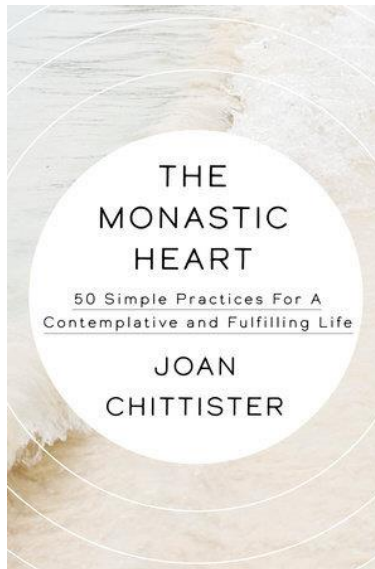


Discussion Questions

The Monastic Heart: 50 Simple Practice for a Contemplative and Fulfilling Life



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General Question

QUESTION:

1. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Introduction

QUESTIONS:

1. Referring to the “deeper part of everyone,” Sister Joan states that “. . . it needs to be cultivated, to be cherished, to be sustained.” Can you name 3–5 practices you have that do this for you?
2. “We need soul” Sister Joan insists. What does this mean to you, given the reality of our nation and world today?
3. “Monasticism is the single-hearted search for what matters in life. Any life; every life,” writes Sister Joan. How has this statement influenced the way you understand monasticism?

Chapter 1: Bells: On Remembering

QUESTIONS:

1. What are 2–3 of the most important awarenesses that were raised for you in this chapter?
2. Sister Joan writes, “It’s what we pay attention to in life that determines both our commitment and our inner happiness.” What qualities or practices do you think a person must cultivate in order to learn how to “pay attention”?
3. Sister Joan asks several poignant questions in this chapter. Which one or two have impacted you the most? Explain why.

Chapter 2: Statio: In Involvement

QUESTION:

1. What is the most important teaching you have learned about “Statio”?
2. How do you practice “Statio”?
3. Is there or has there been a person in your life who has modeled “Statio” for you? Share a brief story about him or her.

Chapter 3: Antiphon: On Mantras of the Moment

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan writes that, “The antiphon functions like a mantra.” Find a psalm whose antiphon has special meaning to you. Share why.
2. What specific sentence in this chapter stood out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 4: Monastic Procession: On the Display of Oneness/Unity

QUESTIONS:

1. What, for you, is the most significant difference between the monastic procession and the annual parish Commemoration of the 40 Hours Devotion? Explain.
2. Research the ritual of bowing in another major world religion besides Christianity. What did you discover about the values that underlay it, compared to those in monasticism?

Chapter 5: The Rule of Benedict: On seeking God

QUESTIONS:

1. Share 3-5 ideas about the Rule of Benedict that you did not know. What difference does knowing them now make for you? For your life?
2. If you are reading this book you are what Sister Joan calls “a spiritual seeker, a vowed monastic, or a person with a monastic heart.” Which are you? What in this chapter has confirmed this?

Chapter 6: Horarium: On Parsing Time

QUESTIONS:

1. After reading the first paragraph in this chapter, ask yourself: “What statement provoked in me the most self-critical reflection?” Explain.
2. Sister Joan writes that “The liturgy of family life at the family table has disappeared.” What do you think is responsible for this? Discuss.

Chapter 7: Hospitality: On a Spirit of Welcome

QUESTIONS:

1. If you have had any experience of Benedictine hospitality, please share it. What did it teach you?
2. Sister Joan firmly states that, “Hospitality was not a social nicety for monastics. It was a ministry, an act of mercy, a response to the reckless generosity of Jesus.” How in your life do you or could you practice a ministry of hospitality?

Chapter 8: Choir: On Singing Praise

QUESTIONS:

1. “Sanctity,” Sister Joan offers, “. . . is the continuing awareness of what it means to be committed to the will of God now and for all time.” What does “the will of God” mean to you? What feelings does it raise in you? Has your understanding of it changed over time? Explain.
2. Sister Joan suggests that “...we become the prayers we say.” Identify 3 prayers you say that have helped you become who you are. They can be a Scripture passage, a devotional prayer, a line from a novel or a poem, something from any world religion, etc... How has each helped your “becoming you”?

Chapter 9: Beauty: On the Invisible in the Visible

QUESTIONS:

1. “Beauty itself is the key to fullness of the spiritual life,” according to Sister Joan. Name 3-5 ways beauty nourishes your spiritually and tell how.
2. Sister Joan states that, “Beauty... changes the spiritual life from an experience of rules to an expression of awe.” Share 3 expressions of beauty that have done this for you. Explain how.

Chapter 10: Silence: On Inner Quietude

QUESTIONS:

1. How have you made silence an invited guest into your life? If you haven’t, why not?
2. “Silence in all its forms and all its times will change us,” Sister Joan writes. Has this been true for you? Explain.

Chapter 11: Lectio: On Reading Between the Lines

QUESTIONS:

1. Identify 2 or more writers, poets, musicians, etc., who have most grounded your lectio/sacred reading. What in particular have they written that has helped you the most spiritually.
2. What, for you, are 2-4 of the most significant of Sister Joan's teachings about lectio? Explain why.

Chapter 12: Cloister: On Sacred Space

QUESTIONS:

1. "The real question for the monastic heart everywhere is, where is your cloister? Sister Joan states. How would you answer her question?"
2. Think honestly and deeply about this question: "If you don't have a cloister, why not?"

Chapter 13: The Monastic Cell: On Privacy

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan asks nine questions in the first section of this chapter and six in the section "Integrating the Practice." Which of these questions impacted your thinking/prayerful reading the most? Discuss why.
2. What surprised you the most about what Sister Joan wrote regarding the monastic cell?

Chapter 14: Metanoia: On Growth

QUESTIONS:

1. Which description of conversion that Sister Joan offers spoke most poignantly to you? Explain why?
2. Write a letter to yourself revealing where and why you need conversion in at least one area of your life.

Chapter 15: Fuga Mundi: On Living in the World or Not

QUESTIONS:

1. Do you agree or disagree with Sister Joan when she states, “It is possible to be too spiritual if rejection of the work of God is your idea of being spiritual?”
2. Sister Joan insists that monasticism/having a monastic heart does not, never did, mean “Fuga mundi” – to flee the world; rather we are “... to be IN the world but not of it.” Share several ways a person might practice this.

Chapter 16: Community: On Spiritual Companionship

QUESTIONS:

1. Speaking of holiness, Sister Joan presents it as a way of life; however, she also cautions that it can “deteriorate,” that to prevent decay it “...needs to be freshened, enlivened, disciplined – or else decay.” What are some practices you would suggest to prevent holiness, as a way of life, from doing this?

2. What communities do you belong to that nourish your spiritual life and way of being in the world? How do they do this?

Chapter 17: The Oratory: On Holy Space

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan writes, “...your ‘oratory’ is whatever invites you, lifts your soul beyond the daily and the mundane. The oratories of the heart are any place that recalls you to your spiritual self.” Describe your oratories.
2. The paragraph that follows the one above is a testimony to Sister Joan’s profound skill, as a social psychologist, at understanding the depth of self- critical reflection that must companion any hope of spiritual maturity. Which of these “challenges of the psyche” spoke most deeply to you? Share it and explain why.

Chapter 18: Hermits: On the Solitary Life

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan’s brief but very candid conversation with the sister who was a hermit was stunning in many ways. What in their exchange surprised you?
2. The hospitality of the hermit is a spiritual hospitality says Sister Joan. Even if it was not a hermit, have you ever experienced, “spiritual hospitality” with anyone? Describe your experience if you have.

Chapter 19: Solitude: On Discovering Calm and Clarity

QUESTIONS:

1. Many poets have written about solitude. Search for another in a book or on the internet who has done this. Copy the poem into your journal or any place that is meaningful to you. Share the poem and why it speaks to you about solitude.
2. How important is solitude in your life? What choices do you make to insure its companionship?

Chapter 20: Blessing: On Recognizing the Gifts of Life

QUESTIONS:

1. "Blessings – the good things, the challenges, even the difficulties of life – lead us back to a Provident God, the Source of Life and all its gifts," writes Sister Joan. Recall one blessing you experienced as a good thing, as a challenge and as a difficulty. Share one or more.
2. Cite three ways you have been a blessing for others in our suffering world, including our ravaged earth and vulnerable earth creatures.

Chapter 21: Divine Office: About the Daily Presence of God

QUESTIONS:

1. If praying with the Liturgy of the Hours/Divine Office is a daily or frequent spiritual practice, share how you became familiar with this age old tradition. If praying the Liturgy of the Hours is not a practice,

you might try an abbreviated form by praying one Psalm a day—in the morning, at noon, and in the evening. A psalm a day is provided on the website of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie.

<https://www.eriebenedictines.org/daily-prayer>.

2. What are 2-3 significant ideas about the Psalms you have learned after reading this chapter?

Chapter 22: Manual Labor: On the Purpose of Work

QUESTIONS:

1. What are some important, perhaps counter-cultural, attitudes toward work that people today can learn from the teachings of Benedict on this topic?
2. Sister Joan states, “Yet the basic questions of life are, what am I doing and why am I doing it? Who profits from what I do and who does not?” How would you answer these questions?

Chapter 23: Serenity: On Inner Peace

QUESTIONS:

1. What are the four ways Sister Joan says are the specific dimensions of peace? Which one or more would you choose or have you chosen to integrate into your spiritual life? Explain why.
2. “Personal transformation was the very goal of the vowed life,” according to Sister Joan. Would you agree or disagree that it should be the goal of every human life? Discuss.

Chapter 24: Laus: On Morning Praise

QUESTIONS:

1. The dualism that the material (life on earth, body, emotions, sexuality, etc) is inferior to the spiritual (getting to heaven, worship, prayer, etc.), has deeply infected the Western mind and much of its Christian theology, as Sister Joan exposes here. Has this dualism played a negative role in your growing understanding of what it means to be both human and spiritual? How so?
2. Sister Joan affirms "... that the quality of life we make for ourselves depends on the way we approach praise and gratitude." Similarly, Benedictine Brother David Stendl-Rast has taught that "It is not happiness that makes us grateful, but gratefulness that makes us happy." Offer several ways you think a person can practice gratefulness to enhance the quality of their lives.

Chapter 25: Vespers: On Evening Praise

QUESTIONS:

1. What is the most inspiring statement Sister Joan has written that makes you want to include praying Vespers/Evening Praise as a daily spiritual practice?
2. As in the previous chapter, Sister Joan reveals a deep respect for science. Such respect has been undercut by a growing distrust of science in recent years in the United States. Do you share Sister Joan's positive attitude toward what science can teach us? Why or why not?

Chapter 26: Holy Leisure: On Quality of Life

QUESTIONS:

1. What erroneous preconceptions did you have about monastic life before reading this particular chapter?
2. Sister Joan differentiates between holy leisure and play. Review the distinction and then ask yourself: “How do I engage in holy leisure?” What is your answer?

Chapter 27: Service: On Caring for Humankind

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan writes that “Benedict’s concern in Chapter 35 (of the Rule) that members should serve one another makes the bridge from personal needs to social consciousness.” What “bridge” (or bridges) led you from personal needs to social consciousness?
2. “Willingness to simply sit back and let the needs of the world go by is a spiritual disease,” Sister Joan makes clear. Where do you see this “spiritual disease” present in US culture today?

Chapter 28: Listening: On Attentiveness

QUESTIONS:

1. When and how do you practice “listening with the ear of your heart”?
2. Sister Joan writes, “Even more important, the question What is the happy life? becomes at least as important a question as How much money will I make?” How then would you answer the question “What is the happy life?”

Chapter 29: Private Prayer: On God and Self

QUESTIONS:

1. “Prayer space, tone and atmosphere...” are, according to Sister Joan, “...the necessary setting for the development of personal spiritual growth.” Describe your prayer space and share how it has helped you develop spiritually.
2. “What we give time to creates us,” states Sister Joan. Name three persons, places or things you have given time to and share how each has helped create you.

Chapter 30: Obedience: On Mutuality

QUESTIONS:

1. “It is total independence that leads us to make reckless or impetuous decisions without counsel, without discernment, without direction,” says Sister Joan. What does “discernment” mean to you? Share one example from your life where you practiced or failed to practice it. This website may be helpful: www.ignationspirituality.com.
2. Sister Joan writes, “The question now, as both lay and religious, is to what do we listen most in life: to the need to get more money, the desire to control others, the attempt to get our own way in life, regardless of the needs of others?” To what do You listen to most in life?

Chapter 31: Stability: On Perseverance

QUESTIONS:

1. Choose five sentences from this chapter that best express to you what stability means. Then compose one succinct sentence that

contains the essence of each. Why might this be a valuable action?

2. Sister Joan writes that regarding the vow of stability, Benedict wanted monastics “to listen to wisdom figures.” Cite three wisdom figures you listened to in your life. They can be alive, deceased, a person you knew, a person you read such as poets, spiritual writers, therapists, artists, etc. What is the most significant lesson each taught you?

Chapter 32: Peace and Justice: On Peacemaking

QUESTIONS:

1. How do you practice peacemaking you both your personal life and in the larger society in which you live?
2. Go to the website www.eriebenedictines.org and then, under Outreach, open Benedictines for Peace. Were you aware of this local Benedictine ministry? If yes, have you participated in any of its peacemaking actions? How has doing so aided you spiritually? If you have not, how might you otherwise support this ministry in the future?

Chapter 33: Chant: On the Sound of Angels

QUESTIONS:

1. On YouTube search “Benedictine Chants Online.” Then listen to the chant sung by the Monks of the Benedictine Abbey, En Eclat, with the boys Choir from L’Alumnat. Also, read the mostly positive responses. What response would you offer?
2. Sister Joan states that “Chant is a tool of prayer...” Consider listening to chant every day for one week for 10-15 minutes daily as a new spiritual practice. Write down how you experienced this form of

prayer. Was it, as Sister Joan affirms, “...the sound of the presence of God...” for you? Explain.

Chapter 34: Incense: On the Sweet Balm of Life

QUESTIONS:

1. If you have ever used incense, is there anything that Sr. Joan says about it that reflects your experience with it? Explain.
2. Sister Joan points out that “...scientific brain studies support the long-term opinion that the burning of incense calms the nervous system, dissipates negative energy, brings rest to anxiety and stress, harmony to the soul, mindfulness to meaning, focus to thought and, of course, a gateway to meditation.” Has using incense done one or more of these for you? Explain.

Chapter 35: Memento Mori: On Valuing Yesterday

QUESTION:

1. Sister Joan contends that, “Our Benedictine sisters and brothers don’t leave us, they just stay with us differently.” Add that the Catholic funeral liturgy proclaims, “Life is not ended but merely changed.” How do these two statements affect your understanding of the afterlife?
2. “By remembering our dead, we find the strength to do things newly again,” shares Sister Joan. Write a letter to or brief story about one of your deceased relatives or friends telling how she/he helped you “find the strength to do things newly again.”

Chapter 36: Candles: On Spiritual Illumination

QUESTION:

1. How has what Sister Joan has written here deepened your appreciation for candles and what they symbolize?
2. Sister Joan ends this chapter with several penetrating questions she suggests “we must forever ask ourselves.” Reflect on each question. How would you answer them for yourself?

Chapter 37: The Abbot/Prioress: On Leadership

QUESTION:

1. Cull from this chapter five characteristics of leadership you would recommend to any would-be-leader in any institution of your choice (educational, ecclesiastical, governmental, etc.) Explain why you chose these in particular.
2. Of all the qualities Benedict desired in an Abbot or Prioress, which one or two do you think would be the most challenging for that community leader? Explain why.

Chapter 38: Contemplation: On Seeing as God Sees

QUESTION:

1. If Sister Joan gave you a test on this chapter and asked you to write what you learned about contemplation/the contemplative life, how would you answer? Be sure to write your answer down!
2. One of the ways Sister Joan describes contemplation is “seeing as God sees.” Name several spiritual practices that can assist a person in cultivating this.

Chapter 39: Humility and the Presences of God: On the Presence of God

QUESTION:

1. “Acceptance of the presence of God in life is the beginning of a real spiritual life rather than simply the exercise in pious practices,” in Sister Joan’s estimation. What are one or two implications Sister Joan is attempting to convey here in this sentence? Do you think most Christians would understand her point?
2. In this chapter we learn that “The first degree of humility, Benedict teaches – ‘is to keep God before our eyes at all times.’” What advice would you give to someone who is a “God-Seeker” and trying to do this?

Chapter 40: Humility and the Essence of the Self: On the True Self

QUESTION:

1. Which of the four rungs of the twelve degrees of humility (5-8) as Sister Joan has explained them, spoke most powerfully to you? Explain why?
2. The last paragraph begins, “You will be enough for you.” If you know someone who embodies the qualities Sister Joan notes in this paragraph, write an email or card or letter to him or her sharing how their being all of this has inspired you.

Chapter 41: Humility and the Making of Community: On Building Community

QUESTION:

1. Which of the four rungs of the degrees of humility discussed in this chapter (9-12) spoke most powerfully to you? Explain why.
2. Which of the four rungs of humility presented here do you think would be the antidote to the hatred and division so prevalent in the United States today? In the world at large? Discuss why you think this.

Chapter 42: The Monastic: On “One Thing Only”

QUESTION:

1. List five characteristics of monastic life you learned by reading this chapter. Which one inspired or surprised you the most? Share why.
2. Go to www.eriebenedictines.org and survey the website. What section of it caught your attention the most? Discuss why.

Chapter 43: Stewardship: On the Conservancy of Creation

QUESTION:

1. “One of the great Benedictine virtues is about “enoughness,” asserts Sister Joan. And she asks in relation to it this question: “Do I need this or do I simply want it?” Reflect on the role both this question and having enough play in your life. How would you respond to each?
2. If you are unfamiliar with Pope Francis’ 2015 encyclical, “Laudato Si,” – On Care for our Common Home,” briefly review it at www.usccb.org and/or see Franciscan Fr. Dan Horan’s YouTube video presentation

“Understanding Laudato Si.” What is your response to one or both? Has either enlarged your understanding of stewardship? Explain.

Chapter 44: The Desert: On Difficult Times

QUESTION:

1. “As far as lifelong Christians who had suffered persecution and even death were concerned, simply naming someone ‘Christian’ did not really make them one,” Sister Joan attests. What, today, do you think makes someone “really” Christian?
2. What are two or three lessons God-Seekers in the 21st century can learn from the Desert Monastics?

Chapter 45: The Beginner’s Mind: On Newness and Possibility

QUESTION:

1. “Nothing of God is ever enough for those who already sense God in their hearts,” submits Sister Joan. What does this sentence mean to you? How does it reflect aspects of your own spiritual journey?
2. Sister Joan ends this chapter with this re-statement:
“With a Beginner’s mind, empty of agitation, open to life, free of a soul frozen by past assumptions and absolutes, every day is a new day, not simple another day. This day will hold surprise and depth – and new possibilities forever.”

Write a short paragraph in which you make the case that you have or are trying to develop a Beginner’s mind. Share it with someone you trust.

Chapter 46: Oblates of St. Benedict: On Extending the Common Enterprise

QUESTION:

1. Sister Joan writes that the community provides oblates with certain aids in life's journey and oblates reciprocate by stretching the community's vision, so that the gifts converge "Into one great flame so the rest of the world can see it and envision another way of life." According to Sister Joan, what gifts does each group provide for the other? Comment on this reciprocity.
2. Does the idea of being an oblate appeal to you? Why or why not? Have you ever considered or actually become part of a lay extension of a religious community (for example Third Order Franciscan or Maryknoll Lay Missioner)? Why or why not? If you are interested in an oblate way of life, go to <http://www.eriebenedictines.org/oblates>. After reviewing it, what caught your attention the most? Discuss.
3. Throughout history many prominent figures became Oblates of Saint Benedict. In our times, Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, was one, and she lived the values of community, prayer, hospitality, work, and peacemaking with exceptional passion and vision. To learn more about Dorothy Day, Oblate, go to https://idahomonks.org/manual_sections/sect6o7.pdf.

Chapter 47: Purity of Heart: On a Life Worth Living

QUESTION:

1. According to Sister Joan, Purity of Heart is a "...commitment to the consciousness of God." If you have purity of heart as Sister Joan describes it, how do you nourish this commitment? Name several

ways.

2. “Every human being, you and I, too, comes bearing a gift meant to be used to do the works of god for the people of the world,” maintains Sister Joan. What is your gift and how have you used it for the purposes Sister Joan states.

Chapter 48: Marian Hymns: On Mary, Model Woman

QUESTION:

1. Explore this webpage <https://onepeterfive.com/four-marian-chants-every-catholic-should-know/>. Listen to at least one of the chants Sister Joan describes in this chapter. What is your response to what you heard?
2. Do you have a favorite painting of Mary? Which is it? Why is this your favorite? If you do not have one, Google “Art works of Mary, Mother of Jesus.” Reflect on several. Then answer these same three questions.

Chapter 49: Good Zeal: On Ardor for Holiness

QUESTION:

1. Quoting Benedict from Chapter 72 in the rule, sister Joan offers this: “Just as there is a wicked zeal of bitterness which separates from God and leads to hell, so there is a good zeal which separates from evil and leads to God and everlasting life.” Where in the United States today do you find one or two examples of both kinds of zeal? Why did you choose these particular examples?
2. Share three ways you practice good zeal based on how Benedict characterizes it in the last full paragraph of this chapter.

Chapter 50: The Making of the Monastic Heart: On Developing the Heart of God

QUESTION:

1. Write down the six characteristics of monasticism. Then choose one sentence from each that will enable you to remember its meaning. Share one of the characteristics along with the sentence you chose and its importance to you.
2. Why do you think Sister Joan titled this chapter the way she did? Explain your answer.