

Night is Our Ministry: Monastic Vigil

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[This title is adapted from Merton's poem
'The Quickening of St John the Baptist']

Night is our diocese and silence is our ministry
 Poverty our charity and helplessness our tongue-tied sermon.
 Beyond the scope of sight or sound we dwell upon the air
 Seeking the world's gain in an unthinkable experience.
 We are exiles in the far end of solitude, living as listeners
 With hearts attending to the skies we cannot understand:
 Waiting upon the first far drums of Christ the Conqueror
 Planted like sentinels upon the world's frontier.

IN HIS *Asian Journal* MERTON DESCRIBED THE "PARTICULAR OFFICE OF THE monk in the modern world" as being "to keep alive the contemplative experience", and I suggest that one important aspect of this "experience" is that of keeping vigil, of watching and waiting, of prayer at night.

I have to admit that when I started looking for references to the monastic practice of vigil and to prayer during the night in Merton's writings, I was surprised not to find a lot more discussion of the spiritual and liturgical significance of the monastic practice. He has, of course, left some marvellous descriptions of his experiences of night, from the 'Fire Watch' when he walked the deserted cloisters as a young monk while his brethren slept, to his last years in his woodland hermitage.

Throughout his life as a monk, his days and nights followed the monastic rhythm laid down by St Benedict as interpreted by the Cistercians of his time, and in his 'Project for a Hermitage' (a remarkably unattractive document, presumably written to reassure

hide-bound authorities!) he describes the *horarium* of a projected semi-eremitical Skete,

Normally all would rise a little earlier than in the monastic community, that is to say, at two o'clock or earlier. It would be understood that all would be saying Vigils and making their meditation and so on in the night hours and all would say Lauds at about dawn...

Vigils have survived in the modern secular world. Candlelight vigils may be kept in protest, as a sign of solidarity, to commemorate anniversaries. Some of you may have witnessed the scenes in London on the night preceding Princess Diana's funeral.

However, here I will only consider monastic vigils, where the 'watching' is a form of 'praying'. We speak of 'keeping vigil'—that word 'keeping' is significant. We *keep* vigils, *keep* silent, *keep* a fast or feast, *keep* the Sabbath. These are all symbolic enactments of some important aspect of our faith which needs nurturing. They also involve doing something, not just thinking about it, but they aren't absolutes; life is not intended to be unbroken vigil, silence, fast, feast or Sabbath. One important thing to remember is that they don't get us brownie points "the Lord pours gifts on his beloved while they sleep" the psalmist reminds us. There is nothing inherently virtuous about them; they are part of a pattern that must include their contrary. It does of course take some effort to keep vigil, but above all it is a gift, and by receiving it we enter into a mystery—it leads us into a land of paradox, and here as ever the Lord has gone before us.

We probably realise more clearly than previous generations that our earthly time is local—we know that the solar eclipse or millennial midnight races towards us across the planet, that comets come from another part of our universe, trailing our distant past in their wake. Even here on earth, when it is night in one place, it is day elsewhere, and some aspects of time are culturally-determined human realities: 24-hour banking, shopping and working have made the hours of one person's 'night', times of lights and work for his or her neighbour. I shan't attempt to discuss the insights of relativity, quantum physics, cosmology and chronobiology, but they have all obviously had their impact. Perhaps all this makes awareness of the graces of prayer in the night more urgent than ever. The night-time worship of the monastery reminds us that our roots must run deep into the quiet stillness, darkness and silence, of openness and

wonder. It plunges us into the mystery of time itself, and releases the inherent energy of an interface, a 'frontier'.

Dom André Louf, the former abbot of the French Cistercian monastery of Mont des Cats who is now living in solitude, writes

At the crack of dawn, at the coming of the light, the monk stands on that frontier between the world which is passing away and the world which is coming. He looks towards the Saviour who always comes with mercy... what is more his prayer hastens the coming of Christ in glory. (*The Cistercian Way*)

Esther de Waal, in *Living with Contradiction* (chapter entitled 'Death and Life'), quotes another living Cistercian:

Matthew Kelty tells us that the feast of John the Baptist has always been a particular favourite with the monks because it comes just at the time (it falls on 24th June) when the sun begins its journey down, a dying which we all know will eventually lead to life.

The monk sees in the plunge into night his own way into the darkness of God.

In the readings of the liturgy, during his first monastic Advent, Merton will have frequently been led to meditate on John the Baptist, from his quickening in Elizabeth's womb, when he, like David, danced at the coming of the Lord, to the desert and the Jordan where he recognised the Lamb of God, to his doubts in prison and his death, foreshadowing that of Christ. The Benedictus is sung daily at the end of Lauds—in it the father of John the Baptist blesses God "who visits us like the Dawn from on high". It celebrates the great hinge of time.

Above all, in the Gospels we see Christ going out alone at night—often into the desert—to pray before important turning points. Indeed, Merton's own abbey carried the name of 'Gethsemani'—the starkest place of Christ's prayer at night.

But before we look at the specifically Christian aspects of the monastic vigil, it may be interesting to see how it is lived in other monastic traditions. I was struck by the close parallel between the timetable followed by Merton and that given by the Dalai Lama describing his routine. Writing to his Muslim friend Abdul Aziz on 2 January 1966 Merton wrote,

I go to bed about 7:30 at night and rise about 2:30 in the morning. On rising I say part of the canonical office consisting of psalms, lessons etc. Then I take an hour or an hour and a quarter for meditation. I follow

this with some Bible reading and then make some tea or coffee and have breakfast if it is not a fast day.

With breakfast I begin reading and continue reading/studying until sunrise...

Incidentally he had previously assured his friend that he remembered him often, particularly at dawn, Merton continues,

... At sunrise I say another office of psalms etc. and then begin my work, which includes sweeping, clearing, cutting wood and other necessary jobs....

In 1996, the Dalai Lama attended a 5-day meeting at Gethsemani and in response to a question outlined his own daily practice,

I must say I am a very poor practitioner. Usually I get up at 3:30 in the morning. Then I immediately do some recitations and some chanting. Following this until breakfast I do meditation ...

Here his Holiness described his practice of meditation.

So from around 3:30 a.m. until 8:30 a.m. I am fully occupied with meditation and prayer and things like that. During that time I take a few breaks, including my breakfast – which is usually at 5:00 am – and some prostrations. After 8:30 a.m., when my mood is good I do some physical exercise.

After a busy day, he has his evening meal at about 6 p.m. and retires for what he calls his “most favorite, peaceful meditation” at around 8:30 p.m.

I think one would find a similar pattern in many monasteries of different faith traditions. It is simply rooted in human nature, which of course makes it an ideal sacramental vehicle for the experience of “standing before the living God” as the prophet Elijah described it, or of ‘practising meditation’, ‘standing’ or ‘sitting’ as other traditions describe it.

In the Jewish and Islamic traditions, regular prayer throughout the day and night is the duty of the whole Community and of every believer.

In the Jewish tradition the institution of the Dawn prayer service is sometimes attributed to Abraham. Commenting on Chapter 19 of Genesis (after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah), the Torah commentary of the Safat Emmet says,

Abraham established the dawn prayer service, as Scripture tells us: “He arose early to that place where he had stood in God’s presence (Gen

19:27)” i.e. he was able to get back to that spiritual place where he had been on the previous night when he lay down. This is the way of those who serve God... Thus we say in our prayers, ‘May we arise and find our heart’s hope’. For this is a sign that we truly love God: if as soon as we awaken we can recall our Creator before we do anything else... Thus Scripture testifies that Abraham, the Pillar of Love, “Abraham my [friend] lover” (Is 41:8) arose early to that place where he had stood. This is what they mean when they say that he established the dawn service: he gave the power to each Jew to arouse the dawn every day. “Awake, my soul! Awake, harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn.” (Ps 56/57)

This notion of leaving a sort of ‘bookmark’ in one’s mind overnight, so that it falls open at adoration, is something else all traditions share.

Islamic tradition prescribes hours of prayer throughout the day, but not at night; however it does recount a mysterious night-time episode which is often interpreted as a spiritual experience: Muhammad’s journey from Mecca to Jerusalem on his steed Buraq and accompanied by the angel Gabriel. From the Noble Sanctuary – the Dome of the Rock – the Prophet ascended to God in the seventh heaven.

We must not limit the notion of ‘keeping vigil’ to ritual prayers. The psalms often speak of meditating on God in bed, of the heart remaining awake during the watches of the night and the Lord Jesus himself clearly valued the peace of the night for solitary prayer.

In his *Life of St Benedict*, St Gregory describes the famous vision in which Benedict saw the world in a ray of light—an ‘enlightenment’-like experience...and this occurred when he had risen before his fellow monks, long before the night office, and was standing looking out of the window.

I think we can genuinely consider the silence and darkness of the night to be sacramental. If we are not so sleepy as to make attention impossible, it is probably the easiest time to achieve focussed stillness and see many things in a totally new way. In his poem ‘La Nuit’, Claudel speaks of the Night as a beloved daughter of God, for whom he has made a wonderful dark mantle decked with stars. There can be few people – believers or unbelievers – who have not been moved to wonder by the spectacle of the starlit night sky. The celebrated Benedictine abbot of Bec-Hellouin, Dom Paul Grammont¹ tells of an old French country woman who told her parish priest that

one advantage of being old was that one had time to pray. After asking how he got on with his breviary, the old woman told him "When I open wide my door in the early morning and see the stars before dawn, I repeat the phrase from the psalm 'The heavens are telling the glory of God...'" The whole psalm (Psalm 18) is a lovely expression of praise in response to the glory of God glimpsed in his creation, and particularly in the beauty of his "daughter" in her starry mantle. It may be helpful sometimes to go out armed with just a single phrase such as this and pray/think/savour it under a starlit sky.

Merton obviously did just that in his night hours in the hermitage. He describes, for instance, coming out onto the porch before dawn, full of sombre thoughts about Vietnam, and seeing a comet.

The comet! I heard about it yesterday in the monastery, went out to see it this morning, and went at just the right time. It was magnificent; appearing just at the ineffable point when the first dim foreshadowing light (that is not light yet) makes one suspect the sun will rise. This great sweep of pure silent light points to the sun that will come—it takes in a good area of sky right over the valley in front of the hermitage. I walked down the path to see it well. It was splendid. I interrupted reading Isaac of Stella's Fourteenth Sermon on God's light in his joy in His creation...

Riches! ...I recited Psalm 18 *coeli enarrant* "The heavens are telling" with joy.

I wonder, did he hear in his head the marvellous setting of these words by Haydn, inspired by his first view of the heavens through a telescope? Merton's description will remind many of us of the gracious visit of comet Hale Bopp to our night skies in recent years. I'm sure I wasn't the only one to stand on my porch and remember Henry Vaughan's words:

I saw Eternity the other night
Like a great Ring of pure and endless light...
There is in God (some say)
a deep and dazzling darkness.

Merton had entered Gethsemani in December and, like every Cistercian novice before and since I imagine, he was overwhelmed by the pure beauty of the Advent liturgy.

In 1964 he looked back on that time,

At the hermitage these cold nights I have spontaneously been remembering the days when I first came to Gethsemani 23 years ago. The stars, the cold, the smell of night, the wonder (the "abandonment")

which is something else again than despondency) and above all the melody of *Rorate coeli*. That entire first Advent bore in it all the stamp of my vocation's special character. The solitude, inhabited and pervaded by cold and mystery, by woods and Latin. It is surprising how far we have got from the cold and the woods and the stars since those early days! (October 31, 1964)

He was ending his 50th year and it was the stars – Orion and Aldebaran – and the moon, that seemed to say to him, "It is the *Kairos*"—the time is ripe. Later that year, he wrote during Advent:

One can pretend in the solitude of an afternoon walk, but the night destroys all pretences, one is reduced to nothing, and compelled to begin laboriously the long return to truth. (December 5, 1964)

And a year later, on December 10, 1965

Celebrating my twenty-third anniversary of arrival at Gethsemani. Long quiet evening, rain falling, candle, silence: it is incomparable!

In *Day of a Stranger*, also written in 1965 when he was living in the hermitage, he described his vigils,

I live in the woods out of necessity. I get out of bed in the middle of the night because it is imperative that I hear the silence of the night, alone, and with my face on the floor say psalms, alone, in the silence of the night...

I have an obligation to preserve the stillness, the silence, the poverty, the virginal point of pure nothingness, which is at the centre of all other loves. I cultivate this plant silently in the middle of the night and water it with psalms and prophecies in silence...

It is necessary for me to see the first point of light which begins to be dawn. It is necessary to be present alone at the resurrection of Day, in the solemn silence at which the sun appears.



Why then does the Christian monk feel it necessary to keep vigil? I don't think the reason is primarily ascetic—the aim isn't really sleep deprivation. Nor is it puritanical...saying prayers at night isn't primarily a way of avoiding debauchery, let alone compensating for it in others, though some of the old Latin hymns do suggest this! I don't think it is mainly practical either, although it is certainly easier to avoid being disturbed or distracted at these rather uncivilised hours.

Part of the explanation lies in the middle-eastern origins of the liturgy. The celebration of Sunday – or any major feast – starts not in the morning, but at first vespers, celebrated the previous evening. So the night is part of the feast, not simply a preparation for it. Sadly, in the Catholic Church the introduction of ‘Saturday evening Mass’ has probably destroyed the last vestige of this, as it is rarely a Vigil Mass ushering the believers into the celebration of the ‘eighth day’ when time goes beyond itself into eternity, but tends to be seen as a way of getting one’s obligation out of the way!

My own favourite mental ‘ikon’ of the monk keeping vigil is the description of the great Abba Arsenius. We are told that on Saturday evening, he turned his back to the setting sun and stretched out his hands in prayer to heaven until the sun shone on his face once more. Then he sat down in the splendour of the dawning Sunday.

The Vigil of course is the Easter Vigil. Ideally the whole night is spent in retelling and reliving the wonderful story of our creation and salvation in story and song, with the marvellous symbol of the great candle standing as a pillar of fire in our midst until it pales in the light of dawn. It also reminds us that God was the first to keep Vigil,

That was for the Lord a night of vigil, to bring them out of the land of Egypt. That same night is a vigil to be kept for the Lord by all the Israelites throughout their generations. (Exodus 12: 42)

The Easter vigil culminates with the dawn celebration of the encounter between Mary Magdalene, the apostle of the apostles, and the Risen Christ.

In the Gospels we see the Lord going out to pray at night, and urging his disciples to watch and pray for they know not the hour. The hour: that of temptation, of testing, that of the coming of the Kingdom, coming like a thief in the night, late in the evening, in the middle of the night or before dawn. Who can know?

When the Spirit drives someone out into the ‘desert’ to pray, that person, like Christ, learns to rely increasingly on the word of God and above all on the psalms.

Probably no-one has caught the beauty of the night as vividly as John of the Cross.

O night that guided me! O night more lovely than the dawn.

We have probably all recognised the thrill of slipping out into a grey pre-dawn to go to early Mass—particularly if one is a convert and Mass-going still has something dangerous and even seditious about it. John describes “going abroad when all my house was hushed”

In safety, in disguise,

In darkness up the secret stair I crept.

“Where is he? Have you seen him?” The frantic questions of the Bride in the Canticle, seeking her beloved through the night of grief have been echoed down the centuries of Judaeo-Christian prayer. Psalm 29/30 praises the Lord

For his anger is but for a moment;

his favour is for a lifetime.

Weeping may linger for the night,

but joy comes with the morning.

The psalmist’s experience leads from mourning into dancing:

You have taken off my sackcloth

and clothed me with joy,

so that my soul may praise you

and not be silent.

O Lord my God,

I will give thanks to you forever.

There is a whole spirituality of the ‘Night’, in which the darkness, the silence, the stillness are not negative, but luminous, music and dancing, and Merton revelled in it. But that will have to be another paper!



We’d better head back to the sobriety of the monastic tradition! In the Rule which Merton followed at Gethsemani, St Benedict tells his monks that they—like boy scouts—must always be ready! They rise when their sleep is finished (rather than getting up in the middle of the night and then returning to bed), and they sleep fully clothed, so that they can rise without delay, encouraging one another as they rise from sleep and hasten together to the Oratory. Then after the Night Office they wait for the dawn, when they will celebrate Lauds. The monk is a “watchman” listening for the shout of joy in the night; his task is not to repel hostile invaders, but to fling open the doors for Christ the Bridegroom when he comes for the wedding feast. In many modern monasteries, the hours of vigil culminate in the Eucharist at dawn.

In St Benedict's Prologue to his Rule we read—as of course Merton read:

However late it may seem, let us rouse ourselves from lethargy. That is what Scripture urges on all when it says "the time has come for us to rouse ourselves from sleep" (Rm 13:11). Let us open our eyes to the light that shows us the way to God. Let our ears be alert to the stirring call of his voice, do not harden you hears (Psalm 94/5:8).

St Benedict uses the language of vigil, of watching and waiting, to characterise the monk's whole way of life. Benedict drew heavily on John Cassian's description of early Egyptian monasticism, and writing of Cassian's teaching, Merton says:

... To embrace the eremitical life is to ascend the "high mountain of solitude with Christ" And to do this is to obey most perfectly Christ's monastic call to prayer. Indeed, it is to follow His example, for He himself withdrew to pray on the mountain by night in order to give Christians an example of solitary prayer. (*The Humanity of Christ in Monastic Prayer*)

One of the most compelling descriptions Cassian gives of early monastic practice is that of the monks gathering for the Night Office celebrated in the desert:

...they are all so perfectly silent that, though so large a number of the brethren is assembled together, you would not think a single person was present except the one who stands up and chants the Psalm in the midst; and especially is this the case when the prayer is offered up... when the Psalm is ended they do not hurry at once to kneel down, ...but before they bend their knees they pray for a few moments, and while they are standing up spend the greater part of the time in prayer. And so after this, for the briefest space of time, they prostrate themselves to the ground, as if but adoring the Divine Mercy, and as soon as possible rise up, and again standing erect with outspread hands – just as they had been standing to pray before – remain with thoughts intent upon their prayers... But when he who is to "collect" the prayer rises from the ground they all start up at once, so that no one would venture to bend the knee before he bows down, nor to delay when he has risen from the ground, lest it should be thought that he has offered his own prayer independently instead of following the leader to the close.

In this description we sense a seamless combination of ascetic practice, liturgical celebration and spiritual experience.²

The Egyptian monks invariably chanted 12 psalms at the Night Office every day, and from that time until very recently, the Church

kept to this rule, which was claimed to have been instituted by an angel, who appeared to settle disputes among the monks about how many psalms should be said. When the nights were short in summer or time short for some other reason, Benedict envisages shortening the readings, but not deviating from the sacrosanct twelve psalms. This office consists almost entirely of psalms and readings from the Old Testament. But of course the traditional understanding of these texts often interprets them as spoken by Christ himself or as casting light on his Coming. For instance in the book of Wisdom, after a dramatic description of the terrors faced by the Egyptians in the night of the Passover, we read,

For while gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne. (Wisdom 18:14)

These words inevitably call to mind the Coming of Christ—Emmanuel, God with us.

The great Syrian teacher, Isaac, says that the monk's vigil involves both "standing" i.e. silent prayer, and psalmody. "One man continues in psalmody all night long; another passes the night in repentance."

The joy in their hearts keeps them from even thinking of sleep, for it seems to them that they have put off the body or that they have already reached the state they will enjoy after the resurrection.³ This great joy sometimes leads them to leave off psalmody as they fall prostrate on account of the onrush of joy that surges in their soul. The whole length of the night is like the day to them, and the coming of darkness is like the rising of the sun⁴ because of the hope which exalts their hearts and inebriates them by its meditation, and from the blazing of their minds which burn with the spiritual memory of the good things of the age to come.

Like every Christian, the monk claims the citizenship of heaven; his conversation is to be in heaven, in the New Jerusalem where there is no longer any night, and so presumably no vigil, for the Lamb himself is a flaming torch. Or is it all vigil—the angels are traditionally known as the holy watchers? But meanwhile, while day and night, light and dark alternate, the monk calls from the ends of the earth in a weak voice, often weak in faith, a sinner only Christ can save. Murmuring God's law by day and by night he clings to the mystery of faith, knowing that the Church waits with Christ, and for Christ—preaching Christ crucified and proclaiming the death of

Christ in the glory of the Risen Christ. There is one Christ waiting and awaited, as there will be one Christ loving himself.

One of the great challenges to the monastics of our age may be to help to keep alive this contemplative experience, to be beacons of 'watching and waiting' in an increasingly rushing world. Any practice must be rooted in the truth, in the 'reality', of life. All too often, 'saying prayers' becomes a major obstacle to growth in real prayer...and indeed to real life at all. Yet some sort of practice is essential. It is often a long struggle, and in a changing world will probably be a dynamic equilibrium rather than a rigid and potentially alienating 'rule'. Whatever our practice, it must enable us to grow in the ability to recognise the presence of God in our entire life, rather than being a refuge from reality. Merton knew how the stability of monastic life – its sheer unchanging monotony – could deepen this experience:

One has to be in the same place every day, watch the dawn from the same house, hear the same birds wake each morning to realise how inexhaustibly rich and different is 'sameness'. This is the blessing of stability and I think it is not evident until you enjoy it alone in a hermitage.

If at times, in Merton's words, we feel ourselves to be exiled "in the far end of solitude,... Planted like sentinels upon the world's frontier, with hearts attending to the skies we cannot understand", we must seek to "live as listeners".⁵

I'd like to end with the prayer of the Irish missionary monk, St Columbanus, who clearly saw his life as a Vigil in the temple of the Lord:

I pray in the name of Jesus Christ
the Son, my God, I pray you Lord,
grant me that love which knows no fall
so that my lamp may feel the kindling touch
and know no quenching,
and may burn for me and for others may give LIGHT.
O Christ, deign to kindle our lamps,
our Saviour most sweet to us,
that they may shine continually in your temple,
and receive perpetual light from you who are light perpetual,
so that our darkness may be driven far from us.

Notes and References

1. Dom Paul Grammont. *Le Feu qui nous habite*. Paroles de Vie, 1990. My translation.
2. I have skipped passages in which Cassian uses the Egyptian practice to criticize what he sees as slackness in the monasteries of Gaul.
3. The monk is rooted in the paschal reality of baptism and called to be a prophet of the age to come... Isaac taught that silence is the language of the age to come, that it will enlighten us in God. The Christian lives in the *kairos*, the hinge between this visible world and the promised Kingdom coming into being in us and around us, calling us forward to an unimaginable future. This aspect of our being vibrates in the night, we recognise our longings in those of the Church waiting in hope for the return of the Bridegroom.
4. "The night shall be as the day. The Lord himself will be our light."
5. From Merton's poem, 'The Quickening of St John the Baptist'.