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“Did you ever go to a monastery when you were a kid?”



“Did you ever go to a monastery when you were a kid?” Kira asked. It seemed funny at the time. Kira’s plaintive question was an attempt to describe her experience of our

yearly, March break visit to Mt. Saviour, a Benedictine monastery in Pine City, New York.

For 15 years my husband, Brian and I have travelled to Mt. Saviour. Our daughter, Kira, has been a part of the journey for most of her 11 years. We make the five to six hour trek for a variety of reasons. At Mt. Saviour, there is respite from telephones, televisions and an increasingly noisy everyday existence. Here we come to experience first hand the hospitality of Mt. Saviour, which is one of the many charisms of Benedictine spirituality.

My coming to Mt. Saviour, like many moments in my life, has an air of serendipity or perhaps just good old-fashioned divine intervention. As part of a liturgy course at King’s College, at Western, our class was encouraged to travel to Mt. Saviour monastery in order to encounter the ritual and symbolic richness of a Benedictine Palm Sunday. From my first step out of the mini-van, I felt that I had come home. Nestled south of the Finger Lakes and just north of the Pennsylvania border is Mt. Saviour, a place of rustic and picturesque beauty. Rolling hills weave throughout the 1200-acre property, which is dotted with sheep, shepherding donkeys, honeybees, apple trees, and trees, lots of trees.

Beyond the physical majesty of Mt. Saviour, there is an even more simple witness to the glory of God and this is the common life shared by the brothers. They are a small band of monastic brothers, who have gathered to live a life modelled on one begun over 1500 years ago by a pious Italian, St. Benedict of Nursia. Since Mt. Saviour’s founding 50 years ago, the community has engaged in a harmonic balance of prayer, study and work.

Pray, Study and Work: A Charism for Today

Daily the monks gather to pray seven times as Psalm 118: 164 says, “Seven times a day I will praise you.” In between these prayer periods, the brothers work and/or study. The seven prayer periods are called the *Hours of the Office*. The Hours are divided into longer hours (Vigils, Lauds, Vespers) and the shorter hours (Sext, None, Compline), which are 20 and 10 minutes respectively.

Monastic days begin early with *Vigils* at 4:45 a.m. in the crypt, a dark, cavernous room located in the belly (basement) of the chapel. Here we sit in darkness, with windowless, dark painted walls and dim lighting to wait, to open ourselves to new discoveries, new awakenings, the new day. As the day begins, light dawns and the community again gathers for *Lauds* at 7:00 a.m., this time in the chapel, which is located on the main level. All of the Hours are prayed in the chapel in the light of day except *Vigils* and part of *Compline*. Work and study are soon followed by the third Hour, which is *Terce* or Mass at 9:00 a.m. Gathering twice more for *Sext* at noon and *None* at 3:00 p.m., the Benedictine’s work day is consistently interspersed with prayers and fellowship. Following *None* is a time for art, study, prayer and reading (see *Lectio Divine*). As the day nears its end the brothers gather for *Vespers* at 6:30 p.m. and *Compline* at 8:15 p.m. Before *Compline* begins, the lights are turned off in the chapel and all sit in darkness. Night has arrived and sleep is coming. The monks having memorized the psalms for this Hour chant while Brother Pierre, a French-Canadian, harp-playing shepherd plays mellifluously, almost lulling all to peace and sleep. Following the psalms the assembly returns to the crypt. The descent is slow and methodical. We return to the womb of the earth where we offer a hymn to Mary before a 15th century statue of the Mother and Child. The day is complete and we rest in God’s hands. The day, thus divided as outlined by St. Benedict in his *Rule* offers the monastic and indeed all of us, an opportunity, for active, conscious prayer in the midst of the necessary work duties of our lives.

The Hours of the Office are moments of immersion in the psalms, scripture and community; a powerful combination and yet there is more. A unique facet of the prayer life at Mt. Saviour involves the body, the senses and indeed, the totality of human experience. The physical journey from night to day to night via movement from the crypt to the chapel and back is powerful. The cyclical, almost percussive, nature of this ritual, the physical movements and prayer forms imbue time with *the sacred* both within and even *through* the ordinary. There is a rhythm to the world, the earth, our days and our lives together, which seem to, at times, escape me during my normal routine.

Benedictine Spirituality and Family/School Life: Incompatible?

Time at Mt. Saviour for us is time *away from* and yet is also *time for, time to, and time with* God, one another and with nature. As a family or individually we attend as many of the Hours as we are

able. We spend mornings hiking for hours, often too tired to return to our casa. The monastery has a men's residence, a women's guesthouse and two self-contained cottages or casas. We bring plenty of supplies to create art. We toboggan down the steep and unfettered hills. Time is also available for rest, afternoon naps, reading and the requisite, nightly game of Euchre.



Family life and the Benedictine rule are not mutually exclusive and are actually quite complementary. A Benedictine spirituality calls for frequent, short prayer, study and work, all of which can co-exist within the messiness and goofiness of family life. Frequent, short encounters with scripture and the ethereal sounds of Gregorian chant can help to form and inform family life so that the essential is not forgotten. In a world of too little time for reflection, I wonder what a school would look like where the Benedictine pattern of regular and repeated prayer was the *rule*. Imagine, praying seven times a day at common intervals during the day. Imagine chanting or sharing psalms in didactic groups. Imagine the power. Imagine the connection we would feel with our Muslim brothers and sisters who pray frequently and for short periods as well.

Finding Balance: Kronos and Kairos

These experiences at Mt. Saviour have reinforced the importance of both *kairos* and *kronos* time for me. *Kronos* is a Greek term, which refers to time as a quantity. For example, we have time we

lose, time we need, time we need to make up, and/or time we just try to get rid of. This is frequently my experience as a principal in a busy, mid-size, Ontario, Catholic school. *Kairos* is

the meaning time; the time of moments, of experiences where beauty, passion and truth are able to enter in. At Mt. Saviour these seemingly polar understandings of time seem interfused and at perfect rest in one another. Time at Mt. Saviour is both, out of this world and in the world, for here in consistent, circumscribed units, the Hours, we are able to encounter the image of Christ, in all we see, do and are.

"So, no, Kira I did not get to go to a monastery when I was a kid, but I sure am glad that I do now." Mt. Saviour Monastery has come to be a special pilgrimage site for our family and we offer gratitude for the life and work of the brothers. Different spiritualities have different charisms and some speak more deeply to others. For me, Benedictine spirituality has been a source of great comfort. I invite all on the journey of faith to enter into the gift of Benedictine spirituality in order to experience the extraordinariness of the ordinary, and the concomitant transcendent gifts of time, truth and love that are available to us all. And no, you don't have to be 11 years old to go to a monastery.

Shalom

Contact Maria Giampa at m.giampa@ldcsb.on.ca or visit the Mt. Saviour website at www.msaviour.org for further information.



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