

## THE MONASTIC WAY

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

### DIGNITY

*"How refreshing, the whinny of a packhorse unloaded of everything!" —Zen saying*

People bring clothes to the community's soup kitchen regularly. Some of it goes to specific families in need. Most of it goes to our soup kitchen guests themselves: winter coats, children's jackets, assortments of shoes and slacks and shirts and hats. All of it comes in clean and pressed, some of it new and unused, the labels still on the sleeves.

If you watch carefully you will see it go down the block later: lime green jackets over maroon pants, ball caps over suit coats, long women's coats over bulky jeans. The women wearing it are pushing shopping carts that hold everything else they own. The men carry their life possessions in green garbage bags over their shoulders or simply wear one set of clothes til it wears out before they try on another set.



That kind of "clothing the naked" is relatively easy. What is not easy is clothing the people who must wear it with the kind of dignity such clothes are meant to display.

There is, at the same time, a kind of poverty even more difficult to deal with than the need for clothes by those whose lives lack the means it takes to pick and choose, to save or give away, to mix and match their way through life. In fact, it is the dignity—the humanity—that those stripped naked of soul and psyche, body and reputation, most stand to lose in a world that lacks compassion. It is that kind of exposure which, in the end, strips us all down to the core of who we really are. We sell newspapers on this kind of nakedness daily. The headlines read:

"Socialite family shattered by expensive divorce case"

"Mentally ill man jailed for public exposure"

"Teenager abandoned by parents too poor to buy food"

"Woman executive found living in family car"

"Rape details released"

"Suspect's background reviewed"

It never ends, this exploitation of emotions, this public disclosure of private information, this exoteric parading of embarrassing data that serves no possible purpose. It is, at best, simply the lurid description of

irrelevant information that has nothing whatsoever to do with the common good or general welfare or civic government or social issues but can, nevertheless, mark people for life. No, this is information useful only to incite the voyeurs and degenerates. It leads people to hide themselves when they can't hide the facts.

It is the stripping naked of the vulnerable, the public lashing of the innocent, the diminishment of the underprivileged that is the eternal marking of a soul and a life in progress.

On each chest the world paints a huge A for alcoholic, a great P for petty pilferer, a large S for sexual sinner, a bright V for victim, a black V for vulnerable. And every time we do it, we expose ourselves—our smallness of soul and ideals, our destructiveness of the other, our own lack of security that leads us to build ourselves up by tearing other people down. And then we make ourselves smaller than the little people whose little pitfalls have been made too large to overcome in life.



**MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 1:** To give dignity to those society deprives of it covers our nakedness as well as theirs.

**TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 2:** When we deal tenderly with the lack in others, we make room for a new kind of greatness in ourselves.

**WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 3:** Those who take delight in the ridicule of others are those who fear the unmasking of their own inadequacies.

**THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 4:** There is nothing holy in pointing out the weaknesses of others. There is, in fact, only the admission of the jealousy that eats away at our own innards.

**FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 5:** Colossians 3:12 is clear about the relationship between goodness in ourselves and our goodness toward others: Because you are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with heartfelt mercy, with kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

**SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 6:** Those who thrive on the insufficiencies of others only prepare their own downfall, the moment at which the world sees through them, too. Inspired by their own sense of self-righteousness, they put their own weaknesses on display. "All are naked, none is safe," Marianne Moore writes. It is a lesson worth remembering, for our own sakes.

**SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 7:** Those who have nothing have only us. "Do you want to honor Christ's body?" John Chrysostom writes. "Then do not despise him when you see him naked, and do not honor him here in church by wearing silk, while you neglect him outside the church where he is cold and naked."

**MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 8:** The poor are among us so that we cannot be condemned by our unmerited wealth.

**TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 9:** There is no nakedness that can possibly obscure the essential worth of any and every human being. "Human nature has ineffable dignity," John Duns Scotus wrote.

**WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10:** There is no person below us and none above us either. We will be judged both on our respect for others and on our sense of the equality of all.

**THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 11:** When we deride another person, mock them, make fun of them, strip them of their essential dignity, we expose the pornographic emptiness of our own souls.

*What we fail  
to seek and to value  
in others is what  
is missing  
in our own souls.*

**FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 12:** When we have nothing that masks us, that makes us look like what we are not, then we have everything. Then there is nothing anyone can take from us that will leave us bereft or embarrassed or undone.

**SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 13:** Don't worry about what anyone will say about your past. Worry only about the authenticity of your present self-presentation.

**SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 14:** To misrepresent your age or your economic status or your professional credentials or your social situation is to have failed to come to grips with yourself. We can only be the best of what we are. Nothing less. Nothing more.

**MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 15:** Being willing to take everyone we meet at face value, to resist evaluating them against false norms, to treat them as equals, to honor their gifts, is a sign of our own security, our

own genuineness, our own quality of soul.

**TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 16:** To refuse to respond to the nakedness of another exposes my own. "Decorate yourself from the inside out," Andrei Turnhollow writes. It is a concept totally foreign to modern society but absolutely imperative to its salvation.

**WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 17:** We can only do so much to make ourselves look better than we are, either physically or spiritually. Then there is nothing left but the soul we bring to a situation with its kindness, its quality and its openness. Or, as Glenda Jackson puts it, "I used to believe that anything was better than nothing. Now I know that sometimes nothing is better."

**THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 18:** True is always better than false—even where I myself am concerned. "If most of us are ashamed of shabby clothes and shoddy furniture," Einstein wrote, "let us be more ashamed of shabby ideas and shoddy philosophies... It would be a sad situation if the wrapper were better than the meat wrapped inside it."

**FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 19:** The props of life—titles, uniforms, rank, cars, clothes, houses, social circles—are only that: The little marks we use to let people know how important we are. It's what we are without them that really matters.

**SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 20:** Those who are stripped of the props of life—money, things, reputation, education, professional rank—stand naked in our midst to show us what we ourselves would be without them. "It is an interesting question," Thoreau writes, "how far people would retain their relative rank if they were divested of their clothes."

**SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 21:** What we wear makes us forget what we are—or pretend to be more than we are. "What a strange power there is

in clothing,” Isaac Bashevis Singer writes, which ought to lead us to wonder how many geniuses are sitting on park benches unemployed, unnoticed, and untapped for their social resources while society ignores them to its peril.

**MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 22:** When we fail to clothe children with education, the arts, and culture, eventually, it will leave all of us naked of dignity and stripped of social impact.

**TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 23:** It isn’t so much that we are naked that matters. What matters more is what we choose to cover ourselves with as we go through life.

**WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 24:** When we make no room in our lives for those who are least like us, we are most naked of reality.

**THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 25:** Jesus is the great model of what it is to be genuine. In a stable, in a manger, in the cold, without retinue, without fanfare, without signs and symbols of public station and public import, Jesus came. And the world around him changed forever.

**FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 26:** Burying ourselves in things only serves to hide us—even from ourselves. As the philosopher Simone Weil said: “Attachment is a manufacturer of illusions and whoever wants reality ought to be detached.”

*There is nothing holy  
in pointing out  
the weaknesses of others.  
There is, in fact,  
only the admission  
of the jealousy  
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own innards.*

**SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 27:** Better to walk through life simply and without masks, than to lose ourselves in the pursuit of identities that are purely cosmetic and commercial. Then, at least, we will be known for what we are rather than for what we are not.

**SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 28:** Nothing we manage to amass here can change the value of what we really are underneath it all. “Why

snatch at wealth, and hoard and stock it?” Betty Paoli writes. “Your shroud, you know, will have no pocket.”

**MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 29:** What we fail to seek and to value in others is what is missing in our own souls. If we discount honesty and beauty, effort and sincerity, simplicity and kindness in those around us, it is we who are naked of these things. It is we who miss the meaning of life. “Our dignity,” George Santayana writes, “is not in what we do, but what we understand.”

**TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 30:** In clothing the nakedness of others, we array ourselves in qualities too profound to mention but too powerful to be missed by the rest of the world.



## 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 we have nothing that masks us, that makes us look like what we are not, then we have everything,” writes Joan Chittister on September 12. Does this ring true in your experience? Which of your masks are you least willing to part with?
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 urges us not to point out other people’s weaknesses, expose their failings, or take interest in the details of their low moments. Is this a challenge for you, or your natural inclination?



## 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.

- True is always better than false—even where I myself am concerned.
- There is no person below us and none above us either. We will be judged both on our respect for others and on our sense of the equality of all.
- When we deal tenderly with the lack in others, we make room for a new kind of greatness in ourselves.

**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

*Because you are God's chosen ones,  
holy and beloved,  
clothe yourselves  
with heartfelt mercy,  
with kindness, humility,  
gentleness and patience.*

- COLOSSIANS 3:12

## PRAYER

Who is fit to hold power  
and worthy to act in God's place?  
Those with a passion for the truth,  
who are horrified by injustice,  
who act with mercy to the poor  
and take up the cause of the helpless,  
who have let go of selfish concerns  
and see the whole earth as sacred,  
refusing to exploit her creatures  
or to foul her waters and lands.  
Their strength is in their compassion;  
God's light shines through their hearts.  
Their children's children will bless them,  
and the work of their hands will endure.

—Psalm 24

*A Book of Psalms. New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, Inc, 1993. Used with permission.*

## 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 \$15.00 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](http://www.joanchittister.org/donations)

**JOAN CHITTISTER** is one of the most influential religious and social leaders of our time. For over 50 years she has passionately advocated on behalf of peace, human rights, women's issues, and monastic and church renewal. A much sought-after international speaker, she is also a best-selling author of more than 60 books. Her new podcast series, "Risking the Questions", is available wherever you listen to your podcasts.

### JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Each month, join the staff of Benetvision on a free Zoom call to discuss the current issue of *The Monastic Way*. Subscribers will receive invitations to register for these calls in their email inbox.

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