

Grounded: "In his will is our peace"

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [October 5, 2004](#) issue

Here is a lesson in monastic stability, transposed to a domestic key: I am invited to give a talk to a general chapter of Benedictine monastic communities, meeting at a historic abbey in Italy. Such occasions, which take place only once every eight years, normally are private affairs involving intramural matters like the election of an abbot president and revision of monastic statutes. But for two years leading up to the event, participating monasteries from Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas have been engaged in a collective self-study, endeavoring to discern what God is asking of them in their monastic life vis-à-vis the contemporary world. And they have decided that it would be good to hear the perspective of an ordinary nonmonastic woman like me.

What shall I talk about? "Just shake us up," one of the abbots suggests. This, of course, is the last thing I want to do. The thought of participating in several days of searching discussion with a singular group of monks and nuns, a few of whom I know personally and admire deeply, whose aim in life is "to prefer nothing to the love of Christ," is so thrilling that all I can think of to compose is a love letter. For I really do believe that the monastic life is an immense blessing to the church and the world, never more precious, never more necessary than at the present moment. In the midst of a dechristianized Christendom, the living witness of monasticism is a sign of contradiction and hope. As a nun remarked in an essay preparing for the general chapter, the monastic life is essentially a lay Christian life, an attempt to respond wholeheartedly to the astonishing fact of having been baptized. In the monastic life we see the lineaments of every Christian's vocation. Be ambassadors for Christ by being simply and unreservedly who you are: that's about as much shaking up as I can offer to what will surely be a forgiving monastic audience.

The complication is that I am also a mother, and can't imagine setting out on such a journey without bringing the family, even though it means the boys will miss a week of school. Our boys love being around monks; some of their friends, who have only encountered monks in books (like Brian Jacques's Redwall Abbey series), wish they could come too. The opportunity to visit Venice and Rome briefly after the meetings

decides the matter; we never had a vacation this year, and this promises to be a wonderful adventure for us all.

So with very little time to get ready, very little sleep and significant disruption of family routines, we set out for the airport, trying to learn bits of Italian along the way (*Capisco un po l'Italiano!*), and hoping against hope that 45 minutes will be enough time to change planes in Paris. The monks, meanwhile, must prepare for the small cyclone of boyish energy that is about to touch down on them.

We arrive at the Boston airport three hours early, burdened with suitcases full of Cheerios, graham crackers and other familiar food to keep nine-year-old Andy on an even keel. To make sure of our connection, an agent squeezes us onto an earlier flight which is still at the gate. Now if only we can find Andy, who has just dashed off through the crowd and possibly boarded a flight to Pago Pago, we'll be all set.

But the plane never takes off. After six airless hours in the cabin, squashed into four different seats dispersed throughout a packed plane, we hear the captain announce that the faulty electrical system cannot be repaired. We receive vouchers for lodging and food at an airport hotel (Go ahead, they tell us, have yourselves a \$50 breakfast!), and spend what remains of the night wondering what to do.

O insensata cura de' mortali, quanto son difettivi sillogismi quei che ti fanno in basso batter l'ali—"O senseless anxiety of mortals, how defective are the reasonings that make thee beat thy wings in downward flight!" Dante said these words from the sphere of the sun, but we are unmistakably grounded. Even if we fly the next day, I will miss my talk, though perhaps the schedule can be rearranged. The kids are exhausted. John is having second thoughts about missing his second week of 12th grade. I am exhausted. Yet we know that if we turn back we will never have this opportunity again. What is God asking us to do? For once it seems clear: cancel the trip, forego the grand monastic adventure, and contemplate the monastic vision from the ground, where our *stabilitas* is located, back home.

I'm writing this at home, the kids are in school, and my paper is being read by a kind prioress. I won't say we're not disappointed. But our monastic adventure, even in its fractured form, has cast a mild enchantment over the family, giving us some share in Benedictine peace. The Benedictine "breathes peace," as Newman once put it, even if he exhales it with sighs. Peace is an objective fact of monastic life, an aesthetic monasteries foster, and a gift they give the world simply by staying the course day in and day out. Friends, strangers, even those who know of monasteries

only through hearsay, partake of that peace, feel the goodness of that peace, or at least have the comfort of knowing that somewhere there is peace, a gospel peace full of vigor and hope. Monastic peace, ultimately, is Christian peace, which we can find wherever we are placed, if we listen for God's will. Dante's famous saying, *E 'n la sua volontade è nostra pace* ("in his will is our peace"), has just found its place in our beginner's Italian phrasebook.