

# ***A Visit to St. Benedict's Monastery, Snowmass Colorado – with Words of Encouragement from Father Thomas Keating***

by Alan Krema / Originally published in Spirit Journal April 2016

This post was written on my way home from a recent five-day retreat at St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. It was the first time I have visited there – the home of Fr. Thomas Keating and a Cistercian (Trappist) monastic community, part of a 900 year old tradition. The roots of the Order reach still further back to the Rule of St. Benedict, written 1,500 years ago. A small community of about 15 members, Snowmass has its own distinct personality and mission statement: "Through daily life in our Cistercian community, we aspire to be transformed in mind and heart by embodying Christ Jesus in ways appropriate to our times."



*Photo: Gill Photography*

The monastery is a place of prayer set in the beautiful Rocky Mountains. From any vantage point on the monastery grounds, you can see no other sign of activity other than the monastery itself, the retreat house, and farm buildings. Mountains surround you and, if I use my cosmic scale of time, these mountains walk on a fiery liquid lava bed, a geologic dance of creation. The beauty of nature here frames the presence I sense as vast and timeless. This is sacred space at the intersection of the valley in the mountain range and the small community dedicated to living prayer.

As you may know, I recently accepted the invitation to serve as the new Coordinator for Contemplative Outreach – Chicago. I've been preparing to take that on, and so it was very serendipitous for me to attend a retreat at Contemplative Outreach's place of origin. I have been trying to arrange a visit for a while and this turned up as a recent vacancy. It takes a bit of patience to reserve a place.

I was not attending an organized retreat, but I allowed the daily prayer routine of the monks to be my structure. I began after my arrival in early evening with vespers, the final prayer of the day. I was aware of a vast and deep presence in the chapel as I entered. I felt connected by the vibration of my heartbeat and the rhythm of my breathing.

The monks filed in, taking their place. The psalms were chanted in a resonant deep way, not with a focus on skill but with presence and interior emanation. Sometimes I could follow the words from a sheet, and other times not. Especially when I could not follow the words, I let the deep vibrations synchronize with my physical interior. These monks live faith as rhythm, a rhythm of chant, of praying the daily office, a rhythm of work and prayer, and a rhythm of a life felt as much as thought, on a scale that is simultaneously infinite and detailed.

The monks are happy to speak with the guests who come for daily mass. There is a meeting place in the bookstore, which is at the entrance to the cloister. The monks enthusiastically engage their rule of hospitality as they meet those who come. Anyone coming for the first time, like myself, is no longer a stranger once the prayer time is experienced and some of the monks welcome you afterward. It feels like a welcome home.

In conversation with one of the monks, I mentioned my acceptance to serve as Chicago chapter Coordinator. I was very surprised when, later the next day, this monk told me that Thomas Keating was interested in meeting me, to share and discuss news about the chapter. Thomas is very interested in our Chicago chapter. He remembers his visit here fondly, and we spoke of those he knew here. He sends best wishes to Phil Jackson, who has spent multiple retreats at St. Benedict's, and he sends all of us his blessings and hopes for a fruitful future of communal participation in the work of the Spirit, in each of us and in us as a community.