



Book review : Trisha Day, Inside the school of charity : lessons from the monastery

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PUBLICATION DATE

01-01-2010

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Crisp, Beth 2010, Book review : Trisha Day, Inside the school of charity : lessons from the monastery, *The way*, pp. 116-118.

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Trisha Day, *Inside the School of Charity: Lessons from the Monastery* (Trappist, Ky: Cistercian Publications, 2010). 978 0 8790 7020 5, pp. 325, £23.99.

As someone whose job involves training the next generation of professional social workers, I must admit to being intrigued by a book titled *Inside the School of Charity*. Professional social work in recent decades has often sought to distance itself from its religious roots and I can only wonder as to how some of my colleagues might respond on hearing that Cistercian monasteries have been known through the centuries as ‘schools of charity’. I was curious as to what, if anything, Cistercian spirituality might have to offer me or my students, especially when I realised that the three months Trisha Day spent as a visitor to Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey was a similar length of time to that which my students spend in each of their educational placements in welfare agencies.

Although the language of Cistercian spirituality would seem to be at odds with the professional discourses I work with, some of the underlying values are not that dissimilar. Respect for the other (including the need for privacy), making newcomers feel welcome or at least at ease, and being appropriately present to others are all things I would hope that my students grasp before graduation. Furthermore, students working with groups or communities in which conflict is rife might just learn something

from the disciplines and practices which enable the twenty members of Mississippi Abbey to live in relative harmony; and potential CEOs might be challenged but could learn a great deal from Gail, the abbess, about running a successful organization. However, some aspects of monastic life would be very foreign, such as avoiding eye contact and valuing silence over conversation.

One of the most difficult challenges for many social workers I know would be that the monastic working day has very firm boundaries, and work is limited to the hours of 8.30 to 11.30 in the morning and then 2.00 until 4.00 in the afternoon. Not only is this substantially shorter than the nominal hours I and many of my colleagues are paid to work, but it is even less when compared to the hours many of us actually work. Yet while some might consider monastic working practices to be unrealistic, I did find myself wondering if they are more sustainable than work patterns which all too often lead to burnout.

I suspect one of the values with which my students would have most difficulty if they ever ended up in a Cistercian monastery would be that of humility. For those of us who have encountered the consequences of inappropriate humility, it can be difficult to grasp its virtues. Trisha Day herself notes her difficulties with this:

The sisters read aloud from the Rule of St Benedict each time they get together to listen to one of Gail's chapter talks. Lately they have been reading from Chapter 7—that's the one about humility and some of it is pretty grim. In fact, parts of it sound downright unhealthy to my twenty-first-century ears . . .

Once I got over my initial hang-up about the way St Benedict wrote about it, I was able to take a closer look at what humility really means and to discover that it has nothing to do with demeaning oneself or sacrificing one's integrity. It is not the same as humiliation—something most of us have experienced in one way or another and have no desire to willingly inflict upon ourselves.
(p. 163)

Throughout the book, Trisha Day often comments on what she has learnt from particular members of Mississippi Abbey, stimulating me to reflect on some of the many teachers from whom I have learnt great and small facts about living well. She also recalls a number of eminent persons who have taught by example that delicate balance between using one's gifts to make a contribution and retaining an attitude of humility. Having been married for almost four decades when she took leave of her husband to spend three months at Mississippi Abbey, Trisha Day frequently reflects on her marriage, and on the similarities and differences between the commitment of marriage and the vowed lives of the members of religious

orders. While her own marriage has clearly brought great blessings to her and to her husband, she remains aware of the gravity of the commitment. She makes the interesting observation that in religious life individuals do not pronounce their vows until they have lived in a religious community for some time, in stark contrast to married life (at least when she was married in the 1960s) which traditionally starts with the vows before a couple begin to live together. While Day is not suggesting trial marriages, her insight reflects a more understanding approach to marriage breakdown than is often found within the Catholic Church.

As an outsider's view of religious life, *Inside the School of Charity* is a worthy contribution, and complements the more readily available material written by those who have vowed to live their lives in a Cistercian monastery (for which the reader will find a bibliography at the end of the book). This fresh view, however, comes with some candid insights which I found surprising. For example, although she has had a long association with the Cistercians, Trisha Day at one point tells the reader that, prior to her time at Mississippi Abbey, she had never appreciated why people might go to daily mass.

Finally, perhaps what I enjoyed most about this book was the way in which the author explores how she can take what she has learnt and find ways of living a Cistercian-influenced life in the house she shares with her husband and those who visit them. Most of us do not have the opportunity to take up monastic life, or would not be suited to such a life if we could, but the possibility of making domestic life a more sacred experience is something to which we can, and perhaps should, aspire.

Beth R. Crisp