

THE MONASTIC WAY

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

HOW DO I KNOW THAT GOD IS PRESENT?

I first encountered “dark” in a Swiss village at the top of the Alps. There were no arc lights along the railroad tracks in the valley below us, no lit up windows in the farmers’ chalets above. There was nothing but black night, a few faraway stars, and no moon. The mountains were surely there. I could feel them behind me, but I could not see them.

For an American accustomed to cities that never sleep and blinking strips of neon madness everywhere, it was a shocking experience. I was standing on the edge of the planet somewhere, surrounded only by black nothingness. I was alone. Or was I?

The question has an urgency to it. It carries within itself the foundations of morality, the purpose of life. God is, my mind insists, in the face of a complex universe and reflective consciousness. But where?

The Sufi tale puts it this way: “How does one seek union with God?” the seeker asked.

“The harder you seek, the more distance you create between God and you,” the elder answered.

“So what does one do about the distance?” The seeker persisted.

“Understand that it isn’t there,” the elder answered.

“Does that mean that God and I are one?” the seeker continued.

“Not one,” the elder answered, “not two.”

“But how is that possible?” the seeker cried, dismayed.

“The sun and its light, the ocean and the wave, the singer and the song: Not one. Not two,” the elder answered.

The elder makes the point: God and I are not the same thing but God is another essence of everything that is. Or to put it another way: A heathen asked Rabbi Joshua ben Karha, “Why did God speak to Moses from the thorn bush?”

Rabbi Joshua replied, “If God had spoken from a carob tree or from a sycamore, you would have asked me the

same question. So as not to dismiss you without an answer, God spoke from the thorn bush to teach you that there is no place where the Divine Presence is absent, not even in a thorn bush.”

God, in other words, is everywhere, as truly in those things where we are sure that God is missing as in those things which we are sure

are infallible signs of the presence of God.

The presence of God does not depend on an act of God’s will; it depends simply on our own realization that where I am, God is. The challenge is to come to the point that where God is, I am. Wherever. Whenever. It is a case of my being present to God.

There is no degree of darkness that is not filled with the Light that is God. It simply depends on our ability to see.



THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 1: God is not a geographical question to be figured out and mapped and located and found. God is the geography.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 2: God is not what we understand. God is what we feel we are looking for more than we can possibly understand but know, despite it all, that it is there. Blaise Pascal puts it like this: “It is the heart that experiences God and not the reason.”

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 3: God is a magnet that attracts the soul. That’s why we are never satisfied with what we have. Whatever we have managed to include in our lives—even religion—is simply not enough unless it is everything. And nothing is, of course, except God.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 4: Augustine wrote, “You have made us for yourselves, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.” We know that God is present because we’re restless for The More. If there were nothing there to want, we wouldn’t want it. It’s as simple as that.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 5: The sure sign that we are living in the presence of God is the way we see and respond to the rest of the world. Those who have cultivated the presence of God, see the world as God sees the world. And they respond accordingly.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 6: To be transported out of the self—by love, by music, by beauty, by fear, by pain—is to be allowed to touch the center of our own universe, there is nothing left but the presence of God everywhere, in everyone else.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 7: There is no one way to come to a sense of the awareness of God. The coming to God is as unique as we are unique. “God enters by a private door into every individual,” Emerson wrote. That means that we must each be open to the presence of God as it comes to us and cultivate it—consciously, assiduously, always.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 8: The sense of the presence of God in us has something to do with our openness to that presence. No religious recipe will do it. It takes much more than that. It takes the consciousness on our part that God is lurking in the center of the self waiting to be discovered.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 9: Don’t doubt for a moment that God is with you. God is the tug you feel toward wholeness. The search for the best of the self is a response to the beckoning call of God.

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SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 10: Each of us is a missing piece of the body of God. It is merging one piece with the other that is the goal of life that can’t happen until it happens here. And just think: all it takes is the memory of it.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 11: The French tell us something that is absolutely essential to our sense of the presence of God: “If the triangles made a god, they would give their god three sides.” God is what we say God is—we make God into our own image. The important thing is to let God be God. Then we might be surprised to find out what we have known all along, that God comes in ways different from anything our own small imaginations can conceive.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 12: We know that God is present in a special way when we are more than ourselves and can’t explain it and when we are less than ourselves and survive it.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 13: The presence of God is that clear, calm voice within that guides us through

darkness as if it were light when we have not a clue how to get through it ourselves.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14: Our hearts know that we have come from somewhere and that we’re on our way to somewhere else. We also know that God is the presence between the two points who companions us from one situation to the other, who steadies us along the way, who takes us from one stage to another. God is the presence that sustains us as we go.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15: God is not an idea; God is what grips our souls and simply will not let go, even when we ourselves have little will to go on.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 16: God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. But the trick lies in learning to let ourselves hear the voice in our hearts that is more than ourselves. Or as Alice Walker puts it, “The experience of God, or in any case the possibility of experiencing God, is innate.”

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 17: Our problem is that we expect—we demand—that God will come to us as we expect God to come to us. We expect to find God in church, for instance, or in sorrow, maybe, or in success, surely. If that doesn’t happen, we say that God is absent when it is simply that God is waiting for us someplace else.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 18: God comes to us in a person, perhaps. In nature, maybe. In another culture, possibly. The call of the spiritual life is to be open. Always open for the feeling, the sign, the awareness of goodness, the strength that comes when and where we expect it least.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 19: The presence of God in absence is the magnet that calls us to the next step in life. When we are most sure that God has left us, may be exactly when we are coming to a new kind of union with God. Otherwise, why would we be thinking of God at all.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 20: God is not provable because God is too obvious to need proof. “A God who lets us prove his existence would be an idol,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote. It is possible that we keep trying to disprove the presence of God in life in order to be freed ourselves from the burden of beneficence that comes with being made in that same image.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 21: The God who created us lives in each of us. The Word that breathed us to life intends to speak through us. So it is to others who are also this voice, this image that we must listen for the message, strain to see the Face of God.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 22: God does not come to a visible world invisibly. God comes now as God always has: through the lives of those around us who challenge us and need us and enable us and prod us on.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 23: The Italian proverb teaches, “Those who leave God out of their reckoning do not know how to count.” We are not alone in this world. We simply forget at times to recognize the connections between this one and the next.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 24: The French philosopher Voltaire put it this

way, “To believe in God is impossible, not to believe in God is absurd.” But if that makes sense why does it not also make sense to realize that the God who made us out of God-stuff could not, then, abandon us?

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SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 25: When we feel abandoned by God, we need to realize that the repudiation may be all on our side. God is everywhere. The question is, Where are you?

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 26: If we have not developed the vision it takes to feel God in personal strength, in absence, in others, in beauty and in the twists and turns of life, that is no proof that God is not with us, only that we do not yet know how to be with God.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 27: We make of God a thing, a noun. But God is energy, is activity, is life. God is a verb. So looking for God in a

particular place or voice may be why we keep missing God’s presence. God is the energy inside of us, around us and beside us. God is the magnet of life because of which we become life and survive it.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28: When we begin to understand that God is everywhere, in everyone, alive in the world always, then life becomes a joy, not a burden, and other people a sign of possibility, not danger. Then we learn to laugh again.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 29: A public sinner was excommunicated and forbidden entry to the local church. He wailed his woes to God saying, “They won’t let me in, God, because I am a sinner.” And God answered back, “What are you complaining about? They won’t let me in, either!” If you are looking for the all-loving, all-merciful, all-just, all-knowing God, make sure that wherever you look, it is God you find.



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. When are you most aware of the presence of God in your life? Are there particular places or people that make you more conscious of it?
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, novel that echoes the theme of this month’s *Monastic Way*.
5. Sister Joan writes on February 5, “The sure sign that we are living in the presence of God is the way we see and respond to the rest of the world. Those who have cultivated the presence of God, see the world as God sees the world. And they respond accordingly.” Who have you known who lived like this?

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.

- “We make of God a thing, a noun, but God is energy, is active, is life.”
- “God is the tug you feel toward wholeness.”
- “The coming to God is as unique as we are unique.”

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....



SCRIPTURE ECHO

*“I will not leave you as orphans;
I will come to you. Before long,
the world will not see me anymore,
but you will see me.
Because I live,
you also will live.”*

—JOHN 14:18-19

PRAYER

Everything on earth is filled with sacred presence
Let us bow down and worship.

—Mary Lou Kownacki

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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- provide beauty to battered and bleak lives
- deliver daily positive reflective messages to stir the heart and seed the soul
- enable caring conversations that give people in prison something to believe in and a sense of the presence of God in themselves.

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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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