

# Refuge and strength: Finding peace at a monastery

by [Suzanne Guthrie](#) in the [April 3, 2013](#) issue



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I see the monastery sign and drive past. I'm too ashamed to turn in. So I continue on to the next town where I buy my five-year-old son a hot chocolate and myself a coffee at a convenience store. We sit in a booth by the steamy window watching cars pull in and out and leave deep ruts in the icy slush at the gasoline pump.

I know two monks from California who now live at Holy Cross Monastery in upstate New York. Maybe they can help me. I'm grabbing at every possible lead. I'm chronically ill, exhausted, in shock and about to be divorced. We're staying temporarily with friends where my nine-year-old daughter numbs herself by watching television. My two older boys are in Germany with their father. For the first time since the age of 22 I have no prayer life. I'm empty, and things will soon become even worse for me. Finally, I find the courage to turn around and drive back toward the monastery.

A few weeks later a sympathetic employee at Holy Cross helps me find a place to live in Poughkeepsie. The children and I try to go to parish churches, but seeing families together distresses my daughter and me. "Why can't we just go to church at the monastery?" she asks. Why not? My son makes caves for his stuffed animals in the monks' choir stalls. My daughter primly times the sermons. They love being the

only children there. We come home to donuts and the Sunday comics, our clothes scented with incense.

A secretarial job opens up at the monastery. Every day I look up from my desk to the sign over the guesthouse door: *Crux Est Mundi Medicina*—the cross is the medicine of the world. And I begin to heal. We meet wonderful people, including a gentle, sweet, quiet man I'll eventually marry. After two years working at the monastery, I go back into parish ministry. But from then on, except for one brief period, I work and live near the monastery.

That was 25 years ago. Today my social worker son—a case manager at a homeless shelter—says that the monastery has been the one stable place in his life. Back when my daughter was involved in drugs and other mischief, the prior of the monastery told her she could come and find refuge there day or night. Whether she ever took him up on it I don't know, but he shrewdly offered her a stability that impressed her at a crucial moment. I found stability too, in a life of prayer that reformed itself amid the solid, grounded architecture, the thick walls, the rounded Romanesque windows and arches designed by Henry Vaughan and Ralph Adams Cram. The monastery continues to give me a space to pray without any responsibility other than being open to God.

I know that I can pray anywhere, and I've always prayed in the churches I've served. The parish church is a good place to pray for parishioners, their families, their concerns and questions amidst the multiple tragedies that hit like a car pileup on a foggy interstate. When I am alone in a church, people's shadows sit in their pews, while the exhausting intuitive pain I feel for them lingers at the communion rail. Healings, resolutions, transitions, absences and rites of passage clutter my parish prayer, as they should.

And responsibilities! I notice that the lightbulb needs changing and that dust is gathering behind the altar where the sexton irrationally refuses to sweep. I worry about where the money is going to come from to fix the roof. I wince at aesthetic dissonance. I bring distraction and anxiety to the convent chapel where I serve. I can't go into our worship space without worrying about the potted flowers, the weeds erupting between the patio bricks, the mistakes in landscaping I've made and how my own preaching and responsibilities for the space affect visitors as well as the sisters and residents here.

But when I go to the monastery none of those concerns confront me. Some monk or staff person takes care of all that. I can enjoy, with detachment, the monastery aesthetics, liturgy and atmosphere. Designed for hospitality, the guesthouse purposefully offers a place of prayer in relative comfort, including magnificent meals for which the guesthouse is well known. I come to visit my friends, to worship and to honor Christian holy days whenever I can. Right now I'm settled in a comfortable chair with my computer, writing an essay about prayer for the *Christian Century*.

I've been seriously at prayer for 40 years now. I pretty much perceive that I "pray at all times and in all places." But I acknowledge that different spaces offer different qualities of experience. I pray in our convent chapel with the sisters and on my own; I pray in the dining room, in the gardens and on the paths between our buildings. I pray with the cows and in my kitchen. I pray at my desk. I pray in my body, with my intellect and imagination and in my heart. I lurch into prayer when I read the *New York Times*. The atmosphere surrounding my pillow at night is as much a chapel as any consecrated place on earth.

But I still come back to Holy Cross Monastery, especially to pray. The thick brick and the rounded arches still shape my prayer and ground me. I renew a sense of stability, and I'm grateful to be a guest in a place designed, built and maintained for loving receptivity with God, a place with no other agenda for my attention but prayer.