



Pray and work: A day in the life of a Benedictine monk

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LACEY

By Linda Thomas

Before daybreak a few monks pray silently inside St. Martin's Abbey Church, which is dark except for the dim glow from three white candles. At 6:20 a.m. a bell chimes three times, lights come on and more monks enter. The bell rings repeatedly at 6:25, signaling the beginning of morning prayer.

"Our life is set by the bells," said Brother Joseph Finnigan. "The symbolism is that it's God calling us to prayer. It's God's way of saying, 'Wake up it's time to pray.'"

Every day begins that way for the Benedictine monks of St. Martin's Abbey in Lacey. The 26 monks who live there – ranging in age from 34 to 87 – follow the monastic rules St. Benedict outlined in the year 530.

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Every breath is a prayer

Morning prayer, the Divine Office, begins with the words, "Lord, open my lips and my mouth shall proclaim your praise." Each of the communal prayers consists of reading Scripture, praying the psalms and offering prayer intentions.

"I was in awe the first time I heard monks reciting the psalms in unison," said 34-year-old Brother Joseph. "I believe God's voice

sounds like that. It sounds like people praying together.”

Brother Joseph is a junior monk. Although he has not taken his solemn vows yet, he believes God is calling him to a monastic life of prayer.

He was baptized a Catholic but didn't practice the faith as a child. Eleven years ago he had a “powerful, moving” confirmation experience.

“Before my confirmation ceremony the instructor said, ‘Now don't expect choirs of angels to come breaking through the ceiling; it's just going to be a Mass.’” Brother Joseph recalled. “But I felt like I heard choirs of angels. I felt my change instantly.”

He transferred from WSU to St. Martin's University to complete his undergraduate study and spent several years as a youth minister in Oregon before returning to join the Benedictine's in Lacey.

Brother Joseph said Benedictine monks have a calm presence because they focus on prayer throughout the day and spend a significant amount of time in silence “listening to God.”

“The goal of the monk is that every breath is a prayer,” he said. “It is the work we do for God.”

“Everything I do, I do for God”

While the “work of God” is their primary focus, the “work of man” or labor takes up about eight hours of a Benedictine's day.

Brother Lawrence Vogel is a former lumberjack who helps clear trees from the property. Incidentally, he does not wear the traditional long, black monk's habit when doing such work. As one monk succinctly said, “That would be foolish.”

Brother Ramon Newell, usually the first to finish breakfast, works in the mailroom and often is seen running to catch up with delivery trucks.

“It is hours of routine, interspersed with moments of terror,” he

joked, “but I do the work to the best of my ability. Everything I do, I do for God.”

Brother Ramon said “God’s grace” brought him to St. Martin’s 40 years ago and keeps him there because he has “a lot to learn.”

“There are certainly monks here who are more advanced with virtue than I am,” he said. “I am constantly growing and learning.”

Other monks take care of finances, building maintenance or work in the print shop. And several monks, including Father Kilian Malvey, teach at St. Martin’s University. The private university offers 22 undergraduate majors and six graduate programs.

Father Kilian is quite familiar with the campus. Before he became a monk in 1957 he attended high school at St. Martin’s. The school isn’t there now. In the mid 1970’s the monks decided to focus on college as their only educational apostolate.

When he was a teenage student, Father Kilian never imagined he’d be drawn to a monastic life.

“I always admired the monks who were my teachers,” he said. “They were strong disciplinarians but they were also peaceful, calm and extremely respectful of others.”

Many current English and religious studies students used similar words to describe their professor, Father Kilian.

“I was very blessed to come from a loving, supportive family” he explained, “and I’ve found a wonderful family of brothers here.”

Family values - hospitality and charity

Abbot Neal Roth is head of the St. Martin’s “family of brothers” who live in a community the same way Benedictines did over a thousand years ago.

Although technology has made life easier for monks today, they are still frugal and disciplined. They don’t

own any personal property – no cell phones, computers, credit cards, or bank accounts. If a monk wants to use the vehicle St. Martin's corporation owns, he has to justify why it's needed before the car can be checked out. The same goes for a request for cash.



Abbot Neal, who will mark 50 years as a monk next year, says the "spirit" of the Rule of Benedict is alive in more important ways.

St. Benedict insisted that all people be treated and welcomed as Christ. Benedictines are known for their hospitality and charity. The abbey's motto is: "Never turn away when someone needs your love."

Although today's monks have more conveniences than their brothers of 15 centuries ago, Abbot Neal Roth said the Benedictine values of hospitality and charity are still important. Phot Linda Thomas

"That's such a beautiful statement and it doesn't make a difference what century you're in," said Abbot Neal. "It's based on having respect for others."

After a day filled with prayer and work, the Grand Silence begins for monks at 8:00 p.m. and continues until after breakfast the next day. Talking is discouraged during that time.

Many monks, including Father Kilian, look forward to the quiet of the evening.

"I cherish being silent," Father Kilian said. "I think simply listening is one of the most effective prayers and you don't have to be a monk to listen to God."

A Monk's Day

6:25 Morning Prayer, Divine
a.m. – Office

7:15

7:30 – Breakfast (All meals are eaten



St. Martin's Abbey Church is the focal point of the Benedictine monastery in Lacey. Each monk has a cubicle in the church for hymnals and prayer books. Photos Linda Thomas



- 8:00 in silence)
- 12:00 Work and Lectio Divina
(Individual contemplative prayer)
- 12:15 Lunch (One monk reads out loud from a book - recent selections included the biography of Mother Angelica and the Making of the New Oxford English Dictionary)
- p.m. –
- 1:00
- 1:00 – Work
- 4:45
- 5:00 Mass
- 6:00 Dinner
- 6:30 – Community time (“Family time” for monks to get together and talk about the day)
- 7:30
- 7:30 Evening prayer, prayer intentions
- 8:00 Grand silence begins until after breakfast the next day