Blog
Religious Life



After signing her handwritten monastic vows, Sr. Helga Leija removes the ring of her former community, leaves it with the document at the altar and after singing "Receive me, o Lord as you have promised that I may live, disappoint me not in my hope" three times, she receives the Benedictine ring, as a sign of her total incorporation into the Benedictine community of Mount St. Scholastica. (Courtesy of Helga Leija)



by Helga Leija

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Today I transferred my vows of poverty, chastity and obedience from an apostolic community to a Benedictine monastery, promising obedience, fidelity to the monastic way of life (*conversatio*) and stability.

Canon law states that after a probation period of at least three years, a religious can be admitted to perpetual profession in the new institute: "Through profession in the new institute, the member is incorporated into it while the preceding vows, rights, and obligations cease" (Canon 684).

My journey to this day was not an easy one. In fact, my path was filled with struggle.

In the fall of 2018, I returned from Africa and I went on exclaustration after undergoing a dramatic surgery and recovery period. My whole world changed. It was as if I had suddenly stepped into the wilderness to wrestle with God. Like Jacob, I wrestled in the night with someone or something I couldn't see.

When God led me to Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, my wrestling with God continued. I had a terrible time adjusting. The predictability depressed me. I wondered if I was meant for monastic life. Yet, I chose to remain, to give it a bit more time. And with time, I realized, it wasn't the predictability, the sameness I was resisting, but something deeper within myself. The very thing I was trying to avoid was the thing I needed to face.

Recently, I read *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, where Belden C. Lane writes about wilderness spirituality, the kind that draws seekers into deserts, mountains and places of isolation to wrestle with God. In his chapter "Dragons of the Ordinary: The Discomfort of Common Grace," Lane says that the most difficult spiritual struggles do not happen in remote landscapes but in the mundane, repetitive and ordinary spaces of daily life. He says that we don't need to cross a desert to find hardship; we only need to stay in one place long enough to face ourselves.



Sr. Helga Leija lies prostrate on the floor and is covered with the pall as a sign of her mystical burial with Christ. As all creation was made new during the time of our Lord’s rest in the tomb, so also is the newly professed made new as the community prays over her that she may live a full and fruitful monastic life. (Courtesy of Helga Leija)

The "dragons" he refers to are the struggles and resistances we face in embracing grace in everyday moments. Lane suggests that common grace — God's presence in the routine, the tedious and the unremarkable — is often more difficult to recognize and accept than the dramatic encounters with the divine that people often seek in wilderness experiences.

The Benedictine tradition offers a radical response to this challenge: *stability* — the commitment to remain in one place, with one community, through all its trials and joys. This vow runs counter to the modern world's obsession with mobility, reinvention and escape. St. Benedict writes in his Rule:

> Therefore, we intend to establish a school for the Lord's service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love. Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love. Never swerving from his instructions, then, but faithfully observing his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom. Amen (Rule of St. Benedict, Prologue 45-50).

But how can staying become a path to grace? How can the discomfort of the ordinary transform us?

Lane explores how harsh environments — the desert, the mountains, the wilderness — serve as spiritual training grounds. These places strip away illusions, forcing the soul to confront its deepest fears and desires. It is no coincidence that biblical figures like Moses, Elijah and Jesus found their calling in the wilderness. The barrenness of the landscape reflects the stripping away of self-sufficiency, of certainty, of any external distraction that might prevent a full encounter with the divine.

But monastic life offers a different kind of wilderness. Stability is its own form of desert. The monastic life may seem predictable, safe and structured, but in reality, it can be just as challenging as a barren wasteland. When we remain in one place long enough, we cannot hide from ourselves or from others.

The silence of the wilderness is external — vast landscapes, empty horizons. In monastic life, the silence is internal, and it reveals everything we would rather ignore. Just as the desert removes physical comforts, monastic stability removes the illusion of escape. The community, the work, the *horarium* — none of it changes to accommodate our moods.

Lane compares two different ways of dealing with the "dragons" in our lives — those inner struggles and resistances we all face. He looks at the story of St. George, the knight who slays a dragon, and contrasts it with the story of St. Martha, who tames

one. St. George's approach is all about battle — facing challenges head-on and defeating them. St. Martha, on the other hand, subdues the dragon through patience, faith and persistence.

Lane uses these stories to show that there isn't just one way to deal with struggle. Sometimes, we need to fight through difficulties, but other times we have more success by learning to live with them. I suppose we can look at St. George's dragon as the dragon of wilderness and we can look at St. Martha's dragon as the dragon of ordinariness. At different times in our lives, we will have to deal with both kinds.

The time of my exclaustration and part of my transfer I tried to slay my dragons — mourning the community I left, reshaping my identity, the vulnerability of living in-between, and wrestling with my own limitations and uncertainties as I adapted. In reality, I needed to befriend them.

The dragons I resisted were the ones I needed to deal with at the time. When I look back at the moments I considered leaving, I recognize that the temptation to escape was not about my circumstances as a transfer sister. It was about my own unwillingness to sit with discomfort. I convinced myself that God's call was elsewhere, that my unsettledness was a sign that I needed to move on. But grace often comes disguised as persistence. In staying, I discovered that what I was running from was not the place or the people, but the deeper work God was doing in me.

Lane reminds us that grace is not always dramatic. More often, it is hidden in the mundane. The daily chanting of the psalms, which feels ordinary, carried me through many dark nights. The work of washing dishes, setting tables or harvesting vegetables — tasks that seem meaningless — became acts of love. "The deepest joys are not so much spectacular as they are commonplace," writes Lane.

My monastic community slowly began to transform before my eyes and heart, their same faces and voices, over time, became instruments of God's presence, and I realized that stability was not about doing the same thing every day in the same place for life, but about trusting that God is present in those faces, in those things we do, in this place we live.

On Mount Horeb, Elijah expected to encounter God in a mighty wind, an earthquake and a fire. But instead, God came in a still small voice. Stability trains us to listen for that voice — not in dramatic moments, but in the routine of everyday life — chanting

the same psalms, walking the same halls, seeing the same faces. Grace is never absent. I simply have to learn to listen.

St. Benedict understood that the deepest spiritual change happens not in terrifying spiritual battles, but in the daily practice of faithfulness. Stability is not about being stuck — it is about being transformed in place. Over time, staying softens our edges, making us more patient, more present, more loving. The people who once irritated us become our teachers. The tasks that once felt tedious become acts of devotion.

For those outside monastic life, the practice of stability still holds wisdom. In relationships, it means staying present in difficult moments instead of walking away. In faith, it means committing to prayer even when it feels dry. In work, it means finding purpose in the ordinary, rather than seeking meaning only in big achievements. Stability does not mean complacency; it means courage — the courage to remain when every impulse says to leave.

There is a profound simplicity in learning to stay. The discipline of presence, the practice of gratitude, the commitment to remain — these small choices shape us in ways we cannot immediately see. The world teaches us to chase the next thing, to believe that satisfaction is always just beyond our reach. But the monastic way insists that everything we need is already here.

So, today, I vow my life to God in this community and with these sisters to be my companions, the ones who will point me toward the deeper work of grace. We will continue to seek God together.