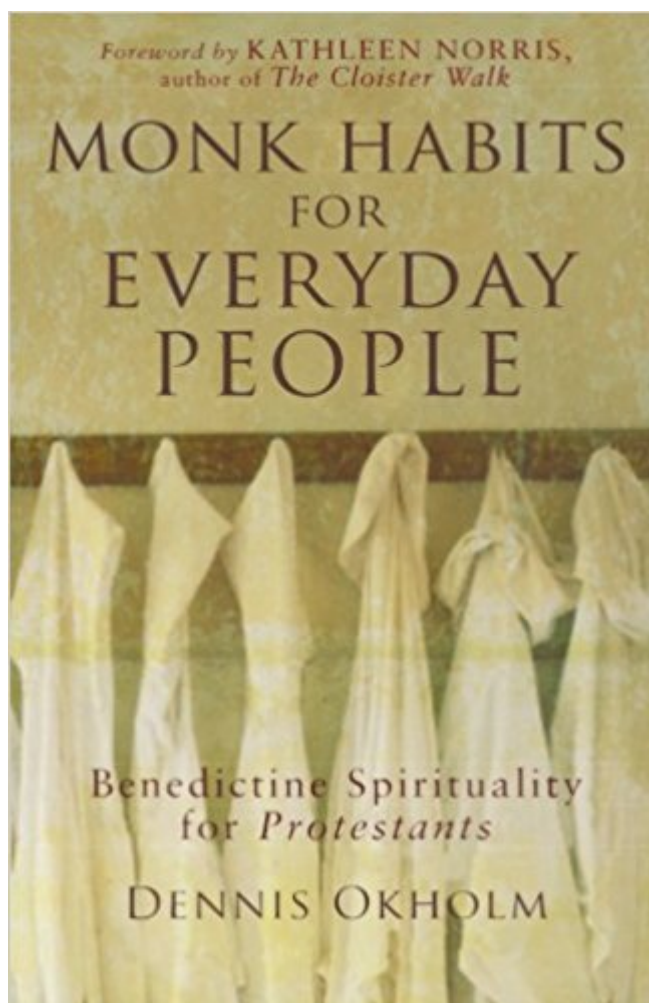


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Monk Habits For Everyday People: Benedictine Spirituality For Protestants



Synopsis

In their zeal for reform, early Protestant leaders tended to throw out Saint Benedict with the holy water. That is a mistake, writes Dennis Okholm, in *Monk Habits for Everyday People*. While on retreat in a Benedictine abbey, the author, a professor who was raised as a Pentecostal and a Baptist, observed how the meditative and ordered life of a monk lifted Jesus' teachings off the printed page and put them into daily practice. Vital aspects of devotion, humility, obedience, hospitality, and evangelism took on new clarity and meaning. Paralleling that experience, Okholm guides the reader on a focused and instructive journey that can revitalize the devotional life of any Christian who wants to slow down and dig deeper.

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Customer Reviews

Readers might not think that poverty, chastity and obedience would be attractive to the common Protestant, but Okholm, a theology professor at Azusa Pacific University, will make them think twice. Although he is a Presbyterian, Okholm is comfortable with Catholicism and realistic about the benefits and burdens of both denominations. He finds in Benedictine monasticism a helpful path to holiness, and he avoids idealizing or romanticizing the monastic life. This is why his work succeeds as a guide for the common Christian. Okholm is wise to point out that St. Benedict's Rule, the text upon which his vision of monastic life is built, is both challenging and down-to-earth. The author invites readers to integrate some monastic practices into their daily lives and stresses that this does not involve cloistering themselves—these practices are both ordinary and sacred. He also

provides an excellent example for Catholics and Protestants alike to dig deeply into the Christian tradition and find how both can spiritually benefit from the other. Okholm provides a Historical Afterword to address why Protestants initially rejected the monastic life. This is a fascinating and, considering its brevity, surprisingly detailed overview that readers should not pass up. (Dec.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

When Dennis Okholm began exploring the roots of contemporary Benedictine monasticism, he quickly found that St. Benedict has as much to offer Protestants as he does Roman Catholics. In *Monk Habits for Everyday People*, Okholm--a professor who was raised as a Pentecostal and a Baptist--uses his profound experience with Benedictine spirituality to show how it can enrich the lives and prayer practices of Protestants. "As a knowledgeable pastor and theologian, Dennis Okholm proves an excellent guide. . . . This memoir, gentle in tone and often humorous, is nonetheless full of challenges to Protestant comfort zones. . . . Okholm reminds us that for all Christians, good spiritual habits are good for our spiritual health; that 'scripture is the original rule'; and that Christ is the point of it all, our true beginning and our end."--Kathleen Norris, author of *The Cloister Walk* (from the foreword) "Twenty years in the making, Dennis Okholm's *Monk Habits* is the perfect introduction to Benedictine spirituality for the earnest Protestant believer. In taking us on his own journey, he invites to discover Benedict of Nursia and Benedict's myriad faithful followers over fifteen centuries. This represents an important bridge between evangelicalism and Catholicism. Highly recommended."--Tony Jones, author of *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* "The practices of Benedictine monasticism have several times brought revitalization and spiritual focus back to the worldwide church at large. In this informative and irenic book, Dennis Okholm explains how the 'rule' of Benedict did the same for him personally as an evangelical professor and Presbyterian minister. The book's winsome portrait of the Benedictines--and, through their monastic practices, of Christ--makes for a spiritual feast. The historically minded will also benefit from Okholm's careful discussion of why more Protestants should pay greater heed to the Benedictine life."--Mark A. Noll, coauthor of *Is the Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Catholicism*

This concise, dense, thoughtful book provides a good introduction to Benedictine spirituality for those of us raised on the prejudices of the Reformation. If you are a fan of the recent books on Christian community by writers like Shane Claiborne or Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, but you've been frustrated trying to actually make such a community, this book might set you on the

right path. Unlike many recent books on the New Monasticism, which are full of exhortations but little practical advice, Dennis Okholm mixes spirituality with insight into how communities are built and how they thrive. Utilizing Benedictine principles that have held houses together for centuries, like obedience, stability, and humility, he posits how Christians can grow together in service to the Lord and the world. But Okholm's directives are not limited to monastic communities. He suggests how Benedictine spirituality can overcome the star-power trend he sees in many Protestant churches. He suggests that if more pastors held obedience, balance, and listening at the heart of their ministries, the dissent that strikes many congregations could be kept at bay, and the Gospel of Christ better served in our mission fields. This book is slim, and can be read in a single night. But it's rich in content that can be used for prayer, study, group discussion, and private meditation. It also contains a long, detailed list of further reading, a checklist of ways to live the Benedictine life in the lay world, and a helpful afterword to reconcile stringent Protestant theology with Benedictine vows. Accessible for both lay readers and seminarians. Laced with helpful examples of how Christ's word is lived in the world. I recommend this book for all who hope to grow as members of the Body of Christ.

Monk Habits for Everyday People is a very readable and interesting look at how Protestants (and more particularly Evangelicals that are often most interesting in evangelism and salvation) can learn from Benedictines about how to live as Christians. This is an ongoing theme for me this year. Not intentionally, but I think it is something that God is doing in me. As Okholm says near the beginning of the book: "We have become consumers of religion rather than cultivators of a spiritual life; we have spawned an entire industry of Christian kitsch and bookstores full of spiritual junk food that leaves us sated and flabby. As if we believed the infomercial that promises great abs if we just buy the right piece of equipment for \$39.95, we think that the secret to being a spiritually fit Christian can be had by finding some secret technique or buying the most recent hot-selling inspirational devotional. Maturity in the Christian life does not come in these ways. The life of the disciple is like that of the athlete who prepares for and runs a marathon. We can have the snazziest running garb, assemble a library full of training schedules and tips, and watch Chariots of Fire each day every day for a year, but while all of these things might help, they will not be a substitute for the unspectacular training and diet that we must engage in if we are going to become mature Christians, "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (Jas. 1:4). It's that way with anything in life--being a concert pianist, a skilled sculptor, or an insightful historian." And this soon after that, "What Benedictines have to offer Protestants in this quest is the lived reminder that the Christian community's ultimate function is to shape individuals who, as disciples of Christ, are being formed into his image." My ongoing project of

reading about Catholic theology and spirituality has meant that I keep running into the fact that spiritual growth is not sexy, it is mundane, on-going and often more about what is not seen. The structure of the book is 7 chapters on 7 virtues that Okholm has identified as central to being Benedictine. These are Listening, Poverty, Obedience, Humility, Hospitality, Stability, and Balance. These are not exciting virtues. These are long term. Okholm does his job of bridging the gap between Catholic monks and an evangelical audience well. He grew up in and has taught in the Evangelical world. But he also became a Benedictine Oblate (someone that does not take monastic vows, but attempts to live the life of a Benedictine outside the monastery.) This is a book well worth reading.

Readable, engaging, and insightful. Okholm doesn't overwhelm readers with an avalanche of information about Benedictine spirituality. Rather, he shares his personal story of encountering the Benedictines and then shares some ways that Protestants could learn from Benedict. He demystifies the monks by sharing some helpful quotes about ways they learn to be aware of each other and how they are well aware of how dull their days can be. I particularly found his chapter about authority to be helpful, sharing how Benedict viewed leadership as a way to serve others.

It has been a few years since I went looking for books on the Rule of St. Benedict and Benedictine spirituality. While Esther De Waal's classic *Seeking God* is still in print (and I am currently re-reading it), I think Dennis Okholm's *Monk Habits for Everyday People* has become my new first recommendation, the book I would offer someone who knows nothing about St. Benedict or why laypeople, especially Protestant laypeople, would want to hang out with monks. It's clear; it covers the essential themes of Benedict's teaching in a fresh and accessible way; it is directed to a specifically Protestant and even Evangelical audience, with an extensive appendix on the Reformers' critiques of monasticism in their day; and it has an excellent recommended reading list that includes De Waal's book and many others, both popular and more scholarly. I recommend it very highly.

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