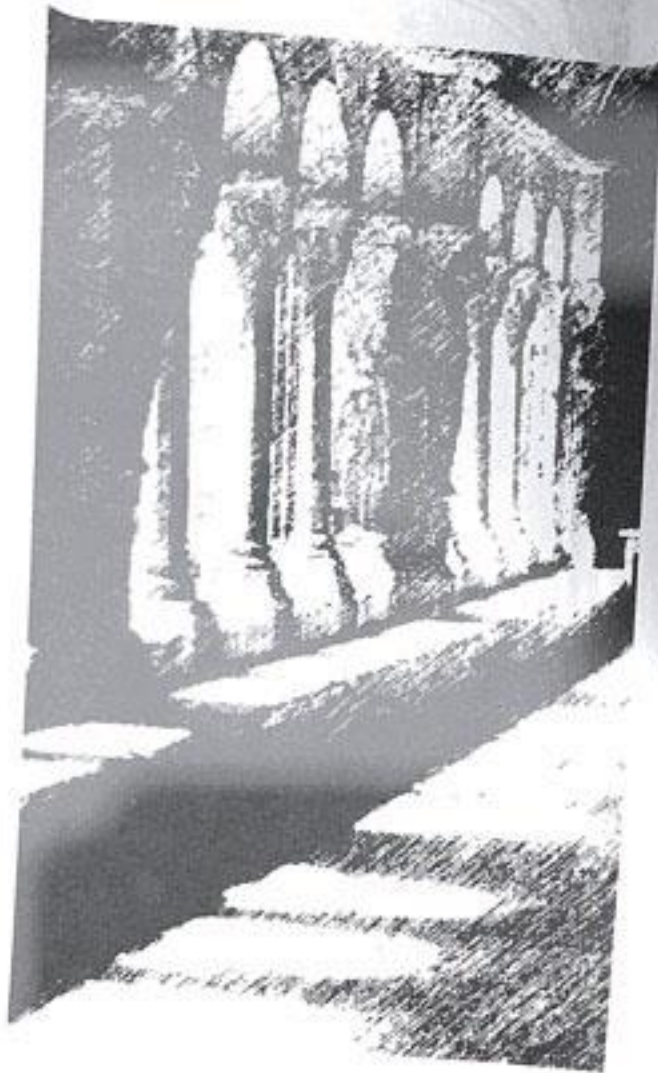


## FOUR

### Lessons *from* the Monastic Cell



Here's some advice from the Desert Fathers and Mothers: Go to your cell, and your cell will teach you everything you need to know. Here's another counsel from Thomas à Kempis's famous book *The Imitation of Christ*: Every time you leave your cell you come back less a person.

On the surface, these counsels are directed at monks, and cell refers to the private room of a monk, with its small single cot, its single chair, its writing desk, its small basin or sink, and its kneeler. The counsels suggest that there is a lot to be learned by staying inside that space, and there are real dangers in stepping outside it. What can this possibly say to someone who is not a monk or contemplative nun?

These counsels were written for monks, but the deep principles underlying them can be extrapolated to shed wisdom on everyone's life.

What's the deep wisdom here? These counsels are not saying, as has sometimes been taught, that a monastic vocation is superior to a lay vocation. Nor are they saying that, if someone is a monk or a professional contemplative, social interaction outside one's cell is unhealthy.



Cell, as referred to here, is a metaphor, an image, a place inside life, rather than someone's private bedroom. Cell refers to duty, vocation, and commitment. In essence, this is what's being said:

Go to your cell, and your cell will teach you everything you need to know: Stay inside your vocation, inside your commitments, inside your legitimate conscriptive duties, inside your church, inside your family, and they will teach you where life is found and what love means. Be faithful to your commitments, and what you are ultimately looking for will be found there.

Every time you leave your cell you come back less a person: This is telling us that every time we step outside our commitments, every time we are unfaithful, every time we walk away from what we should legitimately be doing, we come back less a person for that betrayal.

There's a rich spirituality in these principles: Stay inside your commitments, be faithful, your place of work is a seminary, your work is a sacrament, your family is a monastery, your home is a sanctuary. Stay inside them, don't betray them, learn what they are teaching you without constantly looking for life elsewhere and without constantly believing that God is elsewhere.



What we have committed ourselves to constitutes our monastic cell. When we are faithful to that, namely, to the duties that come to us from our personal relationships and our place of work, we learn life's lessons by osmosis. Conversely, whenever we betray our commitments as they pertain to our relationships or to our work, we become less than what we are.

We are all monks, and it matters not whether we are in a monastery or are in the world as spouses, parents, friends, ministers in the church, teachers, doctors, nurses, laborers, artisans, social workers, bankers, economic advisors, salespersons, politicians, lawyers, mental health workers, contractors, or retirees. Each of us has our cell, and that cell can teach us what we need to know.

