

Being Vigilant

June 2022

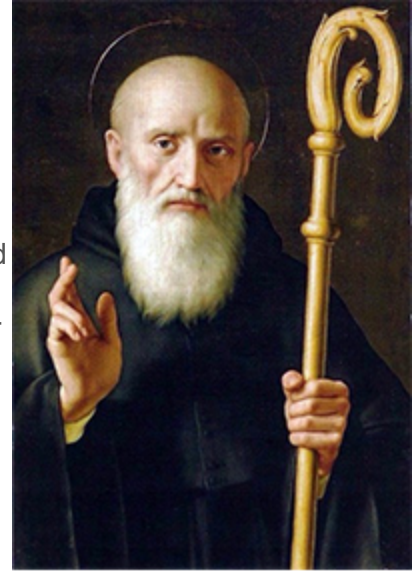
Last week I spent 48 hours praying with Benedictine monks at the New Melleray Abbey near Dubuque, Iowa. These dedicated men pray seven times a day, gathering in a high-ceilinged, magnificent chapel, chanting the Psalms, reading Scripture, and praying for the world. On both days of my retreat, I set my alarm for 3 a.m. so I could make the first prayers of the day called Vigils. While most people in our country were sleeping, we were praying for them. That is what monks do; they pray for our well-being, calling upon God and his army of angels to do battle against the evil in our hearts and world. A lot of people do not know what monks do and may even poke fun at them. These holy men are warriors for Christ's kingdom. They are soldiers fighting against all the terrible forces in the world which are waiting to destroy our souls. They are good shepherds guarding the well-being of their flocks. And they invited us to pray with them so we can learn how to exercise the gift of prayer as well.

My heart broke when I read in the news last month that Russian forces had bombed a Ukrainian Orthodox monastery which had recently broken its allegiance with the Russian Orthodox Church. Two dedicated monks and a nun were killed in this horrible act of unprovoked violence. This tragic war is causing the Body of Christ in the former Soviet Union to be more divided than ever. Three years ago, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church broke its official relations with the Russian Orthodox Church after hundreds of years of cooperation. The Russian Orthodox Church has been furious over this declaration of independence, especially because the city of Kiev is the birthplace of the Russian Orthodox Church centuries ago. Many Ukrainians believe that Patriarch Kirill, of Moscow, and other influential Russian Orthodox priests have become complicit with the Russian government and the KGB. They have even blessed President Vladimir Putin's ambitions and the war against Ukraine.

Please be in prayer for the faithful believers in both the Ukrainian Orthodox and Russian Orthodox Churches. There are numerous, humble followers of Christ in both denominations whose hearts are being torn apart by this unprovoked, empire-building war. Russia and Ukraine are Christian majority countries, including faithful believers from Roman Catholic and Protestant denominations as well. The war is pitting Christians against Christians. Monasteries, monks, and churches on both sides of the border are praying for an end to the war and the madness and evil that originated it. May we join them with our own fervent prayers while remembering these words of the Apostle Paul and his constant cry for unity amongst Christians: "Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all." (Ephesians 4:1-6)



For the past 30 years, periodically, I have seized every opportunity I could to leave behind all the demands of my busy ministry and family life to be alone in silence with Benedictine monks in various monasteries across our country. The Benedictine Order has a deep-seated belief in the Christian virtue of hospitality, welcoming the stranger, finding and celebrating Christ in the other person. They welcome weary and overworked people like me who need rest, the gift of silence, and the infinite blessings of prayer. I have not been able to make these retreats and therefore be refreshed for the past two-and-a-half years because of the pandemic. At 66 years old, I am now measuring the remaining years of my life and active service within the Body of Christ worldwide. My extroverted personality needs a regular dose of the very silence the Benedictine community offers us visitors. There is no talking among the retreatants, even at mealtime. It is beautifully peaceful throughout the hallways and on the grounds. God asks us to be still before him so we can hear his voice, especially now in our highly over-stimulated world full of unnecessary and superfluous noises and distractions. It is only in the presence of silence and prayer we can fully recall our need to be patient, vigilant, and hopeful as we present our needs, sorrows, and petitions before the Lord. Through silence within a peaceful environment, we can hear more clearly his comforting voice within us and seize the opportunity to embrace the unique word and guidance he has to offer for our lives.



Saint Benedict

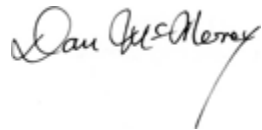
Who fights your battles for you? Is it you alone against the world? Do you often find yourself agitated, defensive, on guard, or spinning in circles without knowing why? God does not want us to live our lives that way. He wants us to include him in our daily struggles and battles. He has wisdom he wants to give us. He has an army of angels at his disposal to help us. Our battles involve the unseen world more than we know. He wants us to be ambassadors for his Good News and representatives of his love, helping others in need. He does not want us to be entering into contentious political, personal, or societal discussions with our fists raised and heated arguments ready to be drawn from our holsters. Instead, he wants us to lead with listening ears, grace, empathy, and a thirst for truth and justice. However, to be in the right frame of mind and most effective for his kingdom, we often need to be on our knees confessing our sins, asking for his forgiveness, help and direction. In other words, he wants us to be in prayer before him on a regular basis.

Are you a nightwatchman or good shepherd for others in your life, or are you thinking primarily about yourself and your own needs all day long? Being a follower of Christ means we have been given the indescribable gift of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Holy Spirit helps us to look outwards towards the needs of others, not just our own. God asks us to be intercessors and a support for each other. Mysteriously and beautifully through our prayers we can bring healing, reconciliation, and hope into the lives of people we hold dear, as well as our enemies. May we learn how to retreat, be silent, and give God our full attention as often as we possibly can through our prayers for the sake of our own lives and for our neighbors. May we learn to be vigilant, aware, and alert to the needs of our neighbors and the confines of our own hearts as well. The Apostle John once wrote, "I have written this to you who



believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life. And we are confident that he hears us whenever we ask for anything that pleases him. And since we know he hears us when we make our requests, we also know that he will give us what we ask for." (1 John 5:13-15)

The thing I liked most about getting up each morning to pray at 3:30 was the beautiful sound of birds, singing at the top of their lungs returning thanks to God and greeting their neighbors. I happened to be at the monastery during the longest day of the year with the most sunlight, June 21st . There is a lot more life going on in the middle of the night than I had realized. During that breaking dawn, the monks and I were singing, too, praising God for another beautiful day of life. We were also praying that the peace of God be with you, our families, friends, neighbors, loved ones and with our brothers and sisters in Christ, all around the world.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Dan McHenry". The signature is written in dark ink on a white background. The first name "Dan" is written in a simple cursive, while "McHenry" is more elaborate, with a large, sweeping "M" and a long, trailing flourish at the end.