

## READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

# *The Abbey*

by

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1. As Mark goes about his duties as director of the physical plant at the abbey, Father Paul often reminds him that Jesus was a carpenter (p. 24). How does the way Mark feels about this comment evolve over the course of the book?
2. Anne was never a religious person but seems to experience a dramatic loss of faith following her son's death. Have you had an experience that made you question your faith? Why does loss in particular make us feel distant from or frustrated with God?
3. Early on, Mark seems to fear Anne, worrying about how she will react to the news of the broken window and calling her a "stickler" for certain things. How do you feel about Anne?

4. Something Anne disliked about church was “people were always telling you what not to do” (p. 42). Do you have similar feelings about your religious denomination? Why might Anne or others have this impression?
5. Father Paul describes Mark to Anne as “a holy man ... in his own way” (p. 51). What do you think he means? Does Mark seem “holy” to you? What qualities make someone holy? Who around you would you characterize as a holy man or holy woman?
6. Why do you think Anne is so drawn to the portrait of the Virgin Mary? What does Mary represent for Anne?
7. Father Paul, reflecting on life in the monastery, thinks about how he has become less concerned about spiritual dry patches. “Perhaps,” he thinks, “the human heart couldn’t take it if God were always so close” (p. 61). Have you ever hit spiritual dry patches in your life? Do his words ring true?
8. Father Paul recalls the reaction of his friends when he first entered the novitiate. “They thought either that Paul was wasting his life ... or that he was entering a perfect world where strife was unknown, mortal problems were banished, and a rich prayer life was the norm” (p. 59). Has reading *The Abbey* changed the way you feel about monastic life? What do you find appealing about such a life? What do you think would be a struggle?
9. Father Paul thinks often of a quote from Saint John Berchmans, which Paul translates as “life in commu-

- nity is my greatest penance” (pp. 64–65). How do you understand this statement? What aspects of life in community might make it a penance?
10. On page 98, Anne explains her old image of God as “this person in the sky who’s judging me every minute of the day. Looking at everything I do—all the times I didn’t go to Mass, all the times I got angry after Jeremiah’s death, and all the times that I got pissed off at my ex-husband—and ticking off everything in little boxes that say ‘Right’ and ‘Wrong.’” How does her image of God change over the course of the book? How have your images of God changed throughout your life?
  11. When Anne shares with Father Paul her feelings about Jeremiah’s death, she admits that she told God, “I hate you.” Paul responds that her prayer was a good one (p. 116). Why does he consider that a good prayer? Does such a sentiment surprise you? What do you think God desires most from us in our prayers?
  12. According to Father Paul, “Monastic life made it easier to find God” (p. 119), although he does not think that monks are holier than other people. In fact, he thinks “the opposite was more often true” (p. 119). Why does he think those who live outside the monastery are holier than monks? Do you agree? Why or why not?
  13. When Anne writes the letter to God, she is surprised that it expresses more sadness than anger (p. 129). If you wrote a letter to God today, what might it say? What experiences would it describe? What emotions would it express?

14. Anne lists her “sanity-preserving measures” (p. 131): gardening, dinners with her co-worker, yoga classes, talking on the phone with her college roommate, going to work every day, and long walks by the river. What would be on your list?
15. When Anne tells her friend and co-worker Kerry about the time she’s been spending at the abbey, Kerry worries that Anne will become a religious “fanatic” (p. 141). Have you ever been afraid to talk about faith or spirituality with a friend or co-worker for fear that person would have a similar reaction?
16. Father Paul tells Anne that our images of God often come from the way our parents treated us (p. 145). How have your parents, or other authority figures, influenced the way you see God?
17. When Father Paul confesses to Father Edward that he is attracted to Anne, Edward replies, “It’s a struggle sometimes of course. But what life doesn’t have struggles? The key is love. As long as your chastity helps you to love, you’re okay. Because that’s all God asks from us here. To love” (p. 191). Does it surprise you to learn that monks might struggle with such things? Why or why not?
18. Father Paul reflects, “How beautiful the world is when things make sense” (p. 193). What does this mean to you?
19. What do you make of Anne and Mark’s relationship? How do they grow together in their friendship and

their faith journeys? How do you think their relationship might evolve?

20. Reflecting on the idea of Jesus as gardener, Anne has a surprising experience of Jesus in which he is wearing her mom's gardening hat and her dad's gloves (p. 197). Father Paul tells her God uses familiar things from our lives to tell us of God's love for us (p. 201). What things in your life has God chosen to speak to you through?
21. Have you ever had an experience that is similar to Anne's? That is, have you ever felt God communicating with you directly?
22. Over the course of the book, Anne learns something not only about the spiritual life but about prayer. What is prayer for you?
23. As the book comes to a close, many things remain the same. Mark is still working for the monastery; he has still not found the right woman. Yet how has his life changed? How has Anne's?
24. Has your image of God changed after reading this book? If so, how?
25. Which character from *The Abbey* do you identify with most? Whose faith journey is most familiar to you? Has anything in this book shed light on faith, God, or perhaps life, in a new way? If so, what?