

# Twelve Marks of a New Monasticism

*The church's response to compromise and crisis has consistently been one of new monastic movements. When the emperors made Christianity legal and offered the favors of their Empire in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the Desert Fathers and Mothers began the first monastic movement by fleeing the centers of power and creating alternative communities in the desert. In the midst of the Crusades, as religious violence raged, St. Francis rejected economic privilege and started a new monastic movement. In an age when "Christian" American is the "last remaining superpower" in an all-out "war on terror," we've begun to think that once again it is time for a new monasticism.<sup>1</sup>*

**Experiments in Radical Discipleship.** At the margins of church and society, a "new monasticism" is emerging. This network of Christian communities seeks to enable its members to live out an authentic Christian life by loving each other and their neighbors. Believing that it is hard to be Christian in America, but also believing that God is faithful, these communities draw inspiration from the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "The restoration of the church will surely come from a sort of new monasticism which has in common with the old only the uncompromising attitude of a life lived according to the Sermon on the Mount in the following of Christ."<sup>2</sup>

Gathering together in a June 2004 conference, members of intentional communities, both old and new, developed a voluntary rule expressed as twelve distinctive marks of a "new monasticism." These are intended to connect like-minded communities and provide a discipline and structure for their many and diverse communities. "These marks show the common threads that connect Christian communities that might otherwise be seen as scattered anomalies, rather than vibrant cells of a body."<sup>3</sup> What these experiments in radical discipleship have to offer the wider church is to stimulate faithful imaginations to envision new possibilities for witness as well as encouraging it to risk embodying the gospel in new ways in the midst of an alienated and fragmented world.

**Mark 1: Relocation to Abandoned Places of Empire.** In every age, God-seekers have made the radical decision to move away from the pressures, pleasures, and rewards of their society. As both liberation and challenge, relocation expresses conversion and commitment. It involves saying no to an old way of life and yes to a new one. Desert-inspired practices influence the way of life in the places abandoned by the world: God-seeking and prayer which is thoroughly integrated with life and witness. Hospitality in the form of sharing food, roof, and friendship with neighbors fosters both compassion and engagement in the search for solutions.

**Mark 2: Sharing Economic Resources with Fellow Community Members and the Needy Among Us.** Seeking downward mobility in an upscale world, the goal is neither the prosperity gospel nor the poverty gospel, but the Gospel of abundance rooted in a theology of enough. Practicing the radical sharing of an economics of love "we are a people of faith, believing that giving is more contagious than hoarding, that love can convert hatred, light can overcome darkness, and grass can pierce concrete—even on Wall Street."<sup>4</sup>

**Mark 3: Hospitality to Strangers.** Grounding our identity in the God who welcomes, we reach out to all humanity in tender, abiding love. "God's reception of hostile humanity into divine communion is a model for how human beings should relate to the other."<sup>5</sup> Such hospitality means that we must be near to and available to strangers. Thus relocation is necessary for hospitality that welcomes the outsider, the needy, and those from whom we are disconnected.

**Mark 4: Lament for Racial Divisions Within the Church and our Communities Combined with the Active Pursuit of a Just Reconciliation.** We live in a new and fuzzier racial time, with the end to legal discrimination yet with most American churches, whether consciously or not, being ethnic-specific. We need to lament the “hidden wound” of racialized, divided, accepted patterns of life at the same time that we engage in just reconciliation by forming new communities across lines of language, ethnicity and privilege.

**Mark 5: Humble Submission to Christ’s Body, the Church.** As with Benedictine monasticism, we see ourselves as distinct from yet closely related to the wider church. We seek to stimulate the church with new practices and ideas, and at the same time learn from and be accountable to the church’s traditions in ways that protect us from the temptation to reinvent the Gospel in new ways.

**Mark 6: Intentional Formation in the Way of Christ and the Rule of the Community Along the Lines of the Old Novitiate.** Renewal movements have a historical ministry, to preserve in a new setting what has been tested and proven of worth. Thus we pay special attention to ways of preparing new members for communal life and ministry. Intentional formation requires moving from the way of the world to a life of radical sharing, sacrificial ministry, and prophetic witness.

**Mark 7: Nurturing Common Life Among Members of Intentional Community.** By following a common rule, engaging in liturgical rituals, and holding one another accountable, we hope to cultivate Christ-centered communities. “At best, neo-monastic communities may provide a space where Christians can taste the eschatological hope of salvation and demonstrate to one another how our longing can witness to God’s healing grace at work in our midst.”<sup>6</sup>

**Mark 8: Support for Celibate Singles Alongside Monogamous Married Couples and Their Children.** We seek to be open to, supportive of, and intentional about forming relationships and seeking out the gifts and graces of celibate singles or married couples. Faithful discipleship involves holding one another accountable for relationships that are life-giving and Christ-bearing.

**Mark 9: Geographical Proximity to Community Members Who Share a Common Rule of Life.** The New Testament expects our *koinonia* to be quite physical, implying a sharing of time, money, possessions, and our very selves. Spiritual disciplines like common prayer, common meals, mutual confession of sins, spiritual guidance, and celebration all call for geographical proximity.

**Mark 10: Care for the Plot of God’s Earth Given to Us Along with Support of Our Local Economies.** The doctrine of creation aims to show us how all of life grows out of God’s love and is directed toward God’s aims and purposes. Growing gardens, supporting local economies, designing generous households, and celebrating God’s gifts are concrete practices that affirm and make manifest our responsibility before God to serve and maintain the wholeness of creation.

**Mark 11: Peacemaking in the Midst of Violence and Conflict Resolution Along the Lines of Matthew 18.** Jesus didn’t just preach *about* the peaceable kingdom of God, he *embodied* that kingdom—most completely on the cross. This is to determine the shape of our lives as well. *Cruciformity* is the inescapable pattern of existence for those of us who would follow Jesus Christ. In the midst of a world

that has bowed to the gods of nationalism and militarism, to become active peacemakers, we need a community that trains us to live lives of cruciform discipleship.

**Mark 12: Commitment to a Disciplined Contemplative Life.** Repentance means “a change of mind,” learning to see as God sees—that is, to see the world as it truly is. Such change doesn’t happen all at once but takes a long time. It involves commitment and discipline. Contemplation is about receiving the “mind of Christ,” through the intentional setting aside of time to be quiet, to listen, to give our minds and hearts over to God in prayer.

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This summary is drawn from *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, edited by Rutba House (Cascade Books, 2005).

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### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is meant by a “new monasticism”?
  2. Which of the twelve distinctive marks most catches your attention? Why?
  3. Which of the twelve marks do you think it would be the most difficult to live out?
  4. In what way do these new monastic communities embody God’s quiet revolution?
  5. What do these communities contribute to the surrounding secular society?
  6. What can the wider church learn from these small communities scattered across the country? What is the opportunity? What is the challenge?
  7. In particular, what can your congregation learn from these communities of radical discipleship?
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<sup>1</sup> *School(s) for Conversion*, p. ix-x.

<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Testament to Freedom* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 424.

<sup>3</sup> Shane Claiborne, in “The New Monasticism,” *Christianity Today*, September 2005, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> *School(s) for Conversion*, p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> Maroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon, 1996), p. 100.

<sup>6</sup> *School(s) for Conversion*, p. 106.