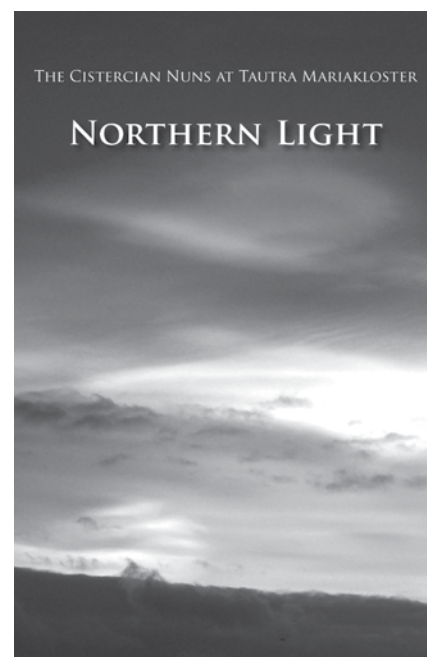


Cistercian nuns deliver insight, inspiration

THE BOOK *NORTHERN LIGHT* (Cistercian Publications/Liturgical Press 2020), by the nuns of Tautra Mariakloster, offers a glimpse into the often mysterious and shrouded life of a traditional monastic community daring to live daily its call from Jesus. This book chronicles the story of a fledgling new Cistercian foundation in Norway, dreamed into existence by the hearts of women nestled in their motherhouse along the Mississippi River. They are the members of Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey in Iowa. What started as a trickle of an idea from the waters of the Mississippi in time grew into a spring of a new foundation on a fiord island in Norway. More precisely their “new” foundation actually re-founded a long-defunct Cistercian monastery that had once existed on Tautra Island.

In this book, four of the women who leave their home monastery to join Tautra Mariakloster reflect on their daily life. Their vows of stability were transformed and transferred to a new land, a new culture forged out of the life cycle of the Paschal Mystery. The venture called each writer to follow Jesus as each one let go, let transformation happen, and let rise within them new life.

Their meditations are painted against a stunning backdrop of rugged mountains and the astonishing, breathtaking glow of the northern lights. This book offers soul light as each sister shares a bit of her soul as a gift to the reader. Long hours of prayer and contemplation, joy, tears, and adversity are illuminated in words paired with the Catholic liturgical year. Stories of the saints complement the reflections of each season and month. The saints are witnesses of living out the everyday yes of life lived with God.



BY SISTER AMY TAYLOR, F.S.P.A.



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Reading this book I pondered the experience of these nuns. I wondered if they had questions and feelings similar to those discerning religious life. In the gospel Jesus says, "Come follow me." There is no map to the destination, no timeline, no country stated ... the invitation and the call is open ended, the road ahead uncertain, and one imagines there will be adventure, adversity, beauty, loss, joy, and surprise.

Something deep within one's heart opens and leans forward and asks, "Do you mean me? Certainly there must be someone else ready to walk the journey you suggest, ready to encounter what was never considered an option, ready to walk alongside the determination of the human spirit, the resilience of the soul in crisis, and to witness in joy the exhilaration of new discoveries."

Perhaps the other side of oneself politely says, "Thank you for thinking of me and offering the invitation, but I am happy with my life as it is. I am comfortable and enjoy the predictability of life in the place I live, the place I minister, and most of all don't ask me to uproot my life. I have worked hard to finally feel settled, and to have found my place.

"You, God, after all are the one who has helped me settle here, who has called me to this place with this group and in this time in history. Why are you now inviting me into this new season of change? With this new offer, with this new whisper, I feel unsure, yet intrigued. My mind is confused but in time my heart will say yes. You are forever my yes."

Perhaps such thoughts crossed the minds of the authors of *Northern Light*. Trust in God became their mantra, the needle on the compass of their lives as they willingly entered into a time of prayer and discernment as they knew God would not abandon them. The time had come for a now stable and fruitful abbey to take a risk, to begin the process of creating a new foundation, as is the tradition in the Cistercian way of life, following Jesus and beginning anew when the Spirit leads.

Why, one asks, why risk the safety and stability to create when maintenance is so much easier? Why not just add on a few more rooms? Expand the physical building to accommodate growth? Why not make do with what is, as eventually there will be space. "Why?" can easily compete with the mantra of trust.

Radical trust and dependence on the providence of God is the cornerstone of all vocations to religious life.

Stagnation is not the gospel. Comfort and routine are often disrupted in the effort to offer deeper relationships, stronger bonds, new insight and faith. Hope guides when human sight is limited.

One of the joys of human sight for the nuns who wrote this book is in the sky surrounding the new monastery. The natural phenomenon of the northern lights cannot be summoned to appear as entertainment or harnessed for gain; they are ethereal and a reminder of each human soul, which in freedom and grace dances before God, offering light and beauty without reserve.

This is also the pathway of religious life; we are called to offer all of who we are without reserve. As vocation directors, formation team members, and members of the community who offer accompaniment, we introduce discerners and new members to the guiding lights of our religious community's tradition. We share with them the triumphs and trials of our founders and foundresses. As relationships deepen, we, like the Cistercian Sisters of Tautra Mariakloster, reveal our hearts and love of God and the experiences of our lives that shape who we are.

The sisters of Tautra Mariakloster invite readers to slow down and let go of the attitude that life and ministry must be done at a hectic pace. God is in all moments, not just the ones our calendars chronicle as the official tasks of ministry. We are invited to again be inspired by the gentle reflections of the seasons, and with soft eyes of love to reflect on God's presence in everyday moments of life. The voicemails, emails, and meeting agendas will still be there, but choosing to live contemplatively, we too can pause within the day and bring refreshment to our souls. Contemplative pauses encourage suspension of the expectation of ministry as production and refocus us on our intention to be in communion with God.

This book encourages us to enter the stillness of our hearts to listen as Jesus once again invites us to come and follow, to see the miracles of everyday life, to come and be in the stillness of prayer and the silence of contemplation. We are reminded of the deep love that awaits us each time we let go, let ourselves be transformed, and let ourselves rise anew.

Northern Light serves as inspiration, as light for our own journeys. May we all continue to challenge ourselves to be radiant light. ■

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