

## **The Universal Monk: The Way of the New Monastics**

John Michael Talbot  
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Amid the many books published in recent years on the relevance and application of monasticism to contemporary Christian life, this book is noteworthy on two accounts. First is the uniqueness of the author. You may recognize his name, as I did, from the late twentieth-century contemporary Christian music scene. John Michael Talbot, while performing with the 1970s rock group, Mason Proffit, had a spiritual awakening, began a serious study of the world's religions, experienced a radical conversion to Christ, joined the Jesus Movement, eventually became a Roman Catholic, and began singing and recording songs of worship and meditation with a broad appeal to Protestants as well as Catholics. In 1978 he sold his possessions and joined a secular Franciscan order. Four years later, his spiritual father encouraged him to establish a new community and pursue his music ministry, which he did on land he had title to in Arkansas, naming it "The Little Portion Hermitage".

The second noteworthy thing about this book is the uniqueness of the monastic community it describes. The "Brothers and Sisters of Charity", officially sanctioned by

the Roman Catholic Church, are what Talbot refers to as an “integrated” monastic community – celibate men, celibate women, singles who are free to marry, and families all living together under common vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, “but in a way proper to their state of life.” (223) In addition to this core group of about forty, there are about five hundred “domestics” associated with the community – people around the world who live in their own homes, but affiliate with the community through commitment to spiritual disciplines appropriate to a non-monastic. Talbot has served as the founder, minister general, and spiritual father of this integrated community for over twenty-five years and it is out of this experience that he writes.

The format of the book is atypical in that the chapters are not numbered, nor do they seem to be ordered with an overall logic. Each reads like a brief meditation (6-10 pages in length) on a topic pertinent to monastic vision and vocation. At a most basic level, then, this book serves well as a primer on the broad subject of Christian monasticism. In a very readable, yet thought-provoking style, Talbot introduces the reader to a brief history of the development of classical monasticism in the Eastern deserts of the third and fourth centuries and the flowering of Western monasticism via St. Benedict and the later mendicant (or missionary) orders. Chapters such as “What is a Monk?”, “Kinds of Monks, Monasteries, and Seekers”, “Solitude and *Monos*”, “Silence and Speech”, “Stillness and Ministry”, “Meditation”, “*Lectio Divina*”, “Common Prayer: The Liturgy of the Hours”, “Obedience”, “Chastity”, “Poverty”, “Conversion of Life”, “Stability”, and “Leadership” review and explain the basics of monastic life in a manner relevant to all vocations and communities, including those of other faiths. While

traveling as a music and retreat minister, Talbot regularly presents the monastic vision and challenges his hearers to consider a monastic vocation. In these chapters one can imagine him as an effective teacher-recruiter.

This book has value beyond its “monastic primer” function due to the uniqueness of the author and the specific monastic community noted above. Two key words capture this: “universal” and “integrated.”

By titling the book “The Universal Monk,” Talbot names a feature of what others (e.g. Phyllis Tickle) might refer to as emerging Christianity, a perspective that is truly catholic (not just Roman). He argues that monasticism is ultimately rooted in the call of the Spirit of God upon peoples in all contexts and all walks of life to a more contemplative way of living “that overflows into action that changes the world for the better.” (vii) So whether or not one actually joins an official monastic community, a Christian can affirm and cultivate “the monk within”. This affirmation and cultivation need not simply be personal and internal, however. All over the world, God is calling Christians to go beyond what is typically available in local parish churches and align themselves with intentional Christian communities that embrace monastic values and practices. In the chapter titled “Universal”, Talbot argues for an open ecumenical stance toward non-Catholic Christians, and a completion model of interfaith dialogue “that accepts all the good and beautiful in all religions but sees the completion of all in one’s own faith in a way that accepts and includes all.” (30)

The chapters titled “New” and “Integration” get at the heart of the special focus of this book – a vision for an integrated monastic community such as that found at The

Little Portion Hermitage. Drawing from his personally eclectic spiritual journey and the long history of Christian monastic expressions, Talbot argues for communities that integrate:

- A conservatism that builds on the past with a liberalism open to new futures. “Like an earthly body the church has a left and a right foot. In order for the church to go forward, she must step on both the right and the left foot in succession.” (18) In these discussions, he offers poignant warnings of the dangers of fundamentalism, including some approaches of the new Catholic “archconservatives”.
- Solitude with community.
- Men with women; celibates with families. Talbot draws on the authority of St. John of Chrysostom who “said that whoever renounces the old self for a unique lifestyle within the church to follow Jesus without compromise is a monk, regardless of whether one is celibate or married.” (33) This is a key feature of the New Monasticism movement (a term in the book’s subtitle) that has arisen primarily out of contemporary Baptist churches, generating a literature of its own in the form of the “New Monastic Library” (Wipf & Stock).
- Charismatic with contemplative; the liturgical with the spontaneous.
- Catholics with non-Catholic Christians.
- A stable, grounded community of daily routines and responsibilities with ministries that extend outward to the local community and beyond. Talbot references extensively the Benedictine and Franciscan traditions (the former

following a classic monastic Rule; the latter following a mendicant Rule) and drew on both to create the Rule for his Brothers and Sisters of Charity.

Even if a reader does not need a primer in monasticism or is not particularly interested in the new, integrated monastic expressions, there is a third value to this book. In his candid descriptions of the inner workings of his Arkansas compound – especially those contained in the chapters titled “Stability”, “New Members”, and “Conflicts and Community”, “Leadership”, “Ministry”, and the Appendix titled “Socioreligious Perspectives” – Talbot provides hard-learned, helpful guidance for the common challenges faced by any intentional form of Christian community, including local parishes and home churches (he provides an Appendix titled “The Home Church and the Universal Monasticism”). Any pastor can benefit from the practical advice he offers. His compassionate, but firm call to disciplined and accountable forms of community is solidly grounded in theologies of the Trinity (the source of integrated relationship) and the Cross (its own chapter). Throughout the book he makes clear that the outward forms of monasticism are not the heart; in fact, they can become distorted means of spiritual self-aggrandizement. Rather, true Christian monastic communities embody the core Gospel message: “Jesus says that we must renounce our possessions, our relationships, and even our very self to follow him. Whatever form of community you choose, it must be a way that provides you with a way to do that. Otherwise it is just a spiritual game.” (174)

As a practical, common sense treatment of monasticism that draws on historical precedent in a non-scholarly way, there is little in Talbot's presentation with which I would take issue. Nonetheless, I was struck with two notable absences. First, he references Pope John Paul II frequently along with occasional references to previous Popes, but never once mentions current Pope Benedict XVI. One wonders whether Talbot's personal and communal Catholicism might be at odds with recent developments in the Vatican. Second, although he mentions that he is now married (to Viola in 1989), he does not at all discuss the genesis or development of their relationship or how it plays itself out in their monastic community. Talbot is very open about his personal journey throughout the book—except in this one dimension. This seems to me a gross oversight in light of the book's focus on an integrated monasticism that features married couples and families and his unique role as the community's spiritual head.

This brings me to a final consideration—the future viability of the Brothers and Sisters of Charity once the author dies or is incapacitated. Talbot raises this vulnerable issue in the book and in so doing points out something that all new intentional communities face once their founder is no longer present. Of particular concern is that the author is not only the community's leader, but is also a major benefactor through the financial support he raises through his music ministry.

In light of this, Talbot does us all a service by writing a book whose value will outlive this particular monastic expression. As he boldly claims, “the new monasticism of today addresses [major cultural shifts and changes] and accommodates them” (165) and “the environmental model monasticism goes to the heart of the problems of

Western civilization.” (211) Overstatements? Perhaps, but he is true to the belief of the many monastics who preceded him that the monastic impulse is countercultural, radically Gospel, and world-transforming. In our day, he would want to join with their voices and say that the “New Monasticism is about living the gospel clearly for all states of life and sending out that clarion call again.” (220)