

Heart's home

by [Roberta Bondi](#) in the [October 27, 1999](#) issue

As a woman who tries to live out Benedictine values as a layperson connected with a particular monastery, I try to spend at least a week every year at St. Benedict's Monastery in St. Joseph, Minnesota.

From the time of my first visit many years ago, it has been the home of my heart. The warmth and joy of the interior of the white, soaring church, the women's voices that dip and swoop among its columns like the sparrow of Psalm 83—these are deeply satisfying, as is the conversation of the sisters who invite me to stay with them. I have never been around so many older women who are filled with such enthusiasm for life, who read so avidly and are so committed to the arts, who laugh so much, who engage in such ambitious social projects, who think so theologically and who are so serious and matter-of-fact about prayer. And it is obvious that no topic of conversation or human experience could scare or embarrass them.

When I visit them I step into the world of early monasticism, a subject I teach. I mull over Athanasius's description of St. Anthony coming out of the abandoned fortress in the Egyptian desert where he holed up alone to learn his discipline. After 20 years, Athanasius says, the crowds could see at once that he had become like Adam and Eve in paradise, neither too fat or too thin but restored to the life of the virtues, and in perfect emotional health. At the sight of him, communities that wanted this life sprang up—communities otherwise not known on this earth, where prayer, justice and freedom from fear were the rule, and people thrived in the ways God intended.

St. Benedict's is a staggeringly different sort of community in many respects. Time, culture, gender and style divide this community from its ancient counterpart. Yet I experience an ethos there which is true to what early monasticism was about, an ethos concerned with restoration of the image of God.

The first extended time I spent at St. Benedict's was during a sabbatical. I had arrived in a state of exhaustion and demoralization. After a day or two of sharing the sisters' hospitable company, I found myself coming to life. I particularly recall the shock I received on the third morning when I looked into the mirror. It was the first

time that I ever liked what I saw. Not that I found myself beautiful, at least not in any conventional sense. It was simply that, middle-aged, overweight and gray-haired as I was, I realized that in this community of sisters I looked exactly the way I was supposed to look.

This was not an insignificant moment. It was a wonderful feeling and, I fear, a not very common one for women in our society. A few years ago, a class discussion of fifth-century Peter the Galatian's advice to the mother of Theodoret of Cyrrhus helped clarify this for me.

I had assigned the text both because it is delightful and because its prologue and epilogue state so clearly the motivation and goals of ancient monasticism. I had asked the students to read it also because the negative image of women is hard to bear in so much of the early material, and I wanted them to have a chance to express their frustrations. The day's assignment, therefore, was simply to engage the parts of the text that talked about Theodoret's mother.

According to Theodoret, his mother was a wealthy, aristocratic young woman who had gone to see Peter about an eye disease. The practical advice he gave was to stop wearing eye makeup. I imagined the students would focus on the effects on women of early monasticism's fear of sexuality. I was wrong. A man who had studied the book carefully began by quoting Peter's words to her:

"Tell me, my child, if some painter, well trained in his art, painted a portrait . . . and someone else who had no accurate knowledge of the art came along and criticized the artistic painting, and added longer lines to the eyebrows and eyelashes . . . does it not seem to you that the first painter would rightly be indignant?"

The student proceeded to note the theological ramifications of the way in which women in our time are led into concealing themselves with makeup and into dressing for others under the assumption that their primary responsibility is to make themselves sexually attractive.

The class was so stunned by what he had rightly drawn from the text that they sat in dreary silence for many minutes. Then all the women—the well-dressed women as well as the sweat-suit-clad—began to share their anguish. Many began to cry as they spoke about their experiences, and I sadly recalled the words of my elderly aunt one

day before her death from malnutrition: "This is the least I've weighed since I was in my 20s!"

Ancient monasticism had its problems, and St. Benedict's does too. Still, what I see in the sisters of St. Benedict's is what the spectators saw in Anthony when he left the fort—the actual, otherwise unimaginable embodiment of the Christian promises of what human life is meant to be. I don't worry about celibacy. I consider, instead, Athanasius's insight that real Christianity only draws the heart as it is embodied in actual people.

How much Protestant Christianity has paid for its misunderstanding and rejection of monasticism! How much the whole church needs St. Benedict's and other radical Christian communities of freedom, love, hope, creativity and prayer that can show us what it might look like for us to live as God intended human beings to live, and can demonstrate to us that it is possible.