

THE MONASTIC WAY

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

IS THE FLESH BAD?

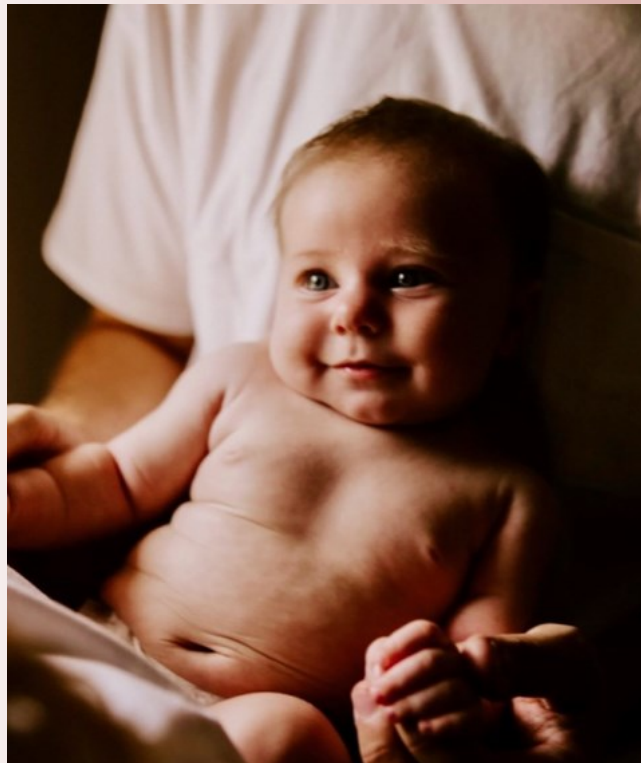
I had an uncle who drank for years. He was an embarrassment to the family. But in the end, when he sobered up, he was the one of us who worked day and night to help other people in pain.

There was a very religious family in the parish: Mass every morning, parish work every week, visits to the church every day. When the daughter had her first child out of wedlock, they refused to allow the father of the baby to visit the home. A couple down the street stopped going to Communion when they began using birth control. Love was the thing holding the two of them together but love, it seemed, was the problem.

The question is an ancient one, Is the flesh an obstacle to life with God? Is the flesh what makes life impossible? Is the flesh a drawback to holiness?

For many people, religion has something to do with fighting the flesh, taming it, beating it down, bringing it to submission so that the spirit can soar untrammelled by anything so mundane as a body. The flesh becomes the enemy of religion, the impediment of goodness, the pulsing, impulsive, lively gift that we're all meant to fear.

That's where Christianity comes in. Christianity is based on the goodness of flesh. Or to put it another way, If human flesh was good enough for Jesus, who of us can afford to reject it? To be human is to be flesh. To be holy is to glory in it.



The very scandal of Christianity lies in the fact that it sees divinity in humanity. It's a hard idea to swallow, after all. Every major religion recognizes the role of the Creator in the development of life, of course. But in it?

Part of it? Identified with it? Gods everywhere look down from the heavens of the world religions and pronounce laws or grapple with demons or pass judgment from on high. Only Christianity argues that the Creator has taken on the flesh and blood of creation in order to bring us to assert the divine in ourselves.

In the Christmas story, we see God become helpless, become like us, become subject to the tensions of growth, become flesh so we might have the confidence to recognize that we have the stuff it takes to become like God.

So, what is this about, renouncing the flesh? How can we call the way God made us inherently bad as philosophers have done since the time of Aristotle? The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning says of it, "Earth's crammed with heaven."

ANN MUCZYNSKI, OSB

And Wendell Berry writes:

*"In the dark of the moon,
in flying snow,
in the dead of winter,
war spreading,
families dying,
the world in danger,
I walk the rocky hillside, sowing clover."*

The flesh, in other words, is all we have. It is our glory. It is our power. It is sweet. It is beautiful. And it is the clay out of which we shape a better tomorrow.



SUNDAY, DECEMBER 1: The message of Christmas is that God comes to us in the small, human things in us that grow us as we go.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 2: Being flesh, being changeable, is the only hope we have. Otherwise, we would be cemented in our insufficiencies and unable to become more of what we are meant to be.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 3: The very flesh that fails us so often is the flesh that enables us to seek the truth, smell the grass and touch another person's hand. Don't fear it. Don't reject it. Rejoice in it.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 4: To be made flesh is the glory of humanity. It means that we are teachable, malleable and full of possibility.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 5: "We cannot despair of humanity," Albert Einstein wrote, "since we ourselves are human beings." Humanity is all we have and it has always been enough. It is the root of science, the depth of music and the awareness of God in the recesses of the human heart.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 6: Never worry about people who fear that they aren't strong enough, good enough, spiritual enough. Worry about the ones who are sure they are.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 7: To spend life trying to transcend the desires of the flesh is to choose to be rational rather than passionate. But either one without the other is some mutation of the human that God did not create.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 8: When you are inclined to despair of your own humanity, think fondly of the wag who wrote: "Be tolerant of the human race. Your whole family belongs to it—and some of your spouse's family does, too."

MONDAY, DECEMBER 9: We're always told that the essential element in humanity is rationality but when we describe a truly human person the term is hardly ever used. Isn't that telling us something? Or as George Bernard Shaw put it, "The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity."

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 10: To learn to "hate the flesh" is to turn against the only self in us that can really connect us to the rest of the human race.

*The purpose
of the human condition
is to get us in touch
with the divine possibility
that lives within us.*

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 11: Life was not meant to be one long dirge that we are human, with all the weakness that implies. It is meant to be an excursion in joyous possibility. Or as Francis Bacon said, "Our humanity were a poor thing were it not for the divinity which stirs within us."

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 12: It isn't what we can't do as humans that counts; it is what we can do that matters.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 13: Humanity is God's promise that things can always get better.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 14: "No doubt," A. A. Milne wrote, "Jack the Ripper excused himself on the grounds that it was human nature." But truth and love and beauty are as much human nature as murder is. It all depends on what we've learned to care about in life.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 15: What makes us most human is our contact with other humans. The way we respond to them has something to do with what I think about my own purpose in life.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 16: "I am part of all that I have met," Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote. My humanity is a composite of everything I've ever done in life. That's why the choices we make about what we will and will not do are so important.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 17: Whatever experiences we choose in life, choosing to do something is always better than choosing to do nothing because everything we do adds another layer of wisdom to our lives.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 18: To fear the flesh rather than to learn from it leaves us half alive. "When I hear somebody sigh that 'Life is hard,'" Sidney J. Harris wrote, "I am always tempted to ask, 'Compared to what?'"

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 19: "The course of human history is determined, not by what happens in the skies, but by what takes place in our hearts," Sir Arthur Kent wrote. The flesh, in other words, is our ticket to peace, not an invitation to disaster.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 20: The flesh is as close as we get to God on earth. Heaven starts in the flesh of us, not in some culturally cultivated out-of-body state of mind.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 21: Life was not created to be escaped. It is meant to be as ecstatic as the heaven to which it points. Why else would we have so many nerve endings?

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 22: The Christmas image of a baby in a manger is the best lesson we have

that the flesh is glorious in both its tamed and untamed state.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 23: Whoever taught the world to hate the flesh should be doomed to live forever, locked into the kind of self-hatred that the rejection of the self implies. Or, as Dickens put it, “it will be very generally found that those who will sneer habitually at human nature, and affect to despise it, are among its worst and least pleasant samples.”

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 24: “Every so often,” Howard Lindsay writes, “we pass laws repealing human nature.” But, try as we might, it never works because the only way the human being grows is by human trial and error. Anything else is not growth, it is simply conformity.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 25: Christmas is the great reminder of the glory of God in each of us. “In every child who is born, under no matter what circumstances, and of no matter what parents,” James Agee wrote, “the potentiality of the human race is born again.”

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 26: If the flesh is so bad, so dangerous, so broken, so evil then, as Theodore Parker said, “Humanity is the sin of God.”

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 27: The flesh is always good; our actions are often lacking. Or, as Mark Twain said, “Such is the human race. Often it does seem such a pity that Noah didn’t miss the boat.” But then, where would be the challenge of the voyage?

*To learn to “hate the flesh”
is to turn against
the only self in us
that can really connect us
to the rest
of the human race.*

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 28: The purpose of the human condition is to get us in touch with the divine possibility that lives within us.

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 29: Those who beat down the flesh suppress

the only chance we have to get a taste of the divine on earth. And without it, why try for heaven at all?

MONDAY, DECEMBER 30: The one hope we have of world unity is the fact that human nature is the same everywhere. We all want the same things: love, security, and peace. As soon as we want them for everyone else as badly as we want them for ourselves, there will be no more wars.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 31: On New Year’s Eve we think back on the year we’ve just been through. We can neither redo it nor undo it, true. But we can do more good than bad the next time around. The glory of humanity is its inherent ability to begin again.



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. What does the Incarnation mean to you in the light of these reflections by Joan Chittister? Is this a new idea for you or have you already felt this way for some time? Is your meaning of the Incarnation visible in your celebrations of Christmas? In what way?
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. How have you thought about the flesh over the course of your life? Is your feeling toward it now different than it was when you were younger? How did it evolve?

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.

- Life was not created to be escaped. It is meant to be as ecstatic as the heaven to which it points. Why else would we have so many nerve endings?
- The very flesh that fails us so often is the flesh that enables us to seek the truth, smell the grass and touch another person's hand.
- The Christmas image of a baby in a manger is the best lesson we have that the flesh is glorious in both its tamed and untamed state.

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....



ANN MUCZYNSKI, OSB

SCRIPTURE ECHO

*And the word became flesh and
dwelt among us.*
—JOHN 1:14

PRAYER

Prayer to She Who Is

Mother of dark soil, morning star, and vast ocean—
Mother who births plants, winged creatures,
fishes, and four-footed beasts—
Mother who nurses the stars, the planets,
the black universe—
Mother who suckles the children of earth—
Mother who holds creation in strong arms,
rocking it through the ages with the lullaby of life—
Show us your face, O Divine Mother.
Show us your face.

—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

We work with a network of prison chaplains and volunteers across the country to send thousands of free copies of *The Monastic Way* to women and men in prison.

A donation of \$12.00 will send a one-year subscription to a prisoner that can:

- 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.

www.joanchittister.org/donations

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.

The Monastic Way Vol. 33 No. 12
Free online subscriptions at
www.joanchittister.org

© 2024 Joan Chittister: Benetvision

355 East 9th St
Erie PA 16503-1107
T: 814-459-5994
benetvision@benetvision.org

No part of this publication may be reprinted without prior permission of the publisher. Benetvision is an outreach of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie.

www.joanchittister.org