

## **The Spiritual Practice of the Monastic Cell**

**by Joe Colletti, PhD**

The word "cell" has a long monastic tradition referring originally to the monk's cave or room. Monastic writings are filled with sayings that note that the monk who lives in a cell lives in a sacred place. The English word for cell comes from the Latin word "cella" which means "small chamber" and from the Greek word "naos" meaning "inner chamber of a temple."

Religious connotations to the word cell have been used to signify a physical spiritual space throughout history. In Ancient Egypt, the cell was a completely walled space inside the inner sanctum of a temple existing in complete darkness and symbolizing the state of the universe before the act of creation. Thus, emphasis was placed on the hidden and unknown.

In Ancient Greek and Roman temples the cell was a room at the center of the building, usually containing a cult image or statue and/or contain a table or pedestal to receive votive offerings. In early Christian and Byzantine architecture, the cell was an area at the center of the church reserved for performing the liturgy as a collective public experience for congregants.

Over the centuries, the cell not only became a very private space for Christian monks but a very private experience as well. The physical space was experienced as a spiritual affair with God. Early monastic writings are filled with metaphors that emphasize the monastic cell as a place to withdraw from the world and as a place for the monk to cultivate one's spiritual life in solitude and silence. Monastic writings, however, after the 12<sup>th</sup> century began to contain metaphors that describe the monastic cell not only as a place that is withdrawn from the world, but also as a place within the world such as a garden where a monastic could still experience solitude and silence amidst outdoor beauty.

Many lay and clergy persons today have become familiar with the idea of the monastic cell particularly through books and retreats. One monastic saying that often appears in writings concerning monasticism and verbalized during retreats is

**"Go Sit in Your Cell, and Your Cell will teach You Everything"**

Another saying goes like this

Said the teacher, "Go sit within your cell  
and your cell will teach you wisdom."

The disciple said "But I have no cell. I am no monk."

The teacher said "Of course you have a cell. Look within."

To "look within" references the soul for many monastics. The soul has been a place where we can find solitude and silence amidst everyday life. It is a place where we can connect with God at any moment of our choosing which allows us to cultivate an on-going interior relationship with God.

There are several mystical sayings that remind us that it may be counter-intuitive to look within our inner monastic cell when we are seeking God because we often want to travel or journey to God. One such saying is

Is the path to enlightenment difficult or easy

It is neither

Why not?

Because it is not there.

Then how does one travel to the goal?

One does not. This is a journey without distance.

Stop traveling and you will arrive.

Another Saying is as follows:

The teacher said -

It is easier to travel than to stop

The disciples demanded to know why

The teacher said -

Because as long as you travel to a goal,  
you can hold onto a dream.

When you stop, you face reality.

What also may feel counter-intuitive is to enter into your inner cell or soul in the midst of your everyday urban experiences. Urban often conjures up images of persons living in crowded and congested areas where they experience a complex of problems such as teeming sidewalks, crawling traffic, busy offices, and noisy stores. Images of persons may also include drug dealers and addicts, prostitutes, and gang members committing crimes in public spaces. Other images consist of homeless mentally ill individuals living on the streets and women and their children fleeing from domestic violence.

Entering into our inner cell/soul while walking along a crowded street and passing by a homeless mentally ill person or waiting for a traffic light to change and observe and/or interact with panhandlers and peddlers provides us with opportunities to further our process of integration. Finding God and the people that make up our everyday urban life in the inner and outer places of our life reminds us that our relationship with God is always lived out in the context of relationships with one another and the whole created order. Therefore, our inner and outer cell/soul experiences are never an escape from our relationships with others and the world. Through our inner and outer cell/soul experiences, unique relationships are discovered, affirmed, empowered, transformed and offered in loving service to God and others.

In summary, our inner cell/soul is not just a private place to be alone in solitude and silence. It is an inner place that we carry with us even in the midst of our everyday urban experiences. Also, our inner cell/soul is not just a private place to be alone with God. It is a private place to be alone with God and others including those who make up our everyday urban experiences.