



Silence in the City

Incarnation Monastery and New Camaldoli, California

By Kaya Oakes

The genius of the monastic life is its balance. The balance of prayer and work, *ora et labora*, is perhaps monasticism's best-known export into secular society, but the more significant balance is between the life of the community and the monk's ability to find solitude. Monks live, pray, and work together, but they also spend much of their time alone, spinning the radio dial of their souls in search of a voice. That voice is God's, and they also hear it communally in the Liturgy of the Hours, and particularly in the Psalms.

The idea of a monastic community has changed over centuries, and that change has only accelerated in recent decades. Today, oblates—lay people who make formal promises, which they call vows, but who live outside of the monastic communities they're vowed to—vastly outnumber monks. As religious communities age and vocations dwindle, as the pandemic still crawls along, and as many people continue to discover the transformative practice of silence and contemplation, the simplicity of monastic practice feels right for the chaos of our time....

Camaldolese monks belong to a reformed Benedictine order founded by St.

Romuald in the eleventh century, and they have always had both urban and rural monasteries and hermitages. Jaqueline Chew, a Camaldolese oblate, pointed out that the Camaldolese monastery in Rome is near the Colosseum, so monks in formation in this place live side by side with ordinary Romans and amid the ebb and flow of tourists. But their rural monasteries, closer to the quiet of the natural world, allow the Camaldolese to balance community and solitude in yet another way.

The Camaldolese rule of life, followed by both monks and oblates, was passed down from St. Romuald. It is exquisitely simple and, in its entirety, a mere Latin hundred words long, translated it reads: "Sit in your cell as if in paradise. Cast all memory of the world behind you, cautiously watching your thoughts, as a good fisher watches the fish." And because, for monks, the Psalms are the key to everything, Romuald added a kind of warning: "In the Psalms there is one way. Do not abandon it." The Psalms, among the most ancient prayers of the Church, form the backbone of the Liturgy of the Hours followed by Camaldolese monks and oblates. They

For some people, the pandemic exposed spiritual longings and an awareness of the need for solitude that is woven into the history of Catholicism, but rarely acknowledged in the chant, recite, and practice *lectio divina*—slow, careful reading—living every day with the Psalms until these prayers are engraved on their hearts.

This kind of kenotic, self-emptying prayer is, of course, easier said than done. For many people, the pandemic has exposed our raw human need for companionship to the point that loneliness, depression, and anxiety became a kind of parallel pandemic. But for some people, the pandemic also exposed spiritual and religious longings and an awareness of the need for solitude that is woven into the history of Catholicism, but rarely acknowledged in the average parish.

Like the Catholic Church itself, a monastery's foundation is the life of Christ, which balanced the growth of the Christian community and its notion of *agape* with Jesus' own frequent calls to solitary prayer and retreat. Today, when the Church almost everywhere can feel anything but stable or steadying, it makes sense that people would seek out places of spiritual refuge.

Fr. Andrew Colnaghi, the chaplain to the Incarnation oblate community, has lived in the United States for nearly half a century, though he still carries a prominent Italian accent. Soft-spoken and dressed in a tracksuit, at first sight he could be any man of a certain age who lives in Berkeley, where Boomers outnumber almost everyone other than UC Berkeley students. But in the chapel, wearing the Camaldolese habit of sweeping white robes, he and the other monks transform into figures out of time.

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Funded by Living the Joy of the Gospel Campaign

Colnaghi grew up near Milan, where he worked in a factory with nine thousand employees. There, where workers were called by number and not by name, he became involved in peace and justice work, which led him to conversations with the superior of a nearby Camaldolese community. That superior advised him not to leave his past as an organizer behind, but to bring it with him into the monastic vocation. After “hours and hours talking,” Colnaghi entered the order in 1979.

When Colnaghi first arrived at the monastery on California, he discovered just how isolating it could truly be. “There’s nothing there,” he told me. Whenever a storm or fire shuts down the road and the phone lines, the monastery is completely cut off from the world. Young people who sought out the Camaldolese vocation there were “very enthusiastic to change, to form” themselves, but very few of them wound up taking vows, many of them finding the extreme isolation too difficult to cope with. But at the same time, more and more lay people were seeking out the monastery for retreats and beginning to form bonds with the monks. The general chapter of the Camaldolese suggested forming a more accessible, less remote sister community somewhere else in California. They decided on the Bay Area and purchased the buildings that now house Incarnation Monastery from the Holy Cross fathers in 1980. The idea of a life of prayer in an urban context for Camaldolese means, according to Colnaghi, “you don’t have to go to the desert; you can go anywhere.”

The original vision for Incarnation Monastery was that it would be a place where monks in formation could live while studying and also serve as a guesthouse for visiting scholars. When I interviewed Colnaghi, the guesthouse had just recently reopened, and a young Jesuit was making a retreat and busily typing on a laptop on the deck. But Camaldolese vocations in the United States are not what they were in the era of Thomas Merton, when monasteries were practically overflowing. As vocations slowed, however, lay people who frequented the Incarnation monastery had begun to discern their own idea of a vocation. Among them was a woman who had begun to think of the monks as being like her brothers, an extended family. She knew she couldn’t be a monk—she was married, and a woman—but she and the monks began to consider some other ideas.

Source: Commonweal Magazine. This story is part of an excellent series entitled *The Varieties of Religious Community Today*

Link: [Silence in the City | Commonweal Magazine](#)

THOUGHTS FOR A DAY

Realize that to know Christ you must lead a dying life. The more you die to yourself, the more you will live unto God. You will never enjoy heavenly things unless you are ready to suffer hardship for Christ. Nothing is more acceptable to God, nothing more helpful for you on this earth. When there is a choice to be made, take the narrow way. This alone will make you more like Christ.

There will always be many who love Christ’s heavenly kingdom, but few who will bear his cross.

-Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471)

We have two instructions of Jesus – a great commandment, “love your neighbor,” and a great commission, “go and make disciples.” What is the relation between the two? Some of us behave as if we thought them identical, so that if we share the gospel with somebody, we consider we have completed our responsibility to love him or her. But no. The Great Commission neither explains, nor exhausts, nor supersedes the Great Commandment.

Can we claim to love our neighbour if we keep the gospel from them?

-John Stott (1921-2011),

Theologian & Cleric, Church of England, notable lead of the worldwide evangelical movement

Masses and Confession

Sundays: Vigil, 6pm (Saturday), 9.30am, 11am, 5pm
Croatian Community Mass 6.30pm

French-speaking community mass 2nd and 4th Sundays of the month at 12.30

Daily masses 10am only for the moment

-Rosary daily after 10am mass

Adoration Blessed Sacrament, Weds 10.30-12.40

IN MEMORIAM

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6pm Vigil: Maurice Wright

11am: Patricia Matthews

Gerard Lardner