

Day by day, Hour by Hour

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Recently I spent a week at a monastery. I didn't interact a lot with the monks—it's a cloistered community, and its members don't often come to the guesthouse area where I stayed. I saw them at church seven times a day; otherwise I was mostly alone, either walking the grounds or in my room reading or praying.

Reading, mostly. I struggled to pray. I have much stronger habits of prayer with others than alone. I did pray more than usual, and I tried out some contemplative practices mostly new to me. It was predictably hard, however, to quiet my mind in such a short time, much less to cultivate new prayer practices. So I read.

Where I did feel a real shift in consciousness was in my sense of time. After a day or two there my watch pretty much stayed in a drawer, and I never really knew or cared what time it was.

Or rather, I didn't know the *numerical* time. I found it very natural to keep time by the Divine Office—I knew not the hour, but I knew the Hour. I would read in my room until I heard the church bell; then I'd stop mid-sentence and go to church. Sing a few psalms and a canticle or hymn, maybe say the Lord's Prayer, back to my room, repeat.

I loved this pattern. It's unsustainable, of course. The monks don't just read and pray all day; they do physical work to support the community. But in a way this was even better than a carefree vacation: instead of a few days of answering to no one, I answered only to the call to worship—and found myself marking time by it.

The worship itself was a bit unsatisfying. I wasn't surprised by the strict separation between the monks and visitors, but I was startled by it. I knew that not all the prevailing norms of parish liturgical life apply in a monastic setting, but I hadn't really experienced this firsthand. At times I found myself wanting to pray the Hours, but in a different context—one where I could participate in worship planning, and prioritize the active and conscious participation of the assembly, and create a clear and hospitable worship aid, etc.

But the more I kept time by praying the Hours from the visitors' section, the more it made sense. This was not an *event* in the sense of a Eucharistic service, a special sort of happening that requires a gathering of two or more and, in most of our traditions, an ordained minister. This was *chronos*, not *kairos*. It would happen like clockwork, with or without me—or, I began to get the sense, anybody else.

While we were there, one of the brothers passed away on the premises. He was old and sick; still, it happened rather suddenly. The monks heard the news at church a half hour later. Then they did what they always do: they prayed the psalms. I suspect that if some Job-like tragedy wiped out all but one of them, he'd still show up for the Divine Office that day, singing antiphonally with the cloud of witnesses.

So I began to appreciate that I was not a second-class participant in a worship event some hierarchically-minded person planned. I was an observer of a holy practice of marking the passage of time, a practice as reliable as time itself.

This was helpful as I struggled with the week's liturgical theme. That Thursday was the Feast of the Ascension, and all week this came up in appointed prayers and the like. I'm fascinated by the story—it's probably the New Testament narrative I have the hardest time taking seriously as an account of what actually happened. Clearly I'm not alone in this. Take the cosmology problem, add our mainline preference for all things immanence, and it's no surprise that it seems you're as likely to hear a sermon against (or at least in spite of) the Ascension as one simply on it.

Not so at the monastery. In worship there we heard several excerpts from Ascension homilies from the early church—homilies that do a lot of interesting things but don't exactly work against the grain of the text. I was reminded that whatever this story and these homilies mean, they don't need my permission to mean it.

Just like the Hours don't need my permission to pass. But giving them my attention—not my interpretation or even my full participation, just attention—changed the very rhythm of my days.