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### **Lessons from the Monastic Cell**

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Monks have secrets worth knowing. Here's some advice from the Desert Fathers: Go to your cell and your cell will teach you everything you need to know. Here's another counsel from Thomas a Kempis' famous book, *The Imitation of Christ*: Every time you leave your cell you come back less a person.

On the surface these counsels are directed at monks and cell refers to the private room of a monk, with its small single cot, its single chair, its writing desk, its small basin or sink, and its kneeler. The counsels suggest that there is a lot to be learned by staying inside that space and there are real dangers in stepping outside of it. What can this possibly say to someone who is not a monk or contemplative nun?

These counsels were written for monks but the deep principles underlying them can be extrapolated to shed wisdom on everyone's life.

What's the deep wisdom contained in these counsels?

These counsels are not saying, as has sometimes been taught, that a monastic vocation is superior to a lay vocation. Nor are they saying that, if someone is a monk or a professional contemplative, social interaction outside of one's cell is unhealthy.

Cell, as referred to here, is a metaphor, an image, a place inside of life, rather than someone's private bedroom. Cell refers to duty, vocation, and commitment.

In essence, this is what's being said:

Go to your cell and your cell will teach you everything you need to know: Stay inside of your vocation, inside of your commitments, inside your legitimate conscriptive duties, inside of your church, inside of your family, and they will teach you where life is found and what love means. Be faithful to your commitments and what you are ultimately looking for will be found there.

Every time you leave your cell you come back less a person: This is telling us that every time we step outside of our commitments, every time we are unfaithful, every time we walk away from what we should legitimately be doing, we come back less a person for that betrayal.

There's a rich spirituality in these principles: Stay inside your commitments, be faithful, your place of work is a seminary, your work is a sacrament, your family is a monastery, your home is a sanctuary, stay inside of them, don't betray them, learn what they are teaching you without constantly looking for life is elsewhere and without constantly believing that God is elsewhere.

Carlo Carretto, the renowned Italian spiritual writer, shares a story to illustrate this: After he had been a monk for more than a quarter of a century and had spent thousands of hours alone in the desert praying, he went to visit his elderly mother. She was a woman who had been so consumed

with the duties of raising a large family that for long periods of time, paralleling his years of solitude in the desert, she had been too busy to have any quiet time in her life. He had spent long years in quiet. She has spent long years in activity. Yet, by his admission, she was perhaps more contemplative than he was. Moreover, he suspected that she was more selfless than he and that she possessed a depth of soul that he could, at that stage of his life, only envy.

But the conclusion he drew from that realization was not that there was something wrong with what he had done during those long, monastic years in the desert. Rather there was something very right about what his mother had done in giving herself over so selflessly to her duties as a wife and mother. He had gone to his cell and it has taught him what he needed to know. She had gone to her cell and it had taught her what she needed to know. His was a monk's cell in the technical sense. Hers was a monastic cell in the wider sense. Both lived monastic lives and both monasteries taught them what they needed to learn.

As well, every small betrayal of his monastic vocation had left him less himself, just as, for his mother, every small betrayal of her duties as wife and mother had left her less herself.

What we have committed ourselves to constitutes a monastic cell. When we are faithful to that, namely, to the duties that come to us from our personal relationships and our place of work, we learn life's lessons by osmosis. Conversely, whenever we betray our commitments as they pertain to our relationships or to our work we become less than what we are.

We are all monks and it matters not whether we are in a monastery or are in the world as spouses, parents, friends, ministers in the church, teachers, doctors, nurses, laborers, artisans, social workers, bankers, economic advisors, salespersons, politicians, lawyers, mental health workers, contractors, or retirees. Each of us has our cell and that cell can teach us what we need to know.

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