

Order of Franciscan Hermits

Formation for Novices, Large Print Edition

NOT FOR SALE

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The following formation materials are the work of Rev. Fr. Bjorn, OES, OFH; the first Abbot of the Stewards of Peace Monastery. His intention is to provide materials that are relevant to those both new and experienced in the vowed life as expressed in the Rule and Customs of St. Francis of Assisi, and that are as inclusive and as educational as possible.

These formation materials are intended to serve as guideposts for both the novice brother or sister and those who have persevered for many years in their monastic practices. It is our hope that the following materials will be found to be relevant at every stage of monastic profession, and that the advice and topics contained herein will serve to strengthen a person's monastic observances throughout the duration of their consecrated life.

It can not be stressed enough that you work together with a mentor or spiritual director throughout your consecrated life as a monastic, regardless of when you find yourself in your private cell or cluster of hermits. The name of our community implies a solitary monastic observance, however even those who follow the model set forth by the Desert Fathers and Mothers have at least one person whom they trust and consult in times of need.

With all of these things in mind, it is with great joy that you are welcomed to the monastic way of life as observed by the OFH. It is our communal hope that we will enjoy the blessings of your presence among us for many years to come. You may feel free to use these materials in e-book or pdf format, or print them and keep them in a binder or folder, if that is easier for you. My only request is that these materials never be bought or sold for any reason.

Guidance for Hermits of OFH

“Listen carefully, my son, to master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it and faithfully put it into practice.”

-The Rule of St. Benedict, Prologue, verse 1

Welcome, dear friend. As you begin the early stages of your monastic profession, the road ahead may seem daunting or confusing. Know that each of us who have persevered in our monastic practice have been where you are now, and that we are here to support you as you begin your newly consecrated way of life.

The act of choosing to lay aside the many possibilities that a secular life has to offer in favor of a life of simplicity and service can be terrifying. Saying yes to this Hermit's way of life means saying no to other ways of living; it is a radical form of consent to the will of God which supersedes the many desires that we ourselves may be accustomed to pursuing.

It is natural for us to wonder what might have been, had we not chosen to lay aside our many pursuits and clothe ourselves in the simplicity of the monastic way. Should

these questions become burdensome, you are encouraged to discuss them with your mentor, who has likely experienced similar emotions concerning the choices that have led to monastic life.

Each of us has come to this way with our own preconceived notions concerning what a monk ought to be like, and all too often we are overly harsh on ourselves when we do not measure up to what is, in most cases, an unattainable image of perfection.

This kind of harshness is like a poison to the soul. The unkind words that our minds tell us in the midst of harshness often defeat us before we even begin to take the action required of us as stewards of peace. We must therefore be constantly diligent in realigning how we treat ourselves at our innermost level. Once the seeds of forgiveness are planted within us, we can begin to live in a way that fosters peace in the world around us.

The monastic way does not require perfection. This way of life can be described as a “school for the spirit”; it is a constant source of learning, growth and change for those who practice it with sincerity. Once we have come to the realization that there is no such thing as a “perfect monk”, we enter into a kind of freedom that allows our innermost self to grow in ways thought to be previously unattainable.

Throughout the ages, countless men and women have chosen to dedicate themselves to a consecrated life of prayer, contemplation and service to others. Over the centuries, the traditions that have developed within these communities of monks are numerous, and vary widely in both religious customs and attitudes.

The documents that outline these traditions are commonly referred to as a Rule of Life, which define what is expected of each person who joins in the shared monastic way of life that is practiced within the community they associate with.

Because of our ecumenical nature as a community (as Br. Paul expresses, ALL Franciscans), the Rule of Life that we follow may be interpreted in many different expressions of monastic practice. The example set forth by St. Francis is intended to be a foundation for building your own monastic observances, which should be intentionally implemented according to what is an appropriate way of living out your particular path of faith.

The formation of a monastic is a lifelong process. As humans, we are always learning and experiencing new things which help us to mature in our understanding of the

world around us and the world within us. With this in mind, this book should serve as a companion to our common Rule of Life, and should be revisited from time to time throughout your lifelong journey down the path of monastic practice.

Recommended Reading
For all Brothers and Sisters

This is a list of published materials that have been found to be beneficial to those both those who are just beginning their consecrated life as a monastic, as well as for those who have been monks and nuns for many years.

Although this list has been compiled with the intention of guidance for the newly professed Novice, the materials listed ought to be re-read from time to time throughout one's life, in order that they might help to reignite and refresh the methods and observances of those called to an Eremitic vocation.

We encourage all who read the materials listed here to employ attentiveness and prayerful intention. Whether or not a particular work is based on your own religious identity, the methods and revelations in the pages of these works ought to be read with objectivity so as to provide the reader with a way of thinking, feeling, or action that previously may have not been known to them.

It is also important to point out that many of the books listed have rich and deeply symbolic content. With this in mind, one might consider using some of the texts for the

practice of Sacred Reading, or for finding a daily affirmation or mantra.

We realize that not everyone learns by reading easily. Should this be the case for you, we recommend either reading with the assistance of a mentor, or perhaps with a friend or tutor that you trust in order to help make these texts understandable and applicable for your life and monastic practice.

Furthermore, St. Francis himself was known to not be a fan of books on the account that “book-knowledge” often created the stumbling block of pride. His intent to safeguard his brothers from this was well-intentioned, however there are at least some basic writings, reflections and educational materials that are crucial to safeguarding the longevity of your vocation as a hermit.

Christian Texts

Author, Title

Henri Nouwen- Making All Things New

St. Francis of Assisi -The Complete Writings of St. Francis

M. Basil Pennington- Centering Prayer

Fr. Charles Cummings, OCSO -Monastic Practices

St. Aelred of Rievaulx- Spiritual Friendship St. Aelred of

Rievaulx-The Mirror of Charity Fr. Cornelius Wencel,

ER.CAM- The Eremitic Life

Carl McColman- Befriending Silence

St. Theresa of Avila-The Interior Castle

Silence: The Cornerstone of Listening

It is highly likely that in your elementary years of formal education, you have heard one or more of your teachers say the following words in order to quiet the noisiness that is natural among young children: “Your mouth and your ears can not be open at the same time”.

This simple statement may not have seemed all that important at the time, however there is a deep truth held within its words; that it is impossible for someone to listen and talk simultaneously.

The Rule of Life written by St. Benedict, who was an early pioneer of the western monastic model, begins with the following words: “Listen, my child to the Master’s words, and incline the ear of your heart”. This advice is crucially important to anyone who has chosen to dedicate themselves to a monastic way of life.

There are many tools which one can implement in order to develop the skills needed to mindfully and honestly listen; the first and most important of which is silence. The practice of silence is not simply a lack of noise; it is a discipline which must constantly be tended to in order that inner quietness may flourish even in the midst of

distractions. Consider for a moment the explanation given by a Trappist-Cistercian monk on the practice of silence:

“Practicing silence is an act of compassion. A kind word left unsaid for the sake of silence allows another who might be in the midst of a deep and prayerful experience to continue that connection with God, uninterrupted. Likewise, it allows us to be open to constantly listening for the still, small voice of God within the deepest parts of our own awareness. Silence is the place where the Spirit of God speaks to us, instructs us in the ways of love, and forms us into the image of God.”

We live in a world where we experience a constant barrage of messages that attempt to shape us into someone else’s idea of perfection. Everywhere we look there are advertisements trying to sell us an artificial image of wholeness; television programs try to convince us of how we should think and feel, while various printed and digital sources attempt to assert countless points of view upon us.

When we have the luxury of a lack of external noise, our own conscious minds play for us an unending stream of the stories we have experienced and the messages we have heard throughout our lives, both positive and

negative. In addition to all of this, cultural influences tell us that silence (such as being quiet in the company of others instead of making small talk for the sake of noise) is considered rude.

It would seem, at first glance, that with all of these kinds of distractions, practicing silence is nearly impossible. In order that we might change our way of thinking about what it means to practice silence, and by extension our comfort level with silence itself, it may be helpful for us to examine new ways of integrating practices that cultivate inner quietness in our lives.

If we adjust our own perspectives concerning both interior and exterior silence, we may find that it is not such a daunting task after all.

The beginnings of the practice of silence start with choosing to step away from the things that distract us in our daily lives. This does not mean that we sever our connections to those we love or to those around us, or that we give up activities that we enjoy. On the contrary, in choosing to spend a little extra time being quiet before liturgical prayer, logging off from our various technological devices earlier than we normally would or choosing to reduce environmental noise such as radio or

TV while we engage in our work, we gain the ability to make ourselves more readily available to others who may be in need of a listening ear.

For the novice monk, adjusting to periods of silence can be discomfoting at first. Just as standing at the edge of a tall cliff and gazing into the space below can ignite a fear of falling, entering into silence when we are accustomed to noise and distraction can stir up an uneasiness within us. In order to avoid what could be an extreme kind of shock, the novice monk must enter into the practice of silence gradually and with mindful intention.

The process of entering into silence began when you were welcomed as a seeker with this community. The person who was assigned to be your mentor has been given the task of offering you continual guidance as you enter into the ever deepening levels of self-awareness and spiritual awakening that come from the practice of silence in your daily life.

It is our hope as a community that a deep and lasting bond between the two of you will be one of the many fruits of your shared labor. More importantly, we hope that you will come to trust in the guidance that you are provided, not just by your mentor, but by the community as a whole.

Reflect for a moment on whether or not you are comfortable with silence in the sense of there being a lack of environmental noise. What emotions does this kind of silence stir up inside of you?

It is vitally important to honestly examine and discover the answers to the above question without making judgments about them. Make a note of the answers that you find so that you can discuss them with your mentor.

There are no right or wrong answers; this is simply an exercise which will help you determine a starting point from which your work of practicing silence as part of your daily monastic observance can begin. Once a course of study and action concerning the practice of silence has been developed and successfully implemented into your daily life and work, the next steps of your formal monastic training will have already begun to take shape.

As you enter into the regular practice of silence, a change in attitude happens within your deepest state of being. This change is very gradual, and often is not even noticeable until a considerable length of time has passed. The markers of this change in attitude include increased attentiveness, open-minded attitudes and the ability to

genuinely listen, rather than simply remaining silent in wait for your turn to speak.

At one time or another, each of us have experienced the need to share our stories with others. This basic human need for connection can be easily seen in times when we experience loneliness, when we require guidance or simply need a sympathetic ear. Many of us have also experienced the disappointment that insincere listening brings. Have you ever felt as if those around you were simply waiting quietly for their turn to speak, rather than listening to and genuinely hearing your words?

Did the realization of the insincerity of those around you contribute to feelings of frustration, loneliness or even helplessness? The genuine kind of listening that the practice of silence fosters is in and of itself an act of compassion. For a person in need of companionship, guidance or sympathy, having their stories not only heard but understood can be a turning point in the alleviation of their personal suffering.

Take a moment to reflect on that statement. As people who have consecrated our lives to the service of others, the most important task that we are called to carry out is the alleviation of suffering.

This is reflected in our communal observance of active service (such as feeding the poor, visiting the infirm or offering pastoral care of those in need), as well as in the very nature of this community, which is to show others that our differences of faith and life experience need not stand in the way of peace and understanding.

The kind of listening that our work as individuals and as a community requires of us is more than something that simply happens from time to time. It is a way of living; an attitude of openness that requires both generosity and constant practice.

This attitude, which is shaped by the practices of silence, prayer and service to others, is central to the monastic way of life and an outward sign of sincerity on the part of the individual monk. As previously stated, the visible changes that monastic practice brings are very gradual.

It is easy to become frustrated or even discouraged when these positive kinds of conversion are not immediately obvious, however part of your monastic formation is to teach you how to develop your own ability to exercise both patience and perseverance.

Living In Obedience to Your Conscience

As with the practice of silence, the examination of one's conscience is central to the monastic way of life. There are many facets to the practice of sincere self examination, each of which find their roots in the attitude of listening.

On the surface, you might observe the practice of self examination to look very similar to basic decision making; asking yourself whether a particular action or response is appropriate is often what comes to mind.

To begin to cultivate the practice of a deep and honest kind of self examination, the kind which spurs growth and change at our innermost level, we must be willing to implement the gifts that the practice of silence imparts to us.

It is likely that the process of self examination will stir up feelings of doubt and questions of faith. It can not be stressed enough that both of these things are not a sign of failure; rather that they are a sign of growth. While your mentor can assist you in finding ways to work through these often confusing or even frightening times, it is ultimately up to you to implement the tools that your

monastic practice gives to you in order that you may find your own truth.

Similarly, you alone must choose an appropriate course of action in response to that truth. Faith without action only results in passivity; it is through constant effort that our shared task of service to others becomes a tangible force of change for the purposes of good in the world around us.

It is important to remember that because of our inclusive nature as a community, the active response to self examination may differ between individual monks. It is not our place to pass judgment on another; one of our specific purposes as a community is to take a stand against the kind of selfishness (and the suffering that it causes) that religious intolerance and attitudes of superiority breed.

In many Rules of Life for monks and nuns of all kinds, there is an admonition against being overly harsh on yourself. While it is imperative for growth that each of us must be sincere in our examination of conscience, it should never be cause for self abuse.

Everyone makes mistakes; it is part of how we as humans

learn, change and grow throughout our lives. Acceptance of this fact is key to overcoming a lifetime of the negativity that is often attached to the mistakes we make.

In place of that negativity, we must constantly strive to cultivate patience and the willingness to try and try again, until we have overcome the challenges set before us.

More importantly, we must come to accept that kindness and compassion for others begins with being kind and compassionate to ourselves at our innermost level.

Regardless of what your image of God happens to be, the presence of Its spirit dwells deeply within you. The practices of silence, listening and self-examination are intended to help you actively encounter the presence of God within yourself and in the world around you, which will produce profound kinds of transformation both within yourself and in the lives of everyone you meet.

Prayer and Its Various Forms

“Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words.”

This statement that is attributed to St. Francis of Assisi is a concise summary of the monastic way of life. In consecrating ourselves to the service of others as well as the service of our sources of spiritual nourishment, we designate our entire state of being as a form of prayer. As part of your daily routine, there should be at least 3 periods designated for prayer or silent meditation. This observance as a whole is known as liturgical prayer; it is marked by a formal ritualization of the acts of prayer and meditation.

The times set aside for liturgical prayer are commonly referred to as the “Daily Office” or the “Divine Hours”; they punctuate the daily routine of the monastic way of life and provide a foundation upon which everything else that we do is built.

The Daily Office should begin before the first meal of the day is taken. By beginning our day in prayerful thanksgiving for the gifts of life and new opportunities, our attitude about the work that lies ahead of us can be

transformed from one of burdensome obligation to one of joyful response to the gifts which are freely given to us.

Traditionally, many monastic houses observe the “pray, eat, work” model of daily life; the day begins with a liturgical prayer gathering before breakfast, which is then followed by chores and other tasks which keep the monastery running smoothly. This kind of rhythm allows the individual monk to focus on the task they are carrying out, whether it is manual labor, study, or liturgy.

While many of us do not have the luxury of complete monastic enclosure and therefore must be creative about how we observe our monastic ways while maintaining a secular job or living in an urban area, there is much we can learn both individually and as a community from this kind of model of daily life. When we realign our own way of thinking about work, chores, study and even leisure, we can begin to transform seemingly mundane things into a prayerful and joyful experience.

To spur this change in thinking, ask yourself what your current attitude about work is. Do you dread it? Does it seem burdensome? Whether you enjoy your work or simply muddle through it has a large impact on the way you treat others, as well as yourself, when carrying out

the tasks involved in the work that you do.

There are countless sources in our modern society that tell us that work is a negative thing. The effects of these messages can be easily seen in the people we work with and in our own attitudes about work; each of us has been guilty of cutting corners or wasting time in wait for our breaks or for the end of our work day.

The practice of transforming work into a form of prayer, like the practices of silence, listening and self examination require time and patience. As with each one of your specific monastic practices, mindfulness is central to whether or not your efforts of growth and transformation bear fruit.

When we intentionally recognize and realign our way of thinking about work in its various forms, a deliberate and prayerful experience develops in place of the suffering that we inflict on ourselves that comes from harboring a negative view of the work that we do.

Remember also that it is work which helps provide for our needs. Whether we are required to maintain secular employment or not, each of us must engage in work if we wish to continue in existence. Food must be prepared, our

living space must be kept clean, and our own bodies must be cared for.

If we strive to be mindful about how we approach our work, we can begin to view any task as a blessing for which we ought to offer gratitude. Whether the work that we do is personally enjoyable or not, glamorous or mundane, it is important that we apply ourselves completely to the tasks before us.

There are many ways that we can transform and integrate various parts of our daily lives into our practice of prayer. Over time, the changes within us that a prayerful way of living produce become easily recognizable, both to us and to those around us.

Remember that, as with all things, growth and change are gradual processes, and that while the desire to cultivate positive changes within ourselves is healthy, it is not realistic to expect immediate results. It may be helpful to you to keep a journal, and read through it from time to time. Reflection of this nature can be both reassuring and enlightening concerning the ways in which we have transformed through our monastic practices.

Study and Reflection

One of the central disciplines of the monastic way of life is the practice of studying. In the previous chapter, we explored some of the ways that studying can become a form of prayer; this chapter focuses more on study for the purposes of educating ourselves and others in order that misunderstandings may be overcome.

We have at our disposal a wealth of information; from books to electronically stored works of text and media, there is a seemingly endless library available to us. There are a few subjects that every monk is required to study. Think of this as a “common core” course of study which will help provide you with a basic understanding of what monasticism is, what it is not and how it has developed over the centuries.

The first part of this common core is the study of how monastic practice has been developed and implemented throughout history. This should include both eastern and western schools of monastic teaching, such as the practices of early Christian, Coptic and Gnostic monastics as well as those of Buddhist, Hindu and other schools of eastern monastic practice.

It is highly likely that in your encounters with others, you will be asked about your monastic way of life and about the community to which you belong. Being able to offer a concise explanation of both of these can help to “break the ice” with those who may be in need of assistance, as well as help dispel some of the common misgivings about what it is that monks do (a few of which are that we are required to engage in practices such as extreme fasting, vows of silence and self flagellation).

Once a basic understanding of the history and development of varying monastic practices has been garnered, the next area of study should focus on how various monastic communities function in the present day.

There are several advantages available to us for this particular subject; many monasteries offer retreats, works of text and various classes about their communal expressions of the monastic way of life.

The main goal of requiring you to seek out an understanding of monasticism in the present day is to present you with a wide range of monastic ways of living, in order that your own emerging monastic practice might be enriched. An added benefit of this field of study (as

mentioned above) is being able to provide these people with some comparative information might help us to dispel some of the common misgivings about monks and the work that monks are called upon to do.

In addition to these two common core courses of study, you are strongly encouraged to engage in the ongoing study of the history and development associated with your own path of faith, as well as a basic study of faiths which are not your own.

The scholarly examination of religious texts associated with your personal faith is important; it allows you to be aware of how these texts have shaped the commonly held practices of the majority of people who share your faith, so that you might be able to discern which practices are appropriate to incorporate into your monastic way of life. In addition, you may be able to offer varying perspectives on the common practices associated with your path of faith, which can help others to gain increased understanding in place of preconceived notions about what it is that monastics do.

Finally, the study of faiths that are not your own is also strongly recommended. In our mission to be stewards of peace, we must be able to implement the proper tools

that our work requires of us. One of these tools is a basic understanding of various faiths and the practices that are involved with them.

In order to be able to work toward cultivating understanding and peace between people of varying faiths, as well as working to heal the suffering that religious intolerance causes in the lives of those around us, we must exert a genuine effort to seek out that which increases our understanding of others.

It should be stressed that your study of these things does not need to be undertaken all at once. Each of us learns in a different way, and some learn new things more quickly than others. The point of studying the subjects mentioned here is not to gain any sort of academic achievement; rather it is to allow each of us the opportunity to grow in understanding and to challenge the practices which cause suffering in our world.

As previously mentioned, it is strongly recommended that you enlist the assistance of your mentor, as well as that of the other monks and nuns in this community. It is likely that one or more of them can provide you with insight that can assist you in ways that may not have been previously accessible.

One might say that study is one of the most fundamental parts of the integrated practices of monastic life, whether it is part of a formal education process (i.e. one leading to a degree) or not.

The Rule of St. Benedict places a high priority on the prayerful reading of both sacred and scholarly texts, which is referred to as “Lectio Divina”, or divine reading. The practice of divine reading as observed by the majority of monastic houses that follow the Rule of St. Benedict usually only involves the reading of sacred texts. When engaging in this practice, a person will read the text slowly and with prayerful intention, until they feel moved to meditate on a word or passage. This process is repeated for whatever length of time that has been designated specifically for Lectio Divina; commonly more time during the winter months (snow is not conducive to working the earth) and less time during the summer months (during which much of the agricultural and grounds keeping work takes place).

For this community, divine reading does not need to be restricted to sacred texts. We find this to be a valid form of study, fit for use with any educational, sacred, or self enriching text of your choosing.

Divine reading is one of many ways of approaching text based study from a different perspective. You may find that the practice of re-aligning your way of thinking about studying in general allows you to learn new things with greater ease, which is a gift in and of itself.

A final word of caution in relation to the practice of study: we must be constantly mindful that as we increase in understanding, we do not allow egotism to take root within us. Learning can be a satisfying and rewarding experience, however as monks, our main purpose is to alleviate suffering. We can not be genuine in this endeavor if we hold ourselves above those we are called to serve.

Conduits of Teaching

Each of us is a unique being, with unique gifts and perspectives. These differences can help to strengthen us as a community, and should be celebrated with joy and gratitude; they serve as a way to increase our understanding of one another and those around us, as well as to challenge each of us to cultivate patience, listening and new ways of thinking.

Whether we realize it or not, each of us has become a teacher simply by choosing to consecrate our lives as monastics. By dedicating ourselves to cultivating peace and compassion in the face of a world of hostility and misunderstanding, those people we come into contact with from day to day learn that the cycle of suffering can be challenged, which spurs a slight change in their way of thinking. In turn, those changes teach the people they come into contact with, and so the cycle continues in small ways.

In the early formation of the Order of Eremitic Servants (the community to which the writer of this text also belongs), two monks (one who had been professed for some time and one who was in the novice stage of profession) were attending their regular place of Sunday

worship. The person who had been scheduled to teach during the service had arrived just before the monks, which was well before most of the people who attended worship in that place.

The teacher had been waiting silently when one of the monks first encountered him. There was a hesitation that could be seen in the eyes of the man who had come to teach, and after this pause, he asked the brother, “are you a monk?” Without giving it a second thought, the monk replied, “Yes, I am.” The teacher’s facial expression changed in an instant, giving way to another question. “What kind of monk are you?” The brother replied, “I am an interfaith monk. The community to which I belong honors all paths to God.”

A comfortable silence fell between these two men as they attended to their preparations for worship. There seemed to be an unspoken connection between them, which became stronger and more clearly visible as the teacher presented his material to the congregation. After the worship service, the teacher approached the other monk who had come there to worship. What struck this brother as both strange and affirming, is the way that the teacher approached him. It seemed as if the man who had come to teach had now intended to become a

student. This unspoken moment between the novice monk and the teacher was so profound that it served to spur the novice monk into an entirely new way of thinking about what it means to teach.

The novice recounted his experience to his mentor, and before the senior monk could offer his insight, the novice said to him, “I never would have considered that by simply being present, we have become teachers to those around us.”

Not all of us have the gift of being able to present material to a group of people. Some of us may have a problem with our speech, or may struggle to put our own thoughts into an order that makes sense to others. None of these things should prevent us from teaching others; there are many ways to teach without having to speak at all (such as the method of presence mentioned earlier in this chapter).

Consider for a moment your early years of school. It is likely that during that time, your teacher read various stories to you while you listened quietly. These stories may not have affected you directly at the time, however the message that they conveyed to you has no doubt been a source of learning in your life.

In a similar way, the things that we experience in our lives create a story that contains within it a lesson that might be a source of learning for us, or for those around us. Sharing the stories of our experiences is one way to take on the role of being a teacher, whether we realize what is happening during this kind of interpersonal sharing or not.

Another way that we might teach others can be found in the way that we conduct ourselves in a public setting. Carrying yourself in a way that is joyful but neither boisterous nor assuming can serve to impart a small glimpse of peacefulness to those who we might come into contact with.

For those of us who possess the ability to teach in what is thought of as the classical way, we must be diligent and thorough in our research, and concise in the presentation of the subjects that we present in a classroom setting. Should one or more of us be called upon to teach in this way, the subject matter being presented ought to be reviewed by one or more of our fellow monks so that constructive feedback may be given well before the topic is presented to others.

This practice can serve many purposes, the first and foremost of which is safeguarding our personal sense of

humility. In addition, it can help us to consider how our words might sound to the ears of those who think, act and observe in ways different from our own.

There are, of course many other ways of teaching that have not been covered in this text. As you grow and mature in your monastic practice and spiritual development, opportunities for both learning and teaching will present themselves in various ways. It is ultimately up to you to implement the talents that your monastic way produces within you in a way that is appropriate and that affirms your vocation to be a steward of peace.

Care of Your Sanctuary

Where would we be without our bodies? Such an existential question might provoke countless paths of thought, however for the purposes of this formation material, we simply wish to call to mind how it is that we act as responsible stewards of the human form that we currently find ourselves in.

There is a book written by St. Teresa of Avila, called “The Interior Castle”. It describes what this Discalced Carmelite nun viewed as the different levels of union with God as various rooms in a grand castle, all of which are contained within a human being. A particularly simple yet profound statement found in the book is this:

“God gave us faculties for our use; each of them will receive its proper reward. Then do not let us try to charm them to sleep, but permit them to do their work until divinely called to something higher.”

Many, if not most paths of faith consider the body a kind of sanctuary. While the overall attitude about and the treatment of the body varies widely between faiths, especially with regard to the ascetic practices associated with a monastic way of life, it is a responsible and healthy

thing to care for our overall health. This includes our physical health, mental well-being, spiritual health and social health.

There are some who truly believe that “if it hurts, it must be holy”. On the contrary, physical discomfort and pain for their own sake only serve to increase personal suffering.

There is little credible evidence that pain-inducing practices or self neglect produce a “fast track” to spiritual awakening or holiness, therefore we as a community do not endorse such practices regardless of one’s path of faith.

It is our responsibility to make responsible and healthy choices that safeguard our total state of health. Each of the four areas of health mentioned above ought to be tended to as part of a practice of integrating our entire being into our monastic way of life.

We recognize that not everyone has access to quality medical care. If you fall into this category, there are a number of resources available to assist you in getting your basic health needs tended to. Your mentor or the Guardian will be able to help direct you toward

assistance should you require it, however it is up to you to implement the resources available to you. In addition to regular medical and mental health care, it is important that each of us tend to the hygienic upkeep of our bodies. This does not mean that we need to practice perfect grooming or indulge in costly products that promise an artificially constructed picture of beauty, however ensuring that regular cleanliness and basic grooming practices are attended to is expected of all monks and nuns in this community.

An often under-stressed facet of care of the human body is nutrition. As monks, it is common for some of us to observe regular periods of fasting, or to refrain from certain foods altogether. We do not require such practices as a community, but if you choose to observe one or more ascetic practices involving food, you must be diligent in making sure that your nutritional needs are still being met in other ways.

We encourage each person to exercise moderation in their dietary habits. Being mindful of the food that you eat fosters a holistic and responsible lifestyle at the most basic level and creates both awareness and gratitude for the food that we eat. We encourage you to choose your dietary intake by how nourishing it is,

rather than how easy it is to prepare (for example choosing to make a meal from scratch with nourishing ingredients, as opposed to a heat-and-eat meal).

To Clothe in Simplicity

As you progress in your monastic practice, you should reflect on this question often. As people who have consecrated our lives to the monastic way, we are called to live a life that is counter-intuitive to the larger societal culture in which we find ourselves. While others occupy themselves with various pursuits and distractions, we intentionally turn away from many of these things, in order that we may become more available for the service of others.

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he vow of poverty asks much of us. While many of us, living in dispersed enclosures which are often our own homes are not able to give up all of our earthly possessions and wander as the first Franciscan did, simplifying our homes, possessions and lives as part of their monastic practice is a more modern and easily attainable way of letting go of that which would serve to distract us from our work, prayer and service.

A few examples of this kind of simplifying of our lives would be giving up the clothes that we never wear (that have likely been forgotten in our closets for some time), choosing to rent various media instead of buying it (with

the exception of books and materials intended for the common library), or choosing to clear out many of the things which clutter our homes.

It would be foolish to rid ourselves of things which serve to aid us in our work and daily life (such as kitchen appliances, tools, and various other things that we use regularly). In the same manner, any solitary monastic may choose not to give up something that brings great joy during periods of rest (one might enjoy watching a movie, while another might spend their time of rest playing an interactive game or musical instrument).

As previously stated, the intent of our common vow of poverty is this: in intentionally distancing ourselves from attachment to an excess of material things, we begin to be free from the distractions and divisiveness of greed. This allows us to be more available to serve the needs of others, and safeguards us from causing further suffering that greed would bring to those around us.

One of the hermits of this community was at his regular place of worship one Sunday. The priest there had drawn attention to the hermit during his sermon, saying to him, “I sometimes envy you, and the simplicity of your life. You do not need to spend an hour choosing what to wear; you

simply put on your robe and proceed with your day”.

As a community, we do not require that everyone wear a monastic habit. For some of us, it is a reliable and appropriate way to safeguard our adherence to the vow of Simplicity, as well as a clear signal to those around us that we have chosen a way of life that puts service to others above all other personal desires.

The man who had given the talk during that worship service mentioned above followed his statement about monastic simplicity with this: “Tossing aside my fine clothing and putting on a robe is a terrifying thought; I am not there yet. Perhaps one day I will have the courage which you have shown in your dedication to a simple way of life”.

It is unclear whether or not the man realized how accurate and profound his statements about choosing a monastic way of life had been. In saying “yes” to this way of life, we have foregone many other possible paths, some of which may have led to the often coveted lives of the wealthy and famous.

Whether or not you choose to clothe in your monastic

habit, it is important that you conduct yourself in a manner that would not bring shame on the community which you represent. Should you choose not to wear a monastic habit, your manner of dress should be simple (such as a plain shirt, casual slacks or jeans in good condition, and nothing that could be considered flashy or boisterous).

Likewise, each of us must be mindful of our manner of speech. We should endeavor to refrain from rudeness, vulgar language, or speaking in such a way that others might interpret as conceited. In accordance with our practice of silence, we must also be mindful that we do not engage in gossip or idle chatter. This does not mean that we are forbidden from engaging in polite conversation in social situations or community recreation, however our speech should be a reflection of an attitude of attentive listening and mindfulness.

Finally, at the core of an attitude of simplicity is the practice of examining whether or not something is truly needed. This applies to material goods, our words and our actions. The monastic foundations which are rooted in the practices of silence, self-examination and study naturally give way to the practice of consideration in regard to simplicity, however they do not automatically produce the practice of simplicity itself.

As with all monastic observances, a simple way of living requires constant effort and discipline, and its benefits may not be immediately visible. You must be willing to exercise patience and trust that in due time, the fruits of your labors will show themselves.

In Conclusion

The journey of monastic life is an ongoing process. It does not advance according to our wishes; rather the progression toward inner awakening and union with God happens very gradually and in ways that often go unnoticed for some time.

There will be times throughout your ongoing formation that may bring with them confusion, doubt, or even sadness. It is important for you to reach out to your mentor, as well as your fellow monks during these times, so that we may be able to be a source of support and reassurance for you.

Remember that each of us has made the journey that you are undertaking; we have all faced the challenges which lie ahead of you. Be assured that the rewards that the monastic way can bring outnumber these challenges, even though they may seem hidden to you at first.

One of the most important disciplines that you can implement into your monastic practice is forgiveness, first of yourself, and then of others. Making a practice of first recognizing and then letting go of the things which have caused and continue to cause pain in our lives can help

each of us to move past them to a place of peacefulness and joy.

Remember that your monastic practice is a personal celebration of the love that exists between you and the God of your heart. While we share in many observances and customs as a community, it is up to you to remain faithful to your own monastic way.

(For further reading, please visit the Wikipedia page on the history of Western Monasticism.)