

Take a mini-retreat at *The Abbey*: Best-seller by Father James Martin, SJ offers hope and spiritual insight



Grab a chair and your copy of *The Abbey* for your own personal mini-retreat

Popular speaker, bestselling author, and editor at large of America magazine, Father James Martin, SJ, has long delighted us with his commentaries on life and faith through his books, videos, and social media posts.

Last Christmas, I put Father Martin's newest book (released October 2015), his first work of fiction entitled *The Abbey: A Story of Discovery*, on my wish list. Our daughter Tracy and her family had it wrapped up and under the tree for me at our holiday gift exchange.

But sadly, my new hardback copy of *The Abbey* was placed on my nightstand for a future time, as I had just started reading the Mitford-Father Tim series of Christian fiction by Jan Karon... I would read all 13 of Karon's books consecutively over the next eight months.

God's time is always best, isn't it?

After slowly reading and savoring the lovely characters and many faith-based storylines in the Mitford books, I was left feeling empty without another one to read. That's when I found *The Abbey* patiently waiting in the stack of books on my nightstand.

Indeed, the timing was perfect:

Just released last Tuesday (September 13) in paperback, *The Abbey* tells the tale of...

—Mark, a young architect who finds himself working as a handyman and carpenter at a Trappist monastery in a Philadelphia suburb, while trying to figure out where his life is going both personally and professionally;

—Anne, Mark's landlord and neighbor, a divorced woman who still rawly grieves the loss of her only child, a young teenage son, three years after his sudden death;

—Father Paul, the monastery's abbot, who offers wisdom and insight to those who seek it, even as he sometimes second-guesses himself and his own ability to offer spiritual insight and direction in this changing world;

—And the delightful elderly priest, Father Edward, a former novice director, who adds to the beauty of the characters, while holding the key to unlocking family information unknown to Anne about her past...

As I read this beautiful story which portrayed the joys and sorrows and mundane events in the lives of these characters, I realized that the spiritual wisdom shared by both Father Paul and Father Edward was akin to taking me on a virtual mini-retreat of sorts.

Through the discernment and efforts made to overcome the struggles that these characters face, we too are also encouraged to find hope in our individual circumstances of life, no matter what we may find ourselves facing.

The wisdom of *The Abbey* can be applied to all of us:

There is something here for everyone...

—If you have ever wondered why your life has taken a particular course that you never imagined and do not understand;

—If you wish to make sense of where you are on your life journey and why you are not on a different path;

—If you are uncertain of God's presence in your life and are not sure whether you should seek Him or where you should turn for guidance;

—If you ever experience anger at God and question Him and what He has allowed in your life;

—If you grieve and are trying to make sense of your loss and the changes you are forced to accept;

—If you are the strong one, and are looked upon for insight and assurance, and are not sure you have anything meaningful to impart;

—If you are highly regarded in your community, parish, or ministry, and feel unworthy of the esteem in which others hold you;

—If you are aging and wonder if God's grace will see you through the challenges;

—If you need assurance that God meets us where we are in life and speaks to us through our individual experiences;

Do you see yourself in any of these descriptions?

I encourage you to treat yourself to a break in your normal reading material and go to ***The Abbey***.

Life lessons waiting for you:

Here are a few examples of spiritual wisdom that you will find at ***The Abbey***:

On spiritual dryness:

"He also knew that the spiritual life had its dry patches—sometimes long dry

patches—when God didn't feel close at all...

It was like any relationship: things couldn't be exciting all the time.

Perhaps the human heart couldn't take it if God were always so close.

—Musings by Father Paul the abbot

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On the image of God as a gardener:

Quoting Saint Thérèse of Lisieux:

"I understood how all the flowers God has created are beautiful, how the splendor of the rose and the whiteness of the lily do not take away the perfume of the little violet or the delightful simplicity of the daisy. I understood that if all flowers wanted to be roses, nature would lose her springtime beauty, and the fields would no longer be decked out with little wildflowers. And so it is in the world of souls, Jesus' garden...

He has created smaller ones and these must be content to be daisies or violets destined to give joy to God's glances when He looks down at His feet. Perfection consists in doing His will, in being what He wills us to be."

—Father Paul the abbot, quoting from ***The Story of a Soul***, the autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux

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On listening to God:

"God can work through your imagination. How else would God come to you in prayer? After all, he made your imagination."

—Father Paul the abbot

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On prayer:

"All sorts of things happen in prayer. The kinds of images you experienced are just one way that God comes to us. For some people, it's mainly emotions that come up—like joy or contentment when they're thinking about God. Other people have memories that bubble up, maybe from childhood, and they feel it heals them in some way. Or it reminds them how much God loved them even when they were young. Sometimes it's just an insight—like figuring something out about a problem that's been bugging you. All those things can happen. Then sometimes it seems like nothing is coming up. That can be pretty frustrating. But in those times we have to trust that God is doing some work deep within us. Because any time spent in God's presence is transformative. But really our main work in prayer is simply to be present to God and open ourselves up. 'Show up and shut up,' as one of the monks here likes to say."

—Father Paul the abbot

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On grace and the spiritual life:

“Spirituality is like spaghetti. When my mother, may she rest in peace, cooked spaghetti, she used to throw a few strands against the kitchen wall. When it stuck, she said it was done. It’s the same in the spiritual life. Not every homily you preach or insight you offer will stick. A lot depends on where the person is, whether they’re open to hearing what you have to say, and whether it’s the right time for them to hear it. One day you say something that you think is profound, and they just shrug. A few months later, you say the same thing, and they start crying. Who knows? In other words, a lot of it depends on grace. Maybe all of it.”

—Father Edward, speaking to his abbot, who was formerly one of his novices in formation years back

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More info on *The Abbey: A Story of Discovery*:

To read an excerpt, listen to a sample of the audio book, or check out Father James Martin’s page at Harper Collins Publishers.

Other books by Father James Martin, SJ:

Jesus: A Pilgrimage;

The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything;

Between Heaven and Mirth;

Follow Father Martin on social media:

Facebook: @FrJamesMartin

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Read my review of the Mitford-Father Tim series by Jan Karon:

“The best of summer reading: Christian fiction with Father Tim and Mitford by Jan Karon”