

Accidental Monk

FEATURED REVIEW

by Joy Jennings (Bristol, Rhode Island)

We all have our personal stories to tell of how we coped and carried on, when the rapid spread of coronavirus was declared a full-blown pandemic in March of 2020...but it would be difficult to top the true story of Wil Hernandez. As an author, seeker, and founder of the ecumenical hub, CenterQuest, Wil has often found himself teaching on the road for several months at a time. As he was shoring up a 3-month stint through various countries and cultures, he finds himself at his final stop in the Philippines ... a Benedictine Abbey where he is meant to teach for a few days. As destiny would have it, Wil ends up remaining at the Abbey of the Transfiguration for 2 months and 10 days, because the world has gone into lockdown and he cannot book a flight back home to the U.S.

Wil is not a stranger to this monastic community in which he finds himself hospitably stranded...he has taught at the Abbey three times in the past. This time, Divine Providence intervenes in what becomes a beautiful struggle of how to deal with the real when life is turned upside down and all your best-laid plans are put aside through necessity.

An effective writer, Wil is able to describe his emotional experience with deep insight in an easy-to-read way. He delights in the sudden discovery of frozen treats to enjoy in the community's freezer. He must cope with the precarious WiFi connections that often frustrate his ability to continue his virtual work within the walls of the enclosure. But he also describes specific moments of appreciation, as in his heartfelt sharing with the abbot of the monastery: *"I've been able to catch wonderful glimpses of the sacramental blessings emerging out of the ever-present reality of human woundedness and the brokenness of our world."* This includes his own deep disappointments in living a lockdown existence...missing his wife's birthday and their wedding anniversary, back home. There are many honest self-assessments in the book, as he reveals, *"By now I've become acutely aware of the emotional roller coaster ride I've been experiencing lately, where I feel good one day and bad the next, or sometimes even contemporaneously."*

Despite the uniqueness of his situation, Wil sees the value in having landed where he did for 10 weeks of the pandemic. Most lay people never get to spend time and share space within an enclosed Benedictine community, and Wil delivers an inside look of the monks' day-to-day life. He writes of his several encounters with the 12 monks who live at the Abbey, and feels *"Blessed in the process...what a rare chance this has been for me."*

When Wil is (at last!) able to make arrangements to fly home on a wing and a prayer, he describes the mad dash to make his flight connections with the help of many friends and a few strangers. Before leaving the Abbey of the Transfiguration, with high hopes for "Los Angeles or Bust!", he takes a loving look at the halls and walls that have been his haven, and takes to heart the words of author and pastor Craig Groeschel: *"What feels like our worst interruptions may actually be God's greatest invitations."*

These words of wisdom are worthy of our personal consideration, as we review what the Pandemic of 2020-21 has offered to each of us. *Accidental Monk* may help us to fully appreciate what we have been through, and what we can become in growth and in gratitude in the days, weeks, months, and even years to come.