

One New Book for the Preacher

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THE CLOISTER WALK by Kathleen Norris. Riverhead Books, 1996. 384 pp.

In a world bombarded with fifteen-second soundbytes and far too many noises period, Kathleen Norris invites us to slow down, even better, to be still and listen to silence. Norris is a Protestant who writes this book out of her experiences with extended stays in two Benedictine monasteries.

An award-winning poet, Norris has recently published a collection of her poems under the title, *Little Girls in Church* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995). Some may recognize her name from her earlier nonfiction work, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (Burlington, IN: Ticknor and Fields, 1993), which was a best-seller. In *The Cloister Walk* Norris combines the best of both—poetry and prose. Journal-like reflections about the rhythms of monastic life are interwoven with journal-like excursions away from the monastery, back home in South Dakota.

A journey may be the best way to describe reading this work. Norris invites us on a walk, not only into the life of contemplation behind walls, but a contemplation of who we are as persons behind walls of a different kind. The book is a no-nonsense poetic look at what it means to be a follower of Christ. Norris's approach to discipleship is somewhere between syrupy sentimentalism and cold cynicism.

For this time of the Christian year and the emotional letdown so many believers experience after Easter, the author appropriately writes:

On Easter Monday, I learn a great secret about monasteries. It's not the strenuous liturgies of the Triduum, not even the complex turns of the Vigil, that monks have to worry about getting through, but Easter Monday. At morning prayer, a man who has been a monk for nearly sixty years has suddenly forgotten how to begin morning prayer. A jump start is required; then we're off and rolling, into forty days of Easter (p. 183).

Of course, we preachers are always "off and rolling," looking for sermon material, something to spice up next Sunday's message. Norris does not disappoint us. I highlighted more than twenty such possibilities—lines, images, stories, and so forth. For example, her description of two young men being initiated into monastic life is a great way of speaking about the community we call church:

It can be an amusing sight to observe a man working slowly, with nervous fingers, to button, snap, and smooth a floor-length habit, scapular, and cowl over street clothes, right in front of God and everyone. It is also a solemn moment in the liturgy, and in the life of any monastic community. There are men here who first put on this habit more than seventy years ago, as well as those who began to wear it just last year. They have this in common: the hope that they will wear this monastic clothing until the day they die, and

even after. They hope to be buried in it, in the cemetery just up the hill (p. 312).

One of my favorite descriptions is the baptism of her nephew:

Today, we are baptizing our little nephew. He's seven months old, chubby, thoroughly healthy. Ever since we came here for Christmas, I've listened for him in the morning. Like the birds, he begins to sing at first light, and together, they make the most joyous music—the baby, the birds—cooing and calling, as if life depended on it. We've planned the ceremony for late in the afternoon of Epiphany....

The baby's tired and cranky, he has no way of knowing that we are passing through hell. We renounce the forces of evil, and he cries out. As the godmother, I am holding him, and he's fussy, squirming; I have to hold on tight.

Our words wash over you, and you brush them away. The candle catches your eye, your mother's hair and fingers transparent in its light. You want the candle, you want the food your mother has become for you, you want to go down into this night at her breast. Poor little baby, water on your hair, chrism on your forehead, dried milk on your chin. Poor, dear little baby; hold on (pp. 88-89).

Even more important than providing illustrative material, Norris feeds the reader's soul, something we preachers could benefit from more regularly. Along with the author and her monk friends, we find ourselves listening not only to silence but to large sections of scripture at morning and evening prayer (pp. 31-ff).

Besides the journal-like entries, Norris includes several thematic articles on topics such as the book of Psalms, Revelation, the virgin martyrs, and even preaching. Commenting on the role of psalms in monastic life, she writes:

People who rub up against the psalms every day come to see that while children may praise spontaneously, it can take a lifetime for adults to recover this ability. One sister told me that when she first entered the convent as an idealistic young woman, she had tried to pretend that "praise was enough." It didn't last long. The earthy honesty of the psalms had helped her, she says, to "get real, get past the holy talk and the romantic image of the nun." In expressing all the complexities and contradictions of human experience, the psalms act as good psychologists. They defeat our tendency to try to be holy without being human first (p. 96).

Norris's treatment of the virgin martyrs is a sober chapter in the history of the church, reminding us of the horrors done to women in the name of religion. She observes, "to forget a martyr is to put her through another martyrdom" (p. 198). Norris does not let us forget.

Although a layperson, she has occasionally preached in the small country church she attends in Lemmon, South Dakota. Norris describes her own preaching style as "biblically based enough for any Protestant," yet dotted with enough stories to keep

the people awake (p. 273). The book strikes a similar balance.

In the Preface she confesses that “for years literature seemed an adequate substitute for religion in my life” (p. xi). Absolution, however, does not seem appropriate. *The Cloister Walk* brings literature and religion together in wonderfully liberating ways. Commenting on the relation of literature and religion, Robert McAfee Brown, in his book *Persuade Us to Rejoice* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), observes: “We should be constantly amazed that authors can put curious, arbitrarily chosen markings on a page (what we call ‘letters’), and that appropriate combinations of these letters can cause people to weep, rejoice, throw in the towel, become intensely political, or *enter a monastery*” (p. 30, emphasis mine). Norris’s combination of letters will take you there.