



Experientia

A Program of Reflection and Sharing

Volume Two

Units 6-10

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UNIT SIX

Generativity

Generativity

Manual work was one of the signature observances of the early Cistercians. The first generations willingly adopted the contemporary practice of clearing and cultivating previously underutilised land, a practice made possible by the Warm Medieval Period (950-1250). Such work was necessary for the building of the newly-founded monasteries and for the material support of the community. To some extent it also assured the independence of the reformed communities from undue influence on the part of benefactors and donors. Although the monks continued to bear part of the burden of manual labour (especially at harvest time), the major portion was carried by laybrothers, assisted by hired hands (EP 15:10) and various specialists. It was not long before monks had to be reminded not to take books to read during work (EO 75:26).

Meanwhile, from the beginning, some monks were engaged in more sedentary occupations including work in the scriptorium. As the material condition of the monasteries improved, ascetical reasons were given for continuing the practice of manual work. It was seen as necessary, not so much for its material benefits, but as a means of generating virtues such as humility. In later centuries when the notion of “doing penance” prevailed; it was the penitential aspects of work that was emphasised.

Following the work of Abraham Maslow (1908-1970), the late twentieth century witnessed a growth in the appreciation of the importance of self-actualization as the highest of human needs. This led to the expectation that the ideal form of work, even in monasteries, would be that which contributed most to the self-actualization of the workers, providing them with the opportunity for the utilisation and development of their creative talents and skills. As a result, monks and nuns began to hope for “meaningful” work – beyond its function of contributing to community support. There was also a dawning recognition that celibates often feel the lack of the opportunity to be generative, to imprint their personal character on the universe, to leave something behind them when they die, beyond being an anonymous part of a corporate enterprise.

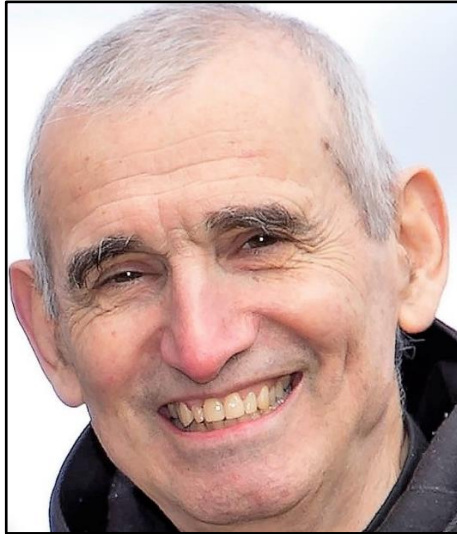
We who live at a time when the nature of work is constantly changing through technological innovations and bureaucratic regulations need to be reminded that our main work is to live the monastic life fully and to persevere in it. The way of wisdom is to live carefree rather than careless. Gueric’s insistence on stability is a reminder that we need to persevere with the common monastic observance if it is to accomplish its magic on us. One of the best aids to perseverance is to understand how work and other observances serve our spiritual purpose. Clearly, in our history, there have been different understandings of the role of work, not all of them mutually compatible. This means that it is probably necessary for our generation to consider our own experience of work and its effects and to enter into dialogue with our tradition in the hope of reaching a fuller and deeper understanding of its role.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In the Cistercian tradition work has been seen as a counterpart to prayer. What role does it play in my life? How much of my work is manual work? To what extent do I see work as a tool of the spiritual life? Have I experienced work as an occasion for spiritual growth?
2. How does my work contribute to my identity? To what extent does it contribute to my personal well-being? Am I slave to my work?
3. Is my work a free gift of self in service to the community? To what extent does my work contribute to the community life? Do I feel that all share equitably in bearing the burdens of community existence? Do I appreciate the work of others?
4. What is the role for personal study in my life? Do I find chapter talks, homilies, courses of ongoing formation, refectory reading useful in building a community culture? In what ways does my community share the fruits of my personal study or interests?
5. Is there a good level of serious communication between the different generations in this community? Do I help build bridges to facilitate the transmission of life?
6. How do I understand contemplative leisure? Is the value of monastic leisure recognised in my community? What activities are or are not appropriate to a time of leisure? In this community is there scope for the exercise and development of personal, artistic or cultural interests? Do I spend time rejoicing in natural beauty?
7. How have I received the Cistercian charism? In what ways do I feel able to communicate my experience of the Cistercian tradition and to transmit life to new members of the community? How is spiritual maternity / paternity understood in my community?



INTRODUCTION TO GUERRIC'S SERMON 22



Dom Bernardo Olivera (Azul)

Date of Birth: 17 June 1943

Date of Entry: 31 October 1962

Email: bernardo@trapenses.com.ar

I begin by presenting myself. I was young, but now I am old, although I prefer to say, “an old-timer.” I entered the monastery 56 years ago as a “seeker” who had been sought for and found. I knew very well what I wanted and only needed to achieve it. But that implies a whole process.

I realized very soon that reading the Cistercian Fathers with any kind of profit means finding the key condition for it, namely the search for God and a personal experience of Him based on *lectio divina* and interpreting Scripture in its traditional four levels of meaning: literally, allegorically, morally and eschatologically. The context for this is a community of brothers or sisters living the liturgy according to the Rule of St. Benedict.

In Gueric’s First Sermon on the Feast of St. Benedict (Serm.22), he teaches us that St. Benedict invites the monk to search for the wisdom that he himself attained. The road can be rocky, but it leads to the waters of Life. To arrive there, however, the monk has to persevere in his search for justice, that is, in the practice of monastic observance, keeping the fear of God always before his eyes.

Because Gueric of Igny is a thoroughly “inculturated” *teacher* of monastic theology, we should not be surprised that the Benedictine *school of the Lord’s service* (RB Prol,45) is for him a school of Christian philosophy, where the monk learns *the discipline of wisdom* (Sermon 22:4). In other words, the monastery is a school where you learn to live according to Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God.

The wisdom taught in the monastery school is twofold. First it is a prudential wisdom that teaches us to give to each element its worth in relation to our last end: eternal life! Then, as a result of having done that, it gives the capacity to “savour” God, to taste and see that his Word is good. That is how the monk becomes a “theologian”.

This school of wisdom has two conditions for producing its fruits, namely stability and perseverance. Stability is not just a geographical condition but, first and foremost, a dynamic relationship, an active stability in the heart of the community of brothers or sisters. Perseverance refers to the passage of time, but also to constancy and firmness in the monastic practices. If we ask Saint Benedict, as Gueric does, about the place to persevere in wisdom, take root and produce its fruit, he replies, “The enclosure of the monastery and stability in the community is the right place to produce the fruits of all the virtues” (Serm.22:4; see RB 4:78)

The great enemy that keeps us from reaching wisdom is *negligence*, which makes us lose the whole purpose of what we do, of the monastic way of life with each one of its bodily and spiritual practices. The term, “way of life”, or *conversatio morum*, has a double meaning: the objective one (lifestyle) and the subjective one (conversion). In our day, it is the former meaning that predominates but we must not forget the subjective dimension. Any way of life is at the service of conversion and any conversion needs the support of a way of life.

It goes without saying that a monk or nun of Saint Benedict is celibate, so that the most tangible element of our *conversatio* according to his Rule is that of the fundamental observances:

- Separation from the world and “taciturnity”: enclosure and silence.
- A life of personal and community prayer: *Opus Dei* and *lectio divina*.
- The austerity of vigils and fasts.
- A stable community life: stability, obedience and fraternal relations.
- Monastic work: Cistercians will say, “Preferably manual work”.

The local monastic “Usages” are the more detailed expression of the Order’s *Constitutions*, which in turn reflect the Rule of St. Benedict. All of this together allows us to enjoy a common, shared vision of monastic experience and the possibility of personal and communal formation in both its first stages and as a continual process.

In his Sermon 22:5-6. Gueric directs our attention four times to “*negligence*,” or to its equivalent “*tediousness*.” What is he talking about? The negligence that ordinarily attacks us in our monastic enclosure consists in carelessness and not fully applying ourselves to what we are doing, especially to fulfilling the personal obligations we professed in the presence of the community on the day of our monastic vows. That is why we are facing here the major enemy of monastic *conversatio*.

There are many ways to name this vicious tendency. Our Fathers speak of *negligence*, *tediousness*, *being lukewarm*, *sluggish or fed up*; *sadness*, *dryness*, *laziness*, *softness*, *lassitude*, *indolence*, *inertia*, *sleepiness* or *lack of concern*. They also use symbols or metaphors to refer to the same reality: pestilence, slime, worm, mould, or spiritual storm. The “mother” of these children is *acedia*, the foremost enemy of the monk or nun. The following four characteristics of *acedia* can be useful for identifying this great evil and for defending ourselves from it:

- **Its beginning** can appear at any time, although it has its own special moments. Its origin is often hard to discover, since it is the Evil One’s favourite weapon. He usually hides his hand so as to be more successful, making us ignorant of who or what is attacking us.

- **The experience** of acedia is totally personal, because it usually takes advantage of the weaknesses of each particular person, one of its features being the variety of its different forms.
- **The goal** of acedia is very specific. Its object is to separate us radically from God, from the community and especially from our neighbouring brother or sister.
- **The classical cure** for acedia is to put order and regularity into our spiritual and bodily practice of monastic *conversatio*, without forgetting that the monk or nun who perseveres in monastic life will often be visited in their heart by God's Word, who comes into them interiorly, flowing gently and peacefully like the waters of Shiloah.

In their sermons, our Fathers compare Saint Benedict to a tree planted beside the flowing waters, whose leaves never fade and that yields its fruit in due season (Guerric, Sermon 23:5-7). We ourselves are those fruits. Benedict gives us life by his word, the Rule, and his own life, so that we, too, can witness to its creativeness and life-giving qualities.

In our monasteries, there is a generative quality available for each and every monk and nun. By this I mean two virtues that St. Benedict mentions in reference to the abbot and his collaborators. He calls them *solicitousness* and *care*. The wise abbot is one who serves his community as a servant among many helpers. A community where all are at the service of one another is a community fully open to attentive caring, where each one helps the other.

Being wise is sad when the monk or nun's wisdom bears no fruit, but it is a great joy, when wisdom knows that its way of life has borne fruit in the community.¹

GUERRIC OF IGNY

SERMON 22: THE FIRST SERMON FOR ST BENEDICT

1.

“HAPPY IS THE MAN who shall abide in wisdom and shall meditate on holiness and shall be mindful of the all-seeing eye of God.” How fittingly these words may be sung in praise of St Benedict each of you will easily recognise; his words and teaching are not unknown to any of you. How aptly they may be applied to the improvement of our own lives is obvious from the words themselves. Promising the reward of happiness, they commend to us wisdom, holiness, and the fear of God; nothing in life is of greater benefit than these.

“Happy is the one who will abide in wisdom.” In other words, this is happiness, this is wisdom, if you continue in wisdom, holding fast to it to the end. For mortals become happy not immediately upon finding it, but only by holding it fast. Scripture does indeed say: “Happy is the one who finds wisdom.” But it does not finish there. On the contrary it adds: “And who is rich in prudence.” This it does lest we think that merely to have found wisdom is enough for happiness. The truth is that when you have found it, you must continue with it and in it, and, making it your intimate companion, take your delight in it. Nor must you depart from its schooling until, by meditating on holiness and being mindful of the all-seeing eye of God, you have made it possible for prudence to abound in you. Solomon certainly found wisdom. But prudence did not greatly abound in him and he did not guard himself with sufficient prudence, in that he did not protect himself from the pagan women. For that reason, not only did he lose wisdom but he fell into the extreme opposite of wisdom, idolatry. And so also with the wise ones of the world who clearly saw the invisible things of God from the creation of the world

¹ Translation: Father Augustine Roberts (Azul).

through their knowledge of things created; they seemed to have found wisdom. But because prudence did not abound in them and because when they knew God, they did not glorify him as God, they did in fact become fools and their foolish hearts were given over to evil thoughts and shameful lusts.

2.

Others, also, like these have rejected the wisdom they had found because of their proud hearts. Some like Solomon have been enticed away by the lusts of the flesh. Others because of inconstancy and frivolity of mind abandon it as soon as they meet the slightest set-back. These are they who believe for a while and in the time of temptation fall away. But why do they fall away? Because they have no roots that can hold them. And how can they take root unless they stay in one place? What plant ever takes root unless it is left in the place where it was planted? Just so, the good person, planted in the house of the Lord, cannot take root nor be founded in charity unless he abides there with stability of place. And if he does not put down roots, he will never flower nor bear lasting fruit. Even if he should give some sign of hope by flowering at the beginning, it may be said of him: "Before the harvest it was flourishing but it has budded without coming to ripe maturity." And another Prophet says in like manner: "if it should yield fruit strangers shall eat it." But do you want to know why stability of place is so necessary if you are to continue in wisdom, take root and eventually bear fruit? Ask your holy Father Benedict and he will tell you that "the cloister of the monastery and stability in the community" is the proper place to cultivate nearly all the virtues. He gives a long catalogue of them. And what does Solomon say of instability? "As a bird that wanders from her nest, so is the man who leaves his place." A turtledove finds a nest where she can put her chicks; she begins to warm it and be warmed by it until the chicks are about to come to birth. Then, lo and behold, she flies away and leaves the work thus begun unfinished. Why, whence or whither she flies she will understand either when she comes to make good the many losses she suffers in the meantime, or when she offers some reason to excuse her violation of her first commitment. For myself, I would not think it a wise plan to suffer certain loss for a hope that is uncertain even if the progress of some individuals bids me refrain from too hasty a judgment.

3.

Most certainly there is a great difference between those who become discontented out of love for wisdom and those of whom I have just spoken, who, made restless by some light and frivolous matter, recoil from wisdom. Just as one must remain patiently under the discipline of wisdom in order to learn wisdom, so they who readily lose patience, we read, lose little time in casting wisdom from them. But what the Scriptures say just before this might strike them: "She shall be to them as a mighty stone of trial." For they have stumbled over the stumbling stone and the rock of scandal. It was a heavy trial that rebuked and taught the unwise and tested their hearts. They considered the might of wisdom to be the hardness of stone and they maintained that everything was hard: its discipline, its appearance, its teaching. "This teaching," they said, "is hard." Yes, this teaching is hard. Does that mean it is not true! The stone is hard. Does that mean it is not precious! But why is truth hard for you? Is it not because your hearts are hard! If your heart were to be softened by love, the rigour of truth would please you more than the emptiness of falsehood or the oil of adulation. "This saying is hard," they said, because the testing time for wisdom was to them like a mighty stone. For that reason, they lost little time in casting it from them and returning to their former state. They did not reject this precious stone chosen by God for any other reason save that they thought it was hard. Now the fact is that the stone was Christ, a stone of might, but without hardness. He was the rock, but a rock that could be changed, and indeed is changed, into pools or fountains of water whenever he finds faithful hearts that are softened and humble. Into them he pours himself. For if they who drew back so quickly at the mere appearance of hardness had remained with the Apostles they might well have drunk with them from the Rock which followed after them. They might have

drunk of the streams of living water flowing copiously from the Rock who was struck on the Cross so that today also “the people and their cattle may drink.” They might even have sucked honey out of the rock and oil out of the hardest stone. Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona, the Father revealed to you the sweetness of the mystery so that it was seen hidden under the hardness of the saying. When the Twelve were asked if they too wanted to go away you answered firmly: “Lord, you have the words of eternal life; to whom shall we go?” You are indeed blessed. You decided to abide with Wisdom and to be nourished with the Bread of the Sacrament at his own table along with the members of his household, until, after you had progressed from faith to full knowledge, he might feed you with the Bread of Life and understanding, and give you to drink of the waters of the wisdom of salvation. And blessed are you also my brethren, who have enrolled in the study of wisdom, the school of Christian philosophy. But you will be blessed only if you persevere, so that when his teaching seems very hard because commands are difficult and corrections stern, there will be in none of you the evil spirit of unfaithfulness to take you away from the living God. Instead with all steadfastness you will say with the Apostle: “You have the words of life; to whom shall we go?” You might imagine there is weariness in his precepts, hardness in his teaching; but we know how great is the multitude of your sweetness, Lord, which you have hidden from those that fear you and will grant in abundance to them who hope in you. And I shall always hope, even if you were to kill me. Indeed, I shall hope all the more when you scourge, lash, burn, kill all that lives in me, so that not I but Christ may live in me. Most certainly we do not depart from you, for you give us life even as you slay, heal us even as you strike. Blessed indeed is the one who continues in wisdom with this steadfast faith; who bears trial patiently and with all confidence becomes obedient even unto death; who never leaves his place no matter how often the spirit of him who has power may come upon him. He knows that the cure of discipline will heal the greatest sins.

5.

Now to achieve this wisdom of continuing in wisdom, it is most important, I think, not readily to allow restlessness or any kind of slight provocation to keep you away from any of the exercises of wisdom: the divine office, private prayer, *lectio divina*, the appointed daily labour or the practice of silence. For the praises of wisdom are sung at the completion of the office. “My lips will rejoice,” says the Saint, “when they shall have sung to you.” And in another psalm you have it in so many words: “You make the outgoings of the morning and the evening joyful.” As for private prayer, you know from daily experience that it too is better at the end than it is at the beginning. This is so that you may have confidence in the advice of the Lord, given so often and recommended by so much example, to be persevering in prayer. Again, when you sit down to read and you do not really read, or if before you even begin to read you put the book down again, what good do you think that will do you? If you do not continue with the Scriptures so as to become familiar with them through assiduous study, when do you think they will open themselves to you? He who has love of the word, we are told, to him shall understanding be given and he will abound; but he who has not, what knowledge he may have by way of natural endowment, will be taken away from him because of his negligence. Then with regard to manual work, surely you have learned enough about this, have you not, to know that, like the wage given to the workers, consolation is often reserved to the end of the work. And of course when we come to silence a promise is given by the Prophet when he says: “In silence and in hope shall your strength be.” For if you cultivate holiness in silence and, following the advice of Jeremiah, you wait in silence for the salvation of the Lord, then secretly in the midst of the silence the all-powerful word of God will leap down to you from his royal throne. The waters of Siloe which flow silently will inundate the valley of your quiet and peaceful heart like a gently-flowing stream. And this you will experience not once but many times, if only your silence is the cultivation of holiness, that is, if you meditate on holiness so

that you may continue in the Scriptures as I have suggested and in your mind consider the all-seeing eye of God.

6.

Meditate on these things, continue in them so that your progress may be made manifest. For if you devise iniquity on your bed, evil thoughts that the Evil One sends or imaginings that your own heart devises or empty philosophies or deceptive theories which are no more than the dreamings of a sick mind, then surely is not your silence more the cultivation of unholiness than of holiness? If therefore you want to continue in wisdom meditate diligently on holiness. "You have desired wisdom," he says, "keep holiness and God will give her to you." But if horrible thoughts rush in on you as if by force, set a strong and trusty guard on yourself, one that will guard your heart with all care. I mean the fear of God, which overlooks nothing and allows nothing to enter without careful examination, often questioning even an angel of light: "Are you one of ours, or from our adversary?" It looks about on all sides as though it were aware at every moment of the all-seeing eye of God whom it contemplates without respite and it takes care to search human hearts. It is well said: "He shall be mindful of the all-seeing eye of God," for obviously that man has no mind nor heart who neglects to keep the fear of God before him, who does not feel the weight of such great majesty and of the judgment that hangs over him. It is also well said that God is all-seeing; all things, past as well as future, are present to him so that he does not look backwards to the one or forward to the other, but sees both in the same way, for he sees all in one simple glance. For him eternity is as a moment, the centre of all time; to his unchangeable simplicity the whole wheel of time as well as its moving finger is always equally present. Fear of the Lord which turns away from evil, not only in deed but in thought also, is ever aware of this eternal eye that sees without ceasing and judges all things; it spurs itself on by its own reflections, teaches us to meditate more on holiness, restrains us so that we will continue with wisdom. So gradually it comes about that a man who at first was held back by the fear of judgment and punishment is afterwards upheld by the love and meditation of holiness and at last finds his rest and delight in the intimacy and embrace of wisdom. This not only casts out fear from the soul through an outpouring of love, but weariness and distress also through an inpouring of gladness. As one man who dwelt with wisdom said to her: "When I go into my house I shall find repose with her; for her conversation has no bitterness nor her companionship any tediousness but only joy and gladness." May he make us partakers in all these things who was pleased to become partaker of our nature, the Wisdom of God, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

Translated by monks of Mount Saint Bernard; [Copyright 1971 by Cistercian Publications, Inc. © 2008 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. Used with permission.]

SEVEN SHORT TEXTS

1

[The acediac monk speaks.] I seek to occupy the time by any kind of conversation. If I did not pass the day chatting and meandering around I would die of boredom (*taedium*).... To keep silent is a torment, to stay in one place tires me out. Working with my hands was never my thing. Much speaking feeds me, sleep delights me, and I am helped by bodily or mental wandering. I consider myself blessed when I hear rumours or see new things. Every day I would wish for a change of government, new laws, different regulations, so that I might get some relief from boredom by means of all these variations. I hate whatever lasts a long time, and I draw back in horror from whatever remains the same.

Galand of Reigny, *Parables* 16:7; (SChr 378, pp. 278-280.)

2

The fear of God first battles against negligence; it urges people to guard themselves. If negligence prevails it generates curiosity. While the soil of the heart remains uncultivated through negligence, it produces thorns and thistles. The heart does not find rest in itself, so it is forced to wander abroad. Thus, curiosity emerges from the heart, piety fights against it. Piety is the worship of God and it is fostered in the heart because God dwells in the heart. If curiosity is not overcome it generates the experience of evil because, when the soul wanders among many distractions, it easily gives itself to sinful pleasure.

Bernard of Clairvaux, *De Diversis* 125:3; (See CF 68, p. 427.)

3

And so, brothers, according to what we have said our soul has become a castle. It is right that two women live in it, one who sits at the feet of Jesus and hears his word and the other who ministers to Jesus and feeds him. See, brothers, if only Mary were in the house there would be no one to feed the Lord. If only Martha were there would be no one to delight in the discourses and presence of the Lord. Therefore, brothers, Martha signifies that activity by which a person labours for Christ. Mary [signifies] that rest by which a person is free from bodily labours and delights in the sweetness of God through reading or prayer or contemplation. And so, brothers, while Christ is a poor man and walks around the earth on foot, while he hungers and thirsts and is tempted, it is necessary that both of these women be in the one house, that is, that both these functions be present in a single soul.

Aelred of Rievaulx, Sermon 19:18-19 (See CF 58, p. 269.)

4

Then some work – even manual labour – that has been prescribed should be done, not so much for the sake of the pleasure it gives and the relaxation it affords the mind as to preserve and nourish the taste for spiritual things. It should bring the mind some passing relaxation, but it should not dissipate it. The mind should have no difficulty in detaching itself from it as soon as it decides to return to itself, without any opposition on the part of the will clinging to it, without any contamination from the pleasure it has given or the images it leaves in the memory.

William of St-Thierry, *The Golden Epistle* 84; (CF 12, pp. 39-40.)

5

[The monk] is a penitent by his state in life and therefore obliged to work, since this is the penalty that God has imposed on all sinners in the person of the first [sinner], by his words: “You will eat your bread by the sweat of your brow”. So, when he is occupied in work [the monk] is obeying God’s commands and is carrying out to the letter the sentence imposed on all those who have had the misfortune to displease God. A monk would not know how to use profitably the time remaining after other duties have been done without having recourse to spending time in manual work... There are fewer persons than one may think who can give themselves every day to seven or eight hours of reading.

Armand-Jean de Rancé, *La Règle [sic] de saint Benoist nouvellement traduite et expliquée selon son véritable esprit* (Paris: François Muguet and George & Louis Josse, 1689); Vol. 2, pp. 266-309.

6

As we all know, the kinds of service that allow one to feel like a “leading actor” in some area are few in the monastery: the abbot or abbess, novice director, cellarer, cantor or chantress. This means that many monks and nuns of generative age find no place to channel their potential, which may lead to a sense of frustration affecting themselves and others.... To put it more concretely, there is not always sufficient room or outlet for the generative capacity proper to adult professed monks and nuns, understood in general terms as the role of affirming and orienting the following generation. Not uncommonly, this is a source of crises and setback on the way to human and spiritual maturity. Even celibacy and virginity for the sake of the Kingdom can end up being lived out in a castrating way. Frustrated generativity causes withdrawal into oneself, obsessive search for intimacy, invalidity at an early age, excessive worry about oneself. On the contrary, a positive living-out of generativity opens horizons, provides mutual enrichment, increases vital human energy, all of which brings with it an appetite for living.

Bernardo Olivera, “Our Young and not so Young Monks and Nuns,” Conference given at the OCSO General Chapter, September 2002.

7

Work, especially manual work, has always enjoyed special esteem in the Cistercian tradition since it gives the monks the opportunity of sharing in the divine work of creation and restoration, and of following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. This hard and redeeming work is a means of providing a livelihood for the brothers and for other people, especially the poor. It expresses solidarity with all workers. Moreover work is an occasion for a fruitful asceticism that fosters personal development and maturity. It promotes health of mind and body and contributes greatly to the unity of the whole community.

Constitutions OCSO 26.

If there are skilled workers in the monastery,
let them practice their crafts with all humility
if the abbot permits it.
But if anyone of these workers
is so proud of his expertise
that he thinks he is a great gift to the monastery,
he should be removed from his work.
Nor should he return to it

FIVE SHORT REFLECTIONS

1



Father Agustín Romero Redondo (Huerta)

Date of Birth: 8 December 1936

Date of Entry: 27 September 1955

Preferred Email: agustin@monasteriohuerta.org

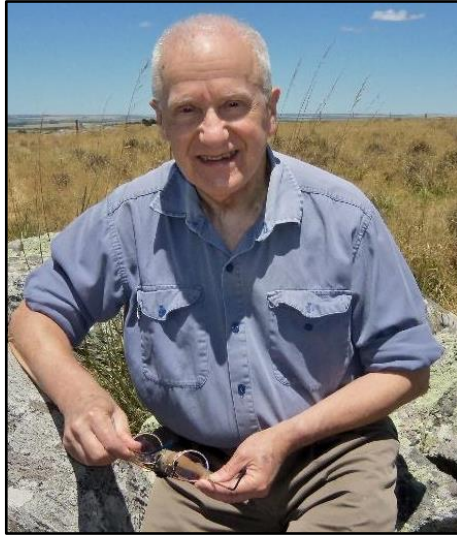
Three notions that strike me in this text are stability of place; meditating on the Word and on justice; and God's presence. In my own life, these three normally carry a sense of lack which I long to overcome but can't manage to do it. Nonetheless, when I'm face to face with these realities, I do realize that, as the text says, they bring me happiness and blessing.

So far, I have been out of the monastery in various services to the community for a total of 27 years: six years for study, thirteen for the pre-foundation of Mount Sion (Montesión) and eight as chaplain of Vico. On the other hand, while living at the monastery I have taught four courses at a children's school and given formation courses in the community and with new members of the Spanish Region. Whenever I'm asked to do something on this level, I agree to do it.

As I reflect on these past experiences, I have a deep feeling of belonging to my community—a feeling that my absences bring to life even more. I have also noticed that preparing classes and talks enriches me interiorly because of my contact with the Word, even if my practice of *lectio* is poor. I always aspire to the Presence of God as something constant in my life.

Over and above what may feel like a negative sense of poverty and desire, the Spirit has been shaping me all along. As for myself, I never stop longing to live out the condition of a servant of Jesus for whom each encounter with people and events is a call, a choice.²

² Translation: Brother Gregory Escardo (Gethsemani).



Dom Augustine Roberts (Azul)

Date of Birth: 23 October 1932

Date of Entry: 3 August 1953

Preferred Email: aroberts32@gmail.com

I was particularly struck by the final third of this Sermon of Blessed Gueric, it being a good summary of what is really important in our life, namely inner and outer unification, of the exterior life of observance and the interior life of faith, confidence and love. It made me think of Saint Benedict's principle for praying during psalmody, which has meant a lot to me during recent years. Benedict finishes his chapter with, "*Mens nostra concordat voci nostrae*: strive to have the heart and mind in harmony with the words you sing, read or listen to." *Mens*, in Latin, is like *nous* in Greek and means not only intellectual thoughts, but also the inner spirit, affections, heart and desires. Benedict's phrase is what Gueric is saying: that in the observances, we should do what we are doing, not only externally but also interiorly. He adds that the necessary context – I would say *catalyst* – for this is silence.

In my own life, as well as speaking with many monks and nuns, I've found that our problems are frequently related to this need for personal unification. Some would call it an identity crisis: Who am I? What am I here for? What went wrong? I am a practical person, formed from the cradle to produce results of one sort or another, produce something decent. But how do I produce results from the observances except by following them, doing them well? My temptation, backed by the Trappist's "Strict Observance," is to follow them well on the external level, which is why Benedict's principle of harmonizing the inside with the outside suddenly impressed me. There is a whole world of inner work to do. People look at external appearances, but God looks at the heart. Besides, Jesus is there.

What a new world I have to work at. It is much trickier than producing jams and jellies, singing correctly or doing *lectio divina*! So I had to discover how to produce this inner-outer harmony. The first light came to me from the Desert Fathers. Gueric says it about stability: don't leave your cell. Traditional Spanish wisdom has the verse, "*En tiempo de nubes, no te mudes*: when clouds fill the sky, don't think of changing!" Keep silent, find the inner meaning and don't dream of doing something externally, which is so typical of our producer-consumer culture.

God is making his New Creation, above all interiorly: in my heart, mind, desires, thoughts and especially my affections and loves. Where are they?

I had presumed that my heart was in the Lord and in the monastery, but my heart is much more complex than just my intentions. It's me, from the inside out, with all these thoughts, distractions, memories, friendships and desires. Anatomically, the heart has just two atriums and two ventricles, but the biblical heart is infinitely richer and more complex. Everything in it has to be centered, here or in Purgatory, on Jesus, so: *Mens nostra concordat voci nostrae!*

There is in me a relatively strong intellectual dimension, but the, interpersonal, social dimension is also strong, and the affectionate, loving dimension is even stronger. Guerric describes the integrating factor of all this as "justice," the "fear of the Lord", maybe thinking of Benedict's steps of humility. It is obviously good to work for the Christ and his justice, but inner personal unification is Jesus' most special work. Fear of the Lord is precisely one of the seven Gifts of his Holy Spirit, who can reach deeper, better and faster than any surgeon or psychiatrist, a reverential, filial and spousal fear, not a slavish one, fear to sadden the Spirit and to get in the way of God's work, the inner *Opus Dei*. Never too late to learn!

3



Mother Bibiane Tayé Igbaro (L'Étoile)

Date of Birth: around 1957

Date of Entry: 1 march 1981

Email: etoilenotredameocso@gmail.com

“As for me, I will always hope even if you kill me. Even better, I will hope all the more that you flog, dismember, and burn all that was living in me, so that it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

This quotation from our father Blessed Guerric reminds me of my own monastic journey, which would require more than the few lines available here to recount. Suffice it to say that during my noviciate, whenever I encountered the least difficulty I found myself saying: “I am tired

and I want to go home.” These words were often on my lips, until one day my Mother Prioress said to me, “If you continue talking like that, you will end up leaving. Stop saying such things.” From that moment on, I settled down. When difficulties arise I now simply say, “Who called you here? Didn’t you come here of your own accord? Just carry on.” Now that I think of it, most of my difficulties came from within myself because of my sensitivity. But the most difficult moments of my monastic life occurred during my abbacy. In fact, the devil makes use of everything he can to defeat us, but the Lord never abandons us. I even found myself telling some of my sisters that they must not flee from trials. When some of them would say to me, “I want to go to another community because it is too painful here”, I would answer, “I will not leave in spite of all the humiliations.” And during my interior struggles, I always say to the devil who nips at my heels, “Even if my body falls to pieces, I will never abandon my Lord.” So I have remained in the monastery to continue on my way of conversion in the footsteps of Christ.³

4



Mother Gail Fitzpatrick (Mississippi)

Date of Birth: 31 January 1938

Date of Entry: 29 August 1956

Preferred Email: gail@olmabbey.org

Early on in my monastic life as we studied the vows I was struck by the relationship of our vow of stability with the Gospel of Saint John. The teaching of Jesus in the 15th chapter of John resonated in me: “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me”. (John 15:4).

In Gueric’s first Sermon for the Feast of Saint Benedict he speaks of “abiding in Wisdom”. This abiding is crucial if we are to find happiness and to bear fruit in our monastic life. As I ponder this sermon I equate the Wisdom Gueric speaks of with Jesus, the Wisdom of God.

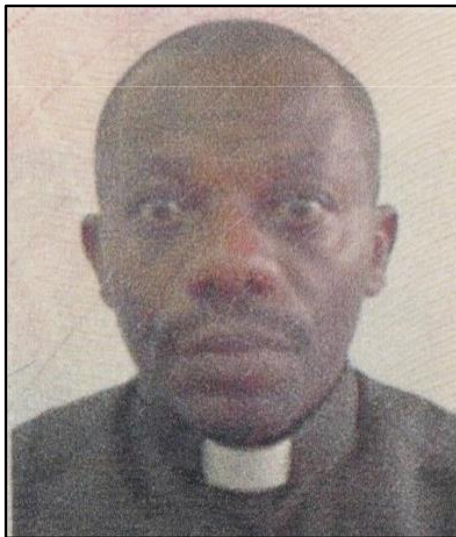
³ Translation: Father William Dingwall (Spencer).

Abiding in Jesus requires “stability of place as well as stability of mind and heart.” Gueric describes the praxis of abiding in Wisdom: faithfulness to the Divine Office, private prayer, Lectio Divina, daily labour and the practice of silence.

These are the ordinary elements of monastic life, the daily practices that rarely shine or elicit awe in the onlookers. They are just “what monks and nuns do” – but that is the crux – what we do is to live moment by moment open to the influx of God’s grace and mercy. But I have to *be here* to receive this grace here and now. In order to grow in love of God and others I have to stick around – in good times and hard times.

So the abiding in Jesus that each of us desires will bear fruit if we let ourselves be shaped, formed and chiselled by this one beautiful place and, even more, by this one unique community.

5



Dom Vedaste Vitchomo Visogho [Mokoto]

Date of Birth: 8 September 1963

Date of Entry: 27 July 1986

Email: vitchomocso@gmail.com

Trying to write on one of the beautiful texts by Gueric of Igny « First Sermon for the Feast of Saint Benedict » opened my eyes to a very rich spiritual treasure. I was astounded to see how, in his writing, Gueric of Igny taught us well about wisdom. Behind his text, we discover his own experience of monastic life nourished by the lifeblood of the word of God, which he has read, listened to, meditated on and put into practice in everyday life.

Indeed, for the feast of Saint Benedict, Gueric comments on the passage from Sirach 14:22: “Blessed the man who abides in wisdom and who will be steadily aware of God’s presence everywhere.” He applies this beatitude to Saint Benedict. He shows us that it is not enough to find wisdom, but it must be guarded with perseverance and prudence.

Listening attentively to the continuation of his sermon, we easily see that he is inviting his listeners, that is, the monks of his community and us his readers, to consider the wisdom-word of God as the mother of virtues. We receive the happiness of living under the benevolent gaze

of God by loving wisdom, keeping her safe and sound through our *lectio divina*, listening to the word of God every day in our liturgical celebrations, and being guided by her in our various activities.

To remain vigilant in the face of temptations, he gives us examples of the vices that can easily deflect us from wisdom: pride, seductions of the flesh, lightness and inconstancy, as well as lack of endurance in the face of trials. Against these last vices he invites the monks constantly to practise the exercises proper to wisdom such as solemn psalmody, prayer, reading scripture, daily work and silence.

In conclusion, Gueric's first sermon for the feast of St. Benedict is a text rich in monastic spirituality. Although our libraries are filled with new and interesting books, for our monastic journey we have great interest in revitalizing ourselves with the writings of our Cistercian fathers.⁴

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. 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: "Manual Work in the Rule and Beyond, *Tjurunga* 78 (2010), pp. 38-63.

Freeman, Brendan, "Beware of 'Acedia'," in *Come and See: The Monastic Way for Today*, (Collegeville: Cistercian Publications, 2010), pp. 121-124.

Jonveaux, Isabelle, *Le monastère au travail: Le royaume de Dieu au défi de l'économie* (Montrouge: Bayard, 2011.)

Olivera, Bernardo, "Our Young and not so Young Monks and Nuns," (Conference given at the OCSO General Chapter, September 2002.)

Vallin, Pierre e.a., "Travail," DSP XV, 1186-1250.

⁴ Translation: Father Cassian Russell (Conyers).

UNIT SEVEN

Prayer

PRAYER

The thirteenth century witnessed a rich flowering of mysticism among Cistercian nuns. Contemporary hagiographical accounts of several of them exist, but – apart from Saint Gertrude – they did not leave much in the way of teaching. Beatrice of Nazareth seems to have written several treatises on aspects of monastic life but mostly they were destroyed after her death to avoid the scrutiny of the Inquisition. We have only traces of most of them preserved in the posthumous *Life* written by a chaplain to the monastery. By good fortune, however, her treatise *On the Seven Modes of Love* survived.

Although Beatrice seems to have had a good education and a sound knowledge of Latin, her work was written in the vernacular. This gives an originality and an immediacy to her teaching, even though it is clear that most of it is in continuity with the great Cistercian authors of the previous century. The whole purpose of Beatrice's treatise is to demonstrate that the lifelong experience of prayer is not homogeneous. In the normal course of events, a monk or a nun will experience something of the variation about which Beatrice writes, perhaps not with the same intensity. In most cases, however, the journey of prayer begins with desire and culminates in union.

In this Unit we are asking you to reflect on your own experience of prayer and the different forms that it has assumed during your years of monastic life. Reflecting on your present practice may, perhaps, lead you to make some changes that might make prayer a more vibrant component of your everyday life.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. I always have time to eat, sleep, to chat, to follow the news and check my email but do I sometimes say that I cannot find time for prayer?
2. How did my relationship with God develop after I entered the monastery? What role was played by liturgy? By *lectio divina*? By personal prayer?
3. Was there a person who initiated me into a more intense interior life at the beginning of my monastic life or before? Is there someone now with whom I can, on occasion, freely discuss my experiences in prayer? Inside or outside the community?
4. What criteria do I use in evaluating my prayer life? Is it a question more of feeling comfortable with my life, feelings of devotion, or of being constantly challenged to live more in accordance with the Gospel?
5. What different forms does prayer assume in my life today? Has there been development or change? On average, how much time do I give to personal prayer and *lectio divina*? To what extent has my prayer developed from periods of prayer into a more diffuse prayerfulness throughout the day? Do I find that there are obstacles to continual prayer in everyday life?

6. Do I experience Liturgy of the Hours and the celebration of Eucharist as a real source of prayer and life? Is my interior life enriched by my participation in the liturgy?

7. To what extent have I experienced monastic life as providing an ambience for contemplative prayer? Does the monastery offer the opportunity for ongoing formation in prayer? Do I think that continual prayer is a realistic ideal in modern Cistercian life?

INTRODUCTION TO BEATRICE OF NAZARETH: *THE SEVEN MODES OF LOVE*



Mother Benedict Thissen (Koningsoord)
Date of Birth: 29 March 1951.
Date of Entry: 08 September 1977.
Preferred Email: zr.benedict@koningsoord.org

Beatrice describes our spiritual way not from a merely human perspective but from that of the Love-dynamics active between God and us. The initiative comes from God, from Love and not from ourselves. Our love is an answering love, a response to being touched and drawn by divine Love.

There are seven Modes in which Love acts on our human experience as a living reality, now with one mode, now with another. It is not a matter of degrees or stages by which we can climb. Love is the guide who leads us on our way back to God. The different Modes of Love, the way Beatrice describes them, refer to the experience of the person, but this experience is the consequence of the dynamics of Love. In this way Beatrice does not focus on the person himself and on everything that person does, but she makes us aware of the effects of Love.

The First Mode makes clear that Love expresses itself as desire, which has to reign for a long time in the heart before it is able to conquer all resistance. This desire calls us to go out of

ourselves and of our self-determined way of life to answer and surrender ourselves to Love. There exists a field of tension between our own desire in which we want to safeguard our own needs and the desire of Love which precisely intends that we entrust ourselves to the eyes of the Other.

This opens us up so that we move beyond a mode of being which is closed within ourselves. The soul is drawn into the desire to receive and to exist in the purity, freedom and nobility in which she was made by her Creator, that is, according to his image and likeness, and to which she is called. A long-term process is needed to purify all that restrains us from entering fully into Love. Love brings this process about in our lives, by means of the second to the fifth Modes. This is why these Modes happen sporadically and, although connected, not necessarily in order. We are so much loved by God, that He wants to clothe us in His own nobility. It is there that we find our true freedom. The spiritual way can only come about in the desire of Love, in which we encounter God. This is what changes us in our very depths. Or, as William of Saint-Thierry puts it: "What the soul understands with natural insight, is what she seizes. But what she understands by spiritual insight, is what rather overmasters her".

The second Mode of Love forms a diptych with the third Mode. It describes the enthusiasm of the beginner when one is touched by God in such a way that one desires to give oneself to Love with all that one is and without any recompense. It is our human answer from within and we serve Love with love. It is the Lord Himself who loves in us, we are drawn outside ourselves into Love, love without measure.

The third Mode of Love confronts us with our dissatisfaction. This is not a lack on our side but a quality of the desire of Love itself: it is never enough. We do what we can, but we discover in all of this that which Love urges us to desire with all longing, remains beyond the range of all our efforts. It surpasses our human imagination or measures of value. Where do we hold on to ourselves and where do we allow ourselves to be moved upon the wings of Love? We experience the agony of the absence of Love. We have to remain in this agony until Love moves us to another mode of Love.

The fourth and fifth Modes of Love also form a diptych: sometimes enormous blissfulness, sometimes great anguish. It is the paradoxical experience of Love. The fourth Mode describes a joyful sweetness because, without our doing, the heart has been transformed in Love. This is on a deeper level in our soul. The continuation of the way of Love is not situated in a perfection which is the result of our own efforts, but in the awareness of an intimacy prompting and accompanying our own efforts. When we become aware that our life takes place in the unbounded overflowing of Love and that we do not need to satisfy Love, our perspective changes. We enter in a more intimate way into contact with God. Estrangement, that is, Love over against ourselves, becomes encounter. What wounds us most deeply has transformed us and heals completely. It is grace to experience how much we are loved by Love before anything else.

The fifth Mode describes how the experience of love deconstructs us. Love strips us of our 'I'. This causes us anxiety. We are overwhelmed, we discover our inertia, the obstacles and contradictions within us. The sweetness of Love irradiates and motivates us from within and makes us able to realize that in her light everything that we ourselves would wish to be or do, no longer has any meaning. Love has taken us over and brought us with her to a place beyond our understanding. That is why at one and the same time this union also feels like being, destroyed. 'Like a devouring fire that draws all it touches into itself and consumes it, she feels

Love working furiously within her, sparing nothing and, without measure, drawing everything into itself and consuming it.’

The sixth Mode can only be reached through the five preceding modes and is lasting. The desire and fundamental attitude of the first Mode find their realization in this mode: all opposition in us is broken and we are freely put in motion by Love. The integrity of God’s image comes to light in us, while we are hidden from ourselves. We have died in Love and have nothing to lose anymore. Everything that happens to us is dear to us because we are aware that in this we are united with God. The way of purification is finished.

The seventh Mode shows us the border between time and eternity. Love lets us be absorbed in an intimacy that in its immediateness escapes our created being. Here we lose ourselves in its eternity. We ourselves do not live anymore but are completely taken up in the Love dynamic between Father and the Son. Stripped of all images, clothed with eternal wisdom, we love all of creation as does God Himself. But seeing God is to die in the immensity of His desire. The soul experiences the absolute abyss between the immediateness of God and the contingency of created existence. Life on earth has become exile, a dying life.

This life in Love with its Love dynamics and our responding to it takes place in every human being, even if we are not at all or only partially conscious of it.

BEATRICE OF NAZARETH

The Seven Modes of Love

In love there are seven modes that come from above and work their way back to the heights.

The First Mode of Love

The first mode 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 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.

Here she desires to lead her whole life in this desire, to cooperate with it, to increase it and to climb to a great height of love and to closer knowledge of God until she attains that fulfilment for which she was made and to which she is called by God. To this end she aspires, day and night; to this pursuit she gives herself completely. This is her prayer and her endeavour, this her supplication to God.

Her thought is how she can come to this goal, how she might receive the gift of a near likeness to love in the total adornment of the virtues and in the full purity of the highest nobility of love.

All the while, this soul earnestly seeks to know what she is and what she should be, what she has and what is lacking to her desire. With all her efforts, with great desire and all possible skill, she strains to prevent and to shun all that might hinder or harm such working. Her heart

never resists or desists from seeking, supplicating, learning, or drawing to herself and holding onto, all that might help her and bring her further towards love.

This is the greatest concern of the soul at this point. In this she must work and labour much until, by her diligence and fidelity, she receives from God the possibility of placidly serving love with a free conscience, a pure spirit and a clear understanding, no longer held back by past misdeeds.

This mode of desire, characterised by such great purity and nobility, certainly comes from love and not from fear. The effect of fear is dread of our Lord's anger and the judgement of the just Judge leading to eternal torments or temporal chastisements. This causes us to work and endure, to do and to leave undone. But only love works and strives for purity and loftiness and for the highest nobility. For this is what love is in its essential self. And love itself teaches this work to those who give themselves to love.

The Second Mode of Love

Sometimes there is also another mode of love. This is when the soul undertakes to serve our Lord without payment, but only for love, without any other motive and not for any recompense of grace or glory. She is like a lady in waiting that serves her lord without payment but out of great love. For her it is enough that she is able to serve and that he suffers her to serve. So from love the soul desires to serve love without measure and above measure, above human sense and reason and to serve completely and loyally.

When she is thus, the soul burns with desire. She is ready to serve. Labour seems light. She bears with difficulty and rejoices in troubles. With all that she is she desires to please the Lord. What gives her pleasure is to find something to do or endure in the service and to the honour of love.

The Third Mode of Love

Sometimes the good soul has another mode of love that involves many pains and miseries. She desires to make satisfaction to love and to follow love in all honour and service, in obedience and submission. From time to time this desire storms in the soul in such a way that she is aware of a stronger desire to do all things and follow every virtue, to suffer and to bear all things and to accomplish all her works in love, without sparing and without measure.

In such is she well prepared for every service and is willing and without fear in every work and in pain. Still she remains unsatisfied in all her works. Her greatest pain, however, above everything else, is that she cannot do enough for love according to her great desire. So much is lacking to love. She knows well that this is above human works and above all her might to do, since what she desires is impossible for all creatures and beyond their capacity.

What she desires is that she could serve, love and honour in accordance with love's worthiness and by herself to do this as much as and countless times more than all people on earth, all spirits in heaven and all creatures above and below. With her whole will she strongly desires also that the many deficiencies in her works will yet be realised. She knows well that this desire is far beyond her might to accomplish, above human reason and all insight. Even so, she cannot act measuredly or restrain herself or be still.

She does all she can. She thanks and praises love. She works and labours for love. She seeks and desires love. She delivers herself entirely to love. And all this gives her no rest. And this is her one great pain: that she is unable to receive what she is obliged to desire.

And here must she remain in agony of heart and dwell in dissatisfaction. For her it is as if living she dies and dying she feels the pain of hell. And all her life is like hell. There is torment and frustration from the horror and dread that comes from a desire she cannot do enough to still or satisfy.

In this pain she must stay until such time as our Lord consoles her and sets her in another mode of love and desire and in still closer knowledge of himself. Then must she act according to what is given her by our Lord.

The Fourth Mode of Love

Our Lord usually gives still other modes of love, at times bringing great well-being, at times great sorrow. It is of this that we will now speak.

Sometimes it happens that love is sweetly awakened in the soul. Joyfully it arises and makes itself felt in the heart without anything to do with human works. Then the heart is so deeply touched by love, so desirably drawn into love, so heartily seized by love, so strongly overpowered by love and so lovingly held by love that it is altogether vanquished by love.

Here she inwardly feels a great nearness to God, clarity of understanding, a wonderful blessedness, a noble freedom, a delightful sweetness, a great rush of stronger love and an overflowing fullness of great satisfaction. She feels then that all her senses have been made holy in love, her will has become love. It is so deeply sunk and absorbed in the abyss of love that it becomes love.

The beauty of love devours her. The power of love consumes her. The sweetness of love drowns her. The greatness of love absorbs her. The nobility of love holds her. The purity of love adorns her. The height of love has drawn her upwards and makes her one. So she must exist totally for love and is unable to love anything else.

When she thus feels herself to be in this overflowing well-being and in a great fullness of heart, then her spirit sinks totally into love and her body is drawn after it. Her heart melts and her might is as nought. She is so overcome by love that she can scarcely stand up and often loses control over her limbs and senses.

A full vessel, if it is moved, quickly overflows and spills. In the same way, the fullness of her heart is such that she is quickly moved and overcome and often beyond her control, she must break forth.

The Fifth Mode of Love

Sometimes it also happens that love is powerfully aroused in the soul and rises turbulently, with a great roaring and frenzy, as if violently to break the heart and to draw it out of itself and above itself into the exercise of love until love is exhausted. And boldly is she drawn in the desire to perform great works in the pure works of love, or to acquire the multiplicity of things that are required of love.

Alternatively, she desires to rest in the sweet holding of love, in the desired well-being and in the satisfaction of having, so that her heart and her sense desire and earnestly seek this and heartily aspire to it.

When she is here, she is so strong in spirit, comprehending so many things, so more vigorous in body, more prompt in works and very active both externally and internally, that she considers herself busily engaged in all her tasks even if she is quite still externally.

In addition, she feels such a strong drawing from within, such great suspense in love, many uncertainties in desire and all sorts of pain from being greatly unsatisfied. Or she feels pain from a great feeling of love itself, either without any reason, or from what she has particularly asked for with desire for love, or from dissatisfaction at being deprived of love.

Meanwhile love becomes so immoderate and so overpowering in the soul that she burns fiercely and furiously in her heart. She thinks her heart has been seriously wounded in many ways and that the wounds are daily repeated and rendered more grievous by sharper pains experienced again and again. She thinks that her veins have burst and her blood boiled, her marrow dissolved and her limbs enfeebled. Her breast burns and her throat is so dry that her face and all her members feel the inner heat and the tumult of love.

She feels also at this time that an arrow has pierced her heart up to her throat and even up to her brain, so that she loses all sense. And like a devouring fire that draws all it touches into itself and consumes it, she feels love working furiously within her, sparing nothing and, without measure, drawing everything into itself and consuming it.

And by these means she is much wounded and her heart is much bruised and all her might comes to nothing. But her soul is fed and her love is fostered and her spirit is suspended. This is because love is so lofty, above all capacity to understand, that she cannot ever attain the enjoyment of it. Because of the suffering she sometimes desires to break the fetters, but not to rupture the union of love. She is so much held by the bands of love and so overwhelmed by the abundance of love that she cannot hold to measure or reason. Nor can she exercise reason intelligently, nor act moderately and within measure, nor remain quiet and discreet.

The more that is given her from above, the more she demands. The more she is shown, the more she experiences the suspense of desire to come nearer to the light of truth, to purity, to nobility and the enjoyment of love. And always she is more and more goaded and drawn. She never has enough. She cannot be satisfied. The same thing that makes her whole and heals her is that which also brings the wounds that alone give health.

The Sixth Mode of Love

When our Lord's bride has come further and ascends higher into greater piety she feels another mode of love in a closer understanding and a higher knowledge. She feels that love has overcome all her opponents within her and has made good her defects. Love has mastered her knowing and allowed her to receive the free disposal over herself without opposition so that she holds her heart in safety, she experiences it in rest and she does what is to be done in freedom.

When she is here she thinks all things small and everything that belongs to the dignity of love is light to do or leave undone, to endure or to suffer. It is pleasing for her to exercise herself in love. Then she experiences a God-like power, bright purity, a spiritual sweetness, delightful freedom, an understanding wisdom and a pleasurable affinity with God.

Then is she like a housewife who governs her house well. She arranges it wisely and orders it beautifully. She concerns herself with it providently and prudently keeps it, working with understanding. She acts inside and outside, doing or leaving undone as she wills. So it is with

such souls. Love powerfully and effectively rules within, working and resting, doing and leaving undone, outside and inside as it wills.

She is like a fish that swims in the breadth of the water and rests in the depths. She is like a bird that flies in the spaciousness and height of the sky. Thus, she experiences her spirit as walking unbound in the depth and spaciousness and height of love.

The power of love has drawn and led the soul, has guarded and protected her. It has given her the prudence and wisdom, the sweetness and courage of love. Nevertheless, it has hidden the power of the soul until the soul has come into greater heights so that she is totally free from herself and love reigns more powerfully within her.

Then love makes the soul so bold and free that in doing and not doing, in working and in rest she does not act from fear of any human being or demon or angel or saint or even from fear of God himself. She experiences well that love is within her and is effectively working as much in her bodily rest as in many works. She knows well and experiences that where love reigns there is more to it than work or suffering.

All those that will to come to love must seek it with fear and follow it faithfully and exercise it with desire. They must not spare themselves in great works and in many sufferings and in enduring difficulties. They must deem all small things great until they come to the point where love reigns within them and becomes so powerful that it makes all things small and all works easy and every pain is softened and debt is paid.

This is freedom of conscience, sweetness of heart, goodness of mind, nobility of soul, lightness of spirit and the beginning of eternal life. This is already an angelic life and after it follows eternal life. May God, in his goodness, give it to us all.

The Seventh Mode of Love

Now the blessed soul experiences a mode of higher love that from within gives her much to do. She is drawn beyond the human into love, beyond human sense and reason and beyond all the works of our heart. She is drawn by eternal love alone into the eternity of love and into the incomprehensible wisdom, the inaccessible loftiness and the deep abyss of the Godhead that is all in all things and remains incomprehensible beyond all things, unchangeable, all-being, all-powerful, all-intelligent and all-vigorous in working.

Here she is so strongly sunk in love and so strongly drawn in desire that her heart is violently moved and inwardly restless. Her soul melts and pines away from love. Her spirit is held in furious suspense by strong desire. All her senses are drawn to this that she may will to be in the enjoyment of love. For this she asks God so earnestly and this she seeks so heartily of God. This is what she desires so much. For love will not allow her to be still or to rest or to be at peace.

Love draws her up and holds her down, comforts her a little and torments her, gives death and brings life, gives health and makes her feeble. Love makes her mad and wise again. In this manner love draws her to a higher level of being.

Thus, does she come in spirit beyond time into the eternity of love which is timeless. In love she is lifted up above the human mode and, in her desire for transcendence, above her own nature. That is her being and her will, her desire and her love in certain truth and in pure clarity, in noble loftiness and in splendid beauty and in the sweet companionship of the supernal spirits who all abound with overflowing love and who live in the clear knowledge and possession and

enjoyment of their love. Her desire is to have business with these spirits above and especially with the ardent seraphim whose lovely resting place and satisfying abode is in the great Godhead and in the high Trinity.

The soul seeks him in his majesty. She follows him there and with heart and spirit gazes upon him. She knows him and loves him and desires him so much that she pays no heed to any saint or human being or angel or any other creature except to love them in him with the love that is shared by all. Him alone she chooses in love, above all and under all and within all. With all the desire of her heart and all the strength of her spirit she desires to see him and to have him and to enjoy him.

Therefore is earth for her a vast exile and a strong prison and a heavy burden. She regards the world as of little value. Earth holds no charm and earthly things bring no calm or satisfaction. What is her greatest pain is that she must exist so far away and seem so foreign. She cannot forget her exile. Her desire will not be stilled. Her longing torments her piteously and afflicts and torments her beyond measure and without relief.

Therefore she lives with great longing and with the strong desire to be freed from this exile and unbound from this body. And so with sorrowful heart she says, as did the Apostle who said, "*Cupio dissolvi et esse cum Christo.*" That is: "I desire to be unbound and to be with Christ." Likewise the soul has a strong desire and an unhappy restlessness to be freed to live with Christ. Not from sadness of this present time, nor from fear of future trouble but only from holy love. From eternal love does she desire eagerly and passionately and with so much longing to come into that landscape of eternity and to enjoyment in glory.

The longing in her is great and strong and her restlessness is severe and hard. The pain that she suffers from desire is great beyond words. Nevertheless she must live in hope and hope makes her yearn and languish.

O holy desire of love! How strong is your power in a soul's love. It is a blessed passion and a sharp torment and a prolonged malaise: a death that kills and a life that dies. She is unable to come to the heights and unable to find rest or endure here below. She cannot bear to think of him because of yearning, and to be without him makes her ill with desire. So must she live in great discomfort.

Thus it is that she does not will to be consoled. As the Prophet says, "*Renuit consolari anima mea et cetera.*" That is, "My soul refused to be consoled." Thus often she refuses all consolation from God himself as from his creatures. For all the relief that comes to her from them strengthens her love more and draws her desire to a higher state of being. This renews love's ardent longing for the enjoyment of love, living as she does without satisfaction and in exile.

And so she remains unsatisfied and unsettled in all gifts until she obtains what is lacking to her love. This is a hard and laborious life since she does not will to be consoled unless she obtains what she seeks so urgently.

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 anxiety, in fear and 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.

Because of all she has sought in exile, she finds her refuge in glory. This is the real work of love, that she desires what is nearest to love and that she most pursues what most leads to most love. Therefore will she always follow love, know love and enjoy love. This cannot happen to her in exile. Therefore the soul wills to journey to the land wherein she has made her dwelling and where her love and desire find rest. There will every hindrance be removed. There will she be welcomed lovingly by the beloved. There will she eagerly gaze upon what she has so tenderly loved. She will have for her eternal blessing the one whom she has so faithfully served. She will enjoy with full satisfaction the one whom she has so often held within her soul. Then shall she enter into the joy of her Lord, as Saint Augustine says, "*Qui in te intrat in gaudium Domini sui et cetera.*" That is, "O Lord, whoever enters into you enters into the joy of his Lord." She will not be afraid because she shall have him best who is the best.

There the soul will be united to her bridegroom and become one spirit with him in indivisible faithfulness and eternal love. She who worshipped him in the time of grace will enjoy him in eternal glory where there will be nothing except praise and love. And may God bring us all to this. Amen. [Editor's translation.]

SEVEN SHORT TEXTS

1

Therefore, raise up, O soul, your two arms of prayer and meditation. Lift them up toward the hidden places of heaven, where Christ is seated at God's right hand; insist in and out of season, so that you may regard his face, so that he may come down to you or draw you up to him, so that you may taste how sweet he is and experience how mild and merciful he is. And so, if the fire of heavenly desire breaks out in your prayer or meditation, if the pricks of love should burst into flame, if heavenly feelings stir you, making you burn and gasp, and you sometimes sense the presence of what you love as though you possessed it, and at other times, after it escapes from your hands, you ache and sigh for its absence, then this is the spiritual wrestling match.

Aelred of Rievaulx, Oner 13:34: (*Homilies on the Prophetic Burdens of Isaiah*: CF 83, pp. 131-132.)

2

Some people, I notice, occasionally experience dryness and a certain dullness of mind in prayer, as though praying with the lips only; they don't pay enough attention to what they say or to whom they speak. That is because they have come to prayer out of a certain habit rather than worthy reverence and concern. . . . It behoves us to enter into the heavenly court at the time of prayer, that court in which "The King of kings sits on his starry throne." . . . Therefore, with how much reverence, how much fear, how much humility should a common frog approach the heavenly court as he comes forth crawling from his swamp? How much trembling, how suppliant, how humble and finally

how concerned and intent with one's whole soul can a wretched little human appear before God's majestic glory?

Bernard of Clairvaux, Div 25:7; (*Monastic Sermons*: CF 68, p. 145.)

3

Prayer fulfils the function of both myrrh and incense. First it gathers and binds together into yourself your affections when you pray; then it releases them to transmit them to God. What is more like myrrh when there is such an outpouring towards union with God? What is more like incense when there is such an effusion towards some perception of God?

Gilbert of Swineshead, SC 28:7; (CF 20, p. 348.)

4

As for private prayer, you know from daily experience that it too is better at the end than it is at the beginning. This is so that you may have confidence in the advice of the Lord, given so often and recommended by so much example, to be persevering in prayer.

Guerric of Igny, *Sermon* 22:5; (CF 32, p. 6.)

5

The purity of prayer and the sweetness of love earnestly seek mutual support and make a reciprocal agreement as to what each is worth. Before pure prayer can be uttered, it must of necessity be forestalled by the spirit of charity, for this it is that utters it, that sets the incense burning, that directs its smoke. Likewise, before charity can be a living flame, sweet-scented and worthy of the heavenly altars, there must of necessity be the incense of prayer.... By the urgency of your prayer, you are laying up for yourself a rich treasure of charity, and the more abundant the charity, the more frequent the prayer, the more powerful its effect, the more perfect its purity, the more delightful its sweetness.

John of Forde, SC 12:1; (CF 29, p. 217.)

6

It is the will of God that we meditate at all times and let no hour pass without making spiritual progress; however, a definite time should be set aside when we are more fully alone with God. According to Jerome, the morning, that is, between dawn and the third hour, is best suited for this.

Stephen of Sawley, *A Mirror for Novices*; (CF 36; p. 101.)

7

Prayer is the affection of a person who clings to God, a certain familiar and devout conversation, a state in which the enlightened mind enjoys God as long as it is permitted.

William of Saint-Thierry, *The Golden Epistle*, 179; (CF 12, p. 71.)

FOUR SHORT REFLECTIONS

1



Father Antonius Anjar Daniadi (Rawaseneng)

Date of Birth: 21 November 1983

Date of Entry: 1 January 2004

Preferred Email: anjar.ocso@gmail.com

The Second Mode of Love

"So from love, the soul desires to serve love without measure and above measure, above the human sense and reason and to serve completely and loyally"

In the monastic community, the spirit of silence is practised together to build a genuine, sincere, and unreserved brotherly love. Through that authentic love, hopefully the soul and body can grow up in the service of unconditional, limitless love, even beyond the boundary of human reason, as revealed by Beatrice of Nazareth. However, the growth process will always be put to the test and refined through the practice of serving each other in the spirit of silence, especially in the midst of the monastic family as the "school of love".

For me who is still learning how to love God and my fellow brothers in our Rawaseneng community, "being silent" here does not mean "nesting" and just simply surviving in the middle of community struggle, paying no heed to others' needs and reality of community situations.

On the contrary, practising self-taciturnity actually sharpens the sensitivity of the eyes, heart, mind, and ears to see, feel, and listen to the will of God through others and every incident that happens.

The spirit of silence trains me and the brothers to love more fully and faithfully, along with inner stillness and clarity of heart. To me, one concrete example of the importance of practising silence is during anger and disappointment, either because of the fragility of self or another or because of the weakness of the community. Anger/disappointment is not something that can simply be silenced and buried, but needs to be expressed and directed properly and correctly.

The more our hearts are still and clear, the more we learn to listen and speak in the right moment and place, and with the right intention. Therefore, I am grateful for the practice to talk honestly and openly in the community; it turned out to be very useful for the establishment of living the common life more intimately, in a more friendly and happier way. through a constant readiness to apologize and forgive.

2



Sister Maria Gonzalo (Crozet)
Date of Birth: 18 December 1977
Date of Entry: 7 October 2007
Preferred Email: sr.maria.ola@gmail.com

How can Jesus become your Spouse when you cannot see him? This question, expressed in different ways, is always present among those who knock at our door to discern their vocation. It doesn't show incredulity, but the inner struggle to figure out what is going to happen with the desires in their hearts if they give themselves to Christ. Beatrice's *Seven Modes of Love* answers this question tracing the sinuous path from the "great energy" of the initial desire to "become one spirit with him."

It could be discouraging to use Beatrice's words to judge what should or should not be happening in my spiritual life. I would like to think this was not her intention, but to encourage

us. Love will teach me the way if I give myself completely to its pursuit. This is the key: completely, without measure.

It is easy to complain that we don't have enough time for prayer, but who would dare to say so about love? Our attention can be divided, but when our love is one, like a pebble thrown into the deep waters of a lake, it will pierce all the layers of our being and take us gradually into the unfathomable abyss of God's love. For me this is the genius of the Cistercian way: it sets before my eyes a promise that can be fulfilled, not only during and through our times of prayer in all its forms, but through the seven and more modes of love of a heart that is always searching in service and leisure, suffering and joy. My task is to follow with perseverance.

3



Mother Sofia Millican (Wrentham)

Date of Birth: 28 November 1982

Date of Entry: 15 October 2007

Preferred Email: m.sofia@msmabbey.org

For me, Beatrice puts flesh on classical descriptions of the spiritual journey that influenced our Cistercian tradition. Her first mode presents the “active life” of cultivating virtue and uprooting vice, turbocharged by desire. It is the positive energy that strikes me the most, the good zeal which she exudes without wasting a minute whining about the *dura et aspera* – the difficulties, humiliations and outright failures which are part of the conversion process. She does not stand too long over the sewer of bitter self-knowledge or cede an inch to *acedia*, because her eyes are on the prize, on becoming that pure, free and noble creature God had in mind from the beginning. In the sixth mode, she has crossed a threshold into vastness, but without losing her footing in reality. She has received “free disposal over herself without opposition so that she holds her heart in safety.” *Apatheia* is enfleshed in a woman: powerful, fearless and free.

As one still very much in the process of becoming and often in danger of getting bogged down, the challenge is to believe in the purity, freedom and nobility which are my birthright. Belief

in this innate capacity, hidden but real, gives the energy to take the small steps of love that daily life calls for. I can only act lovingly if I feel capable of love. And I only feel capable of love when I remember that I am looked upon in beauty by my Creator. From this flows the energy of desire.



Mother Liliana Schiano Moriello (Boa Vista)

Date of Birth: 6 July 1952

Date of Entry (Vitorchiano): 29 September 1973

Preferred Email: boavistaliliana@gmail.com

My first encounter with Beatrice of Nazareth was at the monastery of Chambarand in a study session in the 1980's under Professor Herman Vekeman. From him I got a deep, clear, and passionate view of our holy and mystical Sister. I later delved into her more personally under the guidance of Fr Michael Casey at the first meeting of the Cistercian Heritage Institute (1994) in Jacona.

For me these were providential encounters with a Mother of our Order at a time when there was scanty literature about her and, in the neo-Latin languages, barely a French translation of her work.

Her little mystical treatise is a jewel of Middle Dutch and of all literature that cannot fail to fascinate whoever comes upon it. Moreover, to better know and understand Beatrice, one must see her little work side by side with the story of her life, the *Vita Beatricis*, as a kind of diptych. Her writings are a highly poetic synthesis of a life spent in search of the beloved—and of Love.

With her great physical and emotional delicacy and her fierce tenacity in pursuit of her life's purpose whatever the cost, Beatrice is first and foremost my master teacher in the search for God's face. At the same time, her whole life trajectory shows me that, on this earth, the highest mystical experience is not a goal of the spiritual life, but God's free gift leading a person into all fullness: the fullness of love and the full gift of self to God and to one's sisters and brothers.

"The Soul longs to love in a totally gratuitous way. She wants to serve our Lord for its own sake, for nothing else: to love him simply and for no further reason, without self-seeking even for grace or glory; as a young woman dedicates herself to serve her Lord from pure love, not for compensation, happy both to serve him and to be allowed to serve him. Thus, she wants faithfully to make a return of love to Love himself and to serve him by loving without measure, beyond all reason and understanding." The highest message I get from this Second Mode of

love in Beatrice—for me and for the community I am called to guide at this time—is that we may live all the poor days of our life with a sense of absolute GRATUITY.⁵

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. 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: “Beatrice of Nazareth: Cistercian Mystic,” *Tjurunga* 50 (1996), pp. 44-70.

Faesen, Rob [Ed.], *Beatrijs van Nazareth: Seven manieren van minne* (Kapellen: Pelckmans, 1999).

Ganck, Roger de, *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth, and Beatrice of Nazareth in her Context, and Towards Unification with God* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991).

Huls, Jos, *The Minne-Journey: Beatrice of Nazareth’s “Seven Ways of Minne”, Mystical Process and Mystagogical Implications* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013).

Standaert, Benoît [Trans.], *La vie de Béatrice de Nazareth* (Saint-Jean-de-Matha: Abbaye Val Notre-Dame, 2009).

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⁵ Translation: Brother Gregory Escardo (Gethsemani).

UNIT EIGHT

Diminishment

DIMINISHMENT

Aelred of Rievaulx famously declared that “Our Order is Christ’s cross” (*Ordo noster crux Christi est*. S. 10:31). We enter into life only by traversing the valley of death. This is no more than an alternative way of expressing what Saint Benedict meant that he said that in monastic life we participate in the sufferings of Christ by patience. The challenge involves more than the inevitable frictions consequent upon communal existence, the *dura et aspera* – the hard and contrary things and even undeserved injuries. It is more than the trials occasioned by ageing, illness and bereavement. More difficult to bear than these external troubles is the sense of failure that we experience when confronted with our own weaknesses and infidelities and the long-lasting struggle with the contrary inclinations and bad habits which continue to exercise power over us.

In this Unit we are asking you to reflect on how you have learned to deal with the experience of diminishment. Is it true that hard times have often been occasions for growth and the consolidation of your monastic vocation? Or has suffering somehow weakened your commitment?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Saint Benedict cautions newcomers that they will experience hard and rough things (*dura et aspera*) in living the monastic life. What has been my experience of suffering in monastic life? Have I been called to practise patience as my way of participating in the paschal mystery?
2. What is my attitude to uninvited change? Is it an opportunity or a calamity? Have I been able to let go of responsibilities, jobs, duties, privileges? Did I pass through a conscious process of grieving or did I just carry on, hoping that everything would work out?
3. Have some of these situations lasted a long time? Months? Years? Decades? Have these experiences left me diminished, or have they helped me to grow? Has this been an opportunity to change my moralistic vision of monastic life, to move from the ethical to the spiritual?
4. Who or what has helped me to survive, to move through, or even to gain profit from these negative experiences? Have I found relief in monastic *conversatio*? Did I try to avoid this potentially creative challenge by losing myself in work, external relationships, entertainment? Did my experience at this time change some of my relationships within the community? Did this experience cause some degree of alienation from the community? Has this experience of suffering left a residue of resentment that inhibits relationships?
5. How have I found peace in times of unfair treatment? How have I experienced the process of healing, forgiveness and reconciliation in my monastic life?
6. Do I take reasonable care of my own health? How well do I cope with illness? How well have I traversed the progressive transformations of the years: physical, mental, psychological? What were the little concessions I made for myself that helped me to take care of myself and to avoid becoming disheartened? How did I help myself recuperate?

7. Do I have a capacity of resilience: not to be overcome by negativity but choosing life in times of trouble?

INTRODUCTION TO ISAAC OF STELLA: Sermon 14



Dom Erik Varden (Mount Saint Bernard)

Date of Birth: 13 May 1974

Date of Entry: 20 April 2002

Preferred Email: erikvarden@icloud.com

Rare is the monk or nun who does not at some point experience a period of turmoil and apparent dereliction. The zeal of the early years dissolves into thin air. Within, prayer is barren, *lectio divina* loses its savour, the common life seems a burden. Without, trials and temptations come hard and fast. At such times, the story of Jesus asleep in the storm-tossed boat can cut uncomfortably close to the bone.

In her *Story of a Soul*, Thérèse of Lisieux describes her experience of a time during which the Lord seemed thus asleep. She took comfort in reflecting that Jesus kept her close to his heart in his dreams, thereby anticipating a Scriptural motif that would become for her, later, a light in still greater darkness: “I sleep but my heart wakes” (Song of Songs 5:2).

Isaac understands the Lord’s sleep differently. Underlying his exposition is the Psalmist’s assertion, obliquely cited, that the Lord of himself “neither slumbers nor sleeps” (Ps 121:4). Sleep is an anomaly for God. If he yields to it nonetheless, it is because we do not care about his presence, being effectively asleep to him. Isaac turns our sense that Christ is asleep into an ascetic wake-up call.

On Lake Genesareth, he tells us, the disciples “*let* [Jesus] sleep”: they failed to attend to him as Lord. In his sleep, therefore, he revealed himself as God, sending “winds forth from his

treasuries”. Awakened, he stilled those same winds with a word. If we pray the Office and read the Fathers in the vernacular, we are liable to miss a crucial reference, here, to the Psalms. The line about winds from treasuries comes from Psalm 134, an Exodus Psalm that recounts how God led Israel through tribulation *because* he had “chosen Jacob for himself” and desired to lead his elect home, to the land promised “as a heritage”.

In this way, Isaac would have us understand that storms we experience may in fact be sent by the Lord for a purpose of salvation. The Lord’s gifts are not all sweetness and light. God would have us grow up, become mature, capable of shouldering his yoke, which, although it is easy, demands strength of purpose. When we are caught up in a tempest, let us not blithely assume that we are hapless victims. The storm may play a role in God’s plan. It may be a potential turning point in our Christian and monastic life. The Lord may choose to nod off at times to teach us valuable lessons, such as: to re-read present experience in the light of eternity; to realise our desperate *need* for Christ’s presence; to have faith humble and strong enough to turn to him, even in his apparent non-concern, and pray, “Lord, help”.

That said, Isaac makes it clear that we should keep the Lord from falling asleep in the first place. How? By talking to him, by asking him things. We should keep knocking on his door. We do this, Isaac says, by the practices of reading, meditation, and prayer. This is striking. It seems to be a rule that when someone tires of monastic life, gets itchy feet and starts thinking about leaving, he or she has not practised serious *lectio* for years. Reading goes out of the window on account of the effort it takes to engage perseveringly with texts that, let’s face it, are not easy. Once we stop doing *lectio*, however, prayer soon dries up. We lose the habit of positioning ourselves within the parameters of Revelation. And so our contemplative vocation loses its urgency.

Wounded as we are by sin, the desire for God does not come naturally to us: it must be cultivated and kept alive. This is what Isaac is driving at in various ways. For God to be a palpable presence in our life, we must first be awake, alert to him. If he seems to withdraw, then, resist the childish urge to curl up and sulk! Seek him with renewed determination, that he may be found. Be confident that the traditional monastic practices are privileged means to this end.

Isaac links the sense of God’s absence to *acedia*, a passion to which monastics are prone. It has much in common with depression, being a state in which reality loses colour and taste, in which anger, frustration and hurt start feeding on themselves. “Be watchful”, Isaac tells us. Should poverty, solitude, and silence—the foundations of our *conversatio*—come to seem distasteful and harsh, do not be too quick to blame the Lord, as if he had abandoned you. Ask yourself instead whether you have kept the flame of your vocation alive by living on its terms, coherently and generously. If not, repent and start again: the Lord will help. Otherwise, be certain that God’s trials, although sometimes hard, are purposeful. Try to work out what the tempest *means*, then embrace it as a task. The chances are you will, in time, become aware of the Lord standing by you, holding out his hand, telling the waves to abate, while you, led by him, safely reach dry, fruitful land.

At the end of his text, Isaac makes this prayer to the Lord: “Rise, command the winds and sea, and save me from pusillanimity”. To be pusillanimous is to be “little-souled”. The monk or nun is called, by contrast, to courageous magnanimity. The breaking-open of our soul is the Lord’s great concern. For its sake he will readily make use of fairly radical strategies. We shall know him, no less than the apostles, Isaac tells us, as Master and Lord “if we remain obedient to him” in the midst of darkness and tumult; if we trust him absolutely, stay faithful to our call,

and entrust ourselves to him. That, ultimately, is what will keep us awake and in movement, prepared to know the Lord “as he is”, unsleeping, watchful, ever calling us to advance forward, inward, upward.

ISAAC OF STELLA: Sermon 14

1.

“SUDDENLY a great storm arose on the sea, but he lay asleep.” What, dear friends, did our Lord achieve while his body slept? What, if not wake-up the disciples, whose hearts were asleep? It was while Christ slept that power was at work bringing “the winds out of his storehouse.” Silent and fast asleep the Word spoke, teaching the disciples how perilous it would be for them should they allow their Master to stay silent, to be idle, to sleep. Wisdom is learnt when at leisure, but not by the lazy. No leisure is busier, no free time more full of toil than when wisdom is being learnt, when the Word of God is being consulted.

2.

Martha toiled, Mary kept quiet, but was not inactive. It was Lazarus who was sick, passing from inactivity to death, and from death to corruption. How many today are like him! They are remiss and idle internally, though without the excuse of useful external work. Well provided with the necessities of life, they busy themselves with tall tales and silly scheming. No doubt, they have escaped Martha’s solicitude, but have not experienced Mary’s devotion. No wonder that in Bethany, the very house of obedience, they are afflicted with the languor of sloth.

3.

What wretchedness. Weak in the presence of Power, fools in Wisdom’s company; blind to the Light, dumb to the Word, they are wasted with hunger at the table piled high with the bread of long life and good discernment. It is of such the Scripture says, “With no stomach for food, they are close to death's door.” And just as our Lord allowed sick Lazarus to die that he might raise him to life, so is it here in the text we are discussing; he allowed himself to fall asleep for the benefit of the sickly apostles or whom they signify, so that at least in their peril they might wake him. Outwardly then he slept, he to whom the men we are discussing had, as it were, fallen asleep inwardly. Their inner state was shown by his outward state. But when gentle and subtle instruction could find no place in them, he warned them externally all the more roughly.

4.

Hence “the magnificent rage of the sea” that enables “the Lord to appear magnificent in the deeps” Asleep, he instructs those falsely secure by means of the tempest; awake he teaches by the ensuing calm those rightly terrified. Take my word for it, brothers, the storm and the calm, the sleeping and the awaking are, each of them is a word of that holy Word. Sleeping, he condemns by the word of the tempest that spiritual sloth which is followed by such confusion of mind as makes it a sort of interior and intolerable storm. Once roused and awake, Jesus, by the calm his word wrought, shows the need for vigilance and spiritual eagerness.

5.

So, brothers, we must spare no effort to keep awake. The very remoteness of the monastery we have chosen should be a further reason for our making sure that in the boat of our innermost being, surrounded as it is by our outer nature as by a sea, the Word of God should never fall asleep; in himself, of course, he never sleeps or slumbers. If Christ has nothing to do for us he cannot keep awake to us; he is, to put it briefly, interested only in being asked favours or being asked questions. At very least, he desires attentive listeners should he himself speak. Just you start sleeping to him, brothers, while he is speaking to you, and at that very instant he sleeps to you. Woe betide you should he sleep to you

6.

Let him but sleep to you and the wind, sea, storm wake up; the tidal-waves of fancy and the surgings of a thousand temptations will break upon you. Good cause have you to pray to him as the Psalmist does: "Give light, O Lord, to these eyes of mine lest they close in death." If you keep from sleeping, he will keep unwearied watch over you. Peter proved well able to deny Christ three times simply because he proved unable to stay awake with Christ for a single hour. He slept although our Lord had told him, "Watch and pray, that you may not enter into temptation," that is, into a spiritual storm. What excuse, now, have those who nod over their books in the cloister or snore during readings in church or sleep during sermons in the chapter-room? In all these instances God's very Word speaks and goes unheeded.

7.

Our Lord and Teacher speaks and we, the disciples, sleep. We must consider three practices: reading, meditation and prayer. By means of reading or preaching (this latter is a kind of reading) God speaks to you. That is why we are told, "Listen, you that have ears to hear with." In meditation you put him queries and in prayer you put requests to him. That is why he says: "Ask, and the gift will come; seek and you shall find; knock and the door shall be opened to you". That prayer does, indeed, obtain, that meditation does discover, they know better than I can tell you who in their zeal for things spiritual have trained their faculties by due exercise. Humans by their natural gifts cannot take in such things, even if his form of life be spiritual.

8.

I repeat, and I wish you would remember the fact that, just as you will find people unspiritual in mind but spiritual in form of life, so you will find some unspiritual in form of life but spiritual in mind. A third kind are those whose lives and values are just natural; a fourth, those whose lives and values both are spiritual. There can be no doubt that reading, meditation and prayer are the whole formation of the spiritual mind. Why? Because they are a dwelling of the mind in heavenly realms, like Moses, on the mountain. One who makes use of them speaks and listens to, holds conversation with God as with his neighbour, though it be only in his mind.

9.

A person's life itself can be a going aside and coming near to the Lord. It is in this sense that our Lord says, "Come close to me, and I will come close to you." To repeat: some are near God in their understanding, but far from him in their manner of life; others live close to him in manner of life, though not in understanding; still others are far from God in both their conduct

and their mind; while others are close to God in both ways. Understanding brings one close to God; manner of life brings closer; lastly, understanding and life together bring one as close as possible.

10.

Let us keep awake, then, brothers, and be on our guard most specially against the plague of spiritual laziness that comes usually of immature self-assurance and infects even such as really have made some progress. They tell themselves that, having overcome all evil tendencies, they may lie down to rest in all safety, with nothing to terrify them. In the case of the less advanced, the fact that their bodily needs are taken care of by others leaves them, so they think, nothing further to do.

This explains, dearest friends, why the holy Fathers whose sublime and severe way of life we have the nerve to attempt to follow (we who are so laden and lax, not to say pampered and sleek), made poverty the corner-stone that holds together the two walls of the spiritual building. By making poverty twofold it is applicable to both our exterior and our interior, that is to being poor in pocket and in spirit. The idea is that once people become aware of how lacking they are on both counts, they should begin to take good care that they are lacking in neither.

11.

Here you have the reason, dearest friends, why we have led you into this remote, waste and forbidding wilderness, and did it so craftily. Here you can be as humble as you like, you cannot become wealthy. This indeed is solitude worthy of the name, far out, at sea, cut off almost completely from all the rest of the world. Here then destitute of all worldly comfort and very nearly all human solace, it should not be difficult to give worldliness a rest. What can the world offer to us on this tiny last island at the end of the world? Yes, Lord, I have gone afar off and made good my escape and fled so far away that I have no idea whether there be a place still more remote to which I might farther withdraw. You know.

12.

There was a time when my thirst for solitude made me long to escape; at last I reached this desert-isle, so desolate and remote. Some of my, so to say, fellow-conspirators lost heart and only a handful have come with me. Even these dread this howling wilderness, and there are times, I must admit, when I dread it. It is true, Lord, solitude has been added to solitude, silence has been piled on silence. We are more and more forced to silence among ourselves, but only that we may converse all the more freely and familiarly with you alone. As for ourselves, dearest friends, is it not in our own best interest to focus our attention with thanksgiving and praise on the mercy that God has shown us, mercy beyond our hopes?

13.

His favour has so arranged this exile of ours that on the one hand we have leisure for prayer, meditation and reading, on the other we have no option but to work if we are to have the means of sharing with those in need, that is with our own animal bodies. Rather than with the sweat of hired help or of oxen, we must be ready to earn our bread with the sweat of our own brow.

14.

So, brothers, my dear fellow-prisoners and fellow-refugees, take the advice offered by the Prophet in the words, "You that keep the Lord in remembrance take no rest nor let him rest

either.” Keep awake to him, unless you would have him sleep to you. For my part, “to you Lord shall I cry” at all times, and “do you, my God, not leave my cry unanswered. Listen to me” or I shall become like those at sea, shipping water perilously. Open to one who knocks in meditation, and answer his queries; do but listen to his prayers. Your great and generous love is more than ready, we know, to do this, provided that when you speak we listen. If you are listened to, you listen; you listen carefully to those who listen carefully to you. To turn a deaf ear to your law is to make prayer a sacrilege.

15.

“Speak, then, Lord, your servant is listening.” In your turn make answer to him who speaks to you. While we are both of us at sea neither of us should sleep! Were you to sleep to me, the world and all the memories it brings would rise up against me. What towering waves, what turbulent thoughts would assail me, were you to fall asleep. If I were to sleep to you, my flesh would not sleep to me. Lord, though you could have so strengthened me that I should not have to seek safety with you, nonetheless be my refuge and pay heed to my sobs and the groaning of my heart, and not least, to the unceasing clamour of my cares. Wake and rise up!

16.

Bestir yourself, check the winds, and the sea, rescue me from the fears that daunt me, from the storm around me so that within me and without there be deep calm. Let men and angels alike, to whom we present such a spectacle, see your power and, in their amazement, exclaim: “What kind of man is this, who is obeyed even by the winds and the sea?” This, brothers, is to be the experience of both you and me on condition that we obey him who so truly lives and rules. Amen.

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SEVEN SHORT TEXTS

1

Do you not know this? Have you not felt it? Have you not experienced it? When it happens that the heat of concupiscence burns in the flesh, or anger rages in the mind, or words of indignation and bitterness burst forth, all these are like the sea whipped up by a strong wind. They create a disturbance in a person’s inner life. When Jesus raises his cross above the sea, all is stilled, all is quiet. Also, my brothers, who has brought you to this strait and narrow path of salvation if not the example of the Lord’s cross and passion, which the Lord raised on the Egypt road.

Aelred of Rievaulx, *Sermon* 47:9 (See CF 80, p. 6.)

2

As a Saint [Augustine] has said, it is a good thing for the proud that they sometimes fall into some obvious sin so that they are humbled and it may be

for them what was written, “You take away their spirit and they fail and return to their dust” (Ps 103:29). The spirit proper to the human being is a spirit of pride. When it is taken away we return to dust, that is to the recognition of our own fragility so that the Spirit of God can be sent to us, since [the Spirit] rests only on those who are humble and quiet and who tremble at his word. In this manner [the proud] are re-created and renewed; they can make progress toward the perfect human being, giving consent to all things in accordance with reason.

Aelred of Rievaulx, *Oner* 12:11 (See CF 83, p. 114.)

3

While we are in this body we must flee from the face of the temptation that pursues us. And if sometimes we flee less swiftly then temptation catches us and we are knocked over — but the Lord catches us. . . It is necessary, while we are detained in this world, that we will fall sometimes; but some stay down, others do not. . . “The just fall seven times a day.” There are different kinds of falls. When the just fall they are caught by the Lord and so they rise again, stronger than before. But when the unjust fall, there is no one to help them they rise again. For they fall either into a harmful shame or into hardness of heart. They may offer excuses for what they did and thus shame leads them deeper into sin. Or they show a bold face, like a prostitute, to indicate that they fear neither God nor human beings but, instead, like Sodom they publicise their sin. The just, however, fall into the hand of God and in a marvellous manner, even sin itself works for them towards righteousness. “We know that for those who love God all things work together for good.” Does not a fall work for us for good if we become humbler and more careful because of it?

Bernard of Clairvaux, *QH* 2:1-2; (See CF 25, pp. 125-126.)

4

Certainly, the spring-like peace and joy that God has set aside for his inheritance is very welcome, the rain he willingly gives very desirable. But if it is necessary, the heat of adversity burns up all things and, again, all that Jeremiah has prophesied about spiritual dryness comes about. Still, persons who trust in God, who have put down roots by the refreshing waters of the Holy Spirit’s grace will not fear. Even if grace does not openly shower on them so that they feel it entering into them, yet secretly and interiorly it gives life and fecundity, keeping them faithful to their purpose, strengthening them to persevere and giving them sound speech and steadfastness of action.

Guerric of Igny, *Sermon* 23:5 (CF 32, p. 14.)

5

It follows that whatever comfort, delight and enjoyment we find in our observances and toil is an undoubted foretaste of the reward of our labours. If only because until we learn to delight in the correction which the Lord sends and come to live it, we scarcely support it; we barely withstand the

day's burden and heat. In grief and constraint, subject to fear and grumbling, everything makes us sad and spiritless. But at the eleventh hour, when the fifth grace joins love with observance, and good will is linked to our efforts so that we are able to delight in and enjoy whatever comes, every burden is light and every yoke is easy. Thus begins the death of fear, labour, grief and sadness.

Isaac of Stella, *Sermon* 17:20; (CF 11, p. 145.)

6

Any soul, therefore, that longs for the joys of love must not shrink back from love's bitterness if it desires to taste its sweetness. The lips of the beloved may be ready to kiss you, and in that kiss you may realise that they are dripping with [bitter] myrrh. Do not be so foolish as to reject it., do not offer only a reluctant greeting to the grace that comes to you. You have submitted to the yoke of a strangely hothouse sort of love if you are happy only in its pleasures, and hurry away all whining and squeamish, from everything that is involved in the labour of love and which must, of necessity, be experienced by those who walk in love's ways.

John of Forde SC 24:5; (CF 39, p. 139.)

7

But I am groping in the noonday like a blind man now; in whatever direction I decide to move, I go in fear of pitfalls and destruction. And, like a blind man I am told to go hither or thither, by this way or by that, while I myself, just like a sightless person, do not know in what direction I am travelling, nor by what road I go.

William of Saint-Thierry, *Meditations* 11:2; (CF 3, p. 157.)



FOUR SHORT REFLECTIONS

1



Brother Guerric Heckel (Mepkin)

Date of Birth: 4 March 1940

Date of Entry: 24 September 1994

Preferred Email: guerricheckel@gmail.com

“It was while Jesus slept that power was at work brining the winds out of his storehouse.”

“Silent and fast asleep the Word spoke, teaching the disciples how perilous it was for them should they allow their Master to stay silent, to be idle, to sleep.”

I love it when Jesus shows up when I’ve had a good meditation, a fruitful *lectio* or through *Opus Dei* and other monastic practices I feel aligned with the Divine. His presence makes a difference. I feel Christ present and active in my life and in sync with my monastic identity.

What happens though when I awake to a terrific storm in my monastic life? My *lectio* does not even yield a spiritual buzz. I literally did sleep through the second nocturn reading. No one seems to understand me. I’m disappointed with the direction of my community. So, what do I do when Jesus sneaks off and I feel alone.

I realize now that he is not asleep at those times. He is just using a different way of communicating with me. It is no longer about what is happening around me but within me. There is nowhere to hide. I must face up to who I am and who I am not. I am confronted by what I have done and left undone. I begin to recognize that all my successes, possessions, accomplishments don’t ultimately count for much. I have to admit I am not in control.

Here in the midst of the storm my prayer of self-surrender replaces my prayer for things to change or happen. I no longer ask so much for circumstances to change but that I be changed. Jesus’ presence in the storm makes that change possible. I have found his presence in his absence.



Mother Maureen McCabe (Wrentham)

Date of Birth: 17 September 1943

Date of entry: 2 July 1972

Preferred Email: s.maureen@msmabbey.org

“There can be no doubt that *lectio, meditatio* and *oratio* are the whole formation of the spiritual mind. Why? They are a dwelling of the mind in heavenly realms. Like Moses, on the mountain, one who makes use of them speaks and listens to, holds conversation with God.” Isaac places this profound spiritual principle in the context of a sermon on the storm at sea, experienced as a storm in the soul. It is a perfect context.

As a postulant I rode the waves with joy and conviction for many months and then, suddenly, I sank into the swirling waters of anxiety and doubt. One day, standing in the novitiate, I said to myself, “Why bother reading these assigned articles on monastic spirituality and history. I probably won’t make it anyway.” But I sat down and read, and in *lectio* I gave God a chance to speak to me and to calm me, something that may not have happened otherwise. Later on, as a second-year novice, I started to drown again in the mighty waters, but this time my novice director saved me by the anchor of *meditatio*. She suggested memorizing the psalms and praying helpful verses at work and other times. The power of the Spirit in those words regularly and thoughtfully repeated began to build up in me a quiet attentiveness to God that eventually gave me a way through many other storms. Now in my old age, I find myself most easily steadied by the simple prayer of the Canaanite woman, “Lord, help me.”

I have by experience come to believe what Isaac says: that *lectio, meditatio* and *oratio* are the whole formation of the spiritual mind. Yes; the way into continual conversation with God.



Dom Pierre-André Burton (Désert)

Date of Birth: 1963

Date of Entry: 1987

Preferred Email: F.Pierre-Andre.Burton@abbayedudesert.com

Diminution! Which one of us freely accepts to enter into this experience of “diminution” to share like Jesus and with him his condition of a humiliated man whereas, on the contrary, the culture in which we live urges us to be “fully men”? Nothing is less natural to the spontaneous inclination of man “according to the flesh”, always in search of power, prestige, recognition, and honor of all sorts! So to consent to such an experience of “diminution” proceeds from another order; one that has us enter into a life “according to the spirit”. A life that requires that we call forth all the hidden strengths of the soul. It alone allows us, by an act of faith, to bypass “the horror of solitude” when there is “solitude added to solitude, and silence has been piled on silence” (no.12) and in the pain of a feeling of abandon, or under the impression of having lost the road, or just simply the “way” (as we say lose the way), solitude becomes frightening and blurs any appearance of a horizon of light and brightness. “Reduced to nothing” - “diminished” then! Nothing remains against “the plague of spiritual laziness” (no. 10) but the humble fidelity to the formation of monastic life (and “watching”): *lectio, meditatio et oratio* (no.7); but especially a humble confidence that urges us not to tire in calling to God and saying to Him, “but you, my God, do not let my cry be unanswered...” (no.14).⁶

⁶ Translation: Father Thomas McMaster (New Melleray).



Mother Pilar Germán Rojas (Tulebras)

Date of Birth: 27 November 1966

Date of Entry: 22 October 1994

Preferred Email: pilardetulebras@gmail.com

This sermon by Isaac of Stella reflects and illuminates an experience I have lived all through my monastic life. On more than one occasion, I have felt the storm was about to wreck the boat and Jesus seemed to be unmoved, asleep, oblivious to the danger that gripped me.

Isaac of Stella makes me realize my mistake; in fact, “What ... our Lord [achieved] while his body slept ...” was to “wake up the disciples, whose hearts were asleep ...” (1) Here is the paradox: the Lord, who is asleep, watches and acts; I, apparently awake, am asleep in my self-sufficiency and in my banality. This is a sleep from which only He can bring me back. So, “asleep, he instructs those falsely secure by means of the tempest ...” (4). That is why “he allowed himself to fall asleep ... so that at least in their peril they might wake him.” (3).

Asleep is the heart that is “afflicted with the languor of sloth,” (2) with *acedia*. Isaac of Stella calls us “[wretched!] ... weak in the presence of Power, fools in Wisdom’s company ... wasted in hunger at the table piled high with the bread of long life and good discernment.” (3) Can there be any greater foolishness? No; but I have experienced how I can languish next to the source of life. When closed in on myself, my heart becomes dull, it sleeps and does not keep watch, it does not listen nor speak with the Word. It is the opposite of the beloved in the Song of Songs: while she slept, her heart watched, and thus she could hear the voice of the Beloved when he called her (see Song 5:2). By contrast, the Lord “outwardly ... [sleeps]” (3), but He watches over me and for me, and comes to my help in a thousand ways. Often clothed in storm, He is always filled with Love.⁷

⁷ Translation: Brother Gregory Escardo (Gethsemani).

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. 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: "The Theme of Alternation," in *Athirst for God: Spiritual Desire in Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons on the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1988), pp. 251-280.



UNIT NINE

The Energy of Hope

THE ENERGY OF HOPE

In our journey towards God, our first experience is something like desire but, unlike other desires, it has no clear focus. This tendency is expressed by metaphors such as “seeking God” and “yearning for union with God”, but what is meant by these traditional expressions is beyond logical explanation. Eastern theology distinguishes between the “divine essence” and the “divine energies”. In this life, the divine essence is beyond human comprehension: it is through contact with the divine energies, made present through God’s agency in the world of space and time, that we can enter into a relationship with God and be transformed by it. God cannot be considered as one object among many and, so, cannot be the direct object of our knowing and loving. Our relationship with God is intersubjective. We interact with what God is doing in our midst. “I will be your God and you will be my people.”

As far as our ordinary intellectual and affective faculties are concerned, God is absent from our sphere of existence. Though God is everywhere present, the intimate divinity is hidden from our gaze. Through God’s ongoing self-revelation to the world, we gain glimpses or intimations of a transcending reality, but the experiences are brief and rare. *Rara hora et parva mora*. Reflecting on the alternation between our perception of God’s presence and absence, Bernard uses terminology common among the first Cistercians: it is as though the Word comes to *visit* the soul, but then – alas – departs. Most often spiritual desire manifests itself as a keen sense of the absence of God. Most of us have to remind ourselves that this experience of absence serves a purpose in our ongoing spiritual development. It is not fortuitous. It is not counter-productive. It is a normal component in our spiritual maturation. Saint Augustine reminds us that desire deferred only grows stronger.

Coupled with this is an awareness of the obstacles to union within oneself. To overcome the distance between us and God two simultaneous gifts come to us through Christ: truth which reveals our true status before God, and grace which energises us with hope so that we gain confidence to cooperate with the good work begun in us so that it will be brought to completion. These themes find expression in this eloquent and evocative response to the text of the Song of Songs.

In this Unit we are asking you to reflect on your own experience of God’s perceived presence and absence, in your prayer and in your life, and to find enlightenment in Bernard’s reflection on this topic.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. I came to the monastery in the hope of finding God, to what extent has this hope been realised?
2. How have I experienced the normal alternation between positive and negative experience? Between fear and hope? Between darkness and light? Presence and absence?
3. Have there been times in which the desire for God has seemed hopeless? Why? Have there been times in which I have been conscious of a lack of spiritual energy: restlessness, tedium, tepidity, sadness, distaste, boredom, acedia?

4. How was this situation resolved? Were there members of the community who helped me? How? Was participating in the daily *conversatio* an element in finding a way out of the darkness?
5. Do I welcome each day as a moment of life or is it shrouded in routine? Do I live the present as a road to eternal life?
6. How optimistic am I that the Cistercian way of life will lead me to find God in this life and the next?
7. Do I ever think about the end of my life? What feelings does such reflection inspire

INTRODUCTION TO SERMON 74 ON THE SONG OF SONGS



Father Cassian Russell (Conyers)
Date of Birth: 19 April 1949
Date of Entry: 9 September 2006
Preferred Email: Cassian@trappist.net

This topic would more fitly be discussed by one with more experience and awareness of this holy and hidden love; but I cannot shirk my duty or disregard your requests.... You force me to walk in great matters and mysteries which are beyond me.

Yes, indeed. It is beyond me: this energy of hope. So many little hopes lack energy to stay. They drift away. I hope that Brussels sprouts will not be overcooked. I hope the morning is not so hot that we have to use the noisy exhaust fan to get air moving in choir. These are the small everyday hopes that come and go. All our hopes are, in some way, hopes for happiness, small, large, ephemeral or lasting. But happiness slips away. Is there another hope? An assured hope? “Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundred-fold, and will inherit eternal life” (Matthew 19: 29). Here is a great promise, a hope that endures. And, yes, there is an energy to this hope; it

urges me on beyond myself in this time and place. Returning to this hope leads me toward transcendent happiness, joy, life.

Underneath the tiny hopes for everyday happiness lives that larger yearning for beatitude – that lasting never-ending joy. It is a mountain, a rock, the rock rolled away from the tomb. The promise of life, the life of the resurrected. To touch this solid rock, I must turn my attention away from chains of everyday thoughts, letting the thoughts drift by, in order to touch a deeper level. It is to this level of interiority that Bernard draws us, to a place where our fundamental animating impulse encounters the promise of a new transforming life in a Word that is calling us ever beyond.

Often when I write in my journal early in the morning, I begin by taking my temperature – describing my interior weather, naming the tonality of the inner music, registering the color of the thread of my life. Some days I find a landscape that is flat, grey, without dimension, dull, bland and wearisome - as if I were wandering in an empty plain. There are days when my inner weather is so oppressive with clouds – carrying the heavy humidity that presses down on us in a Georgia summer – that I find it hard to believe I will ever touch any cooling refreshment again in this life. I find only dark oppressive clouds, dead silence and a broken thread cut from the loom of life. It is as if I have no connection to the refreshing Word of Life.

But there is another side of this changing weather: the vibrant green of a well-watered lawn, the sound of water in the fountain in our cloister, the brilliant colours of azalea and wisteria in our Georgia spring. I sense the promise of everlasting life bubbling up from within. That life is one of the “incomprehensible and invisible things of God” presented “in figures drawn from the likeness of things familiar to us, like precious drafts in vessels of cheap earthen ware.” Yes, figures drawn from this American landscape, images of longing carried by the cheap earthenware of ordinary petty hopes in familiar figures.

These floating figures give dimension to the underlying desire: that solid stability of the Rock our of which flows the undying fountain of living water. At baptism we received the Spirit of Our Lord; He has continued to live within, beneath all the vicissitudes of our daily living. Some days the source seems distant, almost unreachable, those days of an empty cloud-covered plain. Other days there is no need to search, joy is so apparent – even before I turn my gaze inward, I feel it bubbling up – the life-giving water promised to the Samaritan woman. This joy manifests the energy of hope for the transcendent, for something that lies beyond.

In the centre of his Sermon 74 on the *Song of Songs* I feel my experience given form by Saint Bernard as he evokes the alternation of our sensing the Word’s presence. I, too, hunger for that life promised by my Lord of Life, and I call out. “He is life and power.” I have a sense that, as my interior weather changes, my Lord of Life comes and goes. But, how can the One who is everywhere be absent? Is this dull wearisome plain not, in fact, my own dullness? My misdirected attention? Is this not my own thick-skinned heart insensitive to Presence? Am I smothering him with petty distractions?

In my prayer of quiet, sitting silently in our darkened church, I let distractions pass by. I wonder whether forgetting my life – and I am forgetting more and more little things, people from the past, where I left a book – whether this forgetting is not a new gift, part of that larger process of revealing who is most real within. Is involuntary forgetting small things not a heating, a melting and a skimming off the dross in order to recover that one drop of pure gold? Is it part of the stripping away concern with Brussels sprouts and noisy exhaust fans in order to uncover that bare essential fact that I will present to God for judgment – that tiny bit of gold left from

all the heating, burning, melting, skimming and refining – this tiny bit that is left after all the extraneous accretions are forgotten, put away, released. Here. This is what I have to give. This is the real, true substance of that deeper hope. The transforming energy of the Promised New Life will have distilled a precious dollop of pure gold that I can present as a gift to my Lord of Life.

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, Sermon 74 On the Song of Songs

*The Bride speaks:
Return, my loved one;
be like a roe or a young hart
on the mountains of Bethel.*

1.

"Return," says the bride. It is clear that the one whom she is calling back is not present, though he was here a little time ago. This is why she seems to be calling him back while he is yet in the process of moving away. Such an urgent summons to return indicates great love in one and great loveableness in the other.

Who are these followers and tireless pursuers of the art of love? One is pursued and the other driven on by such restless love. It devolves on me, as I remember promising, to interpret this text by applying it to the Word and the soul. I confess, however, that even to begin such a task worthily, I need the help of the Word about whom we speak. For such discussion is suited to one more experienced than I, who is knowledgeable in the holy secrets of love. But I am not set aside my duty or ignore your wishes. I see the danger yet I pay no heed, for you compel me. You force me to walk in great matters and in marvels that are beyond me. Alas! I am afraid I shall hear the words, "Why do you narrate my delights and fill your mouth with my mystery?" Therefore, listen to me as one who hesitates to speak yet cannot remain silent. Perhaps my very hesitation will make amends for my daring as, even more, will any profit that you may gain. And maybe even these tears will be viewed in the same light.

"Return," says the bride. So the bridegroom was going away and now he is called back. Who will unseal for me the mystery of this changing scene? Who will give me an adequate explanation for this going and returning of the Word? Is the bridegroom here acting from caprice? How is it possible that the one who fills all things can be said to come and go? What movement in space is possible for one who is a spirit? Indeed, is any movement possible for God, who is subject to no change?

2.

This is surely a case in which the principle holds, "Let one who can, grasp it." For our part, let us walk simply and carefully in the explanation of the sacred and mystic language and follow the lead of the Scriptures which, in mystery, impart a hidden wisdom by human words. In this way, God gains some entry to our experience through the use of images. These propose to

human minds the unknown and unseen realities of God by means of familiar likenesses to visible things, as it were offering us what is precious in vessels made of humble materials.

Following the pattern of this chaste language, let us affirm that the Word of God, who is himself God and the soul's bridegroom, comes to the soul and departs from it according to his will. This comes about, however, in the soul's experience rather than because of a movement on the part of the Word. For example, when the soul experiences grace, she recognises the presence of the Word; otherwise she complains of his absence and again seeks his presence, saying with the Prophet: "My face has sought you; your face I seek, O Lord." And why not? After the withdrawal of such a pleasing bridegroom, surely the soul has no will to desire or even to think about anything else. It follows that she seeks the absent one and calls him back as he moves away. It is in this sense that the Word is called back. He is called by the soul's desiring, but only the soul who has already experienced his sweetness can have such a desire. For surely desire is a powerful cry. As Scripture says: "The Lord hears the desire of the poor." When the Word leaves the soul, the enduring desire for him becomes a single, sustained cry of the soul, a single, sustained call of "Return," until he come.

3.

Now, give me a soul whom the Word is accustomed to visit often, one whom such familiarity makes daring, such tasting makes hungry, and such delightful dallying renders scornful of other pleasures. Give me such a soul and I will unhesitatingly attribute to it both the name of the cry of the bride. I do not think the present text will seem strange to her. It is certainly such a soul who speaks thus. She has, no doubt, shown herself worthy of the presence of the one she calls, even though not worthy of his permanent presence. If this were not the case, she would have called him rather than called him back again, since the use of the word "Return," indicates that it is a matter of calling him back.

Perhaps the bridegroom withdraws for this reason: that he might be sought with greater eagerness and held even more tightly. On one occasion he pretended to go on further. This was not what he wanted; what he wanted was to hear them say: "Stay with us, for the evening is far advanced." On another occasion when he was walking on the sea and the Apostles were in the boat having difficulty with the rowing, he made as if to go past them, not because he wanted to do so, but to test their faith and to draw prayer from them. Eventually, as the Evangelist tells us, they became upset and cried out, thinking that he was a ghost.

This sort of kindly pretence, adopted by the Word as part of his saving plan when he was in the body, he continues now that he is spirit. The same zealous activity is performed in a spiritual rather than bodily manner in souls devoted to him. When he passes by, he wishes to be held. When he goes away, he wants to be recalled. For this is no irrevocable Word. He goes and comes as he pleases, visiting in the morning and putting to the test. His departure is part of his plan, but his return is always entirely voluntary. Both actions are done for a reason and that reason he keeps to himself.

4.

Now it is clear why there is always this sort of change in the soul. It is caused by the coming and going of the Word. He himself has said: "I am going and I am coming to you". And: "A

short time and you will not see me, and a short time and you will see me." A short time and another short time! How long such a short time is! O good Lord, tell me how can any time be short in which we do not see you? With all due respect for this saying of my Lord, this time seems to me long and unduly extended. Yet both viewpoints are correct. The time of his absence is short for our deserts, but long for our desires. Both aspects can be found in the Prophet's saying: "If he delays, wait for him; for he will surely come and not be late." How can he not be late if he delays? It must mean that what is more than sufficient for our merits is not enough for our desires. A loving soul is borne along by her wishes and drawn by her desires. She pays no attention to merits and closes her eyes to majesty. Instead she opens herself to delight, leaving everything to the Saviour and trusting in him.

Thus, fearless and without shame, the soul calls the Word back; boldly seeking his delights and with easy freedom calling out to a lover rather than to the Lord, saying: "Return, my loved one." Then she adds: "Be like a roe or a young hart on the mountains of Bethel." More of this later.

5.

But now you must bear with my foolishness for a moment. As I promised, I wish to speak of how this happens in my own case. It is for your benefit that I speak about myself even though it is not good to do so. If you derive some profit from my foolishness then I shall feel better about it, if not, then I shall plead guilty to foolishness. I admit, in all foolishness, that the Word has visited me many times. When he enters I do not usually advert to his coming. I sense that he is present and I remember that he had been absent. Sometimes I have been able to anticipate his entry, but I have never been able directly to experience either his arrival or departure. I confess that I am ignorant of where he comes from when he enters my soul, and where he goes when he departs. I do not know the manner of his entry, nor how he leaves. This is in accordance with the text of Scripture, "Nobody knows whence he comes or where he goes to." This should occasion no surprise since he is the one of whom it is said: "Your footprints shall not be known." He does not come in through the eyes, for he has no colour; nor through the ears, since he makes no sound. It is not through the nose that he comes: he does not mingle with the air, but with mind, to the atmosphere he gives being not odour. Nor does he gain entry through the mouth, because he is not food or drink. He cannot be experienced by touch, since he is impalpable. How then does he find entrance? Perhaps he does not enter at all as he does not come from outside and is not to be identified with any external object. On the other hand, he does not come from inside me: he is good and I know there is nothing good within me.

I ascended to what was highest in me and, behold, the Word loomed loftier. Earnestly I explored the depths of my being and he was found to be yet deeper. If I looked outside, I saw him beyond myself. If I gazed within, he was even more inward. It was then that I realised the truth of what I had read: "In him we live and move and have our being." Happy are they in whom dwells the one by whom they live; happy they who live for him and are moved by him!

6.

You might ask how it is that I know the Word has arrived, since all his ways are beyond scrutiny. I know because the Word is living and active. As soon as he arrives within he shakes

to life my sleepy soul. He moves, softens and wounds my heart which previously had been hard, stony and unhealthily intact. The Word begins to root up and destroy, to build and to plant. He waters the arid lands and brings light to the gloom; he opens up what was closed and sets fire to what was frigid. The twisted roads he makes straight and the rough ways smooth. All this is done so that my soul may bless the Lord and all that is within me may bless his holy name.

When the bridegroom comes to me, as he does sometimes, he never signals his presence by any indicator: not by voice or vision or the sound of his step. By no such movement do I become aware of him. He does not enter the depths of my being through my senses. It is only by the movement of my heart, as I have already said, that I perceive his presence. It is by the expulsion of my vices and the suppression of carnal desires that I recognise the power of his might. I am lost in wonderment at the depth of his wisdom when he subjects my secret life to scrutiny and correction. It is from some slight improvement in my behaviour that I experience his gentle goodness. It is from the reformation and renewal of the spirit of my mind, that is, of my deepest humanity, that I perceive his beauty and attractiveness. From the consideration of all these taken together I am overwhelmed by his abundant goodness.

7.

When the Word departs it is as though you were to remove the fire from beneath a boiling pot. Immediately the water becomes lifeless and lukewarm and begins to cool. For me this is the sign of his departure and my soul necessarily feels sad until he comes back. The usual sign of his return is that my heart within me begins to warm.

Because this has been my experience with the Word, what wonder that I use the words of the bride in calling him back after he has gone away. I am moved by the same sort of desire as she, even though mine is imperfect and less intense. As long as I live, my habitual manner of recalling the Word will be that word of recall: "Return." Whenever he slips away, I will not cease to call out, my cry following him as he goes. And with the cry is the burning desire of my heart that he return, that he come back to give me the joy of his saving help, to give me himself.

I say this much to you, children. As long as he is absent, who is the only source of my enjoyment, nothing else can bring me pleasure. I pray that he will not return empty-handed, but that he will come back in his usual way, full of grace and truth, just as he did yesterday and the day before. It seems to me that this is why he shows himself like a roe and a young hart: truth has the eyes of a roe and grace has the joyfulness of the young hart.

8.

I stand in need of two things: the truth from which I cannot hide, and grace from which I do not want to hide. The visitation will be incomplete if either factor is deficient. Truth on its own is so severe that it crushes, and the happiness which grace brings will appear to be without substance if it is not complemented by truth, Truth is a bitter thing if it is not sweetened by grace. If it is not restrained by truth, devotion is superficial and prone to excess and often leads to overconfidence. For many there was no profit in receiving grace because they did not receive in like measure the moderating influence of truth. So they became too pleased with themselves

and lost respect for the gaze of truth. They had no regard for the maturity of the roe, giving themselves entirely to the carefree happiness of the young hart. The result was that eventually they were deprived of the grace which they wished to enjoy in isolation. Even at such a late stage, it could be said to them: Go and learn what this means, "Serve the Lord with fear, and trembling pay him your homage." When that holy soul said in the midst of her good fortune, "I shall not be moved", all at once she sensed that the Word had turned away his face. So was she not only moved, but quite upset. Thus she learned that it was her task to cultivate not only the gift of salvation but also the burden of fear.

The fullness of grace is not to be found in grace alone nor in truth alone. What does it profit you to know what should be done if the will to do it is not also given? What use is the will if power is lacking? I know many persons who have been made sadder by the recognition of the truth. They can no longer excuse themselves on the ground of ignorance; they know what the truth teaches, but still do not do it.

9.

Because such is the case, neither grace nor truth is sufficient on its own. I have said only a little about this and that is not right. How do we know about this? Scripture says: "It shall be reckoned as sin when the good is known and not done." And again: "The servant who knows the master's will and does not do the right things will be severely whipped." This is from the side of truth. With regard to grace it is written: "After he received the morsel, Satan entered him." The text refers to Judas who, having accepted the gift of grace, would not walk with the Master of truth, or rather with the Master who was himself the Truth, but made room within himself for the devil. Listen to this text: "He fed them from the fullness of wheat, and honey flowed abundantly for them from the rock." For whom? "The enemies of the Lord acted falsely in his regard." Those whom he fed with wine and wheat acted falsely in his regard and became his enemies since they did not add truth to grace. About them we read elsewhere: "Foreign children have acted falsely in my regard; they have grown old and limped away from their paths." They limp because they walk on one foot, being happy with grace alone and not and not concerned to have truth as well. Their time [of punishment] will last forever, like that of their leader who also departed from truth and acted falsely from the very beginning. It was because of this that he heard the sentence: "You have lost wisdom through your own beauty." As for myself, I do not want any beauty which would deprive me of wisdom.

10.

You may ask, what is this beauty which is so baneful and pernicious. The beauty which is your own beauty. Are you still without understanding? Listen to a plainer statement. It is the beauty which is self-centred and selfish. I do not blame the gift itself, but the use which is made of it. Not that it was written that he lost wisdom through his own beauty, not through beauty itself. Unless I am mistaken, the beauty of the angel is like that of the soul. Without wisdom only rough, formless matter remains. Human beings are both formed by wisdom and made beautiful by it. To appropriate this beauty is to lose it. To claim either beauty or wisdom for oneself is to lose wisdom. It is selfishness which causes this. Those who were wise in their own eyes gave no glory to God. They were ungrateful for grace and did not walk in it according to the truth but distorted it to suit their own wills. This is both the reason and the means by which

wisdom is lost. To be wise in such a manner is to lose wisdom. As Scripture says: "If Abraham were justified by works, then he would have something to boast about, but not in God's eyes." I say "Nothing is safe. I have lost whatever I possessed apart from God." What is death if not the deprivation of life? Nothing is as lost as that which is alienated from God. "Woe to you who are wise in your own eyes and discerning in your own estimation." About you it is said: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the prudence of the prudent I will reject." They have lost wisdom because God, in his wisdom, has destroyed them. What can they avoid losing who are themselves lost? And surely they are lost whom God does not acknowledge.

11.

Such foolish virgins are foolish only because they claimed to be wise and in so doing became senseless. They are the ones who must hear the Lord say: "I do not know you." The same goes for those who would divert the grace of miracles to serve their own glory; they will hear the words: "I have not known you." From these it becomes clear that grace is of no avail when truth is lacking in the intention; instead it becomes an obstacle.

Both grace and truth are present in the bridegroom. John the Baptist proclaimed: "Grace and truth came to be through Jesus Christ". So, if the Lord Jesus knocks at my door with one of these attributes and not the other, he who is the Word of God and the bridegroom of the soul will enter not as a bridegroom but as a judge. God forbid that this should ever happen! May he not enter into judgement with his servant. Let him come in peace with joy and gladness. But let him also be sober and grave because, when he reproves my overconfidence by the stern face of truth, he renders my joy purer. Let him enter like a leaping hart, but also as a cautious roe. Dissembling, let him leap over my guilt and may he show pity when he considers punishment. Let him enter as one coming down from the mountains of Bethel, clad in splendid festal array. Let him enter as one who is gentle and mild, coming forth from the Father and not disdaining to be called and to be the bridegroom of the soul who seeks him. For he is God, blessed above all ages and forever. Amen. [Editor's translation.]

SEVEN SHORT TEXTS

1

It happened sometimes (*aliquando*) that when she gave herself to prayer with her customary love she experienced a certain wonderful sweetness that quenched all the movements of her soul, all operations of thought and even every spiritual affection (*affectus*) that she had concerning her friends. At once her soul, as it were, bade farewell to the burdens she had in this world and was snatched above herself (*rapitur supra se*) and having been flooded with a certain light that is beyond understanding and description she saw nothing except that which is and is the being of all. That was no bodily light or any bodily likeness; it had no extension nor definition so that it was seen everywhere; it was not contained but it contained everything [within itself]. In a wonderful manner that is beyond description, being holds [within itself] whatever is and truth

whatever is true. Flooded with this light she began to know Christ, not according to the flesh as she had known him before, for Christ Jesus, a spirit before her face, has led her into his truth.

Aelred of Rievaulx, *Oner* 2:18-19; (See CF 83, pp. 35-36.)

2

We should know that at some times the righteous are raised above themselves by an excess of contemplation into a certain security of mind and constancy of trust. In this condition, they realise that all present evils and the danger of death are to be despised in God, and by realising this, they despise them. But at other times they are laid low by their own weakness and as [ordinary] human beings, they are afraid in the midst of these dangers; and the more they humbly fear their own weakness, the more truly they recognise it. This is why it is written of them “They ascend as far as the heavens and they descend as far as the abyss.” They ascend as far as the heavens by an excess of contemplation and of security in God. They descend as far as the abyss by an excess of fear and faintheartedness in themselves.

Baldwin of Forde, *The Commendation of Faith* 12:6; (CF 59, pp. 73-74.)

3

In this second kind [of spiritual marriage] there is, now and then, an experience of *excessus* and a recession from bodily senses so that the soul is so aware of the Word that it is no longer aware of itself. This happens when the mind, enticed by the unimaginable sweetness of the Word is, somehow, stolen from itself. It is seized and snatched away from itself so that it may find pleasure in the Word.

Bernard of Clairvaux, SC 85:13; (See CF 40, p. 209.)

4

“I found him,” she says, “I found him who previously sought and found me like a stray sheep and like a lost coin, and his mercy anticipated me.” He found me earlier, I say, when I was lost; when I deserved nothing, he anticipated me. He found me straying, he anticipated me despairing. He found me denying; he anticipated me distrusting. He found me pointing out my state; he anticipated me calling me back to himself. He found me as I wandered in errors; he anticipated me with gifts when I was without grace. He found me not so that I might choose him but that he might choose me. He anticipated me so that he might love me first. So, therefore, chosen and loved, sought and acquired, found and anticipated, how should I not both love and seek him with an effort according to my strength and with longing beyond my strength? I seek, I seek until, having gained my desire, I may cry out in a voice of joy, “I have found him whom my soul loves.”

Gilbert of Swineshead SC 8:8; (See CF 4, pp. 120-121.)

5

When the love of Christ so absorbs all human feelings that someone becomes so unmindful and forgetful of self that Jesus Christ and the things that pertain to Jesus Christ fill the mind, then charity is made perfect. For one who has experienced this love, poverty is no burden, injuries are not felt, shame is laughable, loss is nothing, and even death itself is reckoned a gain, since it is a transition from death to life.

Guerric of Igny *Sermons* 33:5 [Resu 1:5]; (See CF 32, p. 84.)

6

We know a God-fearing monk from the same place [Clairvaux] who, while he was living in that community, was standing in choir with the others on the Vigil of All Saints. This man loved Blessed John the Evangelist with a special affection and he took much pleasure in recalling him and his writings to mind. When at Mass they read the usual epistle from the Apocalypse he experienced a wonderful sweetness in these words. At the end of the last verse where it says: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and divinity” and so forth, his whole soul melted by the fire of divine love. Such a great abundance of happiness was poured into him that he could scarcely control himself for very joy. Then he was snatched up into jubilation and was completely outside himself, seeing only Christ – as it were – present to the eyes of his heart and embracing him with interior arms. He remained standing in the same place while his mind was being abundantly fed by this heavenly allowance.

Herbert of Clairvaux, *De Miraculis*, 2:10; (PL 185, p. 1321 cd.)

7

For there, where there are no rational arguments or lines of thought to lead one on and upwards step by step, up to the torrent of your delights and the full joy of your love – there, I say, he to whom you grant it, he who seeks faithfully and persists in knocking, there of a sudden he may find himself arrived already! But, Lord, when something of this joy falls to my lot – and it is all too seldom that it happens – but when it does, Lord, then I cry aloud and shout: “Lord, it is good for us to be here! Let us make here three tents, one for faith, one for hope and one for love!” Do I ever know what I am saying when I say: “It is good for us to be here!”? But then forthwith I fall to the ground as one dead and when I look around me I see nothing. I find myself just as I was before, back in my sorrow of heart and affliction of soul. Till when, O Lord, till when? How long must I seek counsel in my soul and be vexed in my heart every day? How long will your Spirit thus come and go in mortal men, never remaining with them, blowing where he will?

William of Saint-Thierry, *On Contemplating God* 5; (CF 3, pp. 42-43.)

FOUR SHORT REFLECTIONS

1



Dom Gerard D'Souza (Genesee)

Date of Birth: 24 May 1958

Date of entry: 15 October 1992

Preferred Email: gerarddsouza@geneseeabbey.org

Saint Bernard's Sermon 74 on the Song of Songs has always been noted for its description of the alternation which takes place in the soul with the coming and the going of the Word. I will not focus on this experience of alternation. What really speaks to me occurs later in the text when Saint Bernard touches on the inseparable conjunction of grace and truth as it is disclosed itself with personal experience.

I have heard it said that the reasons that bring someone to monastic life are not the reasons that keep someone in monastic life. In my case, one of the chief reasons I persevere in monastic life is that I can live in the truth. I deliberately have chosen the phrase "to live in the truth" because Cistercian life through the charism of the founders is so organized that every aspect is to lead us into life and truth. I experience this as freedom and as space. Conversely I have experienced untruth in my own life as constriction.

It is also my conviction that I never could have welcomed the truth were it not wrapped in the unction of grace. Were it not for what Rowan Williams calls the "reliable presence", a presence that underwrites our experience, I do not think I would have welcomed the truth. I would have continued living with subtle denials. One of the main channels of grace has been the community. The space afforded by the acceptance of the community over a lifetime is a primary grace in my estimation. It is how we experience the reliable presence of Christ in our midst. When held up by this grace, I am more open to the truth even though it be unpleasant and a "hard saying". Truth is accepted because it is experienced as a robust love that frees us up for a continually deeper immersion into the mystery of Christ and His Father and the Holy Spirit.



Mother Marion Risetto (Crozet)

Date of Birth: 17 September 1941

Date of Entry: 22 August 22 1959

Preferred Email: mmarion@olamonastery.org

Remain with me, Lord for evening draws near. It is getting late and I have grown old, not very old, but old enough. Too old for all these comings and goings of a bridegroom in SC 74, too old to be running around the city seeking you whom my heart loves, too old to deal with watchmen making the rounds, let alone fox hunts in the vineyard. Even too old to bear with you springing across the mountains, leaping across the hills, playing the peek-a-boo game through the lattices, knocking on my door at night. Please, no more comings and goings, remain with me, Lord for the unending evening draws near.

No more the boiling pot of SC 74:7 heat on, heat off. As I cook for my beloved sisters, my least favourite moment in the kitchen is when the pots start boiling, all at the same time. Rest, peace, joy, contentment come at the slow steady simmering stage when, in fact, the real cooking happens.

No more the anxious alternations of SC 74, you are to me like a retired husband, always around. Many women think with apprehension of this time in their lives when their retired husbands will fill the space of their homes, eight more hours a day, five days a week, but that is not you and me, Lord Jesus.

Ours the experience of SC 79:5. I have hold of you and will not let you go. Yet in turn, I am held by you whom I hold. I both hold and am held. I hold you by faith and affection and you hold me by your power and mercy for such is your promise: 'I am always with you.'



Mother Martha Driscoll (Gedono)

Date of Birth: 5 May 1944

Date of Entry: 7 July 1975

Preferred Email: ibumartha@gmail.com

As a superior I find many people get discouraged because they don't see any progress in their lives. Instead of getting better, they feel they are getting worse. Where is God? What's the point of this life? That's when I quote this passage. When asked about his experience of God, Saint Bernard explains that he knows he has been touched by God when he sees more clearly his faults and sins. You might say that he knows God is present when he has a crisis that shows him his misery.

In his love, God shows us to ourselves as he sees us, as we really are, what we don't want to see. We would like to be on fire with desire but our stony hearts seem cold and bereft of desire. But that unfelt desire is being transformed into the energy of faithfulness, perseverance, obedience, gift of self in the common life, learning to love each other - with rare moments of the warmth of his presence and many more moments of faith in his mercy. I learn to see the beauty of his presence in lack of fervour, in the pain of emptiness and selfishness, annoyance and impatience in myself and others: all signs of frustrated, unfulfilled desire seeking compensations.

Desire is hope that doesn't falter as Jesus leads us down the path to the twelfth step of humility that does not seek false heights of individualistic spirituality but rather unites us in our misery as sinners embraced by his infinite Mercy.



Sister Sarah Branigan (Glencairn)

Date of Birth: 11 April 1973

Date of Entry: 7 November 2001

Preferred Email: sarah.ocso@gmail.com

Saint Bernard is not only gifted with “visitations” of the Word, but gifted too with the words to articulate that experience. He is truly our teacher in illuminating the ways of love. Yet, a further message I received in this sermon, and perhaps the more effectively owing to the contemporary translation, is that in spite of his authority he is nevertheless clearly “one of us”. His humble protestations of unworthiness in expounding on the “holy secrets of love” are not the posturing of one who is falsely modest.

It is from the gift of Bernard’s own personal experience of God that he instructs in this sermon, though not from a lofty distance. We see that he too, like us, suffered the mysterious alternations between the presence and absence of God in the spiritual life. He also has asked the question of this “changing scene”: is God inconstant, capricious? Am I forsaken? He too is filled with feelings of sadness and longing in the absence of the beloved.

In cautioning against trusting our senses and emotions and instead recognising the signs of God’s presence by its effects in his life, Bernard also presents in section 6 a deeply human portrayal of the other side of his experience during God’s absence. He confesses to his “sleepy soul”, his “hard, stony” heart that is “arid”, “gloomy”, “closed”, “frigid”, “twisted”, and “rough”. This is the passage I am drawn to again and again in this sermon, where the “experience” is clearly not of Bernard’s making but of God’s initiative, who “shakes to life” and “sets fire”, “makes straight”, “roots up, destroys”, “builds and plants”.

Rather than focusing on feelings, Bernard is “lost in wonderment” at the wisdom of God himself for the transformation of his whole being. It is in the context of this conversion process, in grace *and* truth, that we are to understand the reasons for God’s absence; not as complacent passivity on God’s part, but as a means of drawing forth in us an ever-deepening desire and search for the One to whom we too cry out: “Return!”

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. 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: "Bernard's Biblical Mysticism," *Studies in Spirituality* 4 (1994), pp. 12-30.

Dutton, Marsha, "'Would that I Might': Gilbert of Hoyland on the Bride's Joy and the Guardian's Burden," *CSQ* 53:3 (2018), pp. 311-335.

Fassetta, Raffaele, "The Christocentric and Nuptial Mysticism of Saint Bernard in the Sermons on the Song of Songs," *CSQ* 49.3 (2014), pp. 347-365. (= *La mystique christologique et nuptiale de saint Bernard dans les sermons sur la Cantique*," *Collectanea* 75.2 (2013), pp. 139-154.



UNIT TEN

The Cistercian Tradition

THE CISTERCIAN TRADITION

Aelred was in no doubt about the goal of the Cistercian vocation; it is the promised land of contemplation (S. 82:14). He is equally clear about the means by which we arrive at this desired outcome: it is by the ordinary living of everyday Cistercian *conversatio*. “What I wish to insist on is that you cannot come to this point through slackness or indolence, but by labours, vigils, fasts, tears and contrition of heart” (S. 34:29). As a good pastor, however, Aelred recognised that different elements of the monastic lifestyle were given priority by different people. It is unrealistic to expect that all will be perfect in everything. “In temptation each one should take refuge in that exercise in which he finds the most grace” (S. 8:17). He had confidence in the efficacy of the Cistercian life.

Tradition is more like a verb than a noun. It is not so much a body of teaching and texts and the transmission of something; it is the act of passing on what we have received – accepting that what we hand on will be modified in the process of its being received by another. The Cistercian tradition is accepted when we live the Cistercian *conversatio*. It is strengthened when we deepen the meaning of our observance through internalising the beliefs and values expressed by the great exponents of our tradition. It is handed on when we transmit to a new generation both a way of acting and the beliefs and values that animate it. Ideally the texts of tradition become for us a mirror in which we learn to recognise the dynamism of the vocation to which we have been called.

In this Unit we are asking you to reflect on the impact that the living of the Cistercian tradition has had on your personal development. We are asking you to take responsibility for the flourishing of our tradition in the contemporary world. On a more practical level, we are asking whether you have any suggestion about how communities, regions and whole Order might foster a greater enthusiasm for the Cistercian tradition.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Have the texts from monastic tradition given in this program helped me to recognise, understand, appreciate and deepen my own experience of monastic life?
2. Which texts spoke strongly to me?
3. Has this program changed my perception of monastic/Cistercian tradition?
4. Do I have a desire to pass on the Cistercian tradition to a new generation?
5. Does the Cistercian tradition provide answers for the questions of today and the needs of contemporary monks and nuns? Are there questions that remain unanswered?
6. Do you want the Order to provide ongoing formation in our tradition?
7. If you had the opportunity, what would you say to the General Chapter about monastic life today?

INTRODUCTION TO AELRED'S SERMON 85



Dom Roberto de la Iglesia Pérez (Cardena)

Date of Birth: 17 October 1969

Date of Entry: 31 October 1993

Preferred Email: robertodelai69@planalfa.es

Saint Aelred of Rievaulx is an eminent exponent of the primitive Cistercian tradition. We can see this clearly in the text we are about to consider.

To our eyes, the first possible surprise in the proposed sermon is that, even though the sermon is given on Saint Benedict's feast, Aelred barely cites him three times, and in passing. This is because what Aelred is after, as are the other Cistercian authors, is not so much to praise a person—however dear—as to throw light on how the one in question helps us progress in monastic life. What is central, then, is the tropological or moral sense.

Indeed, Aelred takes off from Saint Paul's text, "These things . . . were written down to instruct us" (1 Cor 10:11), and goes on to tell his monks: We who are spiritual, "*let us seek the spiritual meaning*" (7)⁸ within the literal sense. Thus, Aelred's purpose as abbot and teacher of his brothers is that of seeking the spiritual meaning of Scripture.

The Sermon starts out with Aelred's goodwill gesture toward the monks (*captatio benevolentiae*) by praising them for their desire to celebrate the feast by listening to the Word of God. The Abbot explains the spiritual meaning of God's Word, insofar as it is "the food of our soul, the consolation of our sorrows, and the medicine in our infirmity" (1). The Word of God heals the memory—the *memoria Dei*—which fell through sin into forgetfulness of God, as Aelred tells us in the *Mirror of Charity*.

⁸ CF 80, pp. 417-424. All parenthetical references are paragraph numbers.

The drama of salvation history is involved: the struggle between the spiritual Jerusalem and Babylon. These cities represent peace and confusion—that is their meaning in Hebrew. In the moral sense, they are the strengthening in virtue and the upsurge of the vices, respectively. And, as Aelred learned from Saint Augustine, one of his teachers, these cities are “mixed” both in the church and in the heart of every believer.

“*Flee away from the midst of Babylon,*” (4) Aelred exhorts his brothers. Where should they escape to? To the cities of refuge (see Dt 19:2-10; Nm 35:11-15) that Moses arranged for the Israelites and which *our* Moses, Saint Benedict, instituted for monks. These cities are none other than the practices, the *exercitia* which St. Benedict decreed in his Rule. Three are corporal: manual labour, vigils and fasts; and three are spiritual: *lectio*, meditation, and prayer (see SS 8:15; 117:13). This is about the interaction between the active life—the first three exercises or “cities”—and the contemplative life—the last three—as described early on by the primitive monks from Evagrius Ponticus and Cassian to Gregory the Great, who began to understand the active/contemplative life as we see it today.

The three corporal practices [*corporalia exercitia*] are very typical of the Cistercians, as distinct from traditional monasticism before the 12th century. Above all, manual work—very close to voluntary poverty—was in marked contrast to them; so were vigils and fasting according to the Rule, as Saint Bernard’s *Apologia* reminds us. It is the work of penance that the monk, persecuted by sin—or, in the words of Aelred, “*still outside of the Promised Land*” (13)—must take upon himself. Those who have attained perfection and enjoy a certain tranquillity of spirit and flesh are in the land of Promise: they live in contemplation, tasting of divine sweetness. But even they must beware of thoughts wandering in their head (*vagis cogitationibus*); this is a reflection of the Evagrian doctrine of which Aelred had already advised his sister, the recluse.

We notice here, in all its purity, the Cistercian of the first hour that Aelred was. This is in line with the primitive monastic tradition and, especially with his teacher Saint Bernard. Not for nothing has Aelred been called the “Bernard of the North.”

But, Aelred continues, we “*are instructed to flee to one of these cities [an exercitium], because not all are equally capable of every exercise, and not all have equal grace in all exercises*” (16). Here the other side of Aelred comes through, a side that complements what we just saw of his marked asceticism and which he will develop more fully in sermons parallel to the present one (SS 8 and 117). We cannot all do everything or have everything; but that is the grace of community life, because we mutually help each other and complement each other. This echoes a beautiful Augustinian refrain that is repeated at least six times in the works of Aelred: *singula omnium omnia singulorum* (“each thing belongs to everyone and everything belongs to each one”). And this must be understood not only of the cowl or the robe but much more of the virtues and spiritual gifts, in such a way that what one brother does not have in himself, he has it in another. This is how God himself wanted it, as a means to humility, to increase charity and to come to know unity. The infirm can then say, “I have strength” because another brother has it; just as another brother has patience because another brother bears his infirmity with patience.

But the secret lies in perseverance, because many flee to these cities, but few persevere in them, thinking themselves already perfect after many years of donning the habit, as Aelred says ironically. We must remain in these cities, as Moses commanded, until the death of the supreme pontiff, who for us is Jesus. Christ died once in himself and dies daily in us (*cotidie*) when we

follow his example, putting carnal passions to death in ourselves. Such is the quasi-liturgical offering of ourselves: every day, with Him, and in Him.

Let us remain in the *exercitia* of monastic life (work, vigils, fasting) until we can say: we are “always bearing in the body the death of Jesus” (2 Cor 4:10). Let us do this because the Cistercian monk does not profess anything other than the cross of Christ (*nos professores crucis Christi*) and, moreover, our Order is the cross of Christ (*Ordo noster crux Christi est*), as Aelred says elsewhere.

This is “our Aelred”—as his biographer affectionately calls him—a faithful witness of the very first Cistercian and Bernardine tradition combining an intense asceticism in following the humiliated and crucified Christ, with a spiritual understanding of Sacred Scripture, a strong contemplative longing, and a dynamic experience of community harmony, unity, and friendship.⁹

AELRED OF RIEVAULX, Sermon 82

1.

Blessed (*Benedictus*) be God who has poured into you so much devotion that, coming together with joy and fervour, you expect not the delights of the flesh but those of the heart. Indeed, in this way, you worthily celebrate your feast days not in feasting and drunkenness (Rom 13:13), but in listening to the word of God. So you ought to know that the word of God is food for our soul, consolation in our misery and medicine for our illness (*infirmitas*). But you ought to know that medicine has a double power: one that prevents illness and the other cures it. A good physician instructs those who are well so that they do not become sick, and those who are sick [he instructs] about how to recover their health.

2.

This is the way that the word of God acts with us. We were healthy when we were in paradise. [God] gave us a counsel, or rather a precept, which would have maintained our health if we had observed it. We neglected the precept and so we experienced sickness (*aegritudo*). Our physician did not abandon us, even though we were sick. He gave us a precept by which we may recover our health. The children of Israel were as if healthy while they remained in Jerusalem and kept God’s precepts. But because they sinned, by divine judgement they were led off to captivity in Babylonia. Why there rather than elsewhere? Doubtless because Jerusalem was a sign of their health and Babylonia a sign of their illness. Just as health and illness are opposites, so are these two cities.

3.

Jerusalem signifies “peace”, Babylon “confusion”. In so far as health flourishes in the body there is a certain peace in all its members. But immediately illness springs up, there occurs a certain disturbance and confusion in its members. The same thing takes place in the soul. As

⁹ Translation: Brother Gregory Escardo (Gethsemani).

long as the virtues are flourishing, the soul (*animus*) is healthy and suffers no confusion. Instead it rejoices in a delightful kind of peace. But if vices rush in, all is disturbed, persons are in dispute with their own consciences and so [the conscience experiences] disturbance and confusion.

4.

Now let each one of you think how we were in that spiritual Babylon, how we were afraid, how we were confounded, how much confusion was in the mind of each one of us when on one side anger disturbed us and on another we were constrained by cupidity; here lust burned and there envy twisted us out of shape. Before we have consummated a pleasure we burn with desire, but after its consummation we are wearied by disgust. Out of this confusion God is calling us saying, "Flee from the midst of Babylon" (Jer 51:6). But to what place shall we flee? Maybe to those well-fortified cities of refuge that our Moses, [our] legislator, that is Saint Benedict, has set up for us. For holy Moses instituted particular carnal cities for the carnal children of Israel.

5.

It is written in the Law that Moses set apart for the children of Israel three cities beyond the Jordan River outside the promised land, and three others inside the promised land, so that whoever unknowingly killed someone could flee to one of these cities where there was the promise of peace and security. Nevertheless by the same law there was to be no departure from that city until the death of the high priest. For if someone were to go off in any direction before the prescribed term, it would be legitimate for a relative of the homicide victim to avenge the blood of his kin. But if the murderer were to wait until the death of the high priest then there would be an opportunity to depart and there would be no further permission for the victim's kin to take vengeance.

6.

The carnal Jews kept this law carnally. We who are spiritual seek the spiritual meanings within the letter. With manifest reason we can show that if there is nothing spiritual in this law then it can never have been given by God. What do we think? Could God have given this law that would last for such a short time? Could God have given some law in which supreme reason did not exist? But what reason can there be for punishing a like sin with an unlike penalty so that those whose sin was the same should suffer a penalty that was very different?

7.

For it could happen that somebody might kill a person the day before the high priest died and then flee to one of these cities, and another might do the same deed many years before his death. And so, brothers, let us seek the spiritual meaning of this law and then we shall see how just it is, how eternal, how worthy of God. For the Apostle says openly, "All these things happened to them figuratively: they were written for our sake for whom the end of the ages has arrived" (1 Cor 10:11). Thus [we can interpret as figures] that the children of Israel were in Egypt and that they crossed the Red Sea. Why can we not understand [figuratively] that the cities of refuge were also instituted for us?

8.

Why did the children of Israel not have cities of refuge when they were in Egypt? Let us see the reason they had cities of refuge after they fled from Egypt. Cities of refuge were set up for them so that if someone killed another person through ignorance he could flee to one of these cities so that his enemy could not kill him and he would be safe. They did not have these cities in Egypt not because they did not kill but because they killed knowingly and not through ignorance. Now let us see what is it to kill a person spiritually, for it is possible for someone to kill in a good way or in a bad way.

9.

Once when St Peter was hungry the Lord showed him a linen container full of unclean animals and he heard a voice saying, "Peter, kill and eat" (Acts 10:13). Those unclean animals signify sinful people. Such as those the holy person should slay with the sword, that is the word of God, so that they should not be what they were before, that is, sinners. Hence Solomon said, "Turn sinners and they will not be" (Prov 12:7), that is, convert "the ungodly from their ungodliness" (Ez 3:19) and they will not be ungodly. After he has killed them he must eat them, that is he must join them to his members, that, is to good and holy people to whom the Apostle says, "You are, each of you, members [one] of another" (Rom 12:5).

10.

On the other hand, the Lord finds fault with those who kill in a bad way when he says through the prophet, "They were putting to death the souls that were not dying" (Ez 13:19). You know well enough that sin is the death of the soul. Whoever sins puts the soul to death, for Scripture says, "The mouth that lies brings death to the soul" (Wisd 1:11). Likewise, the eye that sees a woman to lust after her brings death to the soul. The hand that sheds blood and the foot quick [to do] evil; the belly prone to lust, the ear [open] to detraction. All of these bring death to the soul. Therefore, whoever sins brings death to his soul. Whoever provokes another to sin by word or example murders the soul of the other.

11.

Such homicides we were often committing in Egypt. But we did not have cities of refuge because we were not sinning from ignorance but knowingly and voluntarily. But now we have come out of Egypt and are already approaching the promised land, that land which the Lord promised to Abraham and his issue. But not to his issue according to the flesh but according to the spirit. Now we are not without cities of refuge. Yes, brothers, we are greatly in need of such cities. But who has set up such cities for us? Who else but our holy Father Benedict through whose ministry the Lord has led us forth from the spiritual Egypt?

12.

But now let us see what are these cities. It is very useful for us to know them so that we can take refuge in them and remain in them until the death of the high priest. Even though we [still] commit murder at this time, that is we sin — for there is no human being who does not sin — nevertheless it is from weakness or ignorance that we sin, not from pride. These six cities, so it seems to me, are a sign of the six observances (*exercitia*) that our holy Father Benedict has set up for us. The bodily [observances] are manual labour, vigils, fasting. We may safely flee to these cities hoping to find there mercy, even though we sometimes sin, and hoping also to find protection so that we do not sin [in the future].

13.

I think that none of you will doubt that if someone after sinning takes refuge in this labour of penance, the devil who speaks ill of us because of the homicide, will not be able to wreak vengeance on us. But there is something else that pursues us because of the homicide, namely the delight experienced in the sin. For when we sin through some delight even after [repentance and] doing penance the memory of the sin comes back to us and from this memory is born a certain delight and by that we are tempted. So it necessary that we flee to these cities so that the bitterness of the flesh might overpower the delight. But these three cities properly concern those who are still outside the promised land.

14.

The promised land is contemplation and the taste of divine sweetness. Some of the children of Israel were living inside this land, others outside. Those who have already come to such great perfection that their flesh is subdued and their carnal passions are under control and [live] in a certain tranquillity of spirit and flesh and are able very often to think about heavenly realities and to penetrate and taste the divine sweetness: these live in the promised land. This is the land which flows with milk and honey, [offering] a double refreshment — the Lord's humanity and divinity.

15.

Outside the [promised] land are those for whom there is still a certain struggle with the flesh, the world and the devil. These do not lift up their heads in the excellent [practice of] contemplation, but drinking from the flooding torrent of trouble cry out with blessed Job, "If I were godless, {woe to me; and if I were just, I will not lift up my head}... (Job 10:15). These the devil pursues for homicide, that is for sin, suggesting to them the memories of the vices with which they were previously involved. Delight pursues them; the more they previously enjoyed it the more sharply it pursues them afterwards. Therefore it is necessary for them to flee to these cities, that is the bodily observances so that by the tribulation of the flesh they may conquer the delight of the flesh.

16.

It is commanded to flee to one of these, since all are not equally able for everything nor do they have equal grace for all observances. So it is right that when the enemy pursues us, that is when we are tempted, we flee especially to that observance in which we experience the greater grace. There are many who flee to the cities out of fear but there are few who persevere in them for as long as they should. Too quickly they become secure and they usually calculate their religion according to the time since their conversion and so if they have been in religious life for many years they think themselves perfect. But whether they have lived [there] for a long time or only briefly it is necessary for us to remain in these cities until the death of the high priest.

17.

It is not necessary to reveal to you who is our high priest. He is the one who "entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, finding an eternal redemption" (Heb 9:12). But how do we wait for his death in these cities? Brothers, Christ has died once and he dies every day. Once in himself, every day in us. He dies in us whenever, after the example of his death, we mortify ourselves. In the meantime we must

remain in the cities, that is in labours, vigils and fasts, until all our passions die within us and we can say with the Apostle, “Always carrying around in our body the death (*mortificatio*) of Christ” (2 Cor 4:10).

18.

And so, those who are more perfect and have a greater liveliness of mind cross the Jordan, that is [they go beyond] all that is passing (*fluit*) and transitory, and in mind, heart, love, and thought [already] live in that heavenly dwelling which is truly the promised land Antiphon *Iste sanctus*. These, although they are so perfect that they are not assailed by carnal passions, nevertheless consider it a great persecution when their hearts, even for a short time, wander and occupy themselves with frivolous and temporal things. And although [the perfect sometimes] spend time in the other three cities and sometimes those [less-than-perfect] of whom we spoke previously spend time in these [cities], they [the perfect] properly belong to these [cities] just as [the others] belong to the other [cities]. All are moving towards the death of the high priest, that is [the less-than-perfect] tend towards the death of their evil passions, [the perfect] tend towards the death of wandering thoughts.

19.

Brothers, these are the cities which our holy Father Benedict has set up for us. Let us flee to them, let us remain in them so that from them, by his assistance, we may be able to cross over into the eternal tabernacles. May our Lord Jesus Christ grant this, who lives [and reigns] with the Father and the Holy Spirit for ever and ever. Amen. [Translated by the Editor]

SEVEN SHORT TEXTS

1

Our *ordo* is a well-endowed city, surrounded by the ramparts of good observances like walls and towers so that our enemy may not deceive us or turn us aside from the army of our Commander. Oh, what a wall is poverty, how [well] it defends us against the pride of the world, against harmful and blameworthy frivolities and superfluities. What a tower is silence which damps down the assault of contention, dispute, dissension and detraction. What about obedience, humility and cheap clothing? What about rough food? These are walls, towers against the vices, against the attacks of our enemies. Aelred of Rievaulx, *Sermons* 3:7; (CF 58, p. 93).

2

It seems to me that these six [cities] can signify those six general observances (*exercitia*) which are laid down for us by law. Three are bodily, namely labours, vigils and fastings. These especially pertain to those who still are drawn by carnal passions and who are still, as it were, outside the promised land. Not for them to say “our citizenship (*conversatio*) is in heaven” (Phil 3:20). Three [other observances] are spiritual, namely reading, prayer and meditation. These especially pertain to those who having battled the passions

to a standstill, advance to an *affectus* for the virtues, tasting in these cities “how sweet the Lord is” (Ps 33:9). To these cities we flee for refuge, because of those who pursue us because of the murder [we have committed]. (S. 8:15) Aelred of Rievaulx, *Sermons* 8:15; (see CF 58, p. 152).

3

Again, we see that we cannot overcome temptations of the flesh by playing and soft living. Whoever is in the filth of the flesh through evil habit cannot be healed except through great contrition of heart and great destruction of the flesh and assiduous prayer. The one who wishes [simultaneously] to live pleasantly and to overcome the passions of the flesh is treating himself too delicately and deceiving himself. By divine help [St Benedict] so manfully resisted this first temptation that afterwards he had such a great quietness of the flesh that he never after felt tempted to fornication. Let us imitate him and resist unlawful delights.

Aelred of Rievaulx, *Sermons* 115.11-12; (CCCM 2C, p. 168.)

4

Our order is abjection; it is humility; it is voluntary poverty; obedience, peace, joy in the Holy Spirit. Our order is to be under a master, under an abbot, under a rule, under discipline. Our order is to have a zeal for silence, to be trained by fasting, vigils, and manual work and, above all else, to keep to the more excellent way which is charity. Moreover, [it is] to advance in all these things from day to day and to persevere in them until the final day.

Bernard of Clairvaux, Ep 142:1 (SBOp VII, p. 34).

5

I am astonished that monks could be so lacking in moderation in matters of food and drink and with respect to clothing and bedding, carriages and buildings. Things have come to such a pass that right order and religion are thought to be promoted, the more concern and pleasure and enthusiasm there is regarding such things. Abstemiousness is accounted miserliness, sobriety strictness, silence, gloom. On the other hand, laxity is labelled discretion, extravagance generosity, talkativeness sociability, laughter joy. Fine clothes and costly caparisons are regarded as mere respectability, and being fussy about bedding is hygiene. When we lavish such things on one another, we call it love. Such love undermines true love. Such discretion disgraces real discretion. This sort of kindness is full of cruelty, for it so looks after the body that the soul is choked. How can genuine love pamper the flesh and neglect the spirit? What sort of discretion is it to grant everything to the body and nothing to the soul? Is it kindness to entertain the maid and murder the mistress?

Bernard of Clairvaux, Apo 16; (CF 1, pp. 52-53.)

6

About to speak of opening the door, why does [the bride] first advert to her hands? Did she wish perhaps to suggest with what hands you should open to your Beloved, with what meritorious deeds you should prepare your approach to the contemplation of truth? Good indeed are hands scented with myrrh, which practise mortification of the flesh, which check its laxity, constrain its wantonness, that the entrance may be wider for the enjoyment of the Word. Do you not regard as drops of myrrh these works of regular observance, which following one upon the other anoint the mind and constrain the flesh? Consider our vigils, fasts, a modest and sparse diet, rough cloth and black bread, strokes of the rod freely undertaken, the chanting of psalms at daybreak and silent prayer; though each prayer rises with heartfelt passion, still silent prayer is the more passionate the more a quiet breathing of the body releases the breath of the spirit. Do not all these observances distil myrrh upon us as they succeed one another? Rightly are they compared to myrrh, because they inflict on the flesh the bitterness of discomfort and soothe the spirit with the ointment of devotion.

Gilbert of Swineshead, SC 42/43:8; (CF 26; p. 523).

7

The desire for an authentic monastic life acting in different ways through the centuries continues to inspire the monks and nuns of the Order to work hard to renew their way of life. In obedience to the principles of the Second Vatican Council they strive to come to a deeper understanding of their origins and at the same time show themselves docile to God's action in the present. In 1969 the General Chapter, by its *Declaration on Cistercian Life* and *Statute on Unity and Pluralism*, reaffirmed the Order's commitment to the Rule of Saint Benedict as its traditional interpretation of the Gospel and gave guidelines for the faithful observance of this Rule in the changed conditions of the world. In these documents the General Chapter made a distinction between the orientation and fundamental observances of the Rule, which constitute the Cistercian way of life, and those details that can be modified according to local circumstances.

Constitutions and Statutes OCSO, Preface 3.



FOUR SHORT REFLECTIONS

1



Mother Gertrude Ikebe (Ajimu)
Date of Birth: 9 December 1969
Date of Entry: 23 December 1995
Preferred Email: gertrude@oct-net.ne.jp

“God is my refuge”. This secret mantra eventually drew me to the monastic life. Knowing that I would fail to be true to myself as long as I followed the ways of the secular world, I sought a sure path to my true self. So, I fled to a refuge, which was for me a monastery. But little did I know then that the life with each aspect was “a well-fortified city of refuge” that Saint Benedict, had set up for us through whose ministry the Lord has led us forth from the spiritual Egypt.

Having nearly passed a quarter of a century, I wonder if I might get so used to our lifestyle and forget to remember the fact that I am a refugee who once had pleaded to stay and still vowed to remain here until death, which according to St. Aelred, means, “until the death of Christ, the High Priest, who dies every day in us.” His warning seems real to me: “There are many who flee to the cities out of fear but there are few who persevere in them for as long as they should. Too quickly they become secure, and if they have been in religious life for many years they think themselves perfect.”

To take refuge in God means to die to oneself in Christ on a daily basis. The original orientation already involves the final destination. With this conviction, we must endeavour to seek refuge in the God through our commitment to this life, needless to say, regardless of any thought of a monastic career.



Brother Juan Diego Warren (Andes)

Date of Birth: 28 August 1966

Date of Entry: March 15, 1991

Preferred Email: juandiego.ocso@gmail.com

Having an academic background in Spanish literature has advantages and disadvantages when I study the Cistercian Fathers and attempt to apply their teaching to my conversion. On the one hand, I understand that the Fathers, being men of their age, choose literature for expressing theological truth, and I can readily assume their love for metaphor and allegory. On the other hand, the occasional construction of awkward images puts my modern sensibilities on edge and provokes me to lay down this reading and engage in some other activity. Such was the case with Aelred's cities of refuge, which he says are to be found neither in Egypt nor in the Promised Land (See 11-13.) Where, then?

With a little faith and good will I was able to get past this provocation, and am glad for having done so. How often I need to learn again that my efforts are not directed toward eliminating the wild elements within me, but to transforming them into a source of life and communion. "Get up Peter, kill and eat." Here Aelred's graceful interpretation of Biblical allegory motivates me to assume more willingly Saint Paul's stern word about how this transformation is to be effected: by our dying with Christ (See 9-10.) And after allowing Aelred to rekindle the collective memory of wandering in the desert with the children of Israel, my baptismal gift of hope comes alive when he places before us the image of the heavenly tabernacles. (19.) This is truly the work of a spiritual father: to renew the divine word and help me build a common world of experience with the brothers and sisters!



Dom Juan José Domingo Falomir (San Isidro/Generalate)

Date of Birth: 14 June 1966

Date of Entry: 3 September 1987

Preferred Email: juanjose.ocso@gmail.com

Between Babylon and Jerusalem

The years of my youth are over; I'm living my last decade of the age known as adulthood. It's easy to measure the passage of time; what is hard is evaluating the experience. What a joy to have lived all these years—said to be the best of one's life—uninterruptedly as a Cistercian: what a grace and responsibility.

Aelred's Sermon 82 gives me a chance to view monastic life as the road from Babylon to Jerusalem. And what a hard, bustling road it is, from Babylon's disordered disharmony of selfishness and sin to Jerusalem's peace and order and divine sweetness. To reach our destination—Jerusalem—we must get to know the small refuge cities the sermon mentions. Seeing them on a map is not enough to benefit from them; we must enter them in truth and accept their demands with humility. They are the spiritual and corporal exercises Saint Benedict proposes; if you want to be a monk, they are inescapable.

We surely can't take this path without the light of grace—nor can we leave ourselves behind. The big temptation is to stop at deceptive byways and foolishly waste time. It doesn't help much to know the meaning of monastic life and not live according to it; and it's downright useless to know all about its beauty if you don't live its reality. Knowing the way is not enough; you must walk it with resolute step. The rest is chaff driven away by the wind.¹⁰

¹⁰ Translation: Brother Gregory Escardo (Gethsemani).



Mother Marie-Pascale Dran (Brialmont)

Date of Birth: 23 February 1947

Date of Entry (Chambarand): 7 September 1973

Preferred Email: mpascale.brialmont@skynet.be

Without doubt this sermon of Aelred is not one of his better known, more well-constructed, more delightful ones, on the theme of giving homage to Saint Benedict. The subject is the cities of refuge prepared by “our Moses.” These cities, where the children of Israel could find refuge in certain cases of homicide, are equally prepared for us - in less tragic circumstances, or so we hope!

The abbess who welcomed me, with her long experience of sisters more or less easy, made us see these refuges when she would say to us young novices in crisis: “Be where the community is!” That, however, was the one thing we wanted to avoid so that we could run away from everyone and stay in our little bubble of bitterness...

Christian de Chergé and his brothers knew how to find these refuges, after the emir’s visit on Christmas 1993: “After their departure, what was left for us to do was to live; two hours later, it was to celebrate Midnight Mass . . . Our salvation was to have all these daily realities continue day by day.”

For us monks and nuns, Saint Benedict has structured daily life in a way to be able simply to embody the gift of self to God, by the strength of community life and of its simple tasks: *lectio*, the office, manual work, tasks that lead to meeting him at the heart of the “yes” of each day.¹¹

¹¹ Translation: Father 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. 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

Bonpain, René, “Les adaptations et la Règle de saint Benoît ou la double relativité de l’observance,” *Collectanea* 31 (1969), pp 247-264.

Casey, Michael, “Tradition, Interpretation Reform: The Western Monastic Experience,” *American Benedictine Review* 69.4 (2018), pp. 400-429.

Exordium, Unit Eight: “The Value of Austerity”.

Roberts, Augustine, “Spiritual Methods in Benedictine Life, Yesterday and Today,” *CSQ* 10.3/4 (1975), pp. 207-233.

Vuong-Dinh-Lam, Jean, “Les observances monastiques: instruments de la vie spirituelle d’après Gilbert de Hoyland,” *Collectanea* 26 (1964), pp. 170-199.



EPILOGUE



Dom Olivier Quenardel (Cîteaux)
Date of Birth: 6 August 1946
Date of Entry: 8 January 1967
Preferred Email: abbe@citeaux-abbaye.com

LA TRADITION CISTERCIENNE

A treasure has been entrusted to us, a gift of the Spirit for the Church and the world. Hidden in the field of history, our fathers discovered it more than nine hundred years ago. To acquire it they left everything, even Molesme, preferring a desert to a place where they didn't feel completely free to run on the paths of the Gospel with an enlarged heart.

In joy they set our
These men with hearts on fire
To live the Rule of Benedict
Such was their desire.

They chose the narrow road
With Abbot Robert at the head
As the Spirit led them
To a new location.

They opened a glade
Heaven descended in the forest
Their hands built the house
For the poor of Christ.

In the silence they formed
A place flowing with love
As Alberic and Stephen wait
The brothers will come.

They kept the vigil in praise
And carried the weight of the day
From trials grace flourished
The tree of Cîteaux

(*Francophone Cistercian Commission*, Hymn for the Feast of the Holy Founders)

This treasure does not belong to us but it belongs to us to make it bear fruit. Each monk, each nun carries the responsibility. Each community, even to the eventual lay extension linked to it, might find the grace to affirm and renew its Cistercian identity. Each congregation, each order brings forth a color a reflection, an update for the good of the large Cistercian family and its witness at the beginning of the third Millennium. Thus it can be said that our treasure is “polyhedral” in nature, according to the image that is dear to Pope Francis. It reflects the convergence of many diversities which safeguard the originality. Nothing is lost, destroyed or overwhelmed, all is consolidated. (These lines are inspired by the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* §236)

This treasure contains an interior spring: “the living link of charity” allowing the tree of Cîteaux to bloom through the centuries. The number is less important than the flame. The extension or diminishment of its branches is less important than the perseverance in conversion of heart. From pain to grace, buffeted by the storm or renewed by the sun, we maintain the course.

But where does the fruit of charity taste best? In prosperity or in scarcity, in growth or decline? God alone knows! It is not out of place to ask if the fruit of recovered communion in the great Cistercian family has a more excellent flavour for the Easter Christ than those of the finest years of the Golden age, when Saint Bernard commented on the Song of Songs, or when Cîteaux and its daughter houses were multiplying one after another?

The paths of the Lord are not our paths and His thoughts are not our thoughts. *Experientia* has awakened in us the élan to come together. May the Virgin Mary, our Lady and Queen be more than ever at home in our communities, our orders, and our large family! More than ever may we unite with her to give homage to God.¹²



¹² Translation: Father Thomas McMaster (New Melleray).

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Translations into Other Languages

German: Sister Maria Magdalena Aust (Maria Frieden);
Italian: Sister Maria Francesca Righi (Valserena);
Portuguese: Sister Teresa Paula Perdigão, OSB (Encontro, Brésil);
Dutch: coordinated by Dom Bernardus Peeters (Tilburg);
Czech: coordinated by Dom Samuel Lauras (Nový Dvůr).

Rereading of the French Text of the Volume One

Sister Marcelle Bodson (Brialmont).