

*Fr. Perozich comments —*

*Because of the length of the article, some bullet points of statements that moved me are provided for those who might get bogged down in the whole text. These bullet points moved me to reflect on my relationship with God and the daily and even hourly reorientation I need to move beyond the world toward eternal life.*

- *Monastic life,” says Fr Hugh Allan, the abbot of a Norbertine community in Chelmsford in England, “is that reminder to the world to be careful how you live here and now because your life and actions now are what will echo for eternity. The cemetery is full of people who thought they were indispensable.”*

- ***“When we ask the junior monks what were their motivations, they almost always say: the liturgy; the Gregorian chant; the Latin language; long and rich tradition of fifteen centuries of Benedictine life,” Fr Grzegorz says. He highlights how the way the Dominican friars preach the Gospel has been very appealing to young people, with the “liturgy celebrated in a beautiful way, educated preaching and the basis of Thomism” providing “solid foundations in this time of ideological turmoil.”***

- *But, in a way, that process of dissolution [of monasteries] never stopped, going far beyond the matrimonial motivations of an obstinate and reckless king. **For it has occurred in almost all countries, certainly in the West, spurred on by modern secular trends and accompanying shifting mores.***

- *There have been fallow periods before. Having said that, yes, we are in a time of decline. For those of us in monastic life, it is time when we are called upon to be completely faithful and persevere in our vocation. Remember that God has not stopped calling people to monastic life; the problem is that people have stopped listening.” [and non monastics as well have stopped listening —rp]*

- *Huxley argued that the modern era’s increasing obsession with the rational and what can be “proven” has occurred to the detriment of the metaphysical realm and those hidden dimensions deep inside our hearts and souls. As we lose touch with those imperceptible kingdoms—and*

*which is a focus of those who take monastic vows—despair and rancor are often left.*

- *the “fundamental identity” of all humans, consisting of “incarnated minds, subject to physical decay and death, capable of pain and pleasure, driven by craving and abhorrence and oscillating between the desire for self-assertion and the desire for self-transcendence.”*
- *we don’t pause to ask what the metaphysical consequences for society might be if those centers of dedicated prayer and spiritual devotion, offered on behalf of the rest of us distracted by our temporal problems, are no longer in operation.*
- *Governments, nations, societies come and go. Only God endures forever and He has given us the gift of monastic life. But a gift must always be unwrapped.”*
- *monasteries and convents have always provided a crucial crucible of concentrated and continual prayer offered up for the rest of society going about its daily trials and tribulations.*
- *Bishop Sheen went as far as to **say**, “Satan stations more devils on monastery walls than in the dens of iniquity, for the latter offer no resistance.”*
- *monasteries form a crucial part of the delivery system to society of that “spiritual fighting power”*
- *Fulton Sheen wrote in Love, Marriage and Children. “Why are the two linked together? First of all, because modern man, denying immortality, has no hope beyond the grave. Since this world is all, he must derive from it all the pleasure that he can. But, in the midst of his pleasure, he always sees death hovering over him as a shadow and threatening a moment when the pleasures will disappear.”*
- *freedom is not found in the total absence of restrictions, rather, it is only achieved through the counterintuitive situation of there being certain limits in place, thereby preventing liberty spiraling out of control into self-destructive license.*

- *Hence monks and nuns, seemingly trapped in their monasteries and convents to the eyes of many, are **able to experience true spiritual freedom and to embrace that spiritual fighting power that so many of us lack, despite all the liberty we think we enjoy each day.** In doing so, monks and nuns offer an important example and reminder to the rest of us, while they can help in other more tangible ways.*

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## **Monastic decline and the loss that goes with it**

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[December 3, 2022 James Jeffrey](#)

Print



**The Cistercian monastery of Santa María la Real de Oseira. (Image courtesy of the author)**

A strange sense of beautiful abandonment accompanied me as I passed between the soundless cloisters of the Cistercian monastery *Santa María la Real de Oseira* in north-western Spain. One cloister was overrun with purple lavender flowers, the air replete with their tender aroma. In another, flocks of house martins flew around mossy stone pillars, apparently oblivious to the holy environs while depositing plenty of avian waste on the ground. Great stone staircases that two Humvees abreast of each other could drive up led toward another level of endless corridors and rooms.

Amid all that, not entirely surprisingly, I wandered off the path allotted to visitors. A young brother approached me to point out politely that I had strayed into the monks' private quarters. He spoke good English and while leading me back to the official route, he patiently fielded my questions. At one time, he explained, 150 monks lived in the monastery. Now there were just nine.

At least that's something. Walking around Rievaulx Abbey in the North Yorkshire region of England, crumbling ruins and masonry outlines are all that is left of the giant 12th-century monastic complex that once housed 140 monks and 500 lay brothers in a verdant valley beside a bubbling brook (all of which still manages to dazzle, especially on a summer's day). Admittedly Rievaulx's decline was brought about by the intervention of Henry VIII and the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1538. But, in a way, **that process of dissolution never stopped, going far beyond the matrimonial motivations of an obstinate and reckless king. For it has occurred in almost all countries, certainly in the West, spurred on by modern secular trends and accompanying shifting mores.**

“There is an obvious decline in religious vocations in Central and Eastern European,” says Fr Grzegorz Hawryłeczko, a monk at the Abbey of Tyniec in Cracow. He cites figures published annually by the Conference of Major Superiors of Men's Religious Orders in Poland: In 2011 there were 2,032 candidates in formation, which included 365 religious from foreign countries, mostly from Africa, South America, Ukraine and Belarus. In 2021 there were 1,295 candidates in formation, including 447 foreigners.

“So when you count only Polish candidates, it turns out that the numbers have dropped by half,” Fr Grzegorz says. “This trend is obviously more general: the number of candidates to priesthood has decreased by 60 percent over the course of the last 20 years; the number of candidates requesting entry to the diocesan seminaries has dropped by 20 percent over the course of the last year.”

Such trends are a feature in the U.S. too. A 2018 *New York Times* **article** notes that the number of Catholic brothers in the U.S. has **declined by more than two-thirds** since 1965, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.

“When you look over history, monastic life has always gone through times when vocations were plentiful, and times when a lot of monastic houses barely kept going or even closed,” says Fr Hugh Allan, the abbot of a Norbertine community in Chelmsford in England. “It is important to see the current vocations crisis in terms of history. There have been fallow periods before. Having said that, yes, we are in a time of decline. **For those of us in monastic life, it is time when we are called upon to**

**be completely faithful and persevere in our vocation. Remember that God has not stopped calling people to monastic life; the problem is that people have stopped listening.”**

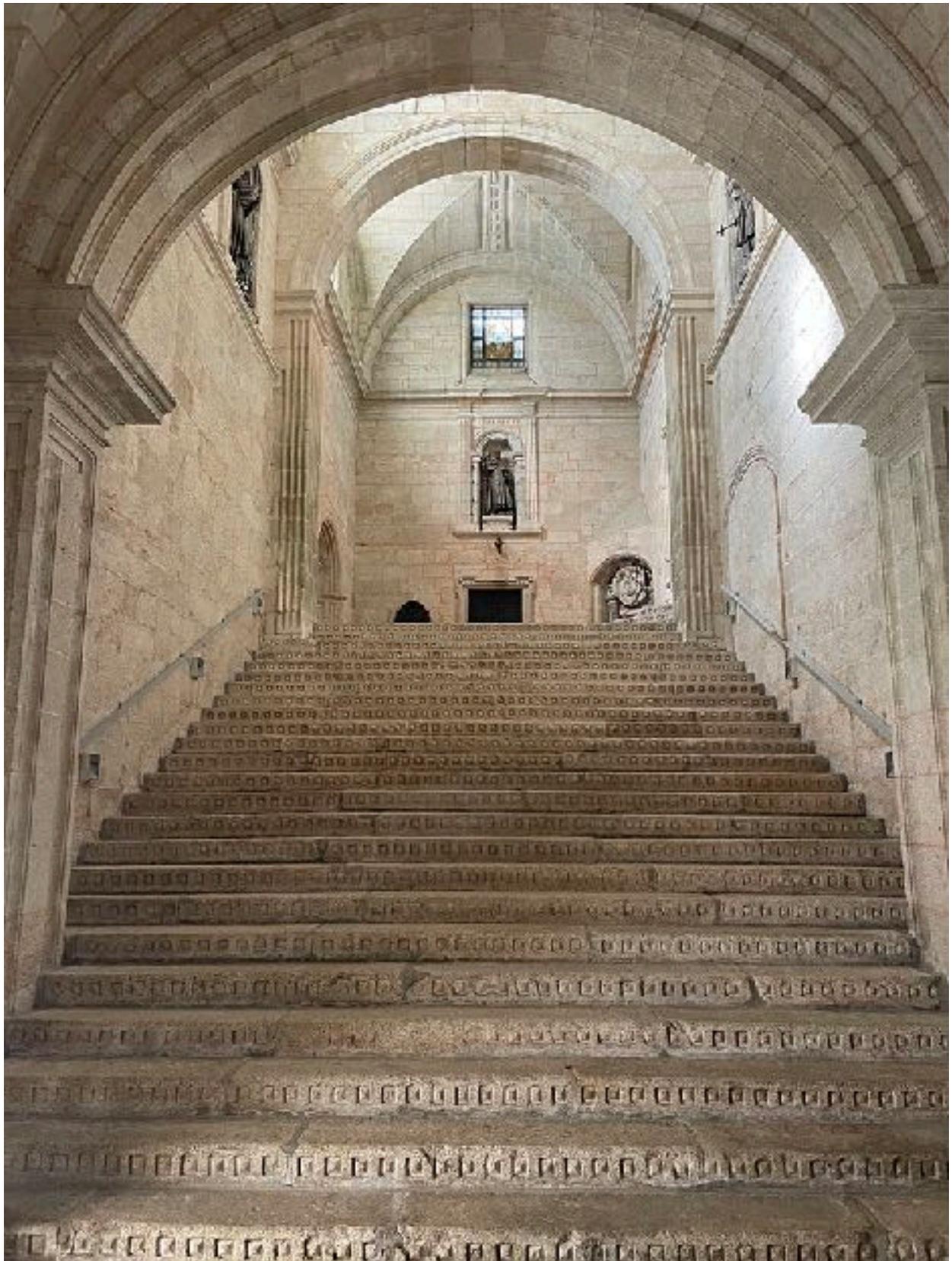
That it is most obvious in Europe is due to the sheer physical evidence of defunct monasteries left behind after so many centuries of Christian worship. As I hiked across Spain and then Portugal during what felt like an **End of Days Camino** to escape lockdowns during the COVID pandemic, I got used to walking out of cities in the lee of abandoned monasteries and convents high up on a surrounding hill or which had been converted to lavish hotels.

More recently, I organized and led a week-long **mini-Camino pilgrimage for the *Catholic Herald***, one of the world’s oldest Catholic publications. Both the first and last days of hiking ended with our latter-day Canterbury Tales assembly staying in the buildings of former convents converted into holiday and hotel accommodation. This, combined with all those previous examples I’d witnessed of grand monasteries and convents either empty or containing a small religious order holding out amid crumbling and cavernous interiors, gave added resonance to the pressing words of the priest accompanying the Catholic Herald group. He spoke of the need for “spiritual fighting power”—he happened to be ex-military—to counter the sense of doubt, fear and hopelessness that seems to grip so many today.

The modern world, especially its scientific cadre, is especially good at probing and prodding in the search of answers based on empirical data. But the British writer Aldous Huxley, best known for his vivid dystopian rendering in *Brave New World*, warned how this process can become dangerously one-sided. **Huxley argued that the modern era’s increasing obsession with the rational and what can be “proven” has occurred to the detriment of the metaphysical realm and those hidden dimensions deep inside our hearts and souls. As we lose touch with those imperceptible kingdoms—and which is a focus of those who take monastic vows—despair and rancor are often left.**

“Hell is total separation from God, and the devil is the will to that separation,” Huxley wrote in *The Perennial Philosophy*, his anthology of

the basic tenets that he contended link all major faiths and have underlined religious inquiry throughout human history. Huxley also highlighted how human behavior has remained remarkably similar across the eons. He put this down to **the “fundamental identity” of all humans, consisting of “incarnated minds, subject to physical decay and death, capable of pain and pleasure, driven by craving and abhorrence and oscillating between the desire for self-assertion and the desire for self-transcendence.”**



*The Cistercian monastery of Santa María la Real de Oseira.*

*(Image courtesy of the author)*

Today, though, increasingly caught up in the whirlwind of technological gismos and distractions, many are losing sight of this fundamental identity. As they are, too, of the vulnerabilities that come with that human condition and which must be administered to, lest we become like G.K. Chesterton's children huddling in terror at the center of a tall island amid the sea in his book *Orthodoxy*. Following the walls that ringed the island being removed by well-intentioned interveners in the name of "freedom," those previously carefree children—who had been playing unconcernedly and safe from danger thanks to those protective walls—are confronted with the "naked peril of the precipice."

Similarly, we seem to have become so used to the idea that our modernizing world must necessarily entail the terminal decline of monasteries and monastic life, **we don't pause to ask what the metaphysical consequences for society might be if those centers of dedicated prayer and spiritual devotion, offered on behalf of the rest of us distracted by our temporal problems, are no longer in operation.**

"The cost to society would be truly tragic if monastic [or] religious life were to disappear," Abbot Hugh says. "I don't think it ever will, but for this time in history, the presence of religious in society may be smaller than in past generations, but this is the age we are called to live in. **Governments, nations, societies come and go. Only God endures forever and He has given us the gift of monastic life. But a gift must always be unwrapped.**"

It is easy for people to be cynical about the utility of a group of men and women spending their entire life in one spot, celibate and disengaged from the rest of society, each day repeating the same routine and saying the same prayers for hours on end. But **monasteries and convents have always provided a crucial crucible of concentrated and continual prayer offered up for the rest of society going about its daily trials and tribulations.** Theologians, including Fulton Sheen, have long argued for the vital power of prayer and the importance for the Church's spiritual tradition of vocations to a life of prayer.

Knowing the spiritual significance of the monastic life, **Bishop Sheen went as far as to say, “Satan stations more devils on monastery walls than in the dens of iniquity, for the latter offer no resistance.”**

**“Above all, I think monastic life is that constant call to look to the far horizon,” says Abbot Hugh. “This life is not all there is. Life changes, it does not end, and we should reflect on eternity. Monastic life is that reminder to the world to be careful how you live here and now because your life and actions now are what will echo for eternity. The cemetery is full of people who thought they were indispensable.”**

It was also the restrained and dogged persistence of medieval monasticism that helped preserve Western civilization through the many dark periods of the medieval era. On such terms, it strikes me that **monasteries form a crucial part of the delivery system to society of that “spiritual fighting power”** that the priest on our mini-Camino spoke about.

I can’t deny some personal bias around talk of spiritual fighting power and the role of monks due to my experiences of both monastic and military traditions. Ten years of my schoolboy education occurred at monastic boarding schools run by Benedictine monks, including Ampleforth College, one of the UK’s most prestigious Catholic schools. The school had its problems—and scandals—but the vast majority of the monks struck me as good, holy men. My time at Ampleforth and experiences of the monks left me with a grasp on the spiritual and philosophical dimensions that, however dimly understood, helped sustain me through darker days during my military service and then, having left, when grappling as a civilian with the shame and guilt about the disasters of Iraq and Afghanistan that form the legacy of that service.

Once the parade ground at the Royal Military Academy of Sandhurst, the U.K.’s equivalent to West Point, became the nexus of my educational trajectory following Ampleforth, I was taught about how combat effectiveness, distilled as Fighting Power, depended on a crucial triptych of components. These were the physical, the conceptual and the moral. Once you lost any one of those—in Afghanistan, arguably both the moral and conceptual components went to pot—like a two-legged stool, the edifice

toppled over. We were also taught how “morale is a state of mind”. If it is to endure, it must have “certain foundations”, according to the *Serve to Lead* anthology, which was the Sandhurst equivalent of the Bible comprising the wisdom of great former soldiers. Every officer cadet received a copy of it. In order of importance, those foundations are given as the “spiritual, intellectual and material.” Material is the least important because “the very highest kinds of morale are often met when material conditions are lowest.” Intellectual is the next most important because “men are swayed by reason as well as feeling.” It is the spiritual element that leads the pack “because only spiritual foundations can stand real strain.”

That former military leaders recognized this essential fact makes it even more striking—and disturbing—to see how the significance of that spiritual foundation is seemingly ignored or undervalued. There is ample evidence of the negative consequences resulting from the loss of this foundation for the collective psychological conditions of many Western societies today.

**“Why are modern hearts haunted today by death and sex?” *Fulton Sheen wrote in *Love, Marriage and Children*. “Why are the two linked together? First of all, because modern man, denying immortality, has no hope beyond the grave. Since this world is all, he must derive from it all the pleasure that he can. But, in the midst of his pleasure, he always sees death hovering over him as a shadow and threatening a moment when the pleasures will disappear.”***

That was published in 1963. The disturbing trends don’t seem to have abated, which appears to include monastic decline. But is the narrative of interminable decline entirely accurate? The priest on the *Catholic Herald* pilgrimage notes that it depends a bit on “whether there is a strict definition of what constitutes monastic life.” He points to the Oratorians, those “secular priests who live a common life in houses but who very definitely are not monks, but who in many ways look like them, and who are not friars but who also smell rather like them” and who “are showing very positive signs of growth in England.”

In her article **“The rise and rise of the Oratorians”**, Madeleine Teahan argues that the Oratorian priests who “offer beautiful liturgies and unashamedly orthodox sermons” are at “the center of a resurgence.” The

number of Oratories in England has more than doubled in recent years. The institution got a boost, Teahan says, during the papal visit of 2010, when Benedict XVI beatified Cardinal John Henry Newman, the founder of the Oratorian Congregation in England.

“Newman drew attention to the intellectual tradition behind the order, which intelligently defends the most counter-cultural teachings of Catholicism, a characteristic which is sought after in an increasingly secular England and Wales,” Teahan says. “Another feature the congregation offers [is] a bulwark against a hostile secular climate—the idea of secular priests living together in community, rather than in an isolated presbytery.”



*The Cistercian monastery of Santa María la Real de Oseira. (Image courtesy of the author)*

The growing popularity of the congregation is not restricted to Britain, she notes. Across the world, while other religious congregations are struggling, the Oratory as an institute has been growing in countries ranging from France to Australia to South Africa and the U.S. It appears part of a wider trend where tradition is being embraced as a reaction to liberal relativism—and a trend that is benefiting some monastic orders.

“Contemplative orders are actually doing well, especially those that are traditional, who wear the habit, where there is a clear charism, where the ethos is clear and there is no doubt regarding what it is all about,” says a Benedictine nun who took her vows 40 years ago in England. She says she knows of “healthy”-sized communities in England of around 30 to 40 nuns with correspondingly healthy novitiates. She notes these communities are attracting younger people. She highlights the move in 2009 by Benedict XVI when he issued the apostolic exhortation *Anglicanorum coetibus*—“to groups of Anglicans”—enabling groups of clergy, laity and religious to enter into the full communion of the Catholic Church as being prophetic, in terms of foreseeing future trends in the Church and what might be needed especially in terms of the Liturgy.

The creation of Ordinariates takes us back to Henry VIII and the dissolution of those monasteries. For the pope’s move sought to help heal the 400-year rift in British Christianity through its “recognition that in those centuries Anglicanism had achieved things that should not be ignored or undervalued,” **writes** Joanna Bogle. “Where parishes are in ordinariate care, the growth in numbers has been substantial. It includes all sorts of people and mostly not former Anglicans.”

The facilitating of initiatives such as the Oratory and Ordinariates again brings to mind my military training. For it was hammered into us that just as important as remaining focused on the so-called Main Effort is the need to be flexible in order to achieve that desired and essential end state. Through the Oratory and the Ordinariate, the Catholic Church has applied a degree of flexibility—without undermining core principles and doctrine—that has helped fill some of the space left by declining monastic orders, regenerating sources for that “spiritual fighting power” to be delivered to society.

And perhaps the Church will ultimately benefit through such flexible initiatives from another key military principle: mutual support, whereby in time the work and witness by the likes of Oratorians and Ordinariates could inspire and lead to new monastic vocations. This might also lead to renewed interest in the sort of pilgrimage done by that group from the *Catholic Herald*, an interest in which monasteries and convents can play a clear role.

Recently, a small group of monks **returned** to the Abbey of Sarrance in southwestern France after 200 years of absence. The monks had come from the Abbey of Mondaye after being tasked by the Bishop of Bayonne to revitalize the Abbey of Sarrance as a reception point for pilgrims passing through on the Camino de Santiago, and which continues to grow in popularity. For as the nun I spoke to highlighted, despite the apparent secular times we live in, “the spiritual is alive in people, even if sometimes they don’t define as Christian. There is a sense that something spiritual, Christian, is needed to counterbalance and overcome the evil we see around us.” Just so also with pilgrimage.

“Banking crashes, the rise of populism, seemingly insoluble conflicts and terrifying pandemics individually and collectively are causing us to question the very foundations on which our post-religion twenty-first-century lives are built,” Peter Stanford writes in his book *Pilgrimage: In Search of Meaning*, in which he highlights the counterintuitive popularity of pilgrimages, especially the Camino de Santiago. “To catch a glimpse of the transcendent, otherwise impossible in the hustle-bustle and hassle of modern life, requires making one almighty and counter-intuitive effort—like going on a pilgrimage in a secular age.”

One of Chesterton’s main themes throughout *Orthodoxy* is how apparent contradictions and incongruous juxtapositions can point to deeper truths. One of which—in the case of those children on the island—is that true **freedom is not found in the total absence of restrictions, rather, it is only achieved through the counterintuitive situation of there being certain limits in place, thereby preventing liberty spiraling out of control into self-destructive license.**

“Free love is a contradiction in terms,” Chesterton argued. “The definition of love is a limitation to a certain object.”

**Hence monks and nuns, seemingly trapped in their monasteries and convents to the eyes of many, are able to experience true spiritual freedom and to embrace that spiritual fighting power that so many of us lack, despite all the liberty we think we enjoy each day. In doing so, monks and nuns offer an important example and reminder to the rest of us, while they can help in other more tangible ways.**

“There is a secular angle to the presence of monks and nuns,” Fr Grzegorz says. “In our monastery, we encounter very different people, often deeply lost; not necessarily exemplary Catholics. We welcome everyone, because this is our place in the society: if you are lost, you can come here and talk to a monk. Someone who has lived in the same spot for decades certainly had figured a couple of things out. It may be a beginning of a journey back to the Church. It may be a beginning of a healing process of a different sort.”

He notes that most of the people who come to the monastery really need “someone to hear them out. It’s good that you can find it in a monastery. But it’s tragic that you cannot find it in most of the families. Listening to a person in pain is a forgotten talent in our society. It’s a crisis, truly.”

His advice to anyone is to try to seek monasteries out. It could be in the form of a retreat for a couple of days, though he cautions that a weekend might be too short. The first day is taken up with a travel day, while the second day “is spent on figuring out how the monastery operates, where is the dining room, how to use the liturgical books, etc. You also need some time to quiet down.”

At his monastery, he says, they allow men to spend longer periods of time in the enclosure, sharing the monks’ way of life.

“They find it very nourishing: these are working men, who take two weeks of their annual holidays to spend it in the monastery. We are always impressed by their dedication to monastic spirituality. And, in this way, not only do monks serve the lay people but also the lay people remind the monks how precious their spirituality is.”

The best way for lay people to “use” monasteries, he advises, “is to become friends with them. Choose one monastery and remain faithful to it, just like

monks or nuns are faithful to their communities. Get to know the monks or nuns. Learn the ways of this particular house, the rules, dos and don'ts. And then you will need less and less time for adjustment when you visit for a couple of days.”

The flip side of all this, he notes, is that monasteries should make it easier for people who might be interested in visiting a monastic environment to access it. He points out that he knows a monastic community in the same region which refuses to create a website or make a bare minimum to assure their presence in social media—and they haven't had candidates for decades. Whereas at Fr Grzegorz's monastery, whilst the numbers who joined the community in the late 1990s or early 2000s were few, “now the numbers are increasing.” The monastery has one postulant and 5 novices, and more postulants are due before the end of the year. It means, he says, his monastery has more monks in training than some other institutes have for their entire Polish province.

**“When we ask the junior monks what were their motivations, they almost always say: the liturgy; the Gregorian chant; the Latin language; long and rich tradition of fifteen centuries of Benedictine life,” Fr Grzegorz says. He highlights how the way the Dominican friars preach the Gospel has been very appealing to young people, with the “liturgy celebrated in a beautiful way, educated preaching and the basis of Thomism” providing “solid foundations in this time of ideological turmoil.”**

That turmoil, and everything that comes with it, shows no sign of slackening off. How this will impact monastic life and its accompanying trends is perhaps far harder to predict than many realize.

“This is something we hear very often, even from non-believers: monks are always *present*,” Fr Grzegorz concludes. “Things change and pass, but the monastery is still upon the rock on the Vistula River, and at 5 p.m. there are always Vespers sung in Latin in the church. For people in Poland, monasteries like ours have also another meaning: it is a token of national identity. Poland dates back to 10th century. Our monastery was founded in 1044. It is as old as Poland, and its continual existence makes people feel safe: we are still at home; we still have our monasteries; this is Poland.”



**The Cistercian monastery of Santa María la Real de Oseira. (Image courtesy of the author)**

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### **About James Jeffrey 2 Articles**

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