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Honors 104 (H03)

The Viability of Monastic Living

To quote Robert Ingersoll, "Hands that help are better far than lips that pray." He was talking about the disaster in Haiti and how people who did tangible things to help, such as donate money or go down to Haiti and help, were being more helpful than the people who simply prayed for the problems to be fixed. As someone who doesn't believe in the power of prayer, praying for anything seems rather worthless, let alone spending large amounts of every day doing so. In this modern world where we can do so many things to influence the world around us, it seems to me that a monastic life filled with prayer seems rather like a waste of time and effort with no quantifiable returns.

While there has been a decline in the total number of monasteries, the life of the monastery is still alive and well in the modern world. The rules of St. Benedict are followed as much as they possibly can be, but of course there are some deviations, as the rules were created for a world that has changed many times over the last 1500 years. The Rule calls for eight offices of prayer daily, starting at 2-3 A.M., however the modern day monk does only four and starts at 5:45 A.M. The Rule calls for a monastery to be entirely self-sufficient and today monasteries have to at least partially depend on the surrounding world as it is much more efficient cost and labor wise. There are other things as well that have changed. For example the monastery is a louder place that St. Benedict would have desired, and I'm sure he'd frown on the monks having Facebook or reading the daily newspaper. The rules that are felt to be in the best interest of the monks to follow however are still enforced.

The question becomes then, if the life of a monk is still alive and well, is it a practical one? Admittedly there are useful things that result from the life of a monk. As well as praying and a sense of community, the monks also do things like beekeeping, teaching, and making Monk Sauce. My only

problem though is that the things that monks do that could be considered practical are all things that now can be replicated by secular institutions. Monasteries were certainly an important part in history, keeping the ancient classics alive and being beacons of learning and research in times that were otherwise dark. Nowadays though, we have a much more advanced civilization with universities and beekeeping companies and such other things. They may have a good school, but there are good secular schools as well. So if their temporal labors don't produce anything special enough to make them a necessity, why do we have them? The answer is obviously prayer and that people believe in its power. Also, some people believe that the prayers of the monks are better than theirs, as the monks are closer to God. The question then becomes, if their prayers are not more important than anyone else's, or if they have no power at all, why should they be kept around? From that viewpoint, then they are basically a drain on resources as they do not provide a needed service. The monks do choose that lifestyle though, and the monastery does provide a good bit of their required resources through selling bulls and having investment portfolios, and they do give back to the community, so I don't know the answer to the question. I personally view it as a waste of time and resources, but I'm sure that the secular life of this sedated 21st century computer science major would seem a waste of time and resources to a monk, so who knows?