Benedictine Monastery located in Oxford, Michigan. This includes reading *The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows* by Martin Luther and *Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as well as participating in discussions that I had with the monks, Father John, Brother Richard, and Father Jude. The reason that I chose the two literary sources is that the influence of each was both visible and lived out in the daily life at the monastery. They connect with the monks through perspectives on vows as well as the importance of community. In the sources and the thoughts from the monks, the continued importance of monasticism is stressed. clearly connect I will explore this by discussing the challenge of monastic vows presented in Martin Luther's Judgment on Monastic vows and the value of community and prayer in Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*. After this I will describe how Father John, Brother Richard, and Father Jude understand the role and importance of Lutheran monasticism today. I will close by presenting my conclusions from my studies at the monastery.

The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows sets up an interesting situation in which monasticism as a whole may seem to be portrayed as wrong, with the vows especially targeted. Evidence toward this is shown throughout the work, such as the titles of section 1 "Vows Do Not Rest on the Word of God: They Run Counter to the Word of God" (Luther 252),

and section 5 “Monasticism is Contrary to Common Sense and Reason” (Luther 336). Simply looking at these section titles, the positive connection between Luther monasticism seems slim or nonexistent. First, if vows are counter to the Word of God, and it is known that the monks did make vows in becoming monks, it seems as though they may not be listening to Luther at all. Second, if Luther is correct regarding common sense and reason, then clearly anyone who chooses to be a monk is lacking in both of these. However, there is more unpacking of his work to be done before a conclusion should be drawn.

We can start by unpacking the monastic vows, for Luther says “there is no doubt that the monastic vow is...without the authority and example of Scripture” (Luther 252). Vows are not at all represented in Scripture, and thus he is able to explain that they are simply a human creation. This is a condemnation of vows that are imposed upon monastic communities because they seem to suggest that “by doing these works they can attain what the saints attained by faith alone” (Luther 271). What Luther does here is not directly attack vows, but he attacks the practice of instating vows simply for the purpose of trying to be like the saints. When the saints become the center of the religious practice, God is no longer at the center, and this is what Luther finds problematic.

A major objection that Luther holds with vows is the fact that they can move the center of monastic life away from God, but he also strongly objects that monks take the vows “under the pretext of a greater godliness” (Luther 283). The monastic life is an option, for some people their best option, but one’s godliness does not increase from simply becoming a monk. At this point, it may still remain unclear how a vow is acceptable, but Luther helps to explain this when he says “faith remains unhurt only when a vow is regarded as a matter of free choice and not as necessary to attain righteousness and salvation” (Luther 296). Required vows become problematic as they seem to point toward one path that is more godly than others, but a vow that is made by an individual because it is what they choose to vow seems to be acceptable to Luther. In this way, the “vows” become more of an individual observance rather than a strictly

enforced obligation.

While these views of monastic vows may seem clear, Luther rejects monastic vows as a path to greater holiness or a means for obtaining salvation, but he raises other criticisms as well. Luther also believes that monasticism “prevents service to any but fellow-monks” (Luther 335). It is clear that Luther had become quite frustrated with the turns that monasticism had taken, and this appears to be a critique of them. A monastic society that only allows its members to work for the betterment of members seems to turn away from many of the teachings of the Bible around which the life is centered. For example, a passage in the Bible says “truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (*New International Version*, Matthew 25:40). With this in mind, Luther’s critique makes sense. Thus, a modern take on monasticism in which service to others is not prevented, vows are not forced but made by individual choice and in which one is not made more godly seems to no longer counter the Word of God or lie contrary to common sense and reason. The monks do not consider themselves more godly because they do not see their lives as making them closer to God or more likely to gain salvation.

The monastic community at St. Augustine’s house is made up of three professed monks who are there year round: Father John, Father Jude, and Brother Richard. There are also associate members, others who are on a path of discernment regarding the monastic life, and guests who visit throughout the year. Members of the community work together to support each other and to complete daily chores. Although the monastic community is small, it is and will continue to be important as a part of Lutheranism today.

Father John said “the monastery will be a place much in demand as people experience the madness of life and no way to step out.” Some ideas from the monastery that can be found helpful in this situation are silence, poverty, and celibacy. Taken as vows, these do not help a person to obtain salvation or to live a more holy life than anyone else. What they are able to do in the community is provide a way for the monks to live in service to God as they are guidelines

from which the monks write vows to shape their monastic lives. In addition to this, the monks open their lives to share in community with guests and all people so they do not get stuck simply caring for themselves. Silence will be covered later, so I will move onto poverty. In this case, poverty is not referring to starving, but it lies along the lines of not overreaching, as it acknowledges that there is no need to be rich. This interpretation of poverty may be objected to by some people, but it is the form of poverty that is observed. Celibacy is not a burden, but a freedom, as it allows one to free themselves from duties to a family so they can give everything to helping others. Silence, poverty, and celibacy are all incorporated into daily life at the monastery and fill the lives of all who spend time there.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book, *Life Together*, and the opinions of the monks, can be brought together in two important categories; community and prayer. Bonhoeffer brings to the discussion his description of life in a Christian community as he goes through important aspects of each day but also the importance of the community as a whole.

"The Christian cannot simply take for granted the privilege of living among other Christians" (Bonhoeffer 1). There is something special about being able to live in community with fellow Christians. I did not really understand this until I had the opportunity to live at the monastery. When a group of people gather to worship together in the world, they may become close but go their separate ways for the week, occasionally gathering in smaller groups, but when one lives in community with others, the experience changes. The life of the community is so interconnected that it functions like a family. The community shares a daily schedule of prayer, worship, fellowship, and meditation. Along with these, there is also the aspect of service.

According to Bonhoeffer, living in a Christian community is a blessing that leads to service while making time for silence, prayer, and reflection. Service can come in many forms, and whenever "listening, active helpfulness, and bearing with others is being faithfully performed, the ultimate and highest ministry can also be offered, the service of the Word of

God” (Bonhoeffer 80). In my time at the monastery I found that whether I was sweeping the chapel, helping to prepare a meal, or working in the office, the Word of God was being lived out in the community. The actions of the members of the community toward the success and livelihood of each other forms a bond which has been centered through the Christian community in Christ. While the brothers were dedicated to a common life, they also understood service as a broader engagement with the world around them, which was demonstrated in many ways such as a community worship service of prayer for Christian unity and through their practice of welcoming guests.

What makes a Christian community special is that it “is founded solely on Jesus Christ, it is a spiritual and not an emotional reality” (Bonhoeffer 13). This foundation can, as I saw at the monastery, bring people from different backgrounds together who may not likely get along in such a way in any other setting. This becomes so special because the community of people, however different they may be, is working together to “show Christ embodied in the world whether the outsiders believe it or not” thanks to the spiritual reality and intentions of the community (Fr. Jude). Father Jude explained that unlike many communities today, the monastic community does not get pushed around by the pressures of modern culture, but it remains a source of “stability in Western civilization” (Fr. Jude).

Another important aspect of being in community is the intervals of silence and solitude. At the monastery I spent long hours in both solitude and silence, and I found that it is quite true that “silence is undervalued in life” (Fr. John). This aspect of the life is important because it allows people to take time to reflect not only on their connection with God, but also their place and role in the community in which they live. Solitude is important in community because when people spend time alone and then gather in community again, they “bring with them the blessing of their solitude, but they themselves receive anew the blessing of the community” (Bonhoeffer 67). Monasticism is powerful in community, but also when in solitude, because “even when you are alone, there is a bigger rhythm of monasticism that can impact your day” (Br. Richard).

Prayer is a core aspect of life in a community centered on Christ. This can take the form of both prayer in community and personal meditation. In many ways, the monastic life is a “church continuing like the early church, with dedication and regular prayer” that provides a structure around which the rest of the day is organized (Br. Richard). This stability and balance allows both prayer and reflection to remain important each and every day, supporting a constant conversation with God. The central form of prayer at the monastery is the reading and chanting of Psalms, which Bonhoeffer supports: “Singing together joins the praying of the Psalms and the reading of the Scriptures. In this, the voice of the church is heard in praise, thanksgiving, and intercession” (Bonhoeffer 38). The reading of Scripture, as well as other prayers together are also formative in the days at the monastery, all of which are a constant reminder of the central focus around which the community is formed, Jesus Christ.

Individual prayer, or meditation is also important in the daily routine. At the monastery, personal meditation is a formative experience in which the monks are both an example and a resource for one to experience “spiritual development and to deepen [one’s] personal relationship to God” (Fr. Jude). The idea of sitting alone in silence can be bothersome and seem like a waste of time. Furthermore, distractions are prevalent so it seems as though it would be possible to drift off or to just get lost in thought, but in reality “meditation does not allow us to sink into the void and bottomless pit of aloneness, rather it allows us to be alone with the Word” (Bonhoeffer 60). Living in a monastic community where the Word is central and everyone shares in it on a daily basis, it is also important to take time alone with the Word as each person comes from a different background with different beliefs so will need more time to reflect on a variety of ideas and passages.

The purpose for monastics varies from group to group, and even monk to monk, but the main mission is clear: they “focus on the Kingdom of God” (Br. Richard). Exactly what form this takes can differ, but the end goal remains the same. For example, when asked about the purpose of monasticism today, the monks gave differing responses to me. Some of the main

points explained here were to show the presence of God, address overreaching, and to escape the madness of modern life.

Brother Richard said that people “don’t see God directly, but they can sense his presence at a monastery by how the monastic community works.” In this statement, a purpose of helping others to witness God is assigned to monasticism. It also encompasses the idea that monks live their lives intentionally, with each structured part of the day intended to keep the focus on God and the Word, in such an intense fashion that those who witness the life of the community essentially bear witness to the power of Christ.

Father Jude spoke about how “monasticism is about how not to overreach.” In a world that is always looking for the newest and best item, monasticism helps people to take a step back and think about what is important in their lives. Living in this community, time, space, and possessions are shared. Everyone within the monastery has everything that they need, but each also shares what each has. It is important to remember to care for one another as Jesus taught, therefore, by working to not overreach one is able to bring one’s focus to the Word and God.

In my time at the monastery, I discovered a purpose attached to being a witness of God. In order for people to witness this life, they must be able to spend time within the community. As a guest, I was quickly welcomed into the monastic family and became a part of the community. Not only were the monks in the family, but other guests as well. Some of them had been there for a long time, others came and went in my time there. I can say that through all of them, Christ shone through in one way or another. Through being together for prayer, meals, work, and conversations, I found that the monastic community was as powerful as a church community and at the same time it was solid ground in the lives of everyone who spent time there. With all of this in mind, I can confidently say that in both the minds of Lutheran monks and all those familiar with the monastic community, “monasticism is a gift for the church...for everyone” (Fr. John).

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