

## THE MONASTIC WAY

*...daily insights to stir the heart and seed the soul.*

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO FOLLOW?

Literature is full of stories about masters and disciples. Jesus had disciples; Buddha had disciples; in recent times, Mahatma Gandhi had disciples. And it's not entirely incorrect to say that Merton and Dorothy Day and all the great religious founders and writers before them—Benedict, Augustine, Catherine McCauley and Teresa of Avila—had disciples, too. Each of them had followers who believed in them, believed what they believed and set out to live as they lived because they saw the value of it become flesh before their very eyes. Discipleship is clearly a very powerful process. But what is it? And when is it good and when is it bad?

Discipleship is watching and learning from the experience and wisdom of another in order to become the kind of spiritual adult ourselves that we recognize them to be. The other side of discipleship, then, is leadership that helps to shape a life into its best possible form.

But discipleship and leadership—misused and misunderstood—can have their downsides, too.

The wrong kind of leadership can turn people into simpering adolescents. The wrong kind of discipleship can mistake the mentor for the thing.

There are two teachings among the ancients that bear reflection in an era of great experts and great despots, great public figures and powerful masses.

One teaching tells us, “In order to heat water there must be a vessel between the liquid and the fire.”

The other teaching warns us, “The purpose of a master is to teach us the uselessness of having one.”

Clearly, the purpose of the spiritual master is to enable us to grow to our own full stature. It is not meant to make us childish; it is meant to lead us to maturity.



ANNE MCCARTHY, OSB

The important thing is to beware the guru, the mentor, the leader who doesn't bring you to respect and follow your own authority. Too many mentors confuse spiritual leadership with authoritarianism and control. Too many people use their position, their authority to keep another person in emotional bondage in order to satisfy their own egos. That's why the Zen masters teach, “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.”

Beware the leader, any leader, any system, who takes away from you either your conscience or your individual call. When you discover that you have given up your own insights, your own institutions, your own wisdom to the control of another, you have given up discipleship for mental slavery.



**SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 1:** An authentic disciple is a learner who grows beyond the learning stage to find the wisdom that is her own. Anything else is simply servitude.

**MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 2:** Leadership demonstrates an ideal to such a degree that others seek to be the same. “It does not drive people to follow,” Charles Lauer writes, “they invite them on a journey.” Beware anyone who tries to force another adult to do anything.

**TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 3:** The really great leaders are willing to be led by those they lead. They prove the value of each person not simply by pretending to listen to them but by actually seeking out their ideas and feelings. Disciples are serious seekers, not sheep.

**WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 4:** The Rule of Benedict, a sixth century document, is very clear about the responsibility of the leader to the group. It reads that whenever weighty matters are to be decided, the abbot or prioress calls all the community together for counsel, even the younger members, because “the Spirit often reveals what is better to the younger.” Think of it: even the young. Clearly, no one—no matter how experienced, no matter what their position—is the whole show, the only answer, the first and last word.

**THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 5:** The disciple is a seasoned seeker, not an automaton whose purpose is to stroke the ego of the resident guru. That is the difference between discipleship and membership in a sect. In one, a leader helps a person develop the best in themselves. In the other, a leader uses a person for the satisfaction of the self.

**FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 6:** The French say, “When a blind man bears the standards, pity those who follow.” Just because a person is in a position does not mean that they should be followed.

**SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 7:** It is as important that the disciples test the values of the leader as it is that the leader shape the hearts of the disciples. Otherwise, the whole enterprise

may well be lost and whole groups of people with it. If the disciples around Hitler had tested the man’s own heart, the whole world would have been safer. Because the disciples failed their own best ideals, the whole world suffered.

**SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 8:** If you are going to follow someone, make sure that they are going somewhere worth going. “We have a choice,” the Virginia Department of Agriculture advised, “to plow new ground or let the weeds grow.”

**MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 9:** Systems do not exist for their own sake. They exist to bring the world closer to the will of God for it. Beware the leaders who are more intent on saving the system than on saving the Gospel out of which it grows.

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a goal for their disciples.  
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**TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10:** When discipleship, the willingness to be led by another, is simply an excuse to be dependent on someone else rather than to take responsibility for our own lives, it is an insidious kind of manipulation. It makes leaders responsible for what they cannot possibly provide and it makes disciples responsible for nothing.

**WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 11:** Good leaders never need to draw attention to themselves, to soak up all the air in a room, to talk only about themselves and their own interests. They exist to release the gifts of others as well as to give their own. The philosopher Lao Tzu wrote, “Leaders are best when people barely know they exist. When the leaders’ work is done, their aim fulfilled, the people will say: we did it ourselves.”

**THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 12:** “There is as much wisdom in listening as there is in speaking,” Daniel Day Kim said.

**FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 13:** There is a great difference between a strong leader and an authoritarian leader. A strong leader knows how to involve a group in a common project and sustain them while they pursue it. An authoritarian leader imposes orders on the group, whether they stand the test of group ownership or not. Strong leaders last; authoritarian leaders fall at the first possible moment.

**SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 14:** It is the seeking that counts, not the finding. For the serious seeker, there is always more to be found. The search itself is the purpose of life.

**SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 15:** When we are new at anything, we need guidance that is clear and precise. When we have traveled the road for a while, it’s not direction we need. It’s the companionship and support that leadership gives that count.

**MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 16:** Discipleship is the willingness to suspend the will but never the power of judgment. In the end, we are all responsible for ourselves.

**TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 17:** The purpose of leadership, like the purpose of parenthood, is to let go so that the children can become the adults we have enabled them to become. It’s interesting, isn’t it, that children and disciples so often find that easier than parents and leaders. The question is, What is that saying about the quality of parenting or the nature of leadership we’re teaching?

**WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 18:** Social scientists maintain that every group deserves the leader it gets. Or, as Arthur Newcomb put it, “Show me the leader and I will know the followers. Show me the followers and I will know their leader.” Mismatches are dangerous both to the leader and to the group. Then neither discipleship nor leadership is possible.

**THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 19:** There are two kinds of leadership problems. In the first the leader does all the leading on all the crucial questions. The disciples turn into children awaiting the will of the master. In the second, the leader does no leading at



all. Then the disciples flounder, unable to identify the questions that face them and so unable to gather the resources they need to resolve it. In both cases, the disciples are misled.

**FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 20:** Disciples are not souls driven by the wind, without substance or mind. They are the extensions of the one who lives their own ideals most strongly. “There are two ways of spreading light,” Edith Wharton wrote. “To be the candle or the mirror that reflects it.”

**SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 21:** All the positions in the world do not a leader make. As Robert Greenleaf puts it, “The only test of leadership is that somebody follows.” Real disciples never simply give themselves over to someone else’s directions. They pick and choose very wisely. After all, it is their lives and souls that are at stake.

**SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 22:** Good leaders do not have a goal for their disciples. They have goals for themselves and let that light penetrate where it will. “You take people as far as they will go,” Jeannette Rankin wrote, “not as far as you would like them to go.” In the end it is God who does the leading.

**MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 23:** Good leaders don’t control a person. They give them choices and, in their own lives, demonstrate the reasons why

one choice is better than another. “The final test of leaders,” Walter Lippmann wrote, “is that they leave behind in others the conviction and the will to carry on.”

**TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 24:** Discipleship is not about the leader. It is about what the leader was about.

**WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 25:** Discipleship is a matter of making choices. When leaders use force to require adherence, they don’t have disciples, they have slaves. Until, of course, the slaves revolt.

*The really great leaders  
are willing to be led  
by those they lead.*

**THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 26:** Spiritual leadership and corporate leadership are two different things. Corporate leaders want efficiency, order and compliance. Spiritual leaders want questions, effort and initiative. One gets you a job. The other one gets you a life.

**FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 27:** Discipleship implies that we take upon ourselves some practices that are tried and true in order to become more than the practices themselves. “There

is no wide road which leads to the Muses,” Propertius wrote. At the same time, once we reach the Muses we become what we sought and must follow the voices within.

**SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 28:** “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free,” the evangelist John wrote. Any leadership that ends at the throne of the leader is no leadership at all.

**SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 29:** The purpose of life is not to attract disciples. It is to live well enough to deserve one if any ever came along.

**MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 30:** Life is not a recipe. Discipleship is not boot camp. Leadership is not enthrone-ment. They are all enterprises in choices designed to release the rest of us to ourselves. And that is poetry, the mystery of it all. As Yogi Berra says, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.”



## LET’S SHARE OUR THOUGHTS

The following discussion questions, Scripture echo, journal prompts, and prayer are meant to help you reflect more deeply on *The Monastic Way*. Choose at least two suggestions and respond to them. You may do it as a personal practice or gather a group interested in sharing the spiritual journey.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree with Sister Joan that discipleship is an essential part of the spiritual journey? If so, why is it so important? If you disagree, what other forms of relationship can serve a similar role?

2. Which daily quote in *The Monastic Way* is most meaningful to you? Why? Do you agree with it? Disagree? Did it inspire you? Challenge you? Raise questions for you?

3. After reading *The Monastic Way* write one question that you would like to ask the author about this month’s topic.

4. Joan Chittister uses other literature to reinforce and expand her writing. Find another quote, poem, story, song, art piece, or novel that echoes the theme of this month’s *Monastic Way*.

5. Sister Joan writes, “Discipleship is watching and learning from the experience and wisdom of another in order to become the kind of spiritual adult ourselves that we recognize them to be. The other side of discipleship, then, is leadership that helps to shape a life into its best possible form.” To whom, or what, have you been a disciple? What did you learn from those experiences? Have you been a leader for anyone?

# JOURNAL PROMPTS

**Prompt 1:** Here are a few statements from this month's *Monastic Way*. Choose one that is most helpful to you and journal with it.

- Discipleship is not about the leader. It is about what the leader was about.
- It is as important that the disciples test the values of the leader as it is that the leader shape the hearts of the disciples.
- An authentic disciple is a learner who grows beyond the learning stage to find the wisdom that is her own. Anything else is simply servitude.

**Prompt 2:** Spend a few minutes with this photograph and journal about its relationship to this month's *Monastic Way*. You can do that with prose or a poem or a song or....

## PRAYER

“Prayer for Conscience and Courage”

God of light and God of darkness, God of conscience and God of courage lead us through this time of spiritual confusion and public uncertainty. Lead us beyond fear, apathy and defensiveness to new hope in You and to hearts full of faith.

Give us the conscience it takes to comprehend what we're facing, to see what we're looking at and to say what we see so that others, hearing us, may also brave the pressure that comes with being out of public step.

Give us the courage we need to confront those things that compromise our consciences or threaten our integrity.

Give us, most of all, the courage to follow those before us who challenged wrong and changed it, whatever the cost to themselves.

Amen.

—Joan Chittister



ANNE MCCARTHY, OSB

## SCRIPTURE ECHO

*“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”*

—JOHN 8:12

Joan Chittister

FUND FOR PRISONERS



**“Prisoners are the most forgotten people in society and the least served in Christianity. Help me change that.”**

—Joan Chittister

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**JOAN CHITTISTER** is an internationally known author and lecturer and a clear visionary voice across all religions. She has written more than 60 books and received numerous awards for her writings and work on behalf of peace and women in the church and in society.

**JOIN THE CONVERSATION:** Each month, join the staff of Benetvision on a free Zoom call to discuss the current issue of *The Monastic Way*. Several times each year, Sister Joan leads the Zoom session. Subscribers will receive invitations to register for these calls in their email inbox.

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