



Lectio Silvam: Reading the Forest with North American Forester-Monks

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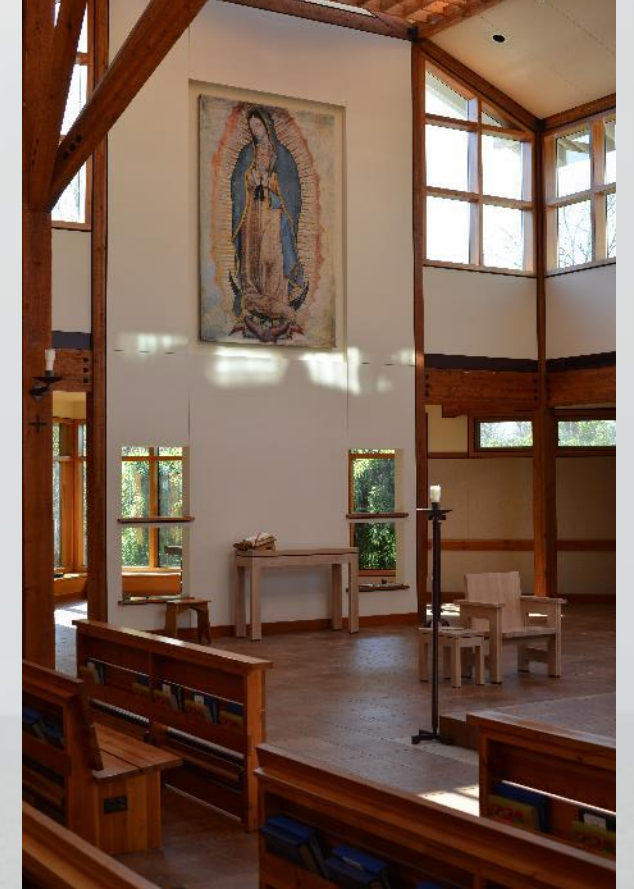
New Camaldoli Hermitage: Big Sur, CA



New Clairvaux Abbey: Vina, CA



Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey: Carlton, OR



Christ in the Desert Abbey: Abiquiu, NM



Benedictine Monastic Spirituality

- Vow of Stability
- Divine Office
- Manual Work
- Contemplative Prayer



Monks of Our Lady of Guadalupe enter the Church on Holy Saturday, Easter Vigil

Conducting Walking Interviews

- Philosopher of Place Edward Casey: “*Dwelling is accomplished not by residing but by wandering*” (1993).
- Anthropologists Jo Lee Vergunst and Tim Ingold: “*Through shared walking, we can see and feel what is really a learning process of being together, in adjusting one’s body and one’s speech to the rhythms of others, and of sharing (or at least coming to see) a point of view*” (2008).
- Spending 10-15 days at four community. I interviewed 50 monks.
- Interviews were on foot when possible.
- I used a small lapel microphone and digital recorder.
- We would walk where the monks suggested, and I would ask them questions from my interview schedule. I would also refer to features and aspects of the landscape.

Monastic Sense of Place

- The vow of stability encourages monks to become ‘lovers of the place.’
- Spiritual formation intertwines inner landscapes with place.
- Daily and seasonal liturgy attunes the monks to the cycles of the land.
- Manual work balances life and enriches spiritual development.
- These encounters become attached to the land, some of which serve as moral lessons, others as raw encounters with the Divine.

Making Sense of Symbol and Body

- A tree can remind a monk of the cross by its shape.
- A tree can symbolize the cross with its wood.
- A tree can hold a particular story, memory or spiritual insight through a monk's experience with and near it.
- A tree can point to God as Creator.
- A tree can be experienced in itself.

“You become part of the land. Our vow of stability grounds us, and an image that was really helpful for me was the idea of these trees [points] taking root; you know we’ve got thirty feet of top soil, and the roots go deep...So that was the image of stability that I had. The longer I stay here, the more I can see myself growing in ways I never thought possible. It’s of course not always easy, staying in one place, but the [longer] you stay the [the higher you can] reach.” –Monk of New Clairvaux



Sycamore tree near abandoned hermitage,
New Clairvaux Abbey

“This Doug fir was just alive, really, and there was this gash and sap dripping out of it. Immediately I thought of Christ, his side, the gash and the blood and water flowing from his side, and I remember touching it and it was a very holy moment...My eyes were kind of opened to the experience of God that God is always with us. We’re the ones that just don’t always see it.

And then I tried that next day and went back and it was not the same. It was alive but the light wasn’t there; but I’ll never forget that tree.” –A monk of Guadalupe Abbey



View of Abbey church from restored Oregon White Oak Savannah, Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey

Lectio Silvam: Place-Making in the Forest

- *Lectio Divina* is the slow meditative reading of scripture in the monastic tradition.
- Lectio Silvam is the slow meditative immersion in the forest.
 - *Solvitur ambulando*: “It is solved by walking.”
- A trend called ‘Forest Bathing’ borrowed from the Japanese Shinrin-yoku claims myriad health benefits.
- Ethnographic research is always in danger of objectifying the informant/researcher relationship.
- Forest Bathing/Wellness craze turns *sauntering* into a competitive sport, or every walk into a hashtag-able encounter.