

A Narrow Passageway

Review of

Beyond the Walls: Monastic Wisdom for Everyday Living

By Paul Wilkes

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Reviewed by **Edward J. Farley**

On a cold, sunny Sunday afternoon in January, 1993, Paul Wilkes, the author of this book and over a dozen others, including a novel and two children's books, spoke to our Massachusetts ITMS Chapter. He reviewed the fascinating work he did in writing and directing the PBS documentary *Merton: A Film Biography*, completed in 1984. He lived near St. Joseph's Trappist Abbey in Spencer, MA. Little did I realize at the time that his interest in monasticism was a lifelong and very personal one.

For years he had visited this abbey during times when "unbridled hedonism – not serious spiritual pursuit" (xx) dominated his life. His marriage broke up and he fell in love with another woman. "When finally," he writes, "I was so sick of myself I couldn't go on, and so frightened of a wonderful woman who had come into my life that I ran from her, I went back to St. Joseph's – seeking its protective shadow like a scared animal. After being the most public and outrageous of men, I lived as a hermit for nearly a year, yielding to the gentle rhythms of the monastic day. . . . I desperately wanted to join the Trappists. . . . Instead, I heard another call" (xxi). He abruptly left his holy sanctuary, bought an engagement ring and got married again. He found a permanent home just minutes from St. Joseph's Abbey and hoped to live a dual life. But it never quite happened. Two sons were born and although he could see the monastery nearby, he could not enter into its life.

In the mid-1990s he moved to North Carolina and made monthly visits to Mepkin Abbey in South Carolina. It was there that he began to realize that he could apply monastic wisdom to everyday life. He did not come to this realization, or carry it out, easily. He had to learn that monasticism demanded that he look deep into himself. *Beyond the Walls* is the story of that process. The subtitle of this book is "Monastic Wisdom for Everyday Life." That is an offer that appeals to many. Wilkes states that "this book is one man's effort to listen to monastic wisdom and to be alert to life's lessons about what it is to be human – and, one hopes, holy" (xxiii). At the end of his year of monthly visits he concluded that "Mepkin had deconstructed my view of monasticism. . . . I know very little about a grand institution or pattern, but something of a simple way of life" (233).

He has arranged this book in chapters that reflect these monthly visits to Mepkin. In each chapter he deals with a basic monastic value and his experiences in trying to make it his own. In-

cluded are indirection, faith, *conversatio*, stability, detachment, discernment, mysticism, prayer, vocation, and community. Wilkes, I believe, made a wise move when he opened with a chapter entitled "Historical Note." He provides an overview of Christian monasticism from its early beginnings to the founding of Trappist monasteries in the United States. This chapter, along with the introductory chapter, entitled "Monasticism," provides the general reader with an appreciation for what Wilkes has tried to do to bring monastic values into everyday life.

In his chapter on Community, Wilkes states that "a community like Mepkin stands in increasingly stark contrast to prevailing societal norms" (211). He believes that "It offers a different template for our lives. Composed of individuals, it stands for the triumph and ultimate wisdom of the common good. Give what you can; be given what you require. And it says that if a person wants to be close to God, to find their true selves, to flourish and not merely survive, a different way must prevail, an overarching communal attitude that reaches into every corner and every action of their lives" (211).

In the opening words of his introduction to the book, he tells us of the influence that Thomas Merton has had on his life. "From the time I pulled up to the gates of Gethsemani, . . . a high school senior in search of Thomas Merton . . . monasteries have always played a major part in the minor drama of my life. . . . I had read Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* and unexpectedly found exactly who it was I wanted to be and how it was I wanted to live" (xix). References to Merton occur throughout the book. For example, in his chapter on Faith, Wilkes writes, "I had always found great hope in Merton's words: the desire to know and please God was sufficient unto the day. . . . I could at least claim the desire to know him and his will for my life" (21).

Wilkes sees lay people visiting monasteries and carrying their experiences into the outside world. He points out that "when Merton first came to Gethsemani he called it 'the center of America, the place that 'was holding this country together'" (237). But Merton soon realized, says Wilkes, that "it was not a place to admire; rather, as with all abbeys, it was a place to be used" (237). The path that he encourages us to follow leads us toward the world, our families, our work, and our community. He cautions us that "Christian monasticism offers a way to God, not *the* way. . . . The way to holiness and transcendence may be through a narrow passageway, but that is not to say that there are not many paths, each with its own passageway" (236).

Paul Wilkes is not only a fine writer but is writing about his very personal attempts to draw closer to God through the example of Trappist monks. He demonstrates that he has a great love for a life that he could see was not for him, but could serve as a path for his own spiritual journey.