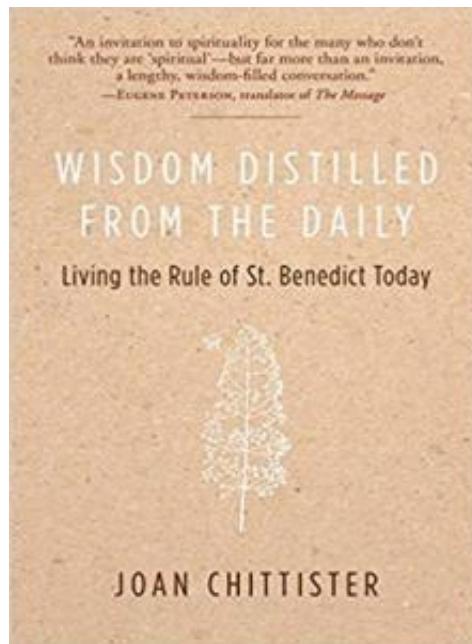


## Discussion Questions

# Wisdom Distilled From the Daily



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Joan Chittister

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## Chapter 1— The Rule: A Book of Wisdom

### **QUESTIONS:**

1. The author defines spirituality as “the way in which we express a living faith in a real world.” Do you agree with that definition? How would you define spirituality?
2. The author explains that the Rule of Benedict is more in sync with the original meaning of the Latin word “regula,”—a guide, a plan of life, a set of principles, more wisdom than law. And she says this “wisdom book” was written for lay people. How do you react to that idea?
3. On pp. 10-11, Sister Joan lists the elements of Benedictine spirituality, of what it means “to live an ordinary life extraordinarily well” in our times. Which of the aspects of Benedictine spirituality interests you at this time? Please explain.
4. Read the monastic tale on p. 13. Spend a few minutes thinking about the closing sentence of the tale. Write out a personal response to the message of the tale, putting your response in the form of a prayer.

## Chapter 2— Listening: The Key to Spiritual Growth

### **QUESTIONS:**

1. Sister Joan writes: “The spiritual life is achieved only by listening to all of life and learning to respond.” List the ways in which God has spoken to you.
  - Through the Gospel
  - Through other people
  - Through nature
  - Through art or music

- Through your life experiences
2. What, if anything, makes listening difficult in our society? What things are there in your life, or what things do you do, that help you be a better listener?

## Chapter 3— Prayer and *Lectio*: The Center and Centrifuge of Life

### **QUESTIONS:**

1. Sister Joan says of Benedictine prayer: “It is regular. It is universal. It is converting. It is reflective. It is communal.” She notes that Benedictine prayer is based on the Psalms and Scripture. Then on p. 37, she lists the implications of this prayer life for our spirituality. React to one or more of these statements. What, if anything, do they mean to your present spiritual life?
2. Sister Joan writes: “I pray to become a better human being, not to become better at praying.” In what ways can taking time to listen and to pray help you to become a better human being?

## Chapter 4— Community: The Basis of Human Relationships

### **QUESTIONS:**

1. Name the communities of which you are a part (parish, family, prayer group, Monasteries of the Heart, clubs, organizations etc). Have any of these communities influenced your spirituality in either positive or negative ways? Be specific—your view of life, of God, your actions.... Which community had the greatest positive influence on your spirituality?

2. List three things about a Benedictine spirituality of community that you learned from this chapter that are important to you. Please explain why.

## Chapter 5— Humility: The Lost Virtue

### **QUESTIONS:**

1. The chapter on humility in the Rule of Benedict is the cornerstone of Benedictine spirituality. How do you react to the word “humility” and why? What is the difference between humility and humiliation?
2. Sister Joan explains that the process for achieving spiritual maturity is outlined in Benedict’s 12 progressive degrees of humility. What do you think of this spiritual program? Did any of the degrees of humility raise concerns, appeal to you, challenge you, confuse you? Explain.

## Chapter 6— Monastic Mindfulness: A Blend of Harmony, Wholeness, Balance

### **QUESTIONS:**

1. The author writes, “Awareness of the sacred in life is what holds our world together and the lack of awareness and sacred care is what is tearing it apart” (p. 69). In what specific ways might “awareness of the sacred in life” help hold our world together?
2. “What are the signs of harmony and balance and awareness in our lives?” Sister Joan asks on p. 76. She then describes (pp. 76-78) how people with a sense of Benedictine balance and awareness operate in the world. Was there anything in her description that you’d like to comment on? How do you understand this sentence: “To the monastic mind, everything speaks of God.”

## Chapter 7— Work: Participation in Creation

### **QUESTIONS:**

1. Chittister writes: “Work is not a private enterprise. Work is not to enable me to get ahead; the purpose of work is to enable me to get more human and to make my world more just” (p.83). How does this understanding of work compare with the way our society understands it? How does it compare with your own understanding?
2. Review the author’s list of the implications of a Benedictine spirituality of work on pages 92 and 93. For each of these, list any concrete ways in which you find these implications true for you in the work you do.
  - “Work is my gift to the world.”
  - “Work is the way I am saved from total self-centeredness.”
  - “Work is meant to build community.”
  - “Work gives me a place in salvation. It helps redeem the world from sin.”
  - “Work leads to self-fulfillment.”
  - “Work is its own asceticism.”
  - “Work is a way of living poverty and being in solidarity with the poor.”

## Chapter 8— Holy Leisure: The Key to a Good Life

### **QUESTIONS:**

1. Chittister writes: “No matter how valuable your work, remember that the empty vessel must be filled” (p. 101). Read the monastic tale on page 97. What things do you do (or not do) to help keep you from breaking? What refreshes you?
2. After reading this chapter, what is your understanding of the Benedictine concept of “holy leisure.” What are some specific ways

that you can engage in the practice of holy leisure?

3. Sister Joan notes that if each of us observed Sabbath in a special way—took the time to look at life in fresh, new ways—we would have enough time to practice holy leisure. Is observing the Sabbath practical in our times? Is there any way that you observe the Sabbath that you'd like to share with others?

## Chapter 9—Giftedness: Making Music Together

### QUESTIONS:

1. The compassion of Benedict is displayed in this chapter when he asks that each person be treated according to his or her needs and that great generosity be shown to another's weaknesses. Specifically, we are asked to hold judgment regarding the needs and failings of others. Does this aspect of Benedictine spirituality have anything to say to families, parishes, city communities? Explain.
2. In this Chapter, Sister Joan explains what Benedictine leadership looks like—the entire community elects the leader that it needs to call it to growth; the leader should be chosen for wisdom; the leader should serve the community, not rule it; and the leader must be more intent on mercy than on judgment. What do you think of these criteria? Anything missing? React to these criteria in light of how leaders are chosen for current civic and church positions.
3. Chittister writes, “In Benedictine spirituality...we grow to full stature in life in order to carry someone else.” Are there people whom you “carry” or “have carried” in life? Are there people who help “carry” you or “have carried you over the years?” Write a prayer that thanks God for the gifts that enable you to help others and for the people and the gifts God has given those who “carry” you.

## Chapter 10— Hospitality: The Unboundaried Heart

### QUESTIONS:

1. The author writes, “Hospitality is the act of giving what you have to everyone in sight...it is the act of the recklessly generous heart” (p. 132). With this definition in mind, respond to the question she asks on page 124: “Is hospitality an impossible art for this time and culture?” What makes the practice of hospitality difficult for people in our day? What can help us overcome these difficulties?
2. Benedictine hospitality, according to the author, begs the stranger to come into our lives, calls for an open mind, learns to let the other in, especially the poor. Watch the daily news or read the newspaper today and list some ways that each of us can practice this hospitality of the heart.

## Chapter 11, 12— Obedience: Holy Responsibility & Stability: Revelation of the Many Faces of God

### QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan calls Benedictine obedience “holy responsibility.” After reading this chapter explain what she means by this.
2. Here are some statements that Sister Joan makes about the monastic vow of stability. Choose one that interests you and explain your choice. In what kind of situations might it be spiritually unhealthy for a person to stay?
  - Stability says that where I am is where God is for me.
  - Stability is designed to still the wandering heart.
  - Perseverance and persistence are aspects of stability which the present world counts little.

- Stability says that we stay with a thing in order to grow, not in order not to grow.
- Stability says there are some values beyond other values that ought to be pursued.
- Stability requires us to be constant of heart and unremitting in our spiritual efforts.

## Chapter 13, 14— Monastic Practices: The Way of Conversion & Peace: Sign of the Disarmed Heart

### QUESTIONS:

1. In Chapter 13, Sister Joan writes, “For the Benedictine, silence, custom, the common table, statio, lectio, manual labor, and stewardship are the tools of the spiritual craft.” All of these “tools” can be incorporated to people who possess a monastic heart, but don’t necessarily live in a monastery. Benedictine life is for people who are in families, or live by themselves, or are in intentional communities. Which of the “tools” that Sister Joan described, can you apply to your present circumstances? Are there any “tools” that you would like to incorporate into your daily life?
2. To summarize the chapter on peace, Sister Joan writes, “the Rule of Benedict offers a model of peace that depends on being gentle with ourselves, gentle with the other, and gentle with the earth.” She captures this vision of Benedictine nonviolence in a series of statements that begin with the word “Imagine” (p. 188). Read through these statements and write a few of your own, imagining a world where Benedictine spirituality has taken root.

## Chapter 15— The Monastic Vision: Gift for a Needy World

### QUESTIONS:

1. In the final chapter, Sister Joan summarizes the essence of Benedictine spirituality and offers how it can be a gift to the needy world. Write a letter to Sister Joan telling her what you gleaned from her book that was especially meaningful to your present spiritual journey.