



# Back to the MONASTERY?

by Ron Benson

**R**adical. Controversial. Mysterious. And swarming with fourth-graders. Those of us in Mrs. Cutting's class had our little legs and hands moving fast around the grounds to explore the territory, find a souvenir, and in my case, snicker with my friends about what the Friars wore under their robes. Such was my field trip to the Mission San Luis Rey.

Along with every fourth-grader in California at the time, I learned about the state's history, a major factor of which was the Franciscan effort to evangelize the natives by establishing a series of missions along the coast. The diminutive Father Junipero Serra, zealous for souls and the spread of Roman Catholicism, conspired to plant missions that would plant other missions which would bring God to heathen tribes.

## Forbidden Mysteries

A visit to a mission was compulsory for our fourth-grade education. And although I could never tell my

fourth-grade buds, I confess I was enthralled with the whole deal. My fundamentalist heritage did not look kindly at Catholicism, and I felt guilty for my fascination. But it was all quite mesmerizing to my ten-year-old mind. I liked the ornate church, the statues of Mary and the Saints, the prayer gardens, the incense and the hundreds of candles in little red glass containers flickering in

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the dark light of the chapel. It was mysterious, a little spooky, and in my world, forbidden.

The forbidden thing is probably what attracted me most about the whole idea when I was younger. But even today there's something compelling and other-worldly about the life of a monk. Setting oneself apart, leading a life of simplicity, practicing spiritual discipline and holy living and generally being more God-like than other people—isn't this kind of the goal of a real Christian? Did I mention the incense? I love incense.

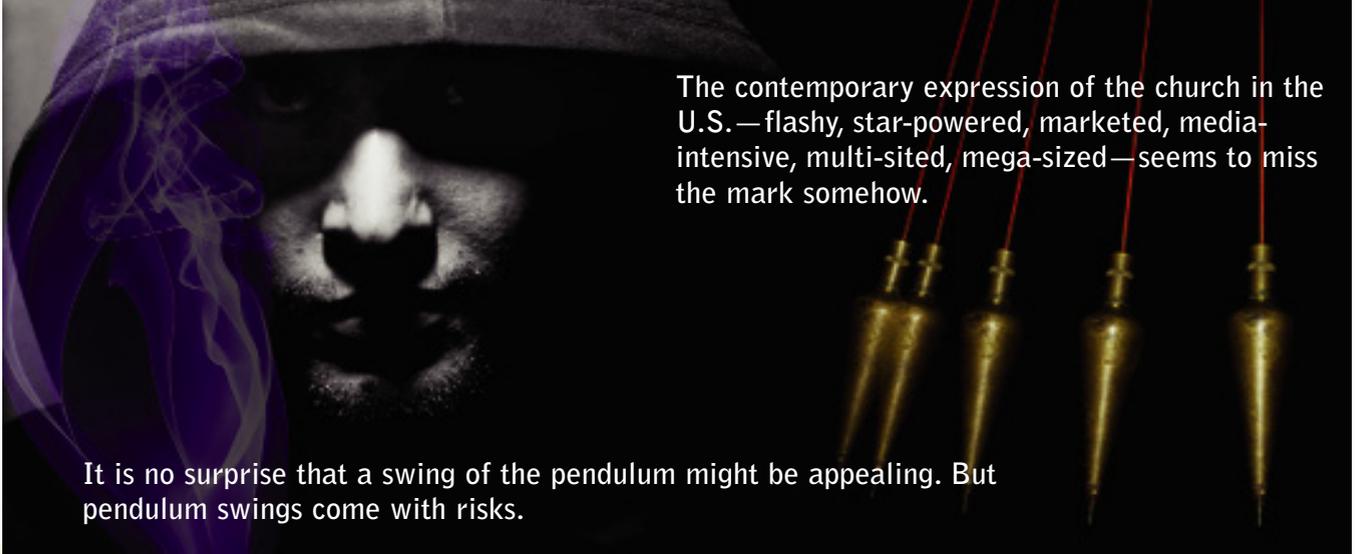
The fascination for mystery—for the radical practice of Christianity, for living in community with other believers—still

drives people to pursue distinctive lives in peculiar groups with specific missional goals. The concept of monasticism has always been with us, but recent buzz seems to indicate that monasteries are now in vogue in evangelicalism.

I should probably put that word, *monastery*, in quotes. The so-called "new monasticism" is not old-order, not particularly Roman Catholic and not separatist or solitary in the ways that we typically think of monks and nuns. Most of the contemporary "friars" don't wear robes, don't kneel and chant for hours at a

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time, or practice other forms of extreme asceticism. And they feel free to wander around and mingle with society at will.

The movement springs from, and is parallel to, the “emergent church,” with the same kind of free-flowing, experimental, ancient-future perspective. The new monasticism is a revival of the old concept using relevant and strategic forms. It’s a Father Serra mission system for the new millennium.

In the strictest definition, California Missions were not monasteries and were not populated by monks. Monasteries were cloistered, private communities wherein monks kept to themselves and didn’t mix it up with the outside world. The mission system of Father Serra’s Franciscans, on the other hand, had a goal to inject God into the culture around them by administering help in the name of Jesus and living lives of discipline.

### New Monastics

The new monasticism shares the same goal. Nearly all of those who gather under the umbrella of these new orders share several things in common, although they are not really organized in any large-scale way. Here are the Twelve Distinctives<sup>1</sup> of the new monastics, as detailed in the literature and websites of the movement. (I’ve added some explanatory comments in italics):

- Relocation to the abandoned places of Empire. *Moving into populations of the marginalized poor.*
- Sharing economic resources

with fellow community members and the needy among us. *Taking their cue from Acts 2 and 4, where the early church “shared all things in common.”*

community members who share a common rule of life. *In many cases, the new monastics do not limit their living arrangements to one building, or even one address, but will obtain*

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- Hospitality to the stranger.
- Lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation. *Most new monastic groups pursue diversity.*
- Humble submission to Christ’s body, the church. *This submission takes various forms and expressions depending on the “order” or specific community.*
- Intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate. *In other words, they intentionally train rookies who come into the group. To become a fully functioning member, the individual must go through a training process.*

*homes or buildings in the same basic location.*

- Care for the plot of God’s earth given to us along with support of our local economies. *Many of the “orders” have environmental components—they’re green. They also work to establish ways to enhance the micro-economy around them by sponsoring and training small business enterprises, as in “teaching a man to fish.”*
- Peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew 18.
- Commitment to a disciplined contemplative life. *This element of the distinctives also shows great variety of expression depending on the “order.”*

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- Nurturing common life among members of intentional community (*a.k.a.—fellowship*).
- Support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children.
- Geographical proximity to

*The practice of the formal spiritual disciplines, along with varieties of meditational and mystical forms.*

### Pendulum Swings

I like these things. The mystery still attracts. I can’t disagree with

# Spiritual Disciplines

any of them, really. And I think I understand the motives involved. The contemporary expression of the church in the U.S.—flashy, star-powered, marketed, media-intensive, multi-sited, mega-sized—seems to miss the mark somehow. It is no surprise that a swing of the pendulum might be appealing. But pendulum swings come with risks.

We should ask ourselves—are there real dangers in living a monastic lifestyle? Are there cautions on the road to the commune? Are there potholes and pitfalls on the monastic journey? Should we drink their grape Kool-Aid?

Here are some yellow flags to consider regarding the new monasticism:

## Rules

The new monasticism brings new rules. In fact, the codified practices of a specific monastic group, or *order*, is called a *rule*. These things help the group function, keep its distinctives alive and serve to foster the desired mission of the group.

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As an example, many of the groups eat strictly organic food. Some are vegetarian. These boundaries are not proscribed by the Bible (in fact, the scriptures clearly advocate freedom in these dietary matters), but the communities involved believe that organic vegetarianism is in keeping with certain lifestyle choices to which they are committed.

Vegetarianism is not the issue, but using vegetables to define holiness can be.

Whenever a group of people establish rules, there is a danger that those rules will supersede the liberty purchased by Christ. Rules are not bad, even rules which are not

from a grace-based perspective the major concern about spiritual disciplines is that they are popularly viewed as yardsticks for spiritual achievement. They offer, to those who will faithfully follow them, spiritual assurance of God’s acceptance and love. Equally problematic, they can provide a scorecard to judge others who do not get with the program. Pride and arrogance can become a by-product of spiritual disciplines.

Spiritual disciplines offer a practical, visible way for those who feel that their spiritual lives are lacking to feel as if they have pleased God by their efforts. They can easily be understood as a works-based religion.

Some Christians who favor spiritual disciplines respond by saying that these are merely practices that Jesus produces in the lives of those who follow him. While some of the following practices may be present in a Christian’s life, we can safely conclude that our freedom in Christ will not make us feel guilt or shame if we do not engage in these practices as others may. Further, authentic Christians should resist any religious attempt to enforce spiritual disciplines under the guise of proof of one’s commitment to Christ.

Lists of spiritual disciplines differ, but seven of the most common include:

**1) Prayer.** While prayer is an essential part of our relationship with God, prayer is misunderstood by many as a necessity we must fulfill before God will do what we want him to.

**2) Meditation.** Meditation is simply the act of reflecting, giving thanks, and pondering who and what God is. But legalistic interpretations offer programs and steps that must be followed for “effective” meditation.

**3) Fasting.** Fasting has a long history of legalistic abuse within Christendom, yet it can be a part of self-denial, which is very much a part of the message Jesus proclaimed.

**4) Bible Study.** As with fasting and other practices, the motivation behind Bible study must be examined. Is Bible study a means to prove a denominational doctrine, or is it a way to listen to God and come to know Jesus (John 5:39-40)?

**5-7) Submission to Authority, Service, and Worship.** These three disciplines can easily become manipulative practices designed to ensure that religion remains in control of its followers. There is no doubt that Christians *submit* to Christ, *serve* him and him alone and *worship* him in spirit and truth. But, in the hands of institutionalized religion, each of these three routines can become mindless rituals, thus spiritually unhealthy.

—the Editors

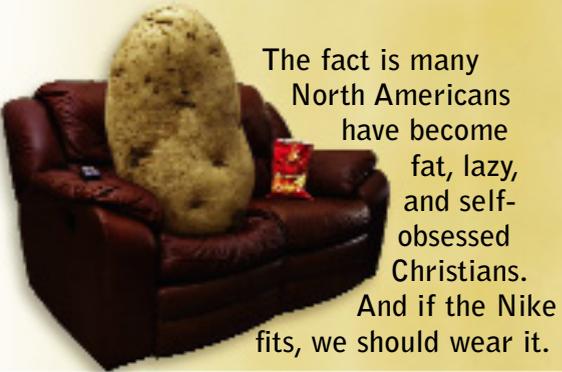
explicitly biblical. All churches, even the most grace-filled, have some rules in place simply to assist in the administration of a group. But if those rules begin to define what it means to follow Jesus, we have a problem.

If my church decides they don’t want gum chewing in the auditorium, they may make a rule about it. But when that rule begins to measure and determine one’s relationship to God, it crosses the

line. “No decent Christian would ever chew gum in the Sanctuary!” (I’ve actually heard these words uttered by a real, live Christian.) The rule must not become the benchmark of righteousness. The same warning goes out for organic, vegetarian or non-gum chewing groups of any kind.

## Authority

Someone has to make the rules, and often it is the person or per-



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sons in authority. How that authority is structured and who takes the role all have a big influence in the nature and function of any group. Whoever makes the rules is “in charge” and has the power. And power can go to your head.

The new monastic groups tend to be structured in a democratic way. The majority of the groups are small, even as small as three people. Group-think is the means to decision making. Since being in the group is voluntary, if you don’t like the decision of the group you can pack up your meager belongings and find another neo-convent that better suits your needs.

Shared and communal authority is wonderful, but often someone takes the responsibility and moves out of the pack as a leader. When that happens, the power of authority begins to weave its spell and a quiet cultism can squirrel in. The expectations adapt to the situation, and people who desire to stay in a group submit to the leadership.

If that leadership is good and holy and true, there may not be a problem. But if the leadership is poor and morally sloppy and doctrinally deviant, there is a time bomb in the cloister’s closet.

Combine that scenario with a tight community, a vow of poverty and submission, and a pooled economy, and it’s easy to see the potential for abuse. Sad to say, but we’ve seen it many times before—in large cults, in tiny, rural churches and in all kinds of groups in between.

Nearly all new monastics aspire to be like the first-century church. In his letters to the first century church, the Apostle Paul often chastises and warns his readers against misapplied and mishandled authority. Paul understood

that the temptation was real for someone to take advantage of the flock, and he gave warnings to leaders and directions for their selection.

**Guilt**

One of the powerful tools of communal groups is the guilt factor.

Guilt can be used as a tool to shame individuals into joining the group. This is especially easy for the new monastics, since their very existence and mission is a counter-cultural response to the suburban, upper-middle class, capitalistic evangelicalism out of which they spring. They have a bone to pick with Baby-Boomer evangelicals.

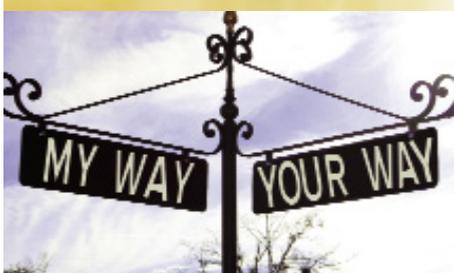
And, I have to admit, it touches a nerve. After reading some of their articles, and considering some of their thinking, I was not all that motivated to climb into my 12-person hot tub and watch a movie on my wall-sized, big-screen T.V. The fact is many North Americans have become fat, lazy and self-obsessed Christians. And if the Nike fits, we should wear it.

The problem, however, lies with a standard of righteousness applied from the outside in. It’s the Pharisaical approach to holiness:

*If you are going to be holy you need to be just like me.* The Pharisee in Jesus’ parable prayed, “I thank you, Lord, that I am not like that slimy tax collector over in the corner of the synagogue.”

The income-surrendering organic pacifist vegetarian living in a commune in a rough part of town may find it easy to take the same approach. The high perch of someone more stringent in their application of rules for living becomes a tower from which guilt can be sprayed in

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all directions. You can imagine the prayer:

“I thank you, Lord, that I am not a soccer-mom-suburbanite-four-kidded-SUV-driving-swimming-pool-enjoying-so-called Christian like that woman on Park Hill Drive.” Jesus would have a major problem with that prayer—he did not look kindly on the pedestal approach to holiness.

Instead, Jesus advocated a confessional humility. In many cases, this humility is in evidence within the new monastic sensibility. But the yellow flag needs to be waved whenever personal choices become the source of applied guilt.

So, you want to be a monastic? That’s okay. Can you believe in grace and be a monk in the new monastery? I think so. Can you be radical about service and sacrifice and still avoid becoming judgmental? It’s possible.

Can you have rules and exert those rules with biblical authority without letting it go to your head? Yes. But...

You must exercise care. Walk with a gentle gait. Forgive as you have been forgiven. Practice humility without presuming it because of your lifestyle. And burn some incense—always a good thing to do. □

1. Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World, Jonathan R. Wilson, Trinity Press International. See also School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism, Rutba House, ed. Wipf & Stock Publishers. Information also available at <http://www.newmonasticism.org>

Ron Benson lives in his own little commune with his wife, Linda, his mother, his son, Jon, a dog, a rabbit and some fish. The most important rule at Benson’s-on-the-River is: “Don’t be late for dinner.” Ron also pastors a non-monastic group in Bay City, Michigan. If you would like to read more of Ron’s material, you can find it on the PTM website ([www.ptm.org](http://www.ptm.org)) or at Ron’s website ([www.ronbenson.net](http://www.ronbenson.net)).

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