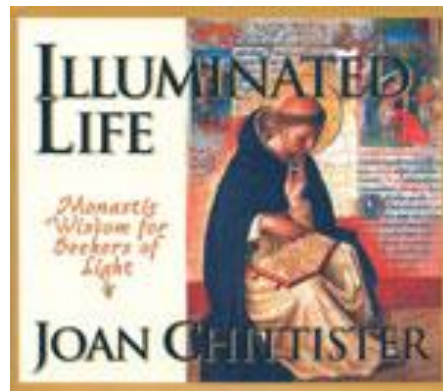


Discussion Questions

**Illuminated Life:  
Monastic Wisdom for Seekers of Light**



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## Introduction:

### QUESTIONS:

1. “It is the way we live each of the circumstances of life, the humdrum as well as the extraordinary, the daily as well as the defining moments, that determines the quality of our lives,” states Sister Joan. Based on this, how would you describe the quality of your life? Has it changed over the years for good or ill? Discuss.
2. Sister Joan suggests that “spirituality is about coming to consciousness of the sacred.” What life experiences, what spiritual practices, have deepened your “consciousness of the sacred?”
3. What sentence in this Introduction challenged or inspired you the most? Explain why.

## Awareness

### QUESTIONS:

1. “Everything in life, in fact, is speaking to us of something,” says Sister Joan. Identify three things in your life, at the present moment, that are speaking to you about something. What is each saying to you?
2. According to Sister Joan, “to be a contemplative I must ask always, of everything: What is there in this of God for me?” Please share a circumstance when you have last asked this question. What did you discover?
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most? Why?

## Beauty

### QUESTION:

1. “A loss of commitment to beauty may be the clearest sign we have that we have lost our way to God.” (26) What commitments to beauty characterize your life and keep you from losing your way to God?
2. Share three early memories you have of learning to appreciate beauty.
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most? Why?

## Community

### QUESTIONS:

1. What experiences of community have helped you become more contemplative, that is, able to see the world, as Sister Joan has so often said, as God sees the world?
2. Do you agree or disagree with Sister Joan when she writes on page 33, “When advice is something we resist and questions are something we avoid in life, God has no voice by which to call us.” Discuss your response.
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most? Why?

## Dailiness

### QUESTIONS:

1. “Abba Poemen said about Abba Pior that every single day he made a fresh beginning.” What is your response to this, spiritually speaking?
2. “To be a contemplative we must remember to begin again, day after

day, to turn dailiness into time with God” (39). Share three ways you practice this.

3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most? Why?

## Enlightenment

### QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan lists several things that “we make God to find God.” These include: religion, national honor, personal security, the color of our skin, gender, dividing spirit and matter. Which of these have you struggled with on your spiritual journey? Would you add any others to the list?

2. “To be enlightened is to know that heaven is not ‘coming.’ Heaven is here” (43). Do you believe this or not? Why or why not?

3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most? Why?

## Faith

### QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan writes that “Life, the contemplative knows, is a process. . . to the contemplative everything matters. Everything speaks of God, and God is both in and beyond everything.” Are you becoming a contemplative who knows this? How do you know you know this?

2. “To be a contemplative, we must have faith that is beyond our need for magic solutions to daily questions” (48). Do you think most Christians realize this? Why or why not?

3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most? Why?

## Growth

### QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan writes that “Life, the contemplative knows, is a process. . . to the contemplative everything matters. Everything speaks of God, and God is both in and beyond everything.” Are you becoming a contemplative who knows this? How do you know you know this?
2. “To be a contemplative, we must have faith that is beyond our need for magic solutions to daily questions” (48). Do you think most Christians realize this? Why or why not?
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most? Why?

## Humility

### QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan distinguishes humility from humiliations. What in your mind is most significant about the difference?
2. Which of the four levels of humility do you find most difficult to practice? Discuss why?
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most? Why?

## Interiority

### QUESTIONS:

1. Why do you think interiority is so important in the spiritual life?
2. Reflecting on your own interiority, has “going into the self” helped you, (as Sister Joan has made clear) find the motives that drive you, the feelings that block you, the desires that divert you and the poisons that

may infect your soul? Please share what you can about this.

3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most?  
Why?

## Justice

### QUESTIONS:

1. “If contemplation means to become immersed in the mind of God, then we must come to think beyond our own small agendas” (65).  
What is at least one example from your life that illustrates how you are doing this?
2. Sister Joan writes that “The true contemplative weeps with those who weep and cries out for those who have no voice.” Name a person whom you think embodies this and explain why.
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most?  
Why?

## Kindness

### QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan writes: “THE DESERT MONASTICS ARE CLEAR: Self-righteousness is cruelty done in the name of justice.” Give three examples of where you see this currently in the United States or the world.
2. Do you have a memory of some unkindness imposed upon you as a child or at some other period in your life? Share it if you can. Then also share the negative and, perhaps, positive effects it had upon you.
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most?  
Why?



## Lectio: The Art of Holy Reading

### QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan indicates that “Thoughtful, reflective reading – lectio – immersion in the lessons of scripture and what the Rule of Benedict calls ‘other holy books,’ provides the background against which the entire rest of the life is lived.” Offer three to five other sources of lectio besides scripture and ‘other holy books.’
2. Recall a particular lectio from scripture or another source that truly impacted your awareness of the Holy Mystery.
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most? Why?

## Metanoia: Call to Conversion

### QUESTIONS:

1. Metanoia or conversion is a daily call to change one’s heart, mind and/or behavior. What do you find most hopeful about this daily call to change?
2. Sister Joan suggests seven “we must” statements that require conversion if we seek to be contemplative. Reflect on each. Then choose two or three and share examples from your life of how you are trying to embody each, practically speaking.
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most? Why?

## Nature

### QUESTIONS:

1. As the reality of climate change thunders about us, what are several sins against nature you feel most strongly are the causes of this foreboding issue?
2. “To be a contemplative it is necessary to grow a plant, love an animal, walk in the rain, . . .” declares Sister Joan. What else would you add is necessary at this point in history given the obvious existence of climate change on our planet?
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most? Why?

## Openness

### QUESTIONS:

1. Do you consider yourself a person with an open mind, an open heart? Discuss why or why not?
2. Sister Joan is clear: “The voice of God within us is not the only voice of God” (90). Have you learned this truth? How?
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most? Why?

## Prayer

### QUESTIONS:

1. Do you agree with Sister Joan’s criticism that the traditional definition of prayer as “the raising of our hearts and minds to God” has misrepresented God? Share why or why not?
2. Why do you pray?

3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most?  
Why?

## Quest

### QUESTIONS:

1. The distinguishing questions for all those on a quest for something, according to Sister Joan, are two-fold: “For what am I seeking, and who am I as a result of the search?” How would you answer these questions?
2. One answer to the question “Who am I,” declares Sister Joan, is “I am the one who realizes that the distance between God and me is me.” Have you realized this yet? What or who has helped you do so?
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most?  
Why?

## Re-Creation

### QUESTIONS:

1. “Life is about more than work” (102). Name five ways your life exemplifies this.
2. What is most meaningful about your daily work? What is least meaningful? How do you deal with the latter?
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most?  
Why?

## Silence

### QUESTIONS:

1. How important is silence to you? How/where have you created space for silence in your daily life?
2. “Silence frightens us because it is silence that brings us face to face with ourselves,” writes Sister Joan. Explore this website <https://allpoetry.com/poems/about/Silence> and choose a poem on silence that is meaningful to you. Then share why.
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most? Why?

## Time

### QUESTIONS:

1. On page 111 Sister Joan shares four life experiences that, as she says, “cannot be hurried.” Which one stood out to you? Why? Would you add any others to this list?
2. “To be a contemplative we must begin to see time, not as a commodity, but as a sacrament revealing God to us in the here and now. Always” (112). What aspects of our culture in this 21st century and/or your personal life, undermine your ability to see time as Sister Joan suggests?
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most? Why?

## Understanding

### QUESTIONS:

1. “The person is always more important than the rule” (114). Have you struggled with this belief in your life? Share an experience that reveals this. How did you reconcile the conflict?
2. Under what circumstances did you come to recognize this statement by Sister Joan: “God, we know, is where we least of all expect God to be, waiting for us to realize that” (116).
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most? Why?

## Vision

### QUESTION:

1. Name three people you think have the kind of vision Sister Joan describes on page 118. What have you learned from each of them?
2. Read a short piece by Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart or Teresa of Avila. Share your response to their “vision.”
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most? Why?

## Work

### QUESTIONS:

1. “And Abba Theodore of Pherme said, ‘In these days many take their rest before God gives it to them.’” What does this mean to you? Do you think it is still operative in the 21st century? Explain.
2. “The contemplative sets out to shape the world in the image of God” (123). Have you done this with your work? Share how.

3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most?  
Why?

## Xenophilia: The Love of Strangers

### QUESTION:

1. Write a letter to or have an imaginary conversation with a significant person in public life or in your personal life, who embodies xenophobia rather than xenophilia. Share three or four points you would make inviting them to conversion of heart.
2. Share a story from your own life, or from a film, TV show, work of art, etc., that proves this statement by Sister Joan is true for you: “It is the stranger who disarms all our preconceptions about life and penetrates all our stereotypes about the world” (129).
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most?  
Why?

## Yearning

### QUESTIONS:

1. For what do you most yearn at this time in your life? Discuss.
2. Sister Joan states that “To be contemplative means to live in the presence of God and the absence of God at the same time.” What wisdom is she offering here?
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most?  
Why?

## Zeal

### QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever been “. . . turned completely into fire” for the sake of growth in your relationship with the Holy One and your commitment to the Reign of God? Share the circumstances.
2. Offer three to five examples in the United States today where you see “zeal not grounded in God. . .” What action/s can you take to transform one of them?
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most? Why?

## Across the Centuries

### QUESTIONS:

1. Do you believe what Abba Anthony said is relevant today, nationally and/or globally? Why?
2. “In the end, the fruit of contemplation is joy” (142). Do you recognize this in yourself? In anyone else you admire? Explain.
3. What sentence in this section challenged or inspired you the most? Why?