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Bringing a little of the monastery home

By Dolores Leckey
NC News Service

Maybe it was a household packed with small children.

Maybe it was the sense of being pulled in many different directions.

Maybe it was a longing to glimpse God in the confusion.

But something — whatever it was — about the life of a monastery called to me in the early days of marriage and parenthood. (No, that doesn't mean I made plans to join one.)

The basic monastic rhythms of prayer and study, of work and play shaped a life (so it seemed to me) that symbolized stability and creativity. Furthermore, those rhythms seemed remarkably apt for a home of lay people, another kind of "household of God," as St. Benedict referred to his first monastery.

How could I tap into that long and rich history?

It seemed best to begin with myself. This effort, however, didn't herald any great outward change in my home management or mothering.

At first it meant saying the church's morning prayer — called Lauds — by myself each morning. Slowly, *slowly*, I began to realize that a long-ago and far-away writer of the psalms knew me through and through. Gradually the prayer of the church became like daily bread to me. It gave me new energy.

Children help their parents to grow in many ways if we let them. Our young children's natural enthusiasm for rituals and celebration led my husband and me to enter more fully into the cycle of the church's year. As a family we recited the particular psalms of the season, we lighted our candles, we read the lives of the saints.

This, then, was our community prayer, offered around the edges and in the natural spaces of the evening meal — a bit like the evening prayer of Vespers in a monastery.

Life in the homes of lay people resembles life in a monastery? Surprising as it may seem, these two "households of God" have much in common, as Dolores Leckey discovered. The ancient rhythms of monastic life found their way into the natural spaces of her 20th-century home life.

So now, two prayer points existed, steadying the active, busy days of a growing family. Like sunrise and sunset, these two points could be counted on. Lauds and Vespers.

Another side of monastic life presented itself — solitude and silence. Were these qualities impossible in late 20th-century homes?

As an at-home mother with children in school and at home, it didn't seem that I had much choice over the use of my time. But I began to discover some op-

portunities to choose silence, even back then.

Several years ago, I wrote about this crossroads of choice in a publication called "The Wind Is Rising":

"I looked at the shape of a typical day and noticed some space. There was nap time, usually grasped at as an opportunity to accomplish tasks I couldn't get to while the children were awake. Instead of stuffing this space with various good deeds, I stopped and did nothing...or so it seemed.

No radio, no telephone, just silence. I entered this midday Sabbath sometimes with Scripture, sometimes with other writings, often with restlessness and anxiety, sometimes with eager anticipation and frequently with fatigue. My time alone often ended in sleep, just like the children."

It is very difficult for working parents to find reliable pieces of time to be alone and quiet. For me, quiet solitude has to be carved out of the early morning hours.

A sunrise walk, a silent drive to work, an occasional half day in seclusion, an annual retreat — these are my pathways back to the silent centers that still stand within my inner landscape, and that await my entrance.

Monasteries long have been recognized as centers of learning. Throughout the centuries monks pursued the study of music and history, science and art, theology and spirituality. They created an atmosphere for learning and for growing.

This is another point at which the home is something like the monastery. The family home is the place for expanding human knowledge as well as the spiritual knowledge of God. The entire atmosphere created in the home is a large factor in promoting this growth. When parents and children pray together and bless each other, for example, they are teaching each other to grow as Christians.

I have been talking about an indirect relationship between monks and lay people. But monasteries do exercise a more direct influence on lay women and men. Spiritual direction and counsel, adult theological education, daily Vespers and retreats are some of the resources available in monasteries.

Do monasteries have anything to contribute to late 20th-century lay life? Yes, clearly — at least my experience of 25 years affirms that this is so.

(Mrs. Leckey is director of the U.S. bishops' Laity Committee.)



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