

PLAISS, Mark, *The Inner Room: A Journey into Lay Monasticism* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2003), pp. 127. ISBN 0-86716-481-6 (paperback). \$9.95.

In reviewing a book like this, one does not so much critique it as engage it. That is what I am going to do. I am writing this review at my monastery "home," my spiritual community, the Abbey of Our Lady of the Redwoods at Whitethorn, CA. My family makes the 160-mile round trip every other Sunday for Eucharistic celebration, knowing that we are called by God to be here. Sometimes, we spend three-day weekends working, praying, laughing, conversing, and being silent with the sisters and brother here, deepening our fellowship and faith together as part of the Cistercian charism. My wife and I can articulate some of the reasons for our spiritual home being a monastery when persons query us, but the truest and simplest response is what Mark Plaiss says, we are *called* to this *vocation of lay monasticism*.

For us, being Christian is *being* this way of living the faith. Our children know no other expression of Christian faith; on those three-day weekends, they were helping to paint the monastery kitchen at ages 8 and 10, working in the garden each summer, and praying the offices (not the early ones!). The Cistercian charism shapes them whether they are consciously aware of it or not. The flavor of the monastic mass is their sense of Christian worship, and it is particularly Cistercian. One short humorous example: In 2003-04, our family had the wonderful rich experience of spending a year at the Ecumenical Institute at the Benedictine community of St. John's University and Abbey in Collegeville, MN. The Benedictine brothers welcomed us into daily prayers and into the life of their community, and we quickly felt very much connected. Even so, I will never forget my son's comment (then age 15), after attending the first Sunday Eucharist celebration in the magnificent church, with the monastic schola singing, and the fine homily by a monk priest. As we arrived back at our apartment on campus, my son said "Well, mass here was nice, but different. Being raised Cistercian, it just felt so *busy!*" *Being raised Cistercian*...he had no idea how profoundly unique his utterance was in the history of Christianity.

Mark Plaiss' book is a description of this reality of lay monasticism. It is an engaging account of his life story of discerning this vocation while also being a reflection on the ambiguous nature of

this vocation in general. The book is composed of short essays. Essays 1-5 relate events and stories of his life coalescing toward a monastic spirituality. Essay 6-8 are flashbacks to his earlier formative days being raised as a Methodist, then Baptist, Protestant. Essays 9-17 are a mixture of glimpses into the experiences of praying the offices on retreat and contemplative reflections on faith, prayer, and the place of the cell and work in the monastic life. It makes for an odd assortment, but it works overall, giving the reader an encounter with the author and an introduction to the experience of retreat at a Cistercian monastery. Appendices include a schedule of Offices and Psalm Schedule at New Melleray Abbey.

Essays 2 and 18 frame the book by examining the lay monastic vocation from two distinct points: the perplexing experience of finding oneself called to a vocation that has no or little precedent, and the resultant need to identify key elements that must structure the lay monastic life so that it does not become self-enclosed, given it is unlikely to have communal structure for vocation formation (though this is increasingly changing as the oblate/associate movements grow).

Essay 2 first appeared in 1999 as an essay entitled "Lay Monasticism" in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, Vol 34.3. I recall the deep rush of gratitude and affirmation and my identification with the emotions, ambiguity, and deep certitude that Plaiss describes there—it spoke my experience so clearly, and it continues to represent the experience of a large, now identified group of lay monastics associated with Cistercian and Benedictine monasteries. Up to that point (as far as I know), nobody had so clearly articulated in publication the *experience* of being called to this largely "hidden vocation," hidden only because it didn't fit either the parish life or the cenobitic life of a cloistered monastery. I think that essay, now chapter 2 in this book, remains a landmark piece, for it did not posit a *possibility*, it described with confidence a present *reality*, making clear that the existence of this vocation was undeniable—both exciting and perplexing to monastics on both sides of the cloister walls. What on earth is the Holy Spirit doing?

Here are some selections from that essay that speak the bewilderment and yet deep emerging conviction in understanding one is being called to a way of life whose primary model is found in a cloister:

The lay monastic is a layperson called by God to transform his or her life into one continuous prayer by using the tools nor-

mally associated with monasticism...The vocation is largely invisible, thereby rendering it incapable of promotion or recruitment. The parish priest may issue an appeal for Eucharistic Ministers, but he is unlikely to issue a similar appeal for lay monastics...Because the vocation is hidden, a person receiving the call to it is often perplexed...Consequently, the person stumbles through one door after another trying to follow the voice that calls....

The search often leads to a monastery. There the person discovers the rhythm of life that speaks to the soul: prayer, work, silence. This discovery is often accompanied by deep spiritual rumblings, a sense of being overshadowed...What the person has uncovered is a vocation. The person has followed the voice, and the voice is monastic.

Now the person is thoroughly confused. Perhaps he or she is married, has children and is paying off a mortgage. How can all that be reconciled with this apparent call to monasticism?... (Plaiss, pp. 5-6).

This is a challenge both for the lay monastics, who want more contact with monasteries, and for monasteries who have a clear structure for cenobitic monk vocations, but are a bit squeamish when the spirituality of their charism is suddenly being claimed, or given, to the larger world.<sup>1</sup> This larger expression of monastic charism requires a redefinition of monastic identity, and birth pangs are always painful and promising. As Plaiss says in Appendix 3, "Monasteries Without Walls,"

It is too early to come to any sort of conclusion about the nature of the relationship between the monks on either side of the [monastery] wall. In my conversations with some members [of monasteries] I find some are wary of the associates and skeptical of what is called monasticism outside the walls; others there embrace it. All of this is too new. Time is needed to digest it and mull it over. I do suggest, though, that we are perhaps on the cusp of a new age in which the boundaries of the monastery will expand... (Plaiss, p. 126).

Essay 18 speaks to the issue of vocational formation for lay monastics. One of the key differences between the canonical monk and the lay monastic is the availability of a system of training and guidance in formation in community. Plaiss discusses six key

elements that the lay monastic must incorporate into his or her life in a disciplined manner: Humility in recognition that this charism is a gift from God, and thus continued discernment of it through the study of Scripture; cultivating prayer practices so that life becomes a continuous prayer, including some hours of the Office, adapted as necessary given the demands of jobs, family, etc.; practicing *lectio divina*, and meditation; seeking a competent spiritual director; seeking out brother and sister monastics, most easily found in an oblate association; and finally, studying the *Rule of St. Benedict* and applying its principles in one's life setting.<sup>2</sup> The question remains, however—in what ways will monasteries adapt to provide a structure for this needed guidance of formation? Plais shows how one Cistercian monastery, New Melleray Abbey in Dubuque, Iowa, has responded with a Monastic Center where lay monastics live for extended stays, in close association with the resident monks, directly involved in the community life of the monastery.<sup>3</sup>

This book does not deal with some important questions. Is the phrase "lay monasticism" an oxymoron? The term "monasticism" has a long usage of application to a celibate, cloistered vocation. Yet the call to conversion of life totally toward God is the *Christian* vocation, and the Benedictine rhythm of life toward that conversion is being claimed as a rightful inheritance by Christians beyond the cloister walls. But for centuries, the very structure of the monastery has remained the symbol of the stability and clarity of that conversion. It should not easily be changed, nor the words that describe it. Likewise, the phrase "*lay monasticism*" is problematic when used to identify non-cloistered, non-celibate persons; monasticism began and remains a lay movement, even though now it is thoroughly formalized into orders and structures. Other persons speak of "the secular monk," using secular as meaning "in the world." But "monk" has implied a celibate, cloistered lifestyle, and that is not the case here. Family life is the central sacramental presence for most lay monastics. Perhaps "monastic spirituality" will become the identifying label, and we will speak of "associates" who are connected formally or informally to monasteries whose walls become less solid, but still remain clear boundaries. Neither associates nor monks want or assume the cenobitic vocation will or should fade away. The monastery as the school of conversion of manners is mother to them all.

But really, this book does not need to address these issues. These matters are all under prayerful reflection and discussion within a myriad of settings, from lay associate organizations to papal addresses.<sup>4</sup> This book is spiritual autobiography, but it is more than that. It is a witness to the Spirit of God moving in our midst. It is a challenge and an opportunity for the traditional structure of monastic communities; how can they embrace the world coming to their doorsteps to be trained, and in turn be blessed by the richness of their charism being manifest in new ways beyond their walls? How can the associates bring new vitality and support, and new expression to the monastic community? How can the monks and associates together find the right balance in this relationship that deepens the communion of God among them and into the world? Trust God. Seek discernment together. Tonight (April 22, 2006), as I sat in the darkness of Vigils, the reading reverberated through the monastic church, "I am the Lord...I am doing a new thing. Can you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43:8-11, 19-19b).

...Lay monasticism exists. The lay monastic may be married or single, man or woman, parent or not. The call to the vocation comes from God and is a means of union with God.

The monastery is a school where the lay monastic learns by both instruction and example the life of monasticism. That monastic life is, in turn, lived in the world, becoming a quiet, hidden, continuous prayer to God. (Plaiss, p. 9)

## Notes

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1. This claiming or giving of the charism to the larger world, and its manifestation as lay monasticism, is similar to the clarifying experience of Jesus in his encounter with the Gentile women (Mark 7:24-30) and to Peter's visionary experience of God's expansive intent (Acts 10). Michael Casey, in commenting on the former, says "Jesus appreciates the woman's feisty rejoinder and is won over by her boldness. She has held a mirror up to him and, as it were, for the first time he has seen himself and his mission more clearly. She has perceived in him more than a parochial savior; it was from her that Jesus began to consider the universality of the Good News." (Michael Casey, *Fully Human Fully Divine: An Interactive Christology*, [Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 2004], p. 145.) In simi-

lar fashion, perhaps lay monastics are holding up a mirror to cloistered monastics today.

2. In the past decade or so, there has been a plenitude of books on applying the principles and sensibilities of the Rule of St. Benedict to everyday life outside the monastery. To name just a very few on my shelf or that came up on a topical search ("Rule of Saint Benedict" on Amazon.com): Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (Crossroad Classic, 1992), and *Wisdom Distilled From the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); Esther de Waal, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001); Hugh Feiss, *Essential Monastic Wisdom: Writings on the Contemplative Life* (HarperSan Francisco, 1999); Father Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt, *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2002); David Robinson, *The Family Cloister: Benedictine Wisdom for the Home* (Crossroad, 2000); Laura Swan, *Engaging Benedict: What the Rule Can Teach Us Today* (Christian Classics, 2005); Benet Tvedten, *How to Be a Monastic and Not Leave Your Day Job: An Invitation to Oblate Life* (Brewster MA: Paraclete Press, 2006) and Paul Wilkes, *Beyond the Walls: Monastic Wisdom for Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday/Random House, 1999). These are listed to show variety only, not necessarily to imply endorsement.

3. For more information on the Monastic Center at New Melleray Abbey, see [www.newmelleray.org](http://www.newmelleray.org), click on "Guests" and then on "The Monastic Center." Other contact information for the Abbey: New Melleray Abbey, 6632 Melleray Circle, Peosta, IA 52068; Phone: 563.588.2319; e-mail: [frsteve@newmelleray.org](mailto:frsteve@newmelleray.org)

4. For example, on the International Lay Cistercians website, [www.cistercianfamily.org](http://www.cistercianfamily.org) under "Resources," one finds three sections of documents entitled "Documents Related to the O.C.S.O.," "Homilies and Presentations from Monks and Nuns," and "Documents from Lay Associates," all of which reflect on lay monasticism in some form or fashion.

Harry Wells

BILLY, Dennis, C.Ss.R. *With Open Heart: Spiritual Direction in the Alphonsian Tradition* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 2003). pp. 128. ISBN 0764810901 (paperback). \$18.95.

Spiritual direction is a ministry that combines artistry, grace and specific skills. In the Catholic tradition, discussions about spiritual direction often turn to the work of Ignatius of Loyola and his *Spiritual Exercises*, and for many, this particular approach has be-