



The Monastery

a resource for RE and PHSE for young people based on the BBC2 documentary 'The Monastery'

❖ Series Synopsis

'The Monastery' follows the experiences of 5 men as they spend 40 days with the monks of Worth Abbey to discover if monastic traditions and spirituality have anything to offer the 21st century. Although from very different backgrounds, all 5 men share a desire to see if life holds any greater meaning. During their stay, they are expected to abide by all the monasteries rules, with a strict timetable of instruction, study, prayer, reflection and manual labour. 'The Monastery' is a three-part BBC2 documentary filmed by Tiger Aspect Productions, in conjunction with Jerusalem Productions, for BBC2.

❖ The Rule of St Benedict

St Benedict wrote his Rule for Monasteries at Monte Cassino in the early 6th century. The very first word is LISTEN which sets the whole tone of the work and its spirituality.

The Rule consists of 73 short chapters and an introduction. A Prologue is followed by seven chapters of spiritual doctrine (on listening to each other, on the tools of good works, and on obedience, silence and humility). This is followed by 13 chapters covering liturgical requirements. The remainder of the Rule covers practical arrangements for living in community and the community life. Finally the Rule returns to its beginning, emphasising the importance of zeal for God and that the Rule is only the beginning of perfection.

There are certain dominant themes throughout the Rule, and hence throughout Benedictine spirituality: searching for God, listening to his voice in everyday

experiences, the balance necessary between prayer and work, and the three vows of obedience, stability and daily conversion. There is also an emphasis on silence (in order to truly listen) on humility; and on peace within oneself and around one. Prayer is dominant as a means both of listening to God and glorifying God. In a monk's life it takes the form of the Divine Office (praying together, mainly with the Psalms), devotion as one's own private prayer, prayer as meditative reading, contemplating and "ruminating on Scripture".

❖ Questions for Discussion

1. Could you imagine yourself doing the same thing as these five men and joining a religious community (for males or females) for a few weeks? What would attract you to the idea? What would put you off?
2. What do you think makes people decide to become monks? Has your opinion changed since seeing the programme?
3. If you were one of the five men in the programme, what would you have found hardest about being at the monastery?
4. How has the programme changed your opinions about monks and living in a monastery?
5. Where do you go to have the space to be quiet and think about your life? Where would your ideal quiet space be and what would it look like?
6. What places or times in your life have you have felt the presence of God or had a 'spiritual' experience.

❖ Reactions to the Series

These quotes can be used as an exercise for students to react and respond to some of the ideas presented in 'The Monastery'. Copy the list and cut each one into a separate piece of paper. Ask students to position them on their desks close or further away from themselves, according to how far they agree.

"I wish it had been me spending 6 weeks at the monastery. I would have loved it."

"No one should have to live such a strict life and obey others."

"They think they are hearing God, but really it's just what's going on in their own heads. Anyone who lived like those monks would start to imagine they were hearing God."

"Religion and spirituality should be in the real world, not trying to escape it. It's a cop out to live in a monastery."

"I liked the monks' spirituality, but I don't think I could ever experience something like that myself."

"I like the idea of having space to listen and think, but it's not realistic to expect everyone to do that. What if you've got kids or something? I need a spirituality that helps me live in the ordinary world."

"I like the idea of a monastery, but only if you could have music and TV and visit outside sometimes."

"The monks have really found God. Their faith and lives are really incredible."

"Listening to God is a new idea to me, but I kind of like it. I wish you really could hear God's voice, but I'm not convinced it's possible."

❖ Reflection

If I spent 6 weeks in a monastery:

The things I would miss most are...

The things I would enjoy most are...

The hardest thing would be...

I hope I would find...

❖ Discussion

"There are more and more superficial pleasures in life, but deep down people are not happy. We believe we have the answer to that dissatisfaction with life." Do you think Abbot Christopher is right?

❖ Values Auction

One of the things the programme highlights is the values that are underneath the things we do. This exercise asks students to take an imaginary £10,000 and decide how they would spend it at a 'values' auction. Using £100 lots to make it easier, the exercise should be run as a proper auction, with bidding taking place for each item.

Instructions: Take a look at the list below and decide which you would like to buy. You only have £10,000 and you will be bidding in an auction against everyone else, so you'll have to decide what matters to you most. It often helps to start by choosing three that you would most like from the list, and then concentrate on bidding for them first.

1. A beautiful house in your chosen location
2. The ability to meditate and experience God
3. A successful career.
4. Free clothes from any store for life.
5. Certainty about whether God exists or not.
6. The ability to listen to others really well.
7. Free entry to any sporting event for life.
8. Humility in all areas of your life.
9. Free plastic surgery for life.
10. A close group of friends.

❖ St Benedict: Did He have a Point?

St Benedict's Rule has been used for hundreds of years to help people deepen their spirituality. But is it relevant to our lives today? This exercise creates a context to discuss this question.

Read carefully through the following quotes from the Rule of St Benedict. Consider...

"The disciple's role is to be silent and listen."

"Idleness is the enemy of the soul, therefore the community must be occupied at definite times in manual labour."

"The pure love of one another as of one family should be the ideal."

"If you are harmed by anyone, bear patiently what you have to suffer."

"Obedience to superiors is obedience to God."

"Monks should be ready to outdo each other in mutual obedience."

"Humility is not having your own way, nor to delight in our own desires."

"Listen, child of God, to the guidance of your teacher."

...would your life be better or worse if you followed these rules yourself? Would the world be a better place if more people were monks?

...which would come easily, and which would be the hardest to obey? How do the monks manage to follow them?

...which are most relevant for life in the modern world, and which, if any, no longer have any meaning for today?

❖ Case Study: Tony

Take a look at the story of Tony, one of the five men who went to the monastery available online at <http://www.worthabbey.net/bbc/tony.htm>.

Why do you think Tony was so affected by his experience at the monastery?

How would you advise Tony to apply his experience at the monastery to his everyday life in the world?

❖ Links

<http://www.worthabbey.net/bbc/index.html>

Worth Abbey's own site on The Monastery with lots of information about the programmes.

<http://www.life4seekers.co.uk/TheMonasteryFreebies.htm>

A Catholic site with links to recommended reading on Benedictine spirituality.

http://www.worthabbey.net/abbey/news_01.htm

List of newspaper and magazine articles about the programme plus some radio interviews you can download and play.

<http://www.sacredspace.ie/>

A Jesuit site with daily reflections and prayers.

<http://www.embody.co.uk/labyrinth/online.html>

An online journey of reflection about God and personal spirituality.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/state/church_reformation/launch_vr_abbey.shtml

A virtual tour of a monastery.

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