



# **Experientia**

**A Program of Reflection and Sharing**

**Volume One**

**Units 1-5**

OCSO

Project approved by the General Chapter of 2017

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# **UNIT ONE**

## **Introduction**

## FOREWORD



**Dom Eamon Fitzgerald**  
Abbot General

What I most like about this program is the way it came into being. I have, in fact, been an interested bystander and witness to its evolution since the General Chapter of 2014. For me, it has all the signs of the parable of the mustard seed in the Gospel.

At its meeting at the end of the General Chapter of 2014, the Central Commission elected Sister Marie Mouris of Val d'Igny Abbey as Central Secretary for Formation. Her first task was to listen to what was said at the General Chapter about formation and the needs of the communities in this area. To gather such first-hand information, she wrote to the abbots and abbesses of the Order to inquire about their desires and needs, and also to see whether they could offer members of their houses who would be free and willing to help needy communities. Among the replies Sister Marie received, there was a suggestion that a newsletter should be edited to share information on what is being done in both Regions and communities in the area of formation, such as sessions, courses, and workshops. That suggestion was followed up at once and now the Newsletter is in regular circulation among the Order's secretaries for formation and beyond. This initiative is much appreciated. It allows for the sharing of information, stimulates thought, and encourages communication and relationships among the secretaries, while also fostering possible collaboration among them.

Sister Marie not only listens; she also reflects. During the year 2015 she asked: "How can we get the Regions to work on the intuition that came out of the General Chapter of 2014 in the area of formation?" The intuition she had in mind was in the form of a question posed by a Capitulant: "How can we promote an 'integral mystical formation'?" Sister Marie then managed to persuade seven abbots and abbesses to write on this topic from their experience, and the result was a booklet that was warmly welcomed.

Our "Guidelines on Formation" (*Ratio Institutionis*) speak of the community itself as "formative". This assertion, together with Sister Marie's own conviction and the experience of some Regional meetings, led to the thought that it would be good to devise a simple proposal

for the continuing formation of sisters and brothers of all ages. This would provide an opportunity for us to return communally to our Cistercian roots, to deepen our sense of identity, and to encourage individual study and *lectio*.

The Central Commission, meeting in 2016, in its discussion of Sister Marie's report, encouraged the project and advised looking for someone with the skill and experience necessary to see it through. The Commission proposed Father Michael Casey of Tarrawarra Abbey for the task, and he happily accepted. A group was set up to work under Father Michael, and together they developed the program. Sister Marie described its contents and methodology in some detail to the General Chapter of 2017. The Capitulants then voted their support and encouragement of the programme as a project that merits being presented to the communities of the Order.

The program bears the title *Experientia*. It is aimed at enabling monks and nuns of today to reflect on their lived experience of monastic life and then to confront that experience with texts chosen from the Cistercian and monastic tradition. In this way, the long experience distilled in our tradition can shed light on our present-day experience and offer us encouragement, motivation and direction in living the Cistercian grace in our contemporary world. There are nine areas of experience chosen for consideration, and they cover important areas of human and monastic living. Some of these topics are: "the journey so far", "desire freed from desires", "community", "prayer", and "diminishment". As these headings clearly suggest, we have before us a program intended not just for the more studious, academic or intellectual monks and nuns among us, but one designed for the ordinary nun or monk in the stall. At bottom the project seeks, quite simply, to foster reflection on authentic human living, and on how to do that well as monks and nuns who follow the particular tradition of evangelical life expressed in the Rule of Saint Benedict and the Cistercian tradition.

I would here like to express my gratitude to Father Michael and the members of the group that has fashioned this program, as well as to those who have a role to play in its implementation. This is an Order-wide project, both in its conception and in its implementation. It is the unpretentious fruit of simplicity. It has sprung from a listening and attentive spirit and is fuelled by an appreciation for the Cistercian charism, lived in its diversity throughout the world, as well as by intelligence, clarity of purpose, and competence. I warmly commend it to all the communities of the Order. May *Experientia* find a home in our monasteries, not just as an addition to our libraries or archives, but as an instrument of good works that will enable us to live our lives in today's world with serenity and ardour and in the communion of Christ's love. And may he bring us all together to everlasting life!



# INTRODUCTION



**Father Michael Casey (Tarrawarra)**

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This program has been conceived as a means of ongoing formation in the monasteries of monks and nuns of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance. As its title indicates the primary focus of the program is the unique monastic experience of each person; it is an invitation to each to read “the book of experience”.

The main objectives of the program are:

1. to help you to reflect on your own monastic experience and to find words to express what you have experienced during the time of your monastic life.
2. to compile the elements of a simple monastic autobiography for your own further reflection and expansion.
3. to hear echoes of your experience in the texts of our Cistercian tradition.
4. to discover affinities between what you have experienced and the experience of other members of the Order, especially those of different cultures.
5. to have the confidence to choose to share some of your experience with members of your community or with monks and nuns of the Order.

The program is designed so that each community – and to some extent, each person – may adapt its content to particular circumstances.

## THE BOOK OF EXPERIENCE

To record your personal reflections, it is suggested that they be written by hand in a special book rather than typed on a computer. The emphasis is not on producing something for others

to read, like a blog, but something more like a private journal to stimulate personal reflection and to make a record of how your thoughts evolve. This reflective writing slows down the process and helps some of the hidden themes of your thought to come to the surface. It is a form of *meditatio*. Since nobody else is going to read what you have written you can be completely honest. There is no need to censor your way of expressing what you are feeling at the time. Nor is there any need to strive for literary excellence. Such writing can be a school of self-knowledge and, ultimately, a school of wisdom.

In addition to your answers to the questions you might enjoy writing out some parts of the other material provided in the program, especially when it is similar to your own experience or complements what you have written. And it may be that, during the time you are engaged in this reflection, you will find echoes of your own thoughts in the Liturgy of the Hours and in the texts you use for *lectio divina* and in other reading. These also can be added to your book as part of your personal treasure.

## METHOD

The program is divided into 10 Units. Originally it was thought to allocate one month to each Unit but, after discussion at the General Chapter, it was decided to make the program flexible, leaving it to each community to create a rhythm.

11. Introduction
12. The Journey So Far
13. Desire, Freed from Desires
14. *Imago Dei*: The Human Person Made in God's Image
15. *Schola Dilectionis*: The Monastery: School of Love
16. Generativity
17. Prayer
18. Diminishment
19. The Energy of Hope
20. The Cistercian Tradition.

After the Introductory Unit, the structure of each Unit will follow the same form

1. A brief orientation, giving an overview of the material to be covered.
2. A series of seven questions for personal reflection. For some it may be useful to take one question per day for a week. For others it might be more profitable to concentrate on one or two questions that more powerfully stimulate reflection. It is not an examination! It is not necessary to answer the questions in sequence, but the different questions can be used to stretch your field of awareness. There are no "correct" or "incorrect" answers.
3. A 1,000-word introduction to the Cistercian text, written by a member of the Order, designed to help you make the linkage between your own experience and our tradition. Since there are about 50 persons making a contribution to this program, it is unlikely that you will agree with all of them. It is simply suggested that you listen to what they have to say, reflecting the monastic experience of different genders, generations, continents and cultures.

4. A sermon or other text of comparable length from one of our Cistercian authors of the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century.
5. Seven very brief quotations that may complement, illuminate or parallel some part of the text.
6. Four 250-word reflections written by different members of the Order, giving their response to the text in the light of their own experience.
7. An invitation to write a short personal synthesis of what you have discovered in your work on this Unit. This is for your own personal enrichment. Some may find it useful as a basis for sharing, whether in your own community or with other members of the Order.

## **MAKING TIME**

For the program to bear fruit, it will be necessary for each monk and nun to invest a good amount of time in formal reading and reflection. It is not a matter of getting each part of the program finished as quickly as possible, so that other tasks, deemed more important, may be undertaken. The optimal way of deriving fruit from the program is not merely to dedicate a period of time to it, but to live with the questions throughout the day, pondering them in the heart, allowing them to serve as a background and context for *lectio*, prayer and liturgy. As we all know from experience, insights may occur while we are doing something else: at work, at leisure, even as we rest. Sharing your experiences and memories with others may help to make them part of your own self-image. We will probably find that, as we age, our interpretation of many events will change and this, also, can be a factor in our journey to wisdom.

At the end of each Unit everyone will be invited to send a short (approximately 250-word) reflection to the General Editor, in their own language. These will be collected at the end of five Units and made available to members of the Order.

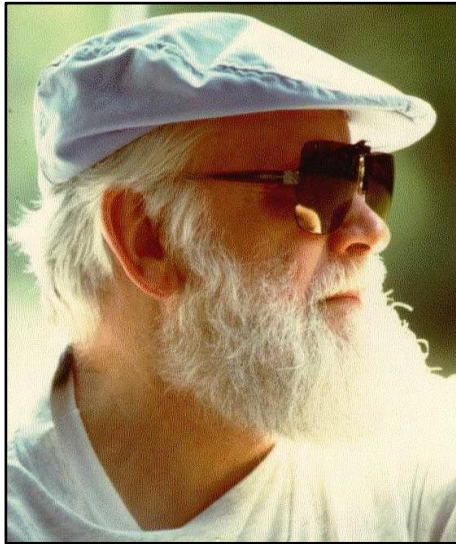
If the program succeeds it will have two contrasting effects for each one of us. We will become ever more aware of the uniqueness of our own spiritual journey and yet, we will be filled with wonder at the similarities of our experiences with those of other monks and nuns whose external circumstances are so different. In the course of the program we will meet about 50 monks and nuns from all over the world. Perhaps, in this way, the goal of the *Charter of Charity* will be advanced: that monks and nuns in various parts of the world, though separated in body, may be indissolubly knit together in soul.

## **THE SHAPE OF UNIT ONE**

This introductory unit is different from those that will follow. It is composed of two essays. The first, by D. Armand Veilleux looks at how the Order may exist in the future, offering an imagined history of monasticism during the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The second is by D. Bernardo Bonowitz, giving an account of the way in which the first Cistercians approached the matter of experience. What these two essays are doing is inviting us simultaneously to look forward and to look back. By this double process it is hoped that we will begin to understand the present more clearly. After each essay there are some simple questions that invite you to reflect on the contribution from your own experience, and to write down a brief response.



## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FUTURE OF MONASTICISM



**Dom Armand Veilleux (Scourmont)**

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### **Abbey Mount-Rescue: 9 November 2057**

Monasticism has undergone somewhat surprising and often unexpected developments during the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As was the case during the preceding two millennia, the evolution of monasticism was deeply marked by the evolution of both society and the Church, and has, in turn, left its own mark on the latter.

At the end of the first half of the first century of the third millennium, we find ourselves in the presence of a great number of small communities, often comprising scarcely a dozen monks or nuns. They are, in general, people with strong personalities, anchored in a personal relationship with Christ. Within each community the members are united by an intense fraternal communion, even though they may not necessarily do very much together. The brothers and sisters experience a profound solitude which is not isolation nor the absence of relationships, but a quality of chosen relationships.

These communities, having developed among themselves and with their neighbours numerous forms of synergy, lead a sober life and do not possess extensive material property. Often living in rented premises, they earn their living by means of humble work, either self-employed or as wage-earners. These monastic communities are joined by all sorts of gateways to other types of ecclesial cells or to other forms of community life – both civil and religious.

What happened to bring us to this point? First of all, it goes without saying that both the world and the Church underwent radical changes at the beginning of this period. In the West, a certain democratic dream that totalitarian regimes had never managed to snuff out gradually died in a general shift to the right and a series of “constitutional” coups d’états. A new form of social relation developed, called “the third way” by the visionary pontiffs of the beginning of the

millennium. The Church, which throughout most of the previous two millennia had exercised its power through social structures that were tied to political regimes, was badly shaken. However the Church, fortified by the unfailing presence of Christ, even if its social structure (known in the past as Christendom) had crumbled, has reinvented itself as a vast communion in the form of a community of communities. The pontiffs of the past (literally, bridge builders) were thus succeeded by great creators of gateways.

The astonishing growth of monasticism throughout the second millennium was largely due to its integration into this ecclesial structure, especially since the so-called Gregorian reform of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. It almost disappeared in the disruptions that occurred at the beginning of the present period. In fact, many monastic communities and congregations whose numerical and geographic expansion had been the glory of this Church did disappear. To borrow a phrase from a visionary pontiff from the beginning of this period, these groups had favoured *space* – or spaces of power – over *time*. Others not only survived but experienced a new vitality, seeing in their fragility and precariousness a grace and a call to trust in the process of *time*, so as to allow themselves to be transformed into a new incarnation of their charism. They became, within this new ecclesial configuration, islands of interiority, communion, openness and joy – receiving life from all the other elements of this vast constellation as well as giving life themselves. They lead a life of interiority projected towards the peripheries.

How is solitude, so essential to monastic life, experienced in these communities? It is experienced first of all at the fine point in the heart where each person is ceaselessly created within a dialogue, in the course of which he receives his own name from God. This is what the old ones called “continuous prayer”, which is the monastic form of prayer *par excellence*. Solitude is next experienced in all the deaths to the self which constitute the numerous, daily decisions that oblige us to choose – alone before God – to remain faithful to the call we have received from Christ. This is what is known as continual conversion. It is also experienced in all the concrete demands that arise from our commitment to live the Gospel with others under a common rule. This is obedience. In all of this, there is nothing that distinguishes the monks and nuns of our age from those of millennia past.

Solitude is neither Christian, nor even real, if it is not the other side of communion. Here we find something new. In the spiritual order, just as in the material order, those institutions that have opted to live in complete self-sufficiency have disappeared; those that have chosen partial self-sufficiency have been able barely to get by. Those communities that have chosen to live in synergy, often in conditions of great fragility joyously embraced, have flourished. Synergy operates on different levels: within monastic communities, among communities in the same monastic congregation, with other ecclesial cells, and with the civil society in which they live. Synergy, demands that each respect his own identity and that of all others, as does every interpersonal relationship. The community of Tibhirine, at the beginning of this period, gave a good example of this.

How is formation practiced within these monastic cells? Each candidate must have a well-defined personality and a very clear spiritual identity. The role of formators (to use a traditional but somewhat inadequate expression) is precisely to help this identity to grow and flourish. A community is not the sum total of individuals but a communion of persons. Newcomers are helped to become more and more themselves, in the personality they have received from God, while entering ever more deeply into communion with their brothers or sisters within the community, as well as with the Church, the world and the entire cosmos.

In order to integrate oneself into a living tradition, it is certainly necessary to study the great masters of the past and other ancient writings, but this alone is not enough. Groups that have limited their formation to this level became spiritual refugee camps, and subsequently disappeared. Living communities are those who have taken the trouble to study the past and connect this long tradition to the lived tradition of today's ecclesial community, which is itself turned towards the world into which it was sent as the bearer of a Message.

Christ promised to stay with his Church until the end of time. Monastic life can count on this promise to the extent that it lives in harmony with the Church of its time.<sup>1</sup>

## REFLECTION

1. Write down three points in this essay that seem most important to consider.
2. How does the general approach compare with your own experience of monastic life?
3. Are there points that you would like to add to this presentation?
4. Are there matters on which you would have a different view?



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<sup>1</sup> Translation: Father William Dingwall (Spencer).

## THE CISTERCIAN APPROACH TO EXPERIENCE



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For the Cistercian Fathers, religious experience is not the goal of the spiritual life, especially discrete religious experiences, so-called “peak experiences.” The objective of the spiritual life is the full carrying out in human lives of God’s saving plan, set out by Saint Paul:

For those whom God knew before ever they were, he also ordained to share the likeness of his Son, so that he might be the eldest among a large family of brothers and sisters; and those whom he foreordained, he also called, and those whom he called, he also justified, and those whom he justified, he also glorified. (Rom 8:29-30.)

We feel God’s love as he works to realize this plan: we become conscious of it, we open ourselves to it, attempt to collaborate with it and are moved by a love for God that echoes and responds to the love God has for us. This is our primordial experience, of being affected by God’s love and of yearning to return this love (*redamatio*.) Within this experience is always the awareness that “It is God who has first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:19; continually cited by the Cistercian Fathers.).

Because the spiritual life has to do above all with the fulfilment of God’s plan, metaphors used to describe this process, especially those drawn from the Song of Songs (the “three kisses” of Bernard’s SC 1-8, for example), should not be interpreted in the first place subjectively and emotionally but theologically, as referring to the history of salvation being accomplished in the Church and in each of us. The famous paintings of Saint Bernard in ecstasy do not accurately translate the meaning of his texts.

The Cistercian Fathers were keenly sensitive to and interested in the organic, dynamic nature of this working out of our salvation. All of them constructed developmental schemes to describe this evolutionary process. One of the best examples of such a scheme is found in

Bernard's *Sermons on the Songs of Songs* where he speaks of the three kisses and the three ointments. The three kisses describe the transforming action of God in Christ in three great stages:

- 1) God's forgiveness of and reconciling of the sinner, wherein God's mercy triumphs over his justice.
- 2) God's renovation of pardoned sinners in holiness of life, permitting them to recuperate their true humanity.
- 3) God's gift of the Holy Spirit to the mind and heart of restored human beings, enabling them to share in – and act out of – God's own wisdom and love.

The three ointments, on the other hand, focus on the experiential resonance and response to what God is accomplishing in these three stages:

- 1) A sense of fear and inward disturbance provoked by the awareness of our sins and the punishment they merit, giving way to compunction and the joy of being forgiven.
- 2) A spirit of habitual thankfulness and praise for the new creation that God is gratuitously realizing in us.
- 3) An abiding in and outpouring of love (the love we have received in the gift of the Spirit), that directs itself both to God and to his Church.

In this evolution, the movement is always towards ever-greater union between the God who saves and the person being saved. The fullness of this union in the present life is the "union of Spirit", in which the human person, continually inspired by the Holy Spirit, constantly welcomes and appropriates the Spirit's inspirations, and where an individual life becomes an ongoing consent to and implementation of what has been received, in a life that is simultaneously total obedience and complete liberty. Here the distance between divine salvation and the human experience of salvation is almost completely overcome.

One of the most interesting insights of the Cistercian Fathers is that the experience of God never occurs in isolation but is always related to an experience of oneself, an experience of the neighbour and an experience of community. The experience of self is typically described as "self-knowledge". Receptivity to the action of God in one's life has two apparently opposite effects: humility and dignity. When we make ourselves accessible to God we gradually experience ourselves as dislodged from the centre of the universe (the universe in general and our own universe), and as diminishing. We become progressively smaller and less important. At the same time, we grow in the experience of ourselves as made in the image and likeness of God: endowed with liberty and rationality, entrusted with the governance of God's creation, open to transcendence. There is a humility in this dignity that reconciles the opposites: the recognition that our humanity is not an independent, self-contained reality, but that it arises out of and depends on our relationship with God. Without this relationship continually renewed and embraced, our humanity is unimaginable. This is one of Thomas Merton's great themes.

The humility that results from our exposure to God leads us to the most significant discovery imaginable with regard to the neighbour: that of their proximity and their equality. Prior to experiencing ourselves in our littleness, we did everything possible to distance and distinguish ourselves from the neighbour; we denied and refused the notion of our being partners with the rest of humanity in a single human nature (*socii naturae humanae*). The discovery of our

likeness to our brothers and sisters leads to an experience of communion with one's fellow human beings. We can say, adapting the text of the Epistle to Hebrews that they are like unto us in all things *including* sin, and *especially* sin. Beginning as a lowly communion in fallen human nature, this experience of oneness with others, particularly in the context of a monastic community, comes to flower in a communion of grace and finally in a communion of glory (Baldwin of Forde).

The humility and fraternal charity that are the result of living in God's presence end up leading us back to God himself. Humility creates an eye capable of seeing ourselves for what we are. Charity and the exercise of charity purify this eye and make our gaze less and less distorted. A degree of clarity and purity is reached which allows God to lift persons into the divine mystery and enable them to "see" God. Here we are talking about extraordinary experiences of the kind usually termed mystical. According to Bernard, such experiences are rare, they are brief and they are always completely the result of a divine initiative. There is no degree of ascetical, moral or fraternal excellence that can ever "earn" us the right to such an experience.

So, just as the impress of God is for the Cistercians indispensable to the experience of authentic self-knowledge, so this self-knowledge joined to the loving knowledge of our neighbour is indispensable to the experiential knowledge of God.

It is important to underline that the experience of God is not solely, and perhaps not primarily, something that takes place in the lives of individuals, but in the life of a community as well. For writers such as Baldwin of Forde, a Cistercian community is not a loose assembly of persons each having a particular experience of God. The Holy Spirit is poured out on the community as a whole rather than on a series of persons. Whatever is bequeathed to one member, is bequeathed with the intention of it being communicated to the other members. This ongoing circular movement is facilitated by the infusion of charity that is an intrinsic part of every gift that is bestowed. It might be said that, for Baldwin, this total communion of gifts among the brothers and sisters – including those that we might consider strictly personal spiritual gifts – is of the essence of the experience of God.

Finally, a word might be said about the abbatial experience of God. Aelred's *Pastoral Prayer* is completely taken up in describing the cleansing and renewing effect of God's "seeing" an abbot into becoming a genuine abbot and how being seen in this way generates a stable experience in the abbot, not only of holding the place of Christ in the monastery but of experiencing as his own the sentiments of Christ for the members of the community. Bernard, for his part, says something similar in describing the effects of the third kiss, that of the Holy Spirit. Whoever has been kissed in this way is made both bride and mother, and interiorly experiences in an abiding form the obligation, the desire, and the capacity to nourish and bring to maturity the persons that have been entrusted to his care.

## REFLECTION

1. Write down three points in this essay that seem most important to consider.
2. How does the general approach compare with your own experience of monastic life?
3. Are there points that you would like to add to this presentation?
4. Are there matters on which you would have a different view?

## SOME FURTHER READING

- Bernardo Bonowitz, “The Role of Experience in the Spiritual Life,” *Analecta Cisterciensia* 46 (1990), pp. 321-325.
- Emmanuel Falque, *Le livre de l’expérience d’Anselme de Cantorbery à Bernard de Clairvaux* (Paris: Cerf, 2017). Summarized by Alexandre Etaix in *Collectanea Cisterciensia* 80 (2018), pp. 187-196.



EXPERIENTIA Working Group  
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# **UNIT TWO**

## **The Journey So Far**



## THE JOURNEY SO FAR

In this Unit we are asking you to reflect on your own vocation story, to think back to its first stirrings and what led you to enter the monastery; and to review what has occurred in the intervening years. Can you sense a movement in your life, a direction that manifested itself only with the passage of time? Perhaps this exercise in retrospection will lead to wisdom and a sense of gratitude. First there are some questions to ponder and then we will reflect on Saint Bernard's *Parable of the King's Son*, which illustrates the way he saw monastic life progressing from its beginnings until its glorious culmination.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What were the beginnings of my monastic vocation?
2. What was I seeking in coming to the monastery? Have I found in the monastery what I was seeking? Have there been pleasant surprises? Have there been moments of grace? Have there been periods of decline?
3. Have I experienced times of crisis? What were the elements? What were the outcomes? Have these crises left traces (positive or negative) in my life?
4. Are there areas in my life which remain under-developed? Do I feel unsatisfied? Has this led to my feeling frustrated or envious? How have I expressed these negative feelings concretely? Do I feel I am a victim?
5. How have I dealt with disappointments? Do I have any enduring resentment? Has this ever led me to feel alienated from the community?
6. Where am I today? At this time, in what place do I feel most at home, most myself? In the church? In the refectory? At work? In the cloister? In my cell? In the guest house? Or elsewhere? To what extent is my personal identity defined by my monastic vocation?
7. Has there been a transformation in my expectations: What do I now hope for in my monastic future?



## INTRODUCTION TO PARABLE ONE



**Father Michael Casey (Tarrawarra)**

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Bernard probably composed his *Parables* as simple devices to instruct the young men who were entering his monastery. Many of them belonged to the knightly class and were much more interested in stories than in abstract dissertations on the values of Cistercian life. Bernard obliged, but he packed a great deal of serious content into the stories, introducing the newcomers to elements of monastic spirituality, and giving them a basic outline of how their life in the monastery might evolve. We are meant to read it as a story, letting it engage our emotions and carry us along with its momentum. As we read, we might like to notice all the different biblical allusions that Bernard inserts into the story, and also his use of vocabulary typical of monastic spirituality.

The key to understanding is given in the last paragraph. First of all, Bernard describes the goal of the journey as “freedom”. It is a movement from servitude to sub-personal forces to the full freedom of the children of God. He divides the journey into four phases. In the first the young man falls into habitual sin. From this, probably coinciding with his entry into the monastery, he is delivered by the action of God and by the active exercise of the various virtues. This leads progressively to the threshold of contemplative experience. But then there is a surprise. The war, thought to have been won long ago, breaks out again. From imminent disaster the monk is rescued by the direct intervention of God. And so the glorious conclusion.

You will find that all who flee from the world pass through all these phases. At first they are weak and silly; then, with better times, they become precipitate and rash; when troubles come, they begin to be fearful and lose heart; and, finally, when they arrive at the kingdom of Charity, they are far-seeing, experienced and made perfect.

Bernard views monastic life as movement. The story begins with the king's son in Eden, the external garden mirrored in the inner landscape of "the paradise of good conscience". Foolishly he rejects the guidance that is offered him and succumbs to *taedium*, weariness with the good and the desire for something new. Seeking that of which he had no experience he leaves Eden and enters the badlands beyond, fleeing from his Father's face, hiding, and wandering aimlessly. In this state he is exposed to temptations he is too inexperienced to handle. He falls and is taken captive by bad habit and enslaved.

And so the King's son arrives in the Region of Unlikeness, unfree and alienated from himself. He is locked in the internal prison of despair and hopelessness. Worse, he lacks self-knowledge and so is unaware of how far he has fallen. He is powerless to redeem himself.

Now it is the time for his Father to intervene and so he begins a rescue mission, by sending as rescuers the various virtues. First he sends Fear to impress on the foolish boy the gravity of his situation. Then comes Hope to ensure that dread does not paralyse but motivate. Then Desire to stimulate movement towards God. And then a whole series of moral virtues intended to support and protect the boy as he makes progress in his long journey to freedom.

All is going well and the king's son arrives safely at Wisdom's castle and is ensconced in her bed. It is as though, having arrived at the monastery, there is a moratorium imposed on the clamourings of the flesh. Once violent temptations seem to have plateaued, there is new danger: complacency and a certain smugness at having arrived at a good place.

This truce cannot last. And so a new and terrible attack is launched, causing fear, anguish and distress. In a panic the young monk turns to prayer – a practice he has allowed to slip away. "For a long time a search was made for Prayer. So great was the upheaval that it was found only with great difficulty." There are no facile solutions to this major crisis in the monk's life. He is left in his helplessness, so shut off from God, that prayer itself is possible only after much anguished searching. It is as though he has forgotten the language of prayer and has to learn it afresh.

Finally, however, Prayer makes a breakthrough and relief comes from God. Queen Charity descends to remedy the situation. God's love is all-conquering and the boy is carried back to his Father's house and is greeted with feasting and joy.

The image of monastic life as spiritual warfare is not favoured by everybody, but it is very traditional. It underlines the fact that there is a great deal of struggle involved in being faithful to a monastic vocation. In this story, Bernard notes that it is not a single struggle that engages us. We are confronted by a whole series of different challenges, each demanding a different response from us. What is happening is that through these different encounters we are being formed by different virtues which have the effect of protecting us from our native weakness and facilitating our journey towards God. Each virtue, as it is summoned forth by different situations, has a different benefit to bestow. And we need them all.

The most cautionary part of the story concerns the final attack. Just when everything seems to have gone well and a stable peace is established, a new and fiercer war breaks out. The king's son is impotent before its rage and cannot help himself; he cannot even call out for help, since he seems to have lost the gift of prayer. He is faced with imminent destruction, but a tenuous thread remains to carry his prayer upwards and help descends and all is well.

If we allow ourselves to be spellbound by the story we will probably learn something that is useful for our own monastic life, at whatever stage we have arrived.

## **BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, Parable One: The Story of the King's Son**

1.

Once upon a time, there was a rich and powerful king, God the almighty. And he caused Man, whom he had created, to become his son. And because he was a delicate boy, he delegated Law and the Prophets to be his guardians, and he gave him other tutors and masters during the predetermined time which preceded his adulthood. He issued instruction to him and cautioned him. He established him as the master of Paradise, showing him all the treasures of his glory and promising them to him if he remained faithful. And lest any benefit should be lacking, he endowed Man with free will so that his choice of good should be voluntary rather than forced.

With the possibility of good and evil before him, Man became dissatisfied with the good things which were his and he was incited with a desire to experience evil as well as good. So he left the paradise of good conscience. Until then he had knowledge only of good things; now he sought novelties beyond his experience. He left aside his Father's laws and guardians, and rejecting his Father's prohibition, he ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Unhappy now, he hid himself and fled from the face of the Lord. The silly boy began to wander through mountains of conceit and through valleys of curiosity; through fields of indiscipline and woods of sexual excess; through the dark groves of fleshly delight and through the rough seas of worldly involvement.

2.

Observing the wanton wanderings of the boy, now without guide or guard, and far from his Father's house, the ancient villain drew near to him. Full of wicked wiles, he handed him the little apple of disobedience. And then, having won his consent, he turned against the poor boy. He threw him down to earth and to the level of earthly desires. To prevent his getting up, he bound his feet (that is, the affections of his mind) with the stout chains of worldly concupiscence, and did the same to the activity of his hands and to the eyes of his mind. He set him in the ship of false security and with the powerful aid of the strong wind of flattery he conveyed him to the distant Region of Unlikeness.

When the boy arrived in this land which was not his own he was offered for sale to all who passed by. He learned to tend pigs and to eat their husks. He unlearned all that he had previously learned and he had to learn to do the work of slaves, of which he had no knowledge. He was crushed in that prison of despair where the wicked walk around. In that mill where the wicked wend their ways he was forced to work, with his only gain a bad conscience. Alas!

3.

Meanwhile, where was the Father who was so powerful and kind and generous? Could he forget his own son? Never! Never! He did not forget him; he pitied him and grieved and mourned for his son's absence and loss. He instructed his friends and begged his slaves and roused them all to make a search for him. Now, one of the slaves, whose name was Fear, following the fugitive's traces according to his Master's instructions, found the King's son in a deep dungeon. He was covered with the prison dirt of sin and held fast by the bonds and chains of evil habit. He was unhappy, but unmindful, and though badly treated he was still secure and smiling.

With words and with blows Fear urged him to get out and return, but he so upset the poor boy that he fell to the ground, lying there as one near death. On the heels of Fear came another slave whose name was Hope. Hope, seeing that the King's son was stunned but not saved by Fear, cast down and not helped, gently came forward. From the dust he lifts up the lowly; from the dunghill he raises the poor. He raises the boy's head and wipes his eyes and his face with the cloth of consolation: "Alas," he says, "how many servants in your Father's house have more bread than they need, and here are you dying of starvation. Rise up, I beg you, and go to your Father and say to him: 'Father, make me one of your servants'." At this the boy finally began to return to himself somewhat. "Who are you? Are you Hope? How is it that Hope is able to find entry into the ugly depths of my despair?" The other replied, "Yes, I am Hope. I was sent by your Father to be your help, and not to leave your side until I bring you to your Father's house and into the room of the one who conceived you."

And the boy said to Hope: "O pleasant lightening of labours and gentle relief for the unhappy, you are not least among the three who attend the royal chambers. But see how very deep my dungeon is. See the chains which remain, even though most of them were broken and unfastened at your approach. See the vast number of my captors and how strong and swift and clever they are. But what is this place to you?" Hope replied: "Do not be afraid. He who helps us is kind; he who fights on our side is all-powerful. There are more for us than for them. Moreover, I have brought for you a horse which your Father sent, a horse named Desire. Astride this horse and with my guidance you will advance, safe from all of them."

Having said this, Hope covered the horse named Desire with soft rugs of holy devotion and gave it the shoes of good example. Then he put the King's son upon it. So hurried was their flight that there was no bridle. The horse left that place wildly, with Hope leading the way and Fear bringing up the rear, urging the horse on with blows and threats. Seeing this, the chieftains of Edom were dismayed, trembling seized the leaders of Moab, all the inhabitants of Canaan were in turmoil; terror and dread fell upon them. Through the might of your arm they stayed still as stone, as your son, O Lord, went past, the son whom you had made your own. Borne along in headlong flight, they escaped; but danger remained, for they left without measure and without counsel.

4.

Because of this, Prudence, who was one of the most important officials of the palace, ran up sent by the Father. With her was her friend Temperance. She restrained their haste. "Slow down," she cried, "please slow down. As Solomon says 'One in a hurry goes off the path.' If you keep running in this way you will go off the path, and if you go off the path you will fall. If you fall you will be giving back the King's son to his enemies although you are trying to set him free. For if he falls, they will seize him."

Saying this, Prudence restrained the ardour of the horse named Desire with the bridle of Discretion and gave the reins into the control of Temperance And when Fear, from his rear position, began to talk about the nearness and might of their enemies and the slowness of their flight, Prudence said, “Get behind, Satan, you are a source of stumbling. For it is the Lord who is our strength and our praise he has become our saviour.

And lo, Fortitude, the Lord’s military champion appeared. He surged through the fields of Boldness, wielding the sword that is Joy. “Do not be disturbed,” he cried, “there are more for us than for them.” But Prudence, the seasoned counsellor of the heavenly court, replied: “Please be careful. As my servant Solomon says, ‘If at the beginning you hasten toward your inheritance, then at the end there will be no blessing.’ Let us, therefore advance prudently and without haste. If it happen that our enemies are not on our path, then it likely that they will leave obstacles at the intersections and cross-ways and at the bends in the road. Therefore, I shall go in front. If you remain firmly on the road of Justice, then we will quickly conduct you to the camp of Wisdom, for it is not far away. For about Wisdom it was said, ‘If you desire wisdom then learn justice’.”

5.

In this manner they advanced. Fear added urgency. Hope attracted. Fortitude strengthened. Temperance controlled. Prudence kept watch and gave instructions. Justice led and directed. The King’s son drew near to Wisdom’s camp. When Wisdom heard of the new guest's arrival, she anticipated his coming and ran outside joyfully letting herself be seen in the streets by him who had so much desired her.

The camp itself was surrounded by a trench of deep Humility. Above it reared the mighty splendour of the wall of Obedience which reached to the skies and was wondrously adorned with painted histories of good examples. The wall was constructed with bulwarks and a thousand shields hung from it, each of them the equipment of a brave man. The door of Profession stood open to all, but a gatekeeper stood at the threshold, inviting those who were worthy and turning back those who were not. And there was a herald stationed above the gate and he cried out: “If anyone loves Wisdom let him turn to me and he shall find Wisdom. And when he has found her, happy is he who keeps his hold on her.”

To this place the King’s son was brought. Wisdom went out to meet him and conducted him back, even carrying him in her arms. Confirmed by the homage of the ruling family, he was brought to the stronghold in the middle of the city, where Wisdom had built herself a home and had cut seven pillars, subduing peoples under her and, by her own might, trampling on the necks of the proud and haughty. Here he was placed in Wisdom’s own bed, surrounded by sixty of Israel’s mightiest, each with a sword at his side, and David was there with timbrel and dance and with strings and pipes. With him were all the other companions of the heavenly courts rejoicing and celebrating more for the one sinner who had repented than for the ninety-nine in no need of repentance.

6.

And lo, a whirlwind springs up from the north, and flashes of fire shake the whole house. Wisdom’s camp is in upheaval. Pharaoh has come forth with his chariots and horsemen to pursue Israel in its flight. They conspire with a single mind and make common alliance against him, the camps of Edom and Ishmael, the camps of Moab and Hagar, Gebal, Ammon and Amalek, foreigners joining with the dwellers in Tyre; Assyria, too, that great destructive devil,

is their ally. How numerous they are! The city is besieged. The devices of temptation are brought forward and the enemy presses in on every side: a dragon in deceit and a lion when it comes to open fighting. He drives his allies forward. The walls are breached. Firebrands are thrown into the city. Battles rage and ambushes are sprung. Repeatedly he threatens the destruction of the entire city.

Inside the city are fear and anguish. At the onset of such a violent and unforeseen attack from their enemies, they all staggered and reeled like drunken men and all their skill was gone. Then they cried to the Lord in their distress. There was a rush to Wisdom's stronghold; the bad news was broken and counsel sought. Prudence, returning to herself, asked Wisdom what was to be done. Wisdom said that Prudence must hurry and seek the help of the Supreme King. "But who," she said, "will go for us?" Wisdom replied, "Send Prayer. And so that there is no delay let Prayer ride on the horse named Faith."

For a long time a search was made for Prayer. So great was the upheaval that he was found only with great difficulty. Prayer mounted the horse named Faith and rode along the heavenly road not stopping until, by Praise, he reached the gates of the Lord and entered his courts by Hymns. Like a familiar servant, Prayer boldly approached the throne of grace and explained the precarious situation.

When the King heard of the danger his son was in, he turned to Charity, his royal consort, and said: "Whom shall we send and who will go for us?" She replied, "Here am I. Send me." And the King said: "Victorious shall be your conquest; you shall set them free."

The whole heavenly court accompanied Charity, the Queen of Heaven, as she went out from the face of the Lord. When they made their way down into the camp, all who were inside were enlivened by the joy and strength of her presence. Turbulence subsided and upheaval came to rest. Light returned to these unhappy people and boldness came back to those who were cowed. Hope, who was on the point of running away, returned, and Fortitude, who was almost overcome, revived. Wisdom's whole army became firm once more.

Meanwhile the enemies who were besieging the city said: "What is happening? Why is there such rejoicing in the camp? Yesterday and the day before there was no such rejoicing. Woe upon us! God has come into their camp. Woe upon us! Let us flee from Israel, for the Lord is fighting on their side."

As the enemies fled away, a torrent of divine grace gave joy to God's city, and the Most High made holy the place where he dwells. God is within, in cannot be shaken; God will help it at the dawning of the day. Nations are in tumult, kingdoms are shaken. He lifts his voice, the earth shrinks away. The Lord of Hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.

Queen Charity gathered up God's young son and carried him to Heaven and gave him back to God his Father. The Father came to meet him, full of mildness and gentleness. "Quickly," he said, "bring out the best garment and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. Go and get the fatted calf and kill it. We must have a feast and rejoice, because my son, who was dead, has come back to life. He was lost and now is found."

7.

There are four stages to be noted on the boy's return to freedom. Firstly, repentance, though not well grounded; secondly, flight, but rash and unthinking; thirdly, the battle terrible and frightening; and fourthly, victory in all its strength and wisdom. You will find that all who flee from the world pass through all these phases. At first they are weak and silly; then, with better times, they become precipitate and rash; when troubles come, they begin to be fearful and lose heart; and, finally, when they arrive at the kingdom of Charity, they are far-seeing, experienced and made perfect.

## SEVEN SHORT TEXTS

### 1

[Bernard] had in his heart the need to be constant in following his vocation, so that he constantly said in his heart, and even often on his lips, “Bernard, Bernard. What have you come for?” (*Bernarde, Bernarde, ad quid venisti?*) William of St-Thierry, *The First Life of Bernard of Clairvaux* 19; (CF 76, p. 22.)

### 2

Clearly each one of you here knows [God], and if you say “I do not know him,” you will be like worldly people – a liar. If you do not know him, who has led you here, or how have you come here? How else could you have been persuaded freely to renounce the affection of loved ones, the pleasures of the body, and the vain things of the world, and to set your thoughts on the Lord and to cast all your cares on him, although you have deserved no good from him but only evil, as your conscience testifies. Who, I say, could persuade you to do these things if you did not know that the Lord is good to those who hope in him and to the soul that seeks him?

Bernard of Clairvaux, *Advent Sermons* 3:3; (CF 51, pp. 21-22.)

### 3

The noble creature was created in the region of likeness, made to the image of God. But when he was in honour he did not understand. He descended from likeness to unlikeness. Great indeed is the unlikeness, from paradise to hell, from an angel to a beast, from God to the devil. Furthermore, a cursed conversion has taken place of glory into misery, of life into death, of peace into struggle, in constant captivity. A damned descent from abundance into poverty, from freedom into slavery, from rest into labour

Bernard of Clairvaux, *De Diversis* 42:2 (CF 68, p. 228.)



## 4

To be far from your face is to be in affective darkness. One does not go away from you or return to you by walking or by movement through space. That son of yours did not seek horses or carriages or ships. He did not fly on any visible wing, nor did he journey by moving his legs when he went to live in a distant country and prodigally dissipated what you, his sweet father, had given him when he left. It was by a lustful and darkened affectivity that he went far from your face.

Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, I, 18, 28; (CChr 27, p. 15-16.)

## 5

There are some persons who are so defiled by their many serious crimes that they are reluctant to be generous with themselves. But if they consider that Christ endured not for himself but for sinners, then they gather hope and are healed from their despair. So we see that Christ by his cross brings healing to the overconfident because he suffered notwithstanding his innocence and also to the desperate since he suffered for the sake of sinners.

Bernard of Clairvaux, *Parable 6*; (CF 55, pp. 81-82.)

## 6

Occasionally prayer is seriously blocked by pusillanimity of spirit or by immoderate fear. This comes about when people think about their own unworthiness in such a way that their eyes are not drawn to the kindness of God. Abyss calls to abyss. The abyss of light to the abyss of darkness, the abyss of mercy to the abyss of misery. The human heart is very deep and beyond all inspection, but even though my iniquity is great, much greater, O Lord, is your love. And so, when my soul becomes upset by [thinking] about myself, I remember the greatness of your mercy and I find relief in it, since when I enter into my own powers I am no longer remembering only your righteousness.

Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons for Lent 4.3*.

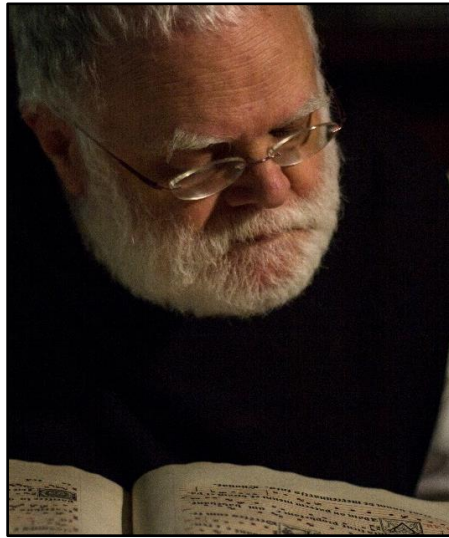
## 7

The Father was more anxious to pardon the son than the son was to be pardoned. The merciful Father suffered more in his compassion for his miserable son than the son did in his miseries. Our feelings should be sweetened and moved towards the love of that high goodness, by learning from human comparison that [God], the supreme goodness, loves us more than we love ourselves.

Guerric of Igny, *Sermon 21.1*; (CF 8, p. 141.)

# FOUR SHORT REFLECTIONS

## 1



### **Brother Lawrence Morey (Gethsemani)**

Date of birth: 4 February 1954

Date of Entry: 26 October 2004

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Monastic literature usually gives desires a wide berth. They are the roots of the passions, that bind us to the world, the very things which divide us from God and frustrate our progress. However, as the parable points out, desire has two faces.

In the first case, the son is “incited by a desire [*concupiscentia*] to experience evil as well as good.” Note that *concupiscentia* is pointed inward. It springs from the will and has for its object some very specific goals. In this case, the son experiences evil through a variety of particular acts involving conceit, curiosity, sexual excess and so on. This face of desire satisfies the son’s own shallow conception of what is advantageous to himself, but ultimately leads to disaster. In the second case, Hope brings a gift from the father, “a horse named Desire [*desiderium*].” A horse is a proverbially strong animal. It can bear the weight of a person easily. Hope places the son on the horse, but after that the horse does all the work. The virtues which are acquired along the way, Fear, Prudence, Discretion, and Temperance, help to guide it, but the horse, Desire, provides the driving force. Most importantly, the son is neither the source of this Desire nor is he guiding it; Desire and its attendant virtues are gifts from the King. Unlike *concupiscentia*, it does not spring from his own will.

In my monastic journey, I have discovered that God has implanted his will in my heart in the very form of my deepest desires. If I follow these desires, I will be following the will of God. However, like the king’s son, I have to carefully discern surface desires, *concupiscentiae*, from my deepest desires, *desideria*. This is hard work. But it is only Desire which has the power

and sure-footedness to carry me over the rocks and rough places I encounter along the way. It is God's gift to me.

## 2



**Father Loris Maria Tomassini (Frattocchie)**

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Date of Entry: 31 May 1990

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The monastic life is a freedom walk. It has to be totally discovered and learned and never comes to an end. It is a fascinating adventure of the Spirit.

I entered the monastery to seek God alone and have discovered increasingly that it is God who is seeking me in the vulnerability of my weakness and my limits. He takes me as I am to fashion me how he wants me, on this very day that he has given me, right here and now and nowhere else: this is the "holy land" where he comes unceasingly to visit me.

It is a walk that is born from a falling in love: "You led me on and I let myself be led."<sup>2</sup> It has not always been easy. My community has gone through difficult moments which caused me pain and made me confused. Along the way there have been lights, graces and consolations, along with struggles, toils and discouragement. But that is the way that we make progress and grow.

The tempter draws close to discourage us, making us face our poverty. We must not let ourselves be discouraged but go on and take up the struggle, because the struggle is life.

Desire has always been a motor which had driven me on: the desire of seeing His Face, with that fullness of love which is holiness. We must never give up desiring great things even if

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<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 20:7. Italian *sedurre*, seduce.

they are difficult and demand an effort. To each one will be given according to his thirst. Only holiness is life to the full and, therefore, a happy life. My support, especially in the most difficult moments, has been the remembrance of my meeting with God, of Jesus' regard, full of love, in which I experienced the sweetness of his mercy and forgiveness. This practice of the remembrance of God remains fundamental for refreshing desire, for moving onwards and for not falling victim to acedia.<sup>3</sup>

### 3



**Sister María Angélica Torres Soto**

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Date of Entry: 01 January 1986

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On this journey, I have found that, despite deep forgetfulness of HIM, I have never lost his imprint. I have touched Good and Evil, but my search has been THE LORD.

The world is one – a continuous fluctuation, leaving from our Father and returning. Sustained by Faith, I will return to the Father till the end of my days when it becomes definitive, not an allegory. Merciful love, undeserved.

I traversed my life. You gave me Parents, Sisters; above all my Mom, whose life taught me discernment, forgiveness, unconditional love, Faith. I got to know the world, other realities, saying versus doing. Youth; guitar playing; responsible study; the sharp cut with the country's gray dictatorship. From within my forgetfulness, I did sense one "TRUE" truth. Some achievements seemed important, but inside me an empty cup remained to be filled.

Just as this Son of the King, I knew the desolation of not having you. Estrangement, gradual forgetfulness; doubt of your existence, instead favoring human intelligence. The return: A scream in search of you; I walked paths that might bring me closer – fascinated by Oriental

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<sup>3</sup> Translation: Dom Bède Stockill (Calvaire).

ways – for many years. After cutting with you, I also fell into desolation – conscious and painful.

Which of us will go? ... The Prayer on horseback astride the FAITH ... Charity the Queen of Heaven arrives and descends; the Light is back.

So, I arrived at the Monastery; the cup empty for years was filled; I discovered the Incarnation of God that I was missing: Jesus Christ. An incarnated God, nearby and fully here. In this monastic life now, fluctuations do come back, but in a different way. Faith sustains me, so I will always come back to the Father.<sup>4</sup>

## 4



**Sister Marie-Benoît Bernard (Rivet)**

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In our abbatial church, just above our stalls there is a capital from the 12<sup>th</sup> century representing a monk being attacked, on the right by an animal who is trying to bite him and on the left, by a man who is trying to pinch his ear. With his arms the monk repels his two attackers. His eyes are open looking to heaven: he is literally being crucified in the battle, and yet there is something of gentleness coming from his face, a light and a deep peace.

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<sup>4</sup> Translation: Brother Gregory Escardo (Gethsemani).



Having this capital permanently above our heads during the offices is not something trivial. I have often thought about the person who sculpted it: was it a self-portrait, a personal experience? When I was a novice I remember how much this representation touched me because it was a powerful realism of truth. The presence of this sculpture was deeply reassuring, normal and even encouraging, the life of prayer in the community, advancing in monastic life and faith: a challenge an adventure, using our gifts to bring out the best in ourselves, repelling evil and choosing the good in order to love it.

In paraphrasing the poet Rimbaud, Christian de Chergé wrote, “The spiritual combat is as brutal as that of soldiers”. Certainly my life and my struggles don’t resemble a novel about knighthood, yet I recognize my own experience in what Bernard describes in his parable since the weapons used in the spiritual combat are the same and also the same grace assuring us victory: the mercy of God which, to my mind, the monk on the capital contemplates with gentleness and interior joy as an unbelievable chance and a happy outcome.<sup>5</sup>

## FOR YOUR NOTEBOOK

1. Write down three points or ideas from this Unit that have triggered a response in you and that you would like to remember
2. If you would enjoy doing so, write a short personal response to the matters raised in this Unit. About 250 words is probably sufficient.
3. If you would like to share this essay you can send it to Father Michael Casey (Tarrawarra), the General Editor: [experientia.editor@gmail.com](mailto:experientia.editor@gmail.com). Please include a photo of yourself with your full name and monastery, your date of birth, your date of entry, and your preferred email address.

## SOME FURTHER READING

Casey, Michael: “Saint Bernard of Clairvaux: The Story of the King’s Son, CSQ 18.1 (1983), pp. 16-23.  
Rochais, Henri [Ed.]: *Saint Bernard de Clairvaux: Les Combats de Dieu* (Paris: Editions Stock, 1981.)

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<sup>5</sup> Translation: Father Thomas McMaster (New Melleray).

# **UNIT THREE**

## **Desire Freed from Desires**

## DESIRE FREED FROM DESIRES

In this Unit, we reflect upon one of the most fundamental themes in monastic spirituality: Desire for God. There are two important aspects of this Desire that will quickly present themselves as we think about this theme.<sup>6</sup> The first is that a Desire for God is mysteriously present in every human being; it is not the object of choice. As the famous quotation from Augustine's *Confessions* reminds us, we have been made for union with God and our hearts are restless until they rest in God. Our task is to uncover this Desire, which is often hidden underneath a whole range of natural and acquired appetites. The second point is that living in the Desire for God involves prioritising. We must give precedence to Desire for God over the many alternative desires which seek our attention. Establishing the priority of love and Desire (the *ordinatio caritatis*) is the reason we engage in spiritual warfare. Desire for God has to be freed from conflicting desires.

William of Saint Thierry's *Meditations* are written as extended prayers of devotion, probably meant to provide a guide to novices. They are fervent and lyrical outpourings of the heart, incorporating many biblical quotations and linking them together. The sentiments expressed would seem exaggerated, if read aloud; they are meant for personal use. *Meditation Seven* is a starter for prayer. It is not a treatise. Its purpose is to attempt to put into words the Desire for God that brought us to the monastery and sustains our monastic life. Counterpoint to this recognition is the awareness of the need to struggle against conflicting desires, as well as a strong sense of unworthiness at our occasional failures. Slow, prayerful reading is necessary.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Saint Benedict addresses his Rule to those who love life and desire to see good days. How has this Desire expressed itself in my life? Have I encountered resistance to this fundamental Desire for life? What concrete form did it take?
2. Can I discern spiritual Desire from other desires? Do I remember times when this force of Desire has been dissipated, dispersed or falsified in other activities such as work, study or relationships? Has it sometimes been disguised as grumbling, criticism or alienation? In such situations, have I experienced desires as burdens?
3. On what occasions have I experienced an upsurge of spiritual Desire?
4. Have I ever experienced in myself or in others this meaninglessness which is termed *acedia* in monastic tradition? Have I seen evidence of depression, lack of fervour or discouragement? What are the reasons for this unhappiness? How has my community coped with this?
5. At different times has my community made me more aware of this fundamental Desire? At different times has my community been a place that energizes, sustains, encourages, and supports this Desire? At other times has my community had a negative effect on my Desire? In what ways has my Desire had a positive effect on the way I act in community?

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<sup>6</sup> To distinguish Desire for God (singular) from other desires (plural), it has a capital letter.



6. Has my *lectio divina* helped me to awaken, interpret, heal or guide my Desire?

7. What have I learned on those occasions when my false desires have been frustrated or have led to a negative result?

## INTRODUCTION TO MEDITATION SEVEN



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### **The Liberation of Desire**

“Lord, I love you more than anything...in general...but right now, in this brief, passing moment I would love an English cigarette...or even a Gauloise even more.” Madeleine Delbrel’s humorous remark marvellously expresses the extraordinary complexity of human desire. In fact, each one of us has had to confront this dense underbrush of contradictory desires since earliest childhood. The monastic tradition has paid particular attention to the mystery of desire. The Rule of St. Benedict can be read as a prolonged exercise in the discernment of desires, which ultimately leads to the discovery of that profound Desire that slumbers in the depths of our hearts.

When we think of the monastic vocation, we often refer to Chapter 58, which seems to provide a set of irrefutable criteria: truly seek God, be faithful to the Opus Dei, welcome humiliations and be prompt to obey. But we soon discover within ourselves so many other realities, sometimes shameful ones, which work against such good intentions. We experience in our

own flesh, in our own hearts, that the four types of monks described in Chapter 1 are merely different disguises under which the power of our desire hides itself. We would like to live under a rule and an abbot, but we run up against the desires of our own hearts. In order to grasp the importance of desire in our lives, we must return to the Prologue of the Rule. When Benedict tries to define the monastic vocation, he does so in the form of a question taken from a psalm: “Which of you desires life, and covets many days to enjoy good?”

The vocation of every monk, and of every Christian, is to discover and liberate, in the depths of his being, this love for life and desire for happiness, the true meaning of which can be discovered in the Scriptures. In fact, if the Bible frequently repeats God’s invitation in Deuteronomy: “Choose life and not death”, it is perhaps because this choice is not always so obvious. Freud was right to speak of an instinct for death, which sometimes surfaces in our personal or communal choices. As for our desire “to enjoy good”, Jesus takes it up several times in his Beatitudes. Benedict bases his invitation to begin the interior voyage on this call to become alive and to be happy. Monastic stability, by preventing us from dispersing, essentially allows us to devote all our attention to this voyage into the deepest valleys of our heart.

This interior voyage, this exploration of the twists and turns where our power of desire gets lost, this knowledge of self: we cannot reach it by ourselves. The benevolent gaze of a senior, as well as that of our brothers, is necessary for us to be able to land safely on the shores of our heart. Gradually, all the bad motives that had been guiding our seemingly free choices will be revealed in the stark light of the Gospel. However we will be able to bear them because others bear us and quite often put up with us as well. Spiritual fatherhood and fraternal friendship, like the smiling benevolence of the seniors, are essential to enable us to confront the fears, doubts and fragility that undermine us, as well as to discover with marvel how God has acted first and chosen us, often in spite of ourselves. It is then that we will be able to recognise that the desire of Another has gone before us, warned and protected us. “Love consists in this: it is He who first loved us!”

This is exactly what Benedict wanted to say when he mentions the formula of monastic profession in Chapter 58 of the Rule. The monk is one who agrees to be received: “Receive me according to your Word and I shall live; let my hope not be disappointed.” It is only then that monastic vows take on their true meaning. They are the instruments of the liberation of our true desire from this hue and cry of desires that confuse the hearts of all people. Obedience is in no way merely an act of submission; it is an act of disobedience to the passions and impulses that reign in our own hearts. We will finally be able to return to Him from whom disobedience had distanced us. Poverty has nothing to do with despising the material goods and splendours of this world. It expresses rather the realisation that we are greater than any particular thing, any ambition, jealousy, or rivalry, because nothing, absolutely nothing, will ever be enough to fulfil our desire. Chastity has nothing to do with fear of the flesh and affectivity, but is rather the troubling and humbling experience of our divided being that can be reconciled only by grace. The entire Rule, in its humblest counsels, becomes a teacher accompanying us on the road to the liberation of desire.

On this road of liberation, the Word of God will gradually become our companion, our friend and our consolation. Moses was torn between the desire to see God and his fear of dying. David succumbed to his passions and experienced the terrible consequences of his wilful blindness. The great wisdom of Solomon was not enough to protect him from the temptations

of idols. The adulterous woman, the greedy Zacchaeus, and the impetuous Peter all experienced the redemptive, peace-giving gaze of Jesus, an experience we share with them. In these examples of the turbulence of desire that Scripture places before our eyes, we can experience a communion of blindness that can become communion in the grace of salvation. And we can cry out with the apostle Paul: “It is when I am weak that I am strong!” The Scriptures teach us that knowledge of self is always inseparable from knowledge of God. In revealing himself to us, God reveals us to ourselves. Because the mystery of the desire that grows ever deeper within us is only a pale reflection of the desire that God feels for each one of us, a desire that finds its expression in the face of Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

## **WILLIAM OF ST THIERRY**

### **Meditation Seven: Longing to see God**

“My heart has talked of you, my face has sought you.  
Your face, Lord, will I seek.  
Do not turn away your face from me;  
do not shun your servant in wrath.”

2.

It seems surpassing boldness and effrontery to make comparison between my face and yours, Lord God! For you see and judge the hearts of all and, if you enter into judgment with your servant, the face of my iniquity can only flee before that of your righteousness. But if, in order to excuse and help my poverty, you should grant me burning love and dutiful humility, then let them flee who hate. I, for my part, should not flee your face. For love is very daring, and humility fosters confidence. I am not conscious of these virtues in myself, yet I avow myself your friend. For, if you ask me: “Do you love me?” as you asked Peter, I shall say plainly, I shall tell you boldly: “Lord, you know all things; you know I want to love you.” And that is as much as to say: “If you ask me the same thing a thousand times, I shall as often make the same reply: “You know I want to love you.” And that means that my heart desires nothing so much as it desires to love you.

3.

I cultivate humility as well, which those who make such definitions call contempt of one's own excellence; but as long as I continue sometimes to accede unthinkingly to certain small suggestions of my own superiority, and fail to shake myself free of them with sufficient speed when they are offered me, then I know quite well I am not really humble.

4.

There is another sort of humility – namely, the knowledge of oneself. In that, if I am judged according to what I know about myself, it is, as they say, all up with me, and my appearance before your just tribunal is ill-starred. But, if the fact that my sin is ever before me is adjudged a virtue in your sight, of that I think I am not wholly destitute. For my inward gaze turns so often to the foulness of my sins (even when I do not want to think of them and am intent on better things) that I detest myself because of it.

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<sup>7</sup> Translation: Father William Dingwall (Spencer).

5.

O Lord, what more shall I say about my shamefaced conscience? Whatever it is like, whatever its condition, its whole face so desires yours that it scorns and despises all the things of this life, and even life itself, for the love of your face! It does not care at all what else it sees, as long as it sees you face to face. Thus, O desire of my eyes, my face seeks you meanwhile. I seek your face and, I implore you, do not turn it from me. Teach me, O eternal Wisdom, by the illumination of your countenance, what is that face of yours, and what is mine. For though I burn with desire to see you face to face, I do not know enough as yet of either yours or mine. I know well enough that, if it was not granted to the apostle Paul in this life to see you face to face, and if your Beloved Disciple, loving and loved as he was, was not allowed to see you as you are, then anyone who hopes and seeks to see you in that way is simply not right in his head.

6.

And yet, when I hear David speak like this of face and face, hearing another hope in you, I cannot give up hope. And this is not because I have forgotten who I am, but because my trust is in your tender mercy. Although I make poor progress in my loving, I would not like to love you less than any other lover of yours does. For, though it seems that Moses was denied what David by no means despaired of attaining, David himself sings and chants concerning this same Moses and the other Fathers that “they did not get possession of the land through their own sword, neither was it their own arm that saved them; but your right hand and the light of your face.” And of himself he says: “O Lord, in your favour you gave strength to my beauty; you turned your face from me, and I was troubled.”

7.

Turn then to me, most Sweet One, that face which once you turned away from holy David; and, as he was troubled, so shall I be consoled. Turn to me that face by which, before you turned it from him, you willed to increase his beauty. Let your right hand, and your arm, and the light of your countenance, which gained possession of the land of those Fathers in whom you were well pleased, take possession also of my land. Indeed, I find nobody who speaks and treats so often and with such familiarity about your countenance and your face as David. and I cannot think that he lacked experience of it, seeing that he calls for every judgment that he gives to issue from your face, and looks for it to fill him full with joy. Moreover, when declaring the blessedness of the people that can rejoice in you, he says: “They shall walk, O Lord, in the light of your countenance.”

8.

How much more purposefully can I walk, O God of my heart, when I keep looking to your face, that it may guide my judgment, my conscience giving its full assent! I find your countenance and your face to be the knowledge of truth. Your happy people show to it their face of good will. They exult in the joy of the Holy Spirit, and keep the feast of the great Year of Jubilee in contemplation and enjoyment of your truth. In the light of that truth, that face, they walk, directing all their goings and doings according to the judgments of your righteousness.

9.

The knowledge of you' has another face, another countenance. Moses was told concerning this: “You cannot see my face, for no one shall see me, and live.” It is to the sight and knowledge

of the divine majesty that these words refer. That knowledge is best known in this life by unknowing; the highest knowledge that a man can here and now attain consists in knowing in what way he does not know.

10.

And yet, O Lord, though you have made the darkness of our ignorance and human blindness the secret place that hides your face from us, nevertheless your pavilion is round about you, and some of your saints undoubtedly were full of light. They glowed and they gave light, because they lived so close to your light and your fire. By word and example they kindled and enlightened others, and they declared to us the solemn joy of this supreme knowledge of you, for which we look hereafter, when we shall see you as you are, and face to face.

11.

Meanwhile, through them the lightnings of your truth have illumined the world, and flashes have shone forth that rejoice those whose eyes are sound; although they trouble and perturb those who love darkness rather than light. For this manifestation of your truth, through whomsoever it comes, is like your sun that you make to shine on the just and the unjust alike. The sun, while ever retaining the purity of its own nature, nevertheless makes use of the substances of things as it finds them. It dries up mud and melts wax. It illumines every eye, whether sighted or blind, but with different effect; the seeing eye sees more when illumined, the blind continues in its blindness. So, too, it was when you, God's Wisdom and Truth's Light, by whom all things were made, came into the world. You enlightened everyone coming into the world, but the darkness did not embrace you. But to as many as received you and the light of your truth you gave the power to become the children of God.<sup>8</sup>



## SEVEN SHORT TEXTS

### 1

The first mode [of love] is a Desire that comes forth from love with great energy. This must reign in the heart for a long time before it has the power

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<sup>8</sup> Translation: Sister Penelope CSMV in CF 3, pp. 134-138, with some editorial amendments. Paragraphs are numbered according to the critical edition in CCCM 89. Copyright 1970 by Cistercian Publications, Inc. © 2008 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. Used with permission.

completely to drive out all its adversaries. It must work at this task with strength and skill and find its fulfilment in so doing. This mode is a Desire that surely comes forth from love. That is, the good soul has the will loyally to follow and truly to love so that she is drawn forth in the Desire to receive and to exist in purity and freedom, and in the nobility in which she was made by her Creator, according to his image and likeness. This tendency is to be loved and nurtured.

Beatrice of Nazareth, *The Seven Modes of Love*, 1; (Cf. CF 50, p. 291.)

## 2

There is another form of divine contemplation, very different from the former, because it takes place in the interior, when God himself is pleased to visit the soul that seeks him, provided it is committed to seeking him with all its Desire and love. We are told what the sign of such a visit is by one who experienced it. "Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries on every side." It is right that the warmth of holy Desire should go before God's face to each soul that He Himself is about to visit. It consumes all the rust caused by vicious actions and, thus, prepares a place for the Lord. Hence the soul knows when the Lord is near when it feels itself set alight by that fire.

Bernard of Clairvaux, *Super Cantica* 31:4; (CF 7, p. 127.)

## 3

The execution of our holy Desire and holy resolve consists in our body and soul taking an active part in the combat of the concupiscence of the spirit with the concupiscence of the flesh, giving our consent to righteousness with the former and never permitting the latter to assent to unrighteousness. The Desire and resolve for righteousness, together with their tireless pursuit, brings to perfection our holy hatred of concupiscence of the flesh, [that concupiscence] which, by its desire and resolve for wickedness, initiates unrighteousness, and which has neither the desire nor the resolve for pursuing the good to its final goal.

Baldwin of Forde, *Spiritual Tractates*, 6; (CF 39, pp. 178-179.)

## 4

Worldly desires are threefold: vanity, sensuality, and ambition. Thus, worldly desires are the desire for meaningless [things], for sensual pleasures, and for honours. These are the three things that worldly people desire. They desire meaningless trappings, such as the beauty of their garments, the speed of their horses, the flight of their birds of prey, the keen senses of their dogs, the spectacle of their games. These are all vain things, void of permanence and truth. They desire also sensual pleasures, such as delicacies at the table, different kinds of drinks, satisfaction of their appetites and such like. They desire also the honours of this world, such as a kingdom, a retinue, episcopal status, and such like.

Aelred of Rievaulx, *Liturgical Sermons* 31:20; (CF 77, p. 20.)

## 5

Our desires appear to be especially directed to three objects: to what is proper, to what is useful, and to what is delightful (*quod decet, quod expedit, quod delectat*). These are the things for which we yearn, all of us for all of them, though some of us desire one more, others another. One person is so given to pleasure as not to give enough thought to what is acceptable or useful. Another is so concerned with profit as to neglect what is acceptable or what is pleasant. A third person is rather negligent about both pleasure and usefulness and is only or mostly concerned with honour. The desire for these things is not reprehensible, provided we seek them where we can truly find them. Where these things truly exist they are one, and this one reality is the supreme good, supreme glory, supreme usefulness, supreme pleasure. This, indeed, in so far as we can grasp it in this life, is the object of our hope: the vision of majesty in us that has been promised to us, so that God may be all in all; all that is pleasant, all that is useful, all that is worthy of esteem.

Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermon for Christmas Eve* 5:7; (CF 51, p. 86.)

## 6

Why go off, good Jesus? Why turn away? Why cheat the beloved of her Desire? Do you prompt her Desire and then withdrew her delight? Or, perhaps, in this way do you draw out her yearnings to greater keenness and warmer Desire by withdrawing your presence? It is so. Obviously, it is so. All the disappointments of love add more fuel to love itself, and all the deceptive wiles raise love to its peak.

Gilbert of Hoyland, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 44:3; (CF 26, p. 530.)

## 7

The reasonable spirit was created so that in union with God it may rejoice and delight in God, and in God alone in everything else. The rational being was made to search for God in himself and in everything. The concupiscible power is his that he should love and desire God alone; the irascible power is his that he should reject all that would hinder this contemplation and delight. As it is written: “That he should know [by rationality] how to reject evil [by irascibility] and choose good [by concupiscibility].”

Isaac of Stella, *Sermon* 25.5; (CF 11, p. 206.)

# FOUR SHORT REFLECTIONS

## 1



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Newcomers to our monasteries are often surprised or even terrified, when they meet elderly members who express their longing for death, wishing to “go to heaven”. During long years of seeking God they have learned that “no human can see God and stay alive”, as the Lord spoke to Moses. Death is the necessary door, the passage, the transition into true life. And often we can actually recognize some of this ultimate grace shining from the face of our beloved dead: serene peace and beauty, some kind of transfiguration.

God wants us beautiful, for he Himself is beauty, and in this ultimate encounter “face to face” he is restoring the image of Himself he had once created. The thirst for God is described as the desire for this encounter “face to face”. This longing is so strong that it despises all the things of this life and even life itself, for the love of His face.



Abbot William therefore strives for humility, for the truth about himself: “Teach me, O eternal Wisdom, by the illumination of your countenance, what is that face of yours, and what is mine”, and in the light of your truth, of that face, I will walk according to the judgments of your righteousness. But the knowledge of the divine majesty is best known in this life by unknowing.

The miniature shows a monk in prayer, and the two faces have become similar. He has gradually become what he looks at, contemplates.





**Sister María Presentación Lite Magaña (Tulebras)**

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William of Saint-Thierry turned into a restless, active drive the first intention Saint Benedict looks for in those who aspire to be monks, "**Whether they really seek God**" (RB 58:7).

The idea of the enlightened heart is one of the ways William expresses and transmits his inner experience of the contemplation of God's face. God has shown all along, and across revelation his desire to open up to us, enlighten us, and communicate to everyone *the image and likeness* of who he is – of his own divine life.

Faced with that light, William is brash in his attempt to contemplate *one-on-one* the face of God – of Love itself, before which the human face is rather a stain, a darkness, a sin that had better run away, hide and disappear – as our first parents did.

William helps us to plant our feet on the ground. Knowing his own unworthiness and the enveloping brilliance of God's face, he declares, "And if you ask me, as you asked Peter, 'Do you love me?' – Lord, you know that I want to love you and that my heart wants nothing but to love you." But ... here William also notices, deep in his being, rootlets of aspirations revealing that his humility is not altogether transparent.

At these shadowy depths, William realizes he is not entirely humble before the radiant light of God's face. And he teaches us how much we need to reach the deepest knowledge of ourselves before we can aspire to be totally transparent in God's light. "Know yourself" – if you would discover the root of the dark brilliance you intuit within the heart.

William asks longingly, "Oh, desirable vision! Teach me what the face-to-face encounter consists in." In the present life, it seems, such encounter is not possible; but the people were not saved by "*their own arms, but by your right hand and your arm, and the light of your face*"

(Ps.43:4). That is where William gets the courage to ask the Lord for that divine gaze to illumine his conscience, to discover in it "that your face and your countenance are the knowledge of your truth."

In his mystical ascent, William enters within the cloud, within the luminous face of not knowing. "The vision and the science of your divine Majesty are best known in the present life by un-knowing. There is some knowledge to be gained by not knowing. Therein lies the supreme science of our life." William's treatise on the *Enigma of Faith* revolves around this line.

With William's guiding hand on our path, we can pray both with him and like him, "Oh, desirable vision! My face is seeking you. I am seeking your face; I beg you do not keep your face from me."<sup>9</sup>

### 3



**Dom Samuel Lauras (Nový Dvůr)**

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As a young monk, I struggled with the cultural distance separating ourselves from Cistercian writers. Thanks to the comments of mediaeval theologians, I understood they had a lot to offer me, providing I established a link between the text – the fruit of the writer's experience – and the experience of my monastic life in its most practical and sincere aspects.

Two themes stand out: The search for the face of Christ and humility. Seeking to know Christ, believing it is possible to live in His presence, love Him over and above the obstacles that are

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<sup>9</sup> Translation: Brother Gregory Escardo (Gethsemani).

within us, which humility teaches us to know and accept, beyond the darkness of the faith that looms before us... What else attracted us to the monastery and motivates our daily choices, faith and perseverance? We can seek allusions in this text to Chapter 7 of the Rule.

Light and darkness. Two people facing each other cannot walk in the same direction. Walking behind Christ means we agree to see only His back (see VII 9). This is a strong evocation of the faith that provides support for us in our path. This darkness, however, resulting from our "blindness", is not exempt from the light received by those who precede us (see §10), namely the Saints, as well as our elders. It's an important lesson and an important art, namely supporting each other without aspiring to look at each other to create ties, but rather to walk together and attach ourselves to Christ in genuine detachment.

## 4



**Dom Thomas Xavier Davis (Vina)**

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“I find your countenance and your face to be the knowledge of truth. Your happy people show to it their face of good will. They exult in the joy of the Holy Spirit...” (Med 7.8) ‘Face of good will’ caught my attention. When I strive to cultivate a thoroughly good will, essential to good zeal (RB 72), situations, which arise in daily monastic life, come into their proper perspective. A good will helps me either to eliminate inappropriate desires, or orient other desires towards inner peace and good, communal living.

Good will helps me realize a personal genuineness with its truth and honesty. I find good zeal (RB 72) rising out of this experience. This is the “face” I want to present to God. In Meditation 3, William makes a distinction between God’s face, “good: what God is,” and God’s

countenance, “goodness: what attracts us to God.” To strive for a good will with its zeal is quite demanding, especially when it goes against a deeply rooted self with its self-will. Here enters into my life, via good will, the Gospel challenge: humility or dying to self by taking up one’s cross. Divine Goodness is always present before me. Striving to have a personal genuine, zealous good will, puts me in contact with God’s goodness, and is the glue bonding my face to the Mystery of God’s Face.

## FOR YOUR NOTEBOOK

1. Write down three points or ideas from this Unit that have triggered a response in you and that you would like to remember
2. If you would enjoy doing so, write a short personal response to the matters raised in this Unit. About 250 words is probably sufficient.
3. If you would like to share this essay you can send it to Father Michael Casey (Tarrawarra), the General Editor: [experientia.editor@gmail.com](mailto:experientia.editor@gmail.com). Please include a photo of yourself with your full name and monastery, your date of birth, your date of entry, and your preferred email address.

## SOME FURTHER READING

Casey, Michael: “Desire and Desires in Western Tradition,” *Tjurunga* 71 (2006), pp. 62-92.  
“El deseo y los deseos en la tradición occidental,” *Cistercium* 60, no. 250 (2008), pp. 103-138.  
Morson, John: “Seeking God by Desire,” *CSQ* 2.2 (1967), pp. 175-186.  
Olivera, Bernardo: “Notes on the Anthropology of Desire at the Service of Monastic Formation,” Conference to the OCSO General Chapters, 2005.  
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# UNIT FOUR

## *Imago Dei*

## ***IMAGO DEI***

In this Unit we are raising the topic of Cistercian anthropology, the fundamental understanding of human reality that is the basis of our spirituality. There are many distinct components in this teaching that can throw light on our own experience.

- ❖ The theological reflection on the *imago Dei* text in Genesis.
- ❖ The theme of integral self-knowledge.
- ❖ The dignity of each human person.
- ❖ The idea that we are called to bring this imagehood to fulfilment.
- ❖ The recognition of inner resistance to the action of grace.
- ❖ Some authors followed Evagrius and Cassian in seeing this contrary principle as resulting from the presence of inherent demons or thoughts that prompt us to evil.
- ❖ The experience of temptation.
- ❖ Thomas Merton's teaching on the deep self as distinct from the outer self.

Isaac is one of the most academic of the Cistercian Fathers and some of his sermons are very dense. In the sermon presented in this Unit he is simply speaking on the Sunday Gospel, using it as a foundation for his meditation on the experience of temptation, a suitable topic for Lenten reflection. Playing on the double meaning of the Latin word *confessio*, Isaac makes the point that without the realistic recognition and confession of sin, there can be no confession of praise.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

1. Who am I? I am not my thoughts. I am not my feelings. I am not my troubles. From what sources do I draw elements of my identity: family, education, friends, experiences, vocation, position in the community...? What films, novels, music, poetry, social media, experiences of beauty, experiences of loss, traumatic moments... have contributed to my interior landscape?
2. How is my experience of self illuminated by the traditional doctrine about human beings created (not self-made) in God's image (*ad imaginem Dei*) and therefore their orientation to God?
3. To what extent has my identity been socially constructed (by conforming to the presumed expectations of others: parents, educators, superiors, peers)? To what extent during my lifetime have I experienced a liberation from the tyranny of internalized expectations?
4. Am I aware that others perceive, assess and respond to events in a way different from me? Do I find delight in the unique identity of others? Or does this make me feel insecure? To what extent do I see difference (personality, ideas, aptitudes, etc.) as a threat to my sense of identity and well-being? Or do I feel complementarity is an enrichment? Am I happy to join in with common ways of thinking and doing things? Do I feel a strong need to assert myself and express my "identity" by actions that distinguish me from others?

5. Thomas Merton placed great emphasis on distinguishing between a false or superficial “self” and the true or deep “self”. Do I notice this duality in my own experience? Has monastic life helped me to become conscious of this potential conflict? Can I accept that sometimes another may see my true self more completely I do myself?

6. How is it possible to have a deep sense of selfhood without giving way to individualism (*singularitas*)? How do I recognize and overcome my own personal demons and learn in harmony with others?

7. How does my life in the monastery help me by grace gradually to become the beautiful person that God created me to be? Am I at peace with the slowness of the process?

## INTRODUCTION TO ISAAC OF STELLA: SERMON 38



**Dom Elias Dietz (Gethsemani)**

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*I am often afraid. Anxiety is not just a bad memory; it is an old witch with whom, in spite of myself, I have signed a long-term lease. I leave her the broom closet and try to keep her within certain limits. She is my little domestic Leviathan, muzzled, but still talkative.<sup>10</sup>*

In this testimonial of a twenty-first-century woman, recovering from a personal crisis, we hear a distant echo of Isaac of Stella from the twelfth-century, instructing his fellow-monks about the inner life:

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<sup>10</sup> Marion Muller-Colard, *L'autre Dieu. La plainte, la menace et la grâce* [Paris: Albin Michel, 2017], 125.

I reckon that I know and understand my demon quite well . . . . Nothing is better known to me, because nothing does me more harm. Nothing is more familiar to me, because nothing is more constant. I am hardly unaware of the nature and kind of temptation that most frequently and sharply pricks me. . . . [My demon] talks constantly to me and weaves endless and deceitful tales. (§7-8)

Whether one calls this intruder a domestic Leviathan or a familiar demon, it seems to be a common human experience that the inner world is at times so chaotic and noisy that it can only be explained by the presence of somebody or something inside making a hubbub. And when the hubbub is loud enough, it blocks one's ears and binds one's tongue.

Isaac takes this image of a familiar demon from a passage in Luke's gospel, where Jesus cures a man possessed by "a demon that was mute" (Lk 11:14). According to Isaac's interpretation, the reason for the man's muteness is that the demon has so monopolized his inner world that he can no longer relate to himself or to anyone around him. Isaac goes on to confess that he experiences this same dynamic within himself: [this demon] often "takes over my ears . . . so that I am free neither to read nor to listen to someone else reading to me. This is its purpose in speaking to me: to make me entirely mute, to render me deaf and dull" (§8).

As Isaac so candidly acknowledges in this sermon, there is no getting away from the thoughts, words, and images that constantly come and go in the human consciousness. One might limit their impact by confining them to the broom closet or, as Isaac suggests, one might fight them off with verses from the cursing psalms. But, as he admits, this strategy in choir (*in concione psallo*) is then countered by the demon's own chanting of flattering thoughts (*multa concionatur*), "talking about my knowledge, my religious observance, my habits, what kind of person I am, my charm, my eloquence, or my refinement."

Twenty-first century people tend to see self-knowledge as a means of self-improvement or self-mastery. Isaac's view of self-knowledge in this sermon is different. For him it is inseparable from awareness of sin and failure. The most genuine expression of self-knowledge is humble confession. In this view, compunction and sorrow for sins are more important than psychological insight. At the heart of Isaac's message is the patristic notion that confession is already praise of God, "for confession is beautiful, and beauty gives praise." And once the tongue is free enough to confess, it can engage in good and life-giving forms of speech, free from the domination of the demon who wants to bind the tongue "with a knot of cupidity, fear, and shame."

By way of context, it is good to keep in mind that Sermon 38 does not stand alone, but is paired with Sermon 39. Both comment on the gospel pericope for the Third Sunday of Lent, sometimes entitled "Jesus and Beelzebul." In a way, they are mirror-image sermons: one has to do with looking inside oneself, and the other has to do with looking outside of oneself. In Sermon 38, Isaac focusses on the mute person out of whom Jesus casts a demon. In Sermon 39 he focusses on the Pharisees, who refuse to attribute this deed to Jesus, and who effectively blaspheme against the Holy Spirit by claiming it was by Beelzebul that Jesus cast out the demon. Isaac sees the tongue-tying demon as an image of impenitence or refusal to admit evil inside oneself (Sermon 38); and he sees in the Pharisees an image of envy or the refusal to look beyond oneself and acknowledge the good in others (Sermon 39).



In an even larger context, it is helpful to keep in mind that Sermon 38 is organized around a three-phase schema of conversion and progress that appears frequently throughout Isaac's writings. We first encounter it here in 38.11: "For discipline has it that contrition of heart should come first, confession of the mouth should follow, and afterwards, correction of deeds should take place." It comes up again, somewhat modified, in 38.15: "But the beginning of the sinner's righteousness is the confession of sin, as it is written, "The righteous are first of all accusers of themselves." After that, one may praise God; and in the third place, one may become a teacher of one's neighbour." At bottom, these are the three classic stages of spiritual progress. For Isaac, each of these stages is a step toward integration into the Body of the Church, the Whole Christ.

In the light of Isaac's teaching, the common notions of self-knowledge or of the true self and false self, seem somewhat individualistic. In his view, finding yourself cannot be isolated from finding your place in the Mystical Body. If you see and acknowledge your truth, your heart is moved to compunction. This salutary sorrow sets you free and restores you to your brothers and sisters. And if you use this new-found freedom well, you in turn become a restorer of the community.

## **ISAAC OF STELLA**

### **SERMON 38: For the Third Sunday of Lent**

1.

*Jesus was casting out a demon, and it was mute.* It was easy, beloved, for the Lord Jesus to cast the demon out from this person; without Jesus' permission and authorization the demon could never have gone into him. For in all creation's great variety, there is nothing that the Father did not create and does not rule through his Son. Therefore, he let the demon enter the man when, how, and for the purpose that he wished, and he cast it out when and how he wished.

2.

He who *was casting out the demon* there with his bodily presence is the same person who before, afterward, and today casts out demons wherever this occurs. He casts them out with divine power by means of any person he wishes—angels or human beings, the good or the wicked—and in whatever manner he wishes: by prayer, invocation, enchantment, plants, stones, or any other method. *All power in heaven and on earth* of course, belongs to him. He has always had this power from the Father according to his divinity, and he received it at a certain moment according to his humanity. *All power has been given to me in heaven and on earth.* He openly taught of this power at a specific time and place so that people would always and everywhere truly believe it.

3.

He had given his disciples *power over all the demons.* Yet someone brought them his possessed son, and they were completely unable to heal him in Jesus' absence. How is it, then, that they had power over all the demons if they did not have power over that one? Or if they did have power over it, why did they not cast it out?

4.

His physical absence and the disciples' powerlessness clearly represent what we said before: without the presence of his divine power and the grace to work with it, nothing could be cast out anywhere. For this reason, to those who asked him why they were unable to cast out the demon, he answered, *Because of your unbelief*. Either they did not know this yet, or they did not yet believe as they should have. So it is also that elsewhere he calls certain people who claim that they are something (*arrogantes*) to return to themselves, saying, Do not boast that *spirits are made subject to you*, etc. *For I have seen Satan falling like lightning from heaven* because of his haughtiness. (*arrogantia*)

5.

We begin by mentioning these matters, brothers, so that you will not presume to claim anything for yourselves and foolishly boast in what you have received. For it is *God who does all things in us*, mercifully casting out what is evil and introducing what is good, and sometimes justly taking away what is good and inflicting what is evil.

6.

Therefore, *Jesus was casting out a demon*, and continues to do so today. Let us ask good Jesus for ourselves, beloved; let us constantly ask him to completely cast our demons out of us, or at least restrain them for a while. All demons are dangerous to us and rejoice when they harm us or discover that we have suffered harm. They all often heap up a great many wide-ranging and chance acts around many different people to deceive them. Yet Scripture informs us that we all have our own particular (*familiaris*) demon who is especially attentive toward us and who watches us everywhere in all our dealings. A monk must certainly be aware of this particular demon.

7.

For I reckon that I know and understand my demon quite well, beloved. Nothing is better known to me, because nothing does me more harm. Nothing is more familiar (*familiarius*) to me, because nothing is more constant. I am hardly unaware of the nature and kind of temptation that most frequently and sharply pricks me. I also know in what area I am most easily afflicted. This is why I must also cry out as a man who sees his weakness and recognizes his enemy: Lord Jesus, you who alone are mighty, *snatch the helpless one from the hands of those who are stronger; the poor, needy one from his plunderer. Snatch the poor one, and free the needy one from the hand of the sinner. Snatch me from the hand of the sinner and from the hand of the wicked one who acts against the law*. When I sing these and other verses like them in the assembly, beloved, I certainly direct that psalm against him in secret.

8.

*And it was mute*, it says. Mine talks constantly to me and weaves endless and deceitful tales about the glory, beauty, and delights of this world. It whispers ideas about these things and a thousand others like them, both promising and threatening miracles. It tells a thousand lies, saying that I can do many things that I cannot, and that I cannot do many things that I can. It says that others recount amazing things about me, both good and bad. It goes on at great length to me, variously talking about my knowledge, my religious observance, my habits, what kind of person I am, my charm, my eloquence, or my refinement. In short, it often grabs and takes over my ears for itself after this fashion, so that I am free neither to read nor to listen to someone else reading to me. This is its purpose in speaking to me: to make me entirely mute, to render me deaf and dull.

9.

And perhaps this is why a wicked spirit that does not stop speaking evil is called *mute*: because it makes those whom it attacks mute, unable to praise God or use their rational tongues properly. *If someone speaks*, says the apostle Peter, *let it be with God's words, as it were*. I can thus understand that the rational tongue is not for speaking empty and lying words, words of conflict and ruin, words of slander or pride, of cupidity and lust, or any kind of nonsense, *which is inappropriate*. The tongue, whether it calls out with all these words and chatters in the ears of others or engages in inner conversation with its particular demon, is mute before God. As it is written, *Because I was silent, my bones grew old, while I called out all day long*. There are three ways, then, with which the tongue *speaks God's words*: when it praises God, when it accuses itself in his presence, and when it builds up its neighbor. But those who do not engage in these kinds of speech are mute, no matter how much they cry out.

10.

O Lord Jesus, cast out my demon, and open my lips to humbly confess my sins, so that my mouth may worthily announce your praise. If you do not, no beautiful praise will be found in the sinner's mouth: *You have put on confession and beauty*, Scripture says. For confession is beautiful, and beauty gives praise.

11.

But if I, a sinner, that is, as someone who hides my sins, should dare to offer praise wickedly, God would immediately say to me, *Why do you*, that is, this sort of person, *tell of my righteousness*, you who are silent about your own unrighteousness and *take up my covenant in your mouth*, a mouth not cleansed by confession and so *yours*? *Confession in the mouth brings about salvation*. So confession cleans the mouth and contrition the heart. *But you have hated discipline*. For discipline has it that contrition of heart should come first, confession of the mouth should follow, and afterwards, correction of deeds should take place. *You*, then, in keeping with your hard heart, your mute mouth, and your slack hands, *have hated discipline and cast my words behind you*.

12.

God's words cite the confession of sins first. Without confession, the praise of God that should follow lacks beauty and the building up of one's neighbor is not suitable. For those who would praise God in the correct order should first thank him for opening their mouths to give praise. For confession opens the mouth, just as stubbornness closes it. Should not those who wish to instruct their neighbors first prepare them for repentance and confession?

13.

For Wisdom and Wisdom's herald began their preaching in this way, saying, *Repent, for the Kingdom of God has drawn near*. And *all the people*, it says, *went out to John, and confessing their sins, they were baptized by him*. This was also the apostle Peter's counsel: *Repent, and let each of you be baptized*; so too was James's proclamation, *Confess your sins to one another*. As we said, this is the order given by God's words.

14.

But if, leaving aside the order given by God's words, you break forth in praise of him while hiding your sins like gold so that they fester, producing sores in you, hear what Scripture has to say: *Why do you tell of my statutes and take up my pure covenant in your impure mouth*? If you begin to teach your neighbor, the apostle reproves you, saying, *You teach others, but do*

*not teach yourself*; you preach that one should confess, but do not confess yourself; you *preach that one should not steal*, but you yourself steal confession.

15.

So either be silent about everything good, brother, just as Jesus ordered the demons to be silent and not praise him or preach of him, or confess all your wicked deeds so that you may be allowed to praise and preach worthily. *Your mouth overflowed with ill-will*; let righteousness overflow. But the beginning of the sinner's righteousness is the confession of sin, as it is written, *The righteous are first of all accusers of themselves*; after that, one may praise God; and in the third place, one may become a teacher of one's neighbor. And so, the first step of righteousness is confession.

16.

*And your tongue was contriving deceit*. If they wish to leave sin behind, then, let them confess their deceit without deceit, as it is written, *Blessed is the man to whom the Lord has not charged any sin, in whose spirit there is no deceit*. If you charge yourself, God will not charge you. If you accuse yourself, laying yourself bare, God will forgive and cover you. *But blessed are those whose iniquities have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered*.

17.

*You sat and spoke against your brother*; sit before your father and confess against yourself. *You placed a stumbling block in front of the son of your mother* the church; place the *stumbling block* of shame and judgment *before the son of your carnal mother*, that is, before yourself, because you did these things to your brother.

18.

If you do not do these things, then he who is now silent, listening and waiting for you to speak first and be pardoned, for you to appear before *his face in confession*, will rebuke you in the end and say, *You thought, O wicked soul, that I would be like you*. You were silent; I was silent. But I will not always remain silent, will I? I will not be like you at all, whether you remain silent or speak. For if you are silent, I will not be silent. If you speak, I will not speak. If you cover yourself, I will lay you bare. If you lay yourself bare, I will cover you. If you accuse yourself, I will excuse you. If you excuse yourself, I will accuse you. I will not, then, be like you, because if you absolve yourself, I will convict you; if you convict yourself, I will absolve you.

19.

This is the benefit of humble confession, beloved: with it, one may win a Judge who pardons and a punisher who shows kindness. Shrewdly recognizing this, if at any point the demon manages to crawl through sin's delight into mental consent, he immediately tries to close the door of the mouth over him. To prevent confession from driving him out at any point, he binds the tongue with a knot of cupidity, fear, and shame. For these are the three things that stand in the way of confession.

20.

But you, my Lord Jesus, you who open and *no one can shut*, you who manifested yourself in order to undo the devil's works, cast out from me, your servant, every delight in sin, so that I may repent with contrite heart. Unknot my tongue for a greater cupidity, a stronger fear, and a more prudent shame. By confessing, may I who have been mute begin to speak, thus amazing

the crowds, not only of humans but also of angels and even demons. *For we are put on show in this world before angels and humans*, the good and the evil. Amaze them, then, with the word of your servant, not only of the mouth but also of deed, for works too are words.

21.

Let this word speak, I beg, of your servant's humility and your grandeur, for the benefit of my neighbors, and all of this with the mouth, with the heart, and with deeds. Let us not blush at confessing in the ear of one person so as not to be convicted before the faces of many. Let us not hopelessly fear losing what must be lost, lest we should lose what can be kept forever. Let us not basely dread falling from a hope that often deceives us, lest we should truly fall from the thing that always renews us. Nor are those whom you have set over us so foolish or wicked, O wise and good Lord, that they do not know how or do not bother to take compassion on our weaknesses. But while this foolish and mute demon weighs us down, it is no wonder that we foolishly and wickedly mistrust those who are prudent and good.

22.

Cast out from us, then, this wicked, mute spirit, O Lord, you who are the Father's Word, so that we may receive a word of confession and praise through you, the Word of power and truth, who live and reign as God with the Father and the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.<sup>11</sup>

## SEVEN SHORT TEXTS

### 1

Understand your dignity, O noble creature, since you are not only endowed in the image of God but you are made beautiful by God's likeness. Just as your Creator who created you in his likeness is good and just, gentle and meek, patient and merciful with the other high qualities of which we read, so too you have been created so that you will have charity and be clean and holy, beautiful and elegant meek and humble. The more virtues you have in yourself the closer you will be to God and you will manifest a greater likeness to your Creator.

*Interior House*, 80; PL 184: col. 547CD

### 2

Happy is the man who suffers temptation. It is not that the experience of these bad things is happiness but the enduring of these bad things is the way to happiness. For happy is the man who suffers temptation, not because he suffers temptation, but because when he is tested (*probatus*) he will receive the crown of life. Temptation is a fire; we are the gold. Unless we are tested by the application of fire we will be considered unsuitable for the royal diadem. Those who are tested will receive the crown of life and will find their place in the crown of the supreme emperor. One who takes delight in the outcome will not be afraid of the labour [involved]. And those who wish to

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<sup>11</sup> Translation: Lewis White for Cistercian Publications. © 2018.

be crowned should be eager to be tested and they should know that they cannot be tested, if they run away from being tempted. For it is written, "The one who is not tempted does not win approval."

Aelred of Rievaulx, *Sermon* 54:2.

### 3

Nothing is more effective and speedier in bringing a soul to humility than for it to discover the truth in its own regard. There is no scope here for dissimulation or deceit. On the contrary, the soul should simply confront itself without averting its gaze. If it thus looks at itself in the clear light of truth, it will make the discovery that it is a dweller in the region of unlikeness and that it cannot hide from its own discontent. Then, out of this unhappiness it will cry to the Lord in the words of the Prophet: "In your truth you have humbled me." How can a soul not be humbled by such truthful self-knowledge? For it perceives itself burdened with sins, weighed down by the mass of this mortal body, entangled with earthly cares, infected with the excremental desires of the flesh, blind, bent, weak, riddled with manifold error, exposed to numberless dangers and fearful of many terrors, made anxious with a thousand problems and beset with a thousand suspicions and afflicted by a thousand constraints, prone to vice and powerless for virtue. Is there here any source of uplift or pride?

Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 36:5 (Cf. CF 7; pp. 177-178.)

### 4

You know, brothers, that the first discord the devil started was pride, since he preferred to dominate rather than be subordinate. This is because, in truth, all who exalt themselves will be humbled, whoever aspires to the heights will be thrust down. Nor has [the devil] put aside his lust for domination, but he has chosen a seat in the frigid hearts of mortals; and he has made partners in his malice the principalities and powers, the rulers of darkness and the wicked spirits, delegating to each of his cohorts [the task] of instigating particular vices. Hence some are spirits of gluttony; they make sport with the miserable attractions of overeating. Others are spirits of fornication who take delight in the filthiness of lust. Others inflame human beings with the fire of cupidity; these are called spirits of avarice. Those called spirits of anger influence the minds of poor people with the stings of impatience. The spirits of acedia take their function from their name, which is to make the souls (*animus*) of mortals impatient with quiet. They are called spirits of sadness through whom many are overcome by a particular sadness that is unreasonable. The spirits of pride are the most inflated of all since they incite frivolous hearts to self-promotion.

Aelred of Rievaulx, *Sermon* 54:8.

### 5

It is the serpent who is saying, "Taste and you will become like gods," as often as it is suggested to a monk that he look upon another's lukewarm way of living so that he himself is led to lukewarmness and weariness; that looking

upon a dissolute person he himself becomes dissolute through idleness; that looking upon one afflicted with acedia he himself following his example begins to run about here and there; and whenever it is suggested to him that he willingly listens to a detractor, or agrees with a murmurer, or secretly nurtures an idle sign or word.

Aelred of Rievaulx, *Sermon 59:29*.

## 6

Oh, if only we knew ourselves to be human, and so understood that we were made to the image and likeness of God. My brothers, what follows from this dignity? We humans are made with two natures. We have a body, we have a soul. In the bodily nature, we are like beasts; the image and likeness of God is not there. For it is in the soul that we are made to the image and likeness of God. Let each one see if he lives according to [the soul] where the image and likeness of God is or according to that in which there is a likeness to the beasts. I say, let each see whether he cares more for those things that sustain the body or for those that sustain the soul.

Aelred, *Sermon 34:8*; (Cf. *CF 77*; p. 53.)

## 7

Return, then, return, O Shulamite, from pondering upon your deformity and imperfection. Return, I say, return to considering also your graciousness and beauty. Try, at least, to regard the causes of your self-dissatisfaction in such a way that you can also recognize that there are some things that give satisfaction to your spouse. Do not ignore that you are dark, but at the same time, do not be unaware that you are beautiful.

John of Forde, *Sermons on the Song of Songs SC 63.4*; (*CF 45*, p. 17.)



## FOUR SHORT REFLECTIONS

### 1



**Sister Anne Elizabeth Sweet (Tautra)**

Date of Birth: 9 May 1950

Date of Entry (OSB): 24 August 1969, (OCSO): 14 March 1995

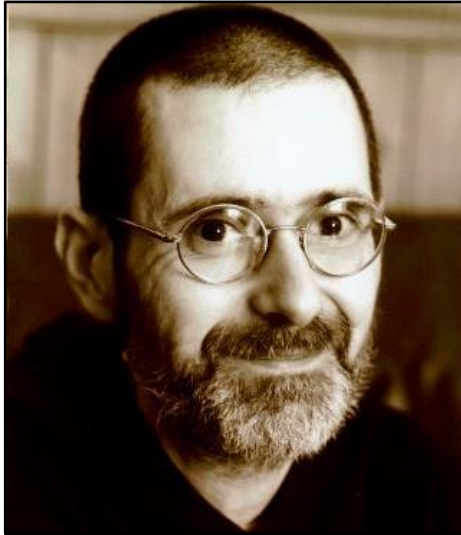
Preferred Email: [anneelizabethocso@gmail.com](mailto:anneelizabethocso@gmail.com)

There is much in Isaac’s description of the workings of “his” demon with which I can personally resonate – and it touches upon what is the biggest regret of my monastic life: the time I have wasted. Not that I was idle or lazy, but it was time in which I allowed myself to be distracted and preoccupied with some of the very things Isaac describes with reference to his particular devil (§8). I was robbed of precious time that could have been filled with lectio, monastic study or prayer, “gazing on the Lord’s glory . . . (so as to be) transformed . . . into his very image.” If only I would have recognized that earlier.

Sometimes the promptings of the devil through the thoughts Isaac describes can be overpowering. But the presence of God’s power and grace within us is even more powerful – and, as Isaac points out, we must work with it (§4) – and that can mean hard work.

Like Isaac, I have known the power of God’s Word, “the Word of Power and Truth” that can cast out those inner thoughts and voices which divert my gaze from Christ. Sometimes, as for Isaac, it is a Word from the psalms chanted in choir. Sometimes it is a Word to which I am led in *lectio*. When I come upon such a text, I cling to it and read/pray it repeatedly throughout the day, allowing its power to work within me. I find that when I do, my mouth—and my heart—is filled with praise in the experience of a new-found freedom and peace.





**Brother Antonio Manuel Pérez Camacho (Huerta)**

Date of Birth: 19 July 1969

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Surely you have at some point – due to some persistent fault, insistent noxious thoughts, and not being able to erase them from your life – seriously thought you might have a demon, some evil spirit possessing you; and whether an exorcism was what you needed. It seems as if, embedded inside us, we had an agent of Satan who kept prodding us; as if next to God's gifts – and warring against them – a very impertinent voice will not stop bothering us.

It is that well-known noxious, and garrulous demon that Isaac mentions. It is that barrage of specious, pernicious ideas continually spraying our memory and keeping us from prayer and good works, and even from confessing our sins. In fact, inside us is embedded the most powerful army of enemies, so when I pray with the psalms for liberation from our enemies, it is from that multitude of false thoughts that I am asking God to defend me. And that is because only the power of God acting in Jesus can free me from them and is the only one capable of ejecting "my demon." As Peter tells Cornelius, that is why Jesus came into the world: "Jesus of Nazareth, who came doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil" (Acts 10.:38). And this is my experience: By simply calling to mind the memory of his person, by ceaselessly reciting his sweet Name, I already take up positions against the enemy.<sup>12</sup>




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<sup>12</sup> Translation: Brother Gregory Escardo (Gethsemani).



**Dom Mark A. Scott (New Melleray)**

Date of Birth: 9 May 1948

Date of Entry (Vina): 1978

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Isaac is an abbot and so am I. It is as an abbot that I read his sermon. When he first addresses his brothers he calls them “beloved,” *dilectissimi* (§1). Temperamentally I could not do this convincingly and without offending someone. But I can find and use my own way of showing affection to the brothers. Isaac goes further. Isaac soon confesses that “I, myself, beloved, know my own demon all too well” (§6), and he names the temptations he is liable to and probably yields to, and that the brothers are very much aware of (§8-9).

In effect, Isaac models to his brothers what it means to make confession, the very virtue he is trying to encourage in them. To the monks, Isaac is the teacher who is charged to proclaim the Word of God to them (§14), just as their first duty is the praise of God. But neither can fulfil his vocation without confession of sin. Only then can the one properly teach, the other properly praise (§15). He quotes the Psalm, “You have put on confession and beauty” (§10; Ps 103:1). The Psalm refers to God, but God is a model for the human being; Isaac refers it all to himself, and he becomes a model for his brother monks. Boldly, man is in the image of God, says Isaac, but you, my beloved, be in my image, but only if that image is a reflection of God. “You thought ... that I would be like you (§18; Ps 49:21).





**Mother Rebekka Willekes (Klaarland)**

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Date of Entry: 27 September 2002

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“My personal demon!” I am more inclined to think of my guardian angel than of demons. But Isaac jumps from Jesus casting out a demon a long time ago to this personal demon of mine. And his description is pretty accurate. An eloquent one, who keeps distracting me and silences my prayer. By talking to me he makes me deaf to the voice of the Lord. During the Divine Office, he whispers in my ear and says: what about your agenda today? Or he reminds me of a problematic situation suggesting that I think about it now for it has to be resolved. When he is in a less serious mood he asks me what we will have for dinner. And when he takes his task as a demon more seriously he starts feeding my pride, my resentment, my sadness, my distrust and my anger. And all the time I am listening to him I remain mute. No words of praise for God and no beneficial words for my neighbour. My tongue may sing the glory of the Lord but my heart is silent.

But if he is just a demon there is no reason for despair. The image of a talkative demon helps me to resist him and turn back to the Lord; to recognize him for what he is: not a clever thought, not a necessary reflection, not a precious emotion, but a demon about to be cast out by Jesus when I call to Him: Lord, make haste to help me!



## FOR YOUR NOTEBOOK

1. Write down three points or ideas from this Unit that have triggered a response in you and that you would like to remember
2. If you would enjoy doing so, write a short personal response to the matters raised in this Unit. About 250 words is probably sufficient.
3. If you would like to share this essay you can send it to Father Michael Casey (Tarrawarra), the General Editor: [experientia.editor@gmail.com](mailto:experientia.editor@gmail.com). Please include a photo of yourself with your full name and monastery, your date of birth, your date of entry, and your preferred email address.

## SOME FURTHER READING

Dietz, Elias: "Conversion in the Sermons of Isaac of Stella," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 37.3 (2002), pp. 229-259.

Dietz, Elias, "Aelred on the Capital Vices: A Unique Voice among the Cistercians," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 43.3 (2008), pp. 271-294.

McGinn, Bernard: "Freedom, Formation and Reformation: The Anthropological Roots of Saint Bernard's Spiritual Teaching," *Analecta Cisterciensia* 46 (1990), pp. 91-114.

Standaert, Maur: "La doctrine de l'image chez Saint Bernard," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 23 (1947), pp. 70-129.



# UNIT FIVE

## *Schola Dilectionis*

## ***SCHOLA DILECTIONIS***

In this Unit we are asking you to reflect on your experience of the presence or absence of love in the monastic community, and to compare your experience with the texts in our patrimony which speak of the community as a school of love and charity. The significance of the word “school” is that it indicates that by living the monastic life and participating in a monastic community we are instructed, guided and supported in growing in human and divine love. That is the ideal. To what extent is it realised in practice? How can we ensure that our communities really are places where we learn how to love more widely, more deeply, more spiritually?

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

1. Where have I experienced love? Where have I received love? Have I experienced this monastery as a place where my affectivity has been encouraged and freed from its constraints? Have I always felt “at home” in this community, or have there been periods in which I have felt uncomfortable, marginalised or alienated?
2. How important are relationships with other members of the community? How am I hospitable to others in the community, welcoming them as Christ? Through small courtesies? Through mutual service? Through listening? Through giving careful attention to my community duties? With which members of the community can I have a serious conversation?
3. Am I able to reach out, or do I wait for others to make the approach? Do I experience speaking and listening in community as occasions of growing together through greater mutual openness? How willingly do I participate in community activities: liturgy, meals, work, meetings, celebrations?
4. How do I build relationships in the community? How can I be concerned for others without being intrusive? To which members of the community am I practically indifferent? Are there elements in another’s behaviour that threaten me and discourage me from making an approach? Are there members of the community who at this time are almost my “enemies”? Do I experience the giving and receiving of forgiveness as a reality in this community?
5. Is there an equitable distribution of material goods in this community or does the possession of some items serve as a status symbol? Is there an invisible hierarchy of privilege in this community that allows some easier access to the resources of the monastery? Does this provide the opportunity for envy and murmuring? Is this inequality disruptive of communion?
6. What gifts and capacities do I see in particular members of this community? Do I rejoice in the gifts and abilities and achievements of others or are they for me a source of envy and vexation? Have I known a member of this community with the gift of clearly showing a generous and welcoming benevolence towards others? Does the community encourage me to recognise my special qualities? What do I feel when my gifts and abilities are not recognised or when I am not given an opportunity to use and develop them?

7. To what extent in my experience is love of God connected with love of neighbour? Have the seniors in the community been instrumental in leading me along the way of love?

## INTRODUCTION TO BERNARD'S SERMON 20



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Cistercian monasteries can be points of light in fidelity to the tradition that has called them *schola caritatis* or *schola dilectionis*. Today, we who have been called to be “experts in humanity” and “experts in communion” need to re-learn the art of transmitting experience. Our real point of departure, in our globalized world which exalts the emotions and humiliates reason and freedom, has to be that we are illiterate in love. When we make humankind the measure of all reality we weaken the links between us, because we are denying the truth of what we cannot manage to live.

We need a school, a master and matter to re-learn; we have to win back, in a reflective experience, the cultural heritage of the West built on the Christian Faith to supplement our monastic theology. We will then need training in experience so that we can savour its validity and its trustworthiness. We need to re-learn the fundamentals of our humanity; the truth of its origins: that the history of humankind starts with sin. We need therefore, to admit into our vocabulary – which may be incurably optimistic or tragically desperate – words like: evil, death, disorder, pain, redemption. Precisely the painful experience of this incomprehensible *mysterium iniquitatis* requires the education of the faculty to love, according to the Benedictine method of humility-obedience.

The faculty of love defines the human person: God is love and the human person created in his likeness is love. Love in all the fibres and levels of its psychophysical and spiritual constitution, is love in the anthropological complex. Love is the unifying element of that body-soul unity which modern thinking tends to reduce to the level of biology or of nervous energy;

the double faceted body-soul unity is indwelt by the spirit, the proper level of being of the human creature among all other living beings, the respiration within it of the breath of God. We need to re-learn this unity in the life of the liturgy which educates the body, in a spirituality that nourishes the soul, in a fraternity which is the dwelling-place of the Spirit.

The three basic elements of Benedictine-Cistercian spirituality correspond to these three elements: work (the body), reading (the *ratio*) and personal and liturgical prayer (the spirit). Hence, we can relate these elements to the Persons of the Blessed Trinity: the body to the Father who created it, the *ratio* to the Word, the Spirit to the *affectus*, the deep inner life of God.

The homeland of love is, in fact, the Trinity. The master of this school, at the same time witness, father and mother, friend and brother, companion is one alone, Christ, whom we love at the start as slaves, then as mercenaries, then with the chaste love of sons and daughters and of the spouse, responding to the love with which the Father has loved us.

The response of love of our freedom grows as the person grows; the initial choice is decisive: the path of virtue, of good, of truth, of beauty and of happiness, or the path of vice, of evil, of lies, of brutality and of unhappiness. Once this decision has been taken a person can set off on the adventure of love, which is a race towards the goal and the ability to hand oneself over. The privileged tool at this first stage is the relationship with a senior who can guide one's first steps in the experience of spiritual paternity-maternity. Another major tool is personal and liturgical prayer. The work that is accomplished in this first stage is the moulding of that material which is so fickle and alive, which is our affectivity, until it takes on the whole substance of the interior person. The place in which this work is done is the physicality of the observances of monastic life, the whole life of the community. This constitutes, as it were, the womb for the re-birth of the new self, of the interior self. When persons immerse themselves in those waters what comes out is the new creature, unified within and capable of communion.

In this first step love, *amor*, (Karol Wojtyla would say, *desire* or *concupiscence*, Bernard would say *love for its own sake*, Aelred would speak of still juvenile love), egoistical at the beginning, brings with it a certain sweetness, a taste, a new flavour; the sweetness of the first experience of the love of Christ; He has loved us: with all his humanity, with a love clothed with flesh and which, of the flesh, has taken every part which was an obstacle in us, the consequence of sin: death, pain, disorder, and he has given us what belonged to him: true and eternal life.

Love in the first degree is continually stretching out towards the end, the mind enlightened by maturity results in charity; this, then, is nothing other than the eye with which God is seen, a dynamic of the soul, simple, powerful and pure. To pass from individual divided within oneself and from others, to communion of persons in the likeness of the Trinity, the third step is needed, chronologically it is seniority, but morally it is the stage of the spiritual man, which does not necessarily coincide with chronological maturity.

The sacrament of authority mediates the relationship between the Trinitarian life and the experience of the person called to pass from the divided I to the I-in-communion and the privileged sacrament of this passage is the sacrament of the Eucharist, centre and fount of our whole life.

The foundation which supports and links all the levels of this school, which makes it a bridge between Earth and Heaven, is he who presided over the creation of man, he who, by his death



on the cross, brought about the redemption of man and sustains his journey in the Spirit; it is Christ who establishes communion between all the members of the body and between them and the Church in Heaven. And, as Christ was born in the womb of a Virgin, so also Mary is the virginal and maternal womb, according to the Marian ecclesiology of communion of Vatican II, which is something of a generating principle of our communities: the Mother of Beautiful Love is mistress and mother in the *Schola dilectionis*.

In this way, the *schola dilectionis* fulfils the study programme foreseen in the Rule of Saint Benedict: “Come to me for I am the Way (the method), the Truth (the content), and the Life (the prize). The graduation from the *schola dilectionis* is ratified by the embrace of the Most Holy Trinity; after the Son has educated his brothers, after the Spirit has purified their affections, the Father lifts them up as sons to the embrace of his love.”<sup>13</sup>

## **BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX,** *Sermon 20 on the Song of Songs*

1.

Let this talk have as its starting point the words of the Master [Saint Paul]: “Let the person who does not love the Lord Jesus be anathema”. It is absolutely certain that [the Lord] is to be loved because he is the one through whom I have being, life and wisdom. If I am ungrateful then I am unworthy. That person is worthy of death and already dead who refuses to live in you, Lord Jesus. One who does not find wisdom in you becomes foolish. One whose concern is to be something apart from you is for nothing and is nothing. Ultimately, what are human beings unless you have taken note of them? You have made all things, O God, for your own sake and those who wish to have being for themselves and not for you, begin to be nothing among all [that you have made]. [The sage] says, “Fear God and observe his commandments: this is the whole of the human being”. If [fearing God and keeping his commandments] constitute the whole of the human being, then without them there is nothing human.

Turn to yourself, O God, the insignificant thing that you were pleased for me to be. And from this wretched life receive, I ask, the remnant of my years. Because of the [years] that I have wasted in living because I lived wastefully, do not despise, O God, a contrite and humble heart. My days have shrunk away like a shadow and have passed fruitlessly. It is impossible for me to call them back. May it please you if I think of them in your presence, in the bitterness of my soul. Now, regarding wisdom – since all my desire and the purpose of my heart is before you – if there is any wisdom in me I would keep it for you. But you, O God, know my lack of wisdom – unless, perhaps, I am wise when I recognise this [lack], and even that is by your gift. It is not that I am ungrateful for this small gift, but I am zealous for what is lacking. So it is that it is for these small things that I am loving you, as much as I am able.

2.

There is, however, something that moves me more, motivates me more, and sets me on fire more. More than anything, I say, it is the cup that you drank, the work of our redemption, which makes you lovable to me, O good Jesus. This readily and completely claims the whole of our love for itself. This, I say, more agreeably attracts our devotion, more justly demands it and is more intensely attached to it. Our Saviour laboured much [in the work of our redemption], in

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<sup>13</sup> Translation: Dom Bede Stockhill (Calvaire).

a manner more wearying than the Creator's work in making the whole world. [The Creator] spoke and things came to be; he gave an order and things were created. But [our Saviour] had to bear with those who contradicted him when he spoke, with those who [malevolently] observed what he did, with those who mocked him when he was in torment and reproached him at his death. See how he loved.

Add to this the fact that he did not return love but rather he gave love [where love was none.] For who first gave love to him that it could be returned? As Saint John the Evangelist said, "It is not that we loved him, but that he loved us first". Finally, he loved those who did not [yet] exist, and he extended his love to those who resisted – as Saint Paul testified when he said, "While we were still enemies we were reconciled to God by the blood of his Son". If he had not loved enemies he would not have had any friends, just as there would have been no one to love if he had not loved those who did not yet exist.

3.

He loves sweetly, wisely, strongly. Sweetly because he clothed himself with flesh; prudently because he guarded against fault; strongly because he endured death. Those whom he visited in the flesh he did not love in a fleshly manner but with prudence of spirit. "Christ the Lord is a spirit before our face". He is jealous for us with the jealousy of God – not that of human beings. [The jealousy of God] is certainly more wholesome than that which the first Adam had for his Eve. Those whom [Christ] sought in the flesh, he loved in the spirit and redeemed in strength. To see the Originator of humanity as a human being is a pleasing experience, one that is totally full of sweetness. While by prudence he kept [human] nature separated from fault, by strength he drove death away from [human] nature. In assuming [human] nature he stooped down to me, in removing fault he acted on his own counsel, and in accepting death he made satisfaction to the Father.

He is a sweet friend, a prudent counsellor, a strong helper. I safely entrust myself to this one who wishes to save me, who knows how to save me and who is able to save me. Those whom he sought he also called through his grace, and he will never drive away any who come. I need not be afraid that any force or fraud can pluck me out of the hand of the one who in conquering all things also conquered death and who, by a holier art, tricked the serpent who led all astray. He was more prudent [than the serpent] and more powerful [than death]. He assumed the truth of flesh but only the likeness of sin. In [assuming flesh] he showed himself as a sweet consolation for the week. In [taking on the likeness of sin] he prudently hid a trap to deceive the devil. To reconcile us to the Father he was subject to death and caused it to submit, pouring out his blood as the price of our redemption. Therefore, unless he loved sweetly, such majesty would not have sought me in [my] prison. He joined wisdom to affection so as to deceive the tyrant and he added patience [in endurance] so that he could placate God the Father who had been offended. These are the [different] ways [of loving] about which I promised [so speak]. First I spoke about them as they are in Christ so that they may seem more desirable to you.

4.

O Christian, learn from Christ how you are to love Christ. Learn to love sweetly, to love prudently and to love strongly. Sweetly, so that we are not seduced [by pleasures]; prudently, so that we are not deceived [by errors]; strongly so that we are not turned away from love of the Lord by oppression. So that you are not led astray by the world's glory or by the pleasures of the flesh, let Christ's wisdom be a greater source of sweetness than they are. So that you are

not seduced by a spirit of falsehood and error, let Christ's truth become your light. So that you are not wearied by adversities, let Christ the power of God be your strength. Let charity influence your zeal, let knowledge give it direction, and constancy be its strength. Let your zeal be fervent and careful and unconquered. Let it not be lukewarm or lacking in discernment or fearful.

See that whether these three [qualities] are not also handed down to you in the Law when God said, "You must love the Lord your God from your whole heart and from your whole soul and from your whole strength". It seems to me – unless there happens to be a more appropriate meaning to this threefold distinction – that the love of the heart refers to a certain affective intensity [*zelum affectionis*], the love of the soul refers to the operation and judgement of reason, and love with [the whole] strength refers to constancy and vigour of spirit [*animus*]. Therefore, love the Lord your God with total and full affection of the heart [*cordis affectus*]. Love [God] with all the vigilance and caution of reason. Love [God] also with all [your] strength so that you may not be afraid to die for love [of God] for "Love is as strong as death and passion is as harsh as hell".

May the Lord Jesus be pleasant and sweet to your affection and, in the face of the evilly sweet allurements of fleshly life, he will conquer sweetness with sweetness in the same way as one nail drives out another.

In addition, let Christ be a light that goes ahead of your understanding and a guide for your reason, not only to guard against the deceitful traps that are heresies and to protect the purity of faith from their clever tricks, but so that you may also avoid excessive and undiscerning intensity in your monastic life [*conversatio*]. Also, let your love be strong and constant, not yielding to fears or losing heart because of labours. Thus, let us love with affection, with caution, and with strength. Recognise that the love of the heart, which we have called "affectionate love" is sweet but liable to go astray if it is without the love of the soul. In the same way, [the love of the soul] is in accordance with reason, but without the love that comes from strength it is fragile.

5.

Let us see that what we are saying is correct by some obvious examples. When the disciples were upset when they heard about the departure of the Master, who was about to ascend, they heard, "If you loved me you would rejoice that I am going to the Father". What does this mean? Are they unloving because they were sorrowful because of his departure? Rather, they loved him in one manner and [in another] they did not love him. They loved him sweetly but less than prudently. They loved him according to the flesh and not according to reason. They loved him with their whole heart but not with their whole soul. Their love was working against their salvation and so he said to them, "It is right for you that I go," finding fault with their reasoning, not with their affection.

Again, as you remember, when he was speaking of his future death, he rebuffed and rebuked Peter, who loved him tenderly, because he tried to prevent it. What else does [Jesus] find fault with but [Peter's] lack of prudence? What does this text mean? "You do not have a taste for the things of God". [Surely it means] that you love unwisely, following human affection rather than the divine plan. And so he called him "Satan" because, even though [Peter] was unaware of it, by wishing to prevent the Saviour's death he was in opposition to the work of salvation.

Once corrected, [Peter] ceased to forbid Jesus to die. When later [Jesus] repeated this sad saying [Peter] promised that he himself would die with him. He did not fulfil [that promise] because he had not yet arrived at the third level at which he would love [Christ] with his whole strength. He had been taught to love with his whole soul but he was still weak. He was well-instructed but had only a little support. He was not ignorant of the mystery but he was fearful of martyrdom. At that time, clearly, love was not as strong as death because it was subdued by death. Later it became so when, following Jesus' promise, he was clothed with strength from on high. Then, at last, he began to love with so much strength that when he was forbidden by the Sanhedrin to preach, he constantly replied to those making the prohibition, "Obedience must be rendered to God rather than to human beings". Then, at last, he loved with all his strength when, out of love, he did not spare his own life. Indeed, "no one has greater love than to give up his life for his friends". Even if [Peter] did not, at this time, give up his life he, nevertheless, exposed it [to risk]. Therefore, to love with the whole heart, the whole soul, and the whole strength is not to be led astray by pleasures, not to be seduced by falsity and not to be broken by injuries.

6.

Note that the heart's love is, in some way, fleshly. It is directed mostly towards the flesh of Christ. What Christ did and ordained in the flesh touches the human heart. When [the heart] is filled with this love it easily comes to compunction whenever it hears talk of such topics. It hears nothing else more willingly. It reads nothing else more earnestly. It ponders nothing else more frequently. It meditates on nothing else with greater pleasure. And so, prayer is enriched by it, as a holocaust is enriched with the fat of a plump calf.

At prayer there is a sacred image of the Man-God, being born, being nursed, teaching, dying, rising or ascending. It whatever form it takes, its purpose is to bind the soul to the love of the virtues, drive away the vices of the flesh, flee from enticements, and sedate desires. It is my judgement that the main cause for the unseen God being willing to be seen is the flesh and living with fellow-human beings was that he might first draw back to the saving love of his own flesh the affections of fleshly people who were able to love only in a fleshly way. So he could lead them gradually to a more spiritual love. Were they not still at this [fleshly] level who said, "Behold we have left everything and have followed you?" It was only through the love of his bodily presence that they left everything. Hence they were not able to bear with equanimity even to hear of his future saving passion and death, nor could they later look at the glory of the one ascending without the burden of grief. As he said to them: "Because I say these things to you sadness fills your hearts". In the meantime, it was only the grace of his fleshly presence that kept them above the love of everything fleshly.

7.

Afterwards he showed them a higher level of love when he said: "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is of no use at all". I think that [Saint Paul] had already risen to that level when he said, "If we knew Christ according to the flesh, we know him thus no longer". We may join to him the one who said, "Christ our Lord is a spirit before our face". The addition, "Under his shadow we live among the nations" seems to have been made for beginners so that they may rest under the shadow, since they feel that they are unable to bear the heat of the sun. They are nourished by the sweetness of flesh while they are, as yet, unable to receive the things that belong to God's Spirit. I believe that Christ's shadow is his flesh. It was by this that Mary was overshadowed, so that by its being in place the heat and brightness of the Spirit would be moderated for her.

In the meantime, in fleshly devotion there is consolation for the person who does not yet have the life-giving Spirit in the manner in which they do who say, “Christ Jesus is a spirit before our face,” and “If we knew Christ according to the flesh, we know him thus no longer”. Even to love Christ in a fleshly manner is impossible without the Holy Spirit, but such love is not complete.

The measure of this devotion is that this pleasant experience occupies the whole heart and claims everything for itself at the expense of the love for all flesh and fleshly enticement. This is to love from the whole heart. Otherwise, if I happen to give more weight to fleshly kinship or fleshly pleasure than to the flesh of my Lord, so that it happens that I put into practice less of what he taught me by word and example, is it not clearly true that in no way do I love from my whole heart? My heart is divided; I give part of it to his flesh and direct the other part of it to my own. Finally, he said, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me”. Therefore, to summarise, to love from the whole heart is to give less priority to everything pleasurable in one’s own flesh or in another’s than to the love of that sacred flesh. I include in this the world’s glory, since the world’s glory is the flesh’s glory and, beyond doubt, those who delight in it are themselves fleshly.

8.

Although this kind of devotion is a gift, a great gift of the Spirit, nevertheless I would say that this love is fleshly relative to that love that finds savour, not so much in the Word as flesh, but in the Word as wisdom, the Word as righteousness, the Word as truth, the Word as holiness, goodness, virtue and any other such quality of which we may speak. All these are Christ “who has become for us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption”. [Consider] the person who feels compassion for the suffering Christ, who experiences compunction and is easily moved by the memory of what [Christ] endured, who is nourished by the sweetness of this devotion and is strengthened [to perform] actions that are wholesome, right and loving. Surely that person is not touched in the same way and to the same extent as another who is always afire with zeal for righteousness, who in every situation is zealous for the truth, who is fervent in his pursuit of wisdom, who is a friend of holiness of life, who is disciplined in conduct, whose character blushes to be boastful, who abhors detraction, knows nothing of envy and does not only flee from human glory but has no taste for it and despises it, who very intensely hates and rejects all impurity of flesh and heart and, finally, who rejects every evil and embraces what is good as it were naturally. Is it not clear that if you compare the affection of both, the first [relative to the second] is somewhat fleshly?

9

This fleshly love is, nevertheless, good, since through it the fleshly life is excluded and the world is despised and conquered. An advance is made when it becomes reasonable as well; it is brought to completion when it becomes spiritual also. It is reasonable when in everything that should be believed about Christ the rule of faith is so firmly held that in all things [this love] does not deviate from the purity of what the Church believes by any [false] likeness of what is true, or by any heretical or diabolical deceit. Also, in his personal way of life, that caution is maintained by which the limits imposed by discretion are not exceeded through superstition or lack of seriousness, or by the apparent intensity of a more fervent spirit. This is to love the Lord from the whole soul, as we have said above.

If, with the Spirit’s aid, there is present so great a vigour that no force of labours or torments, nor even the fear of death, can cause him to abandon righteousness, then this is to love also

from the whole strength; it is a spiritual love. I think the name “spiritual” is especially appropriate for this love because it excels [the others] by having the fullness of the Spirit as its prerogative.

This suffices for [the text] in which the bride says, “For this reason young girls have loved you much”. In what follows may Christ Jesus our Lord, their guardian, be pleased to open the treasures of his mercy, for he lives and reigns in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for all ages of ages. Amen.<sup>14</sup>

## SEVEN SHORT TEXTS

### 1

Because “God is love” let us be vigilant in three particular areas of concern. We owe it to God that we be concerned that love is born, that it grows, and that it is maintained. It is born when if you give food and drink to your enemy for thus “you will heap fiery coals on his head.” The fiery coals are the deeds of charity which are piled up on the devil who is the head of all the wicked. When he is removed God, who is love, is born as their head. Love grows if you come to the help of one suffering hardship, if you give to one wishing to borrow, if you open your soul to a friend. Love is maintained if you grant your friend’s wishes by what you say and manifest, even beyond what seems necessary. Love is also maintained and increased by a friendly expression, a pleasant word, a cheerful deed. In this way kind and cheerful behaviour confirms what is conveyed by facial expression and words, since love is proved and manifested by deeds.

Bernard of Clairvaux, *De Diversis* 121; (Cf. CF 68, p. 417.)

### 2

It is difficult to avoid being hurt sometimes in these communities. When this happens, you should not do as people in the world do: rush in to repay the offence with a sharp retort. But you must also avoid piercing with a sharp and inflammatory word a soul for whom Christ was pleased to die, under the pretext of constructive criticism. Nor may you rebuke with a grimace, nor by mumbling words under your breath. You may not belittle him by mockery with snorts and laughing. There must be no scowling reproaches and threats. Instead, let your disturbance remain where it began. Because it is a vehicle of death it must not, under penalty of death, be allowed out. Thus you can say with the prophet: “I was upset, and yet I did not speak.”

Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* 29:5; (Cf. CF 7, p. 107.)

### 3

The most important thing of all to be sought, therefore, is the love (*dilectio*) of God which is the beginning and end of all things. As a result of this we

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<sup>14</sup> Translation: Michael Casey (Tarrawarra); Cf. CF 4; pp. 147-155.

may become worthy to be loved also by people. By striving to grow in the love of God we may learn the art of loving people. When this is settled, so that you have in your mind the firm desire of being loved only in God and for God's sake, then I fully desire that the sweetness of your behaviour, the humility of your service, and the goodness of your zeal will commend you to the awareness of all people.

Guerric of Igny, *Sermons* 24:4; (Cf. CF 32, pp. 20-21.)

#### 4

Love has drawn her and led her and taught her the ways that she has faithfully followed. Often in great labour and in many activities, in great infirmity and in strong desire, in frequent impatience and in great dissatisfaction, in adversity and in prosperity, in great pain, in seeking and asking, in lacking and in having, in climbing and in hanging suspended, in following and in striving, in need and in anxiety, in fear and in concern, in great faithfulness and in many unfaithfulnesses, in pleasure and in pain, is she ready to suffer. In death and in life she commits herself to love. Though she feels many sorrows in her heart yet, because of love, she desires to attain that land.

Beatrice of Nazareth, *Seven Modes of Love*, #7.

#### 5

Among themselves they burn with such great charity that if it happens to anyone that he is at a great distance on account of common utility, no mother could desire her only son more. When he returned to his own, immediately with fraternal affection they hastened to kiss his neck, fulfilling what the Lord said in the Gospel: 'Then you will truly be my disciples if you have love for one another'.

An unidentified customary edited in Jean Mabillion's *Vetera Analecta*.

#### 6

Brothers, wherever a soul moves, whether to good or to bad, it does not move except by love. If we love these passing and perishable things which are lower in nature than ourselves, then we cast ourselves down lower than ourselves. If, however, we direct our whole love to ourselves, then it is as though we remain in ourselves and so, because we are subject to misery, as long as we love only ourselves, we cannot be anything but miserable. If, however, we raise our whole heart and all our love towards God then we raise ourselves up [above ourselves], and since this is true happiness (*beatitudo*) then we cannot be anything else but happy.

Aelred of Rievaulx, *Sermons* 43:30; (Cf. CF 77; p. 135.)

#### 7

Having received that grace of which we have spoken, whereby they dwell in unity among themselves in God and enjoy God in themselves, they sense that all the contradictions of the flesh have disappeared, with the result that the

general substance of the flesh is not in them, except as the instrument of good work. For although they waste away gradually by its miseries and infirmities, by this very fact they grow stronger in the inner self.... Their countenance along with the bearing of their whole body, with the seemliness of their life, manners, and activities, even in their manifestations of mutual service, devotion, and gracious acceptance of one another, so unite and bind them to one another in this particular gracefulness, that they truly are one heart and one soul. Surely by purity of conscience and the grace of a communal way of life they are already here beginning upon that future glory of their bodies which they will obtain perfectly in the unending life to come.

William of Saint Thierry, *The Nature and Dignity of Love* 43; (CF 30, p. 107.)





## FOUR SHORT REFLECTIONS

### 1



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The basic text from St. Bernard is pretty evocative in discussing fraternity by dealing with God's love of us and our own love of God: If you love God, love your brother/sister. This is a normal-life reality. When you open yourself to the mystery of the God of love, you feel you need to love your brother/sister. When you do not love your brother/sister, your relationship with God turns tenuous.

I have lived in the environment of a community that is poor in many ways, with all the human frictions of living together, all kinds of confrontations among the brothers, difficulties, envy, jealousy, murmuring. And as it happens in any community, selfishness and isolation sometimes gain the upper hand.

But at the truest depths of the community, I can certify that from my first years of monastic life, the community has always opened a path of reconciliation and communion, even while it has remained "proven in the combat of fraternity" (RB 1: 5 – *bene extracti fraterna ex acie*). The experience of the love of God is lived without much ado, and you sense you are accepted, loved and valued. Outsiders never fail to notice that we love each other in the community.

How the community performs at work can be seen in that the elders, despite their long past, have arrived at a peaceful *apatheia*, full of kindness and even, radiating peace and joy to

the young. Finally, one can tell that we are indeed the holy Church, the Bride of the Lamb, the new humanity walking towards its fullness amid difficulties and miseries.<sup>15</sup>

## 2



### **Sister Josepha Chang [Hye-Kyung Chang] (Sujong)**

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Therefore, love the Lord your God with total and full affection of the heart [*cordis affectus*]. Love [God] with all the vigilance and caution of reason. Love[God] also with all [your] strength so that you may not be afraid to die for love [of God] for “Love is as strong as death and passion is as harsh as hell.”

This is a special phrase that makes me feel again the trembling moment when I heard for the first time. It is this word that made me realize that the spiritual journey is a process of integration rather than endless development.

Loving God with full affection, reason, and full strength brings transformations throughout the human being. In my experience, when these three integrate, there is a change, especially in the area of desire and desires. Like the poles of two magnets, which had been accustomed to reject each other, and are now attracted and adhere to each other.

But there remains a tight tension and distance between them. In such distance, you can see how much personal and humanistic narrative you have. There is an infinite distance between the person who desires and the object of their desire, yet throughout history desire has played an active role, even though it is unrecognised. Because of it, art is born, science is developed, farmers are productive, and new babies are born. There are some people who have thrown themselves out of the tension because they cannot narrow the infinite distance. The result is the exhaustion of vitality, the desolation of life.

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<sup>15</sup> Translation: Brother Gregory Escardo (Gethsemani).

But the vain jumping never ends in vain. In the brief moment when the tightness of tension can be relieved, desire and desires become one! Moreover, it is not the end.

Unity,  
where you can desire without coveting  
and where the one who desires is willing to die in the other.

### 3



**Father Justin Muzindusi Kanumbu (Mokoto)**

Date of birth: 3 September 1979

Date of Entry: 1999

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It is with great humility that I give to you my brief experience of the ‘schola dilectionis.’ Saint Bernard affirms that ‘what most attracts love for the Lord Jesus is nothing other than the chalice which he drank, the work of our redemption.’ Indeed, the love of God is presented to me as a demand, especially when considering what Jesus did for me: ‘my life,’ ‘my intelligence’ and ‘my vocation:’ all of that comes from God. In re-reading my own history, I cannot help but discover the hand of God.

I was born September 3, 1979, in a family which included eight children, four boys and four girls, all now married. My father was a government administrator and my mother, very charming, raised us in a spirit of freedom. I entered the monastery in 1999, made my solemn profession in 2005 and was ordained in 2013.

I find that the community is a place where my love is purified each day. My novice director reproached me for being attached to my family. It was with pain and trust that I lived this transition, this separation, this dispossession. Indeed, there is a gap between the wanting and the doing. Monastic life is a paschal way to follow Christ. Loving without introspection is

beyond our capacity. Fraternal community highlights God's love for us. All is said in the double commandment of love. It is marvelous to unite the love for God with love for our brothers!<sup>16</sup>

## 4



### **Sister Kathleen O'Neill (Mississippi)**

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Date of Entry: 6 July 1979

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The conversion experience which led me to the monastery, a powerful experience of God's love, effected a shift in my inner desires where love is concerned. All of a sudden, the desire to love ran past and overwhelmed my desire to be loved. Of course, there remained and still remains in me much that seeks to be the object of others' love, for all the wrong reasons. But that taste of how much more desirable a gift is the power of loving, is the inner energy of my monastic life.

In this beautiful commentary on the first love commandment, Bernard offers much that can be put to practical use. One line that jumps out for me is "let your love be strong and constant, neither yielding to fear nor [my personal temptation] cowering at hard [spiritual] work." I think I understand what he is talking about in urging us to love tenderly and strongly. What Bernard means by loving wisely I'm not so sure I really grasp, but his many examples, especially those from Jesus' life, are great sources for examining my own life.

But more than any practical advice or encouragement to renew my own efforts, the gift this sermon gives me is that Bernard excites my desire to love. When he speaks of the experience of loving, something in me says, "Yes! Yes! This is what I want, this is the real meaning of my life." And I feel my confidence renewed that the amazing gift the Father wants me to have, the gift of loving with God's own love, will someday be mine in a way surpassing all I can hope or imagine.

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<sup>16</sup> Translation: Brother Cassian Russell (Conyers).

## FOR YOUR NOTEBOOK

1. Write down three points or ideas from this Unit that have triggered a response in you and that you would like to remember
2. If you would enjoy doing so, write a short personal response to the matters raised in this Unit. About 250 words is probably sufficient.
3. If you would like to share this essay you can send it to Father Michael Casey (Tarrawarra), the General Editor: [experientia.editor@gmail.com](mailto:experientia.editor@gmail.com). Please include a photo of yourself with your full name and monastery, your date of birth, your date of entry, and your preferred email address.

## SOME FURTHER READING

Dumont, Charles, "Fraternal Love in the Monastic Doctrine of Saint Aelred," CSQ 32.1 (1997), pp. 25-35.

Olivera, Bernardo, "Aspects of the Love of the Neighbor in the Spiritual Doctrine of Saint Bernard," CSQ 26:2-3 (1991), pp. 107-119, 204-226.

Ryan, Patrick, "*Sensus Amoris*: The Sense of Love in Two Texts of William of St Thierry," CSQ 40.2 (2005), pp. 163-172.

