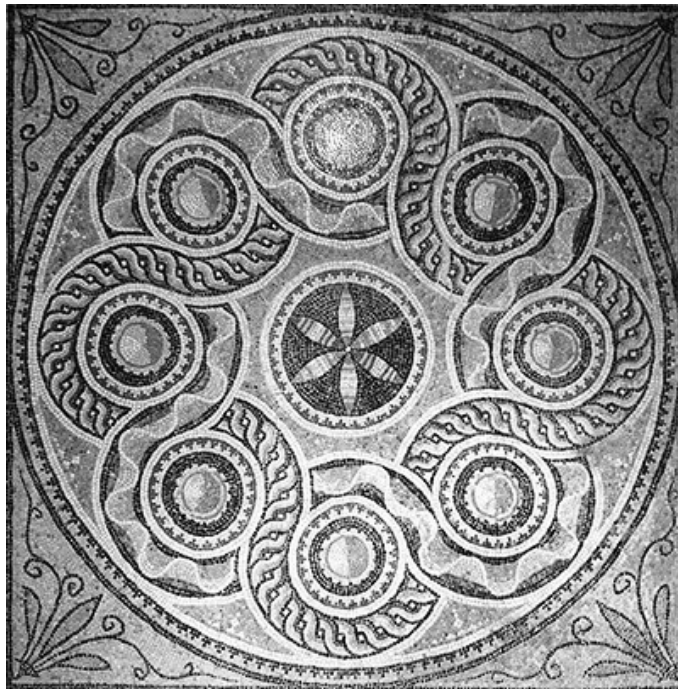
BENEDICTINES

LXIV:2 2011: FALL/WINTER



Although we firmly believe that Jesus has given us a share in his holy Spirit, sometimes things go poorly. In our very human households and families, in our very human ecclesial communities as within our all-too-human monastic communities, we know what it is to abandon that Spirit and so betray our core identity. In his wisdom, St. Benedict recognized the role that wisdom figures in the monastery must play in helping wayward companions from getting lost. Wise family members and friends do the same.

Mary Collins, OSB, p,17

Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. You gradually struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationship that saves everything.

- Thomas Merton

Contents

Editorial

	Barbara Mayer, OSB	4

Articles

Recovering Hope Under Dim Ecclesial Horizons	Mary Collins, OSB	6
Thomas Merton and the Wisdom of Nonviolence	John Dear, SJ	18
Monastic Leaders Comment	Jerome Kodell, OSB John Klassen, OSB Gregory Polan, OSB Patricia Henry, OSB Anne Shepard, OSB	28
Index	Joachim Holthaus, OSB Jane Brummel, Obl.SB	44

Poetry

Circus of Faith	Lillian Englert, OSB	27

Book Reviews

WORK: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor	Ben Witherington III	36
NUMBERS	Irene Nowell, OSB	37
WELCOME TO THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD: And Its Meaning for You	Joan Chittister, OSB	37
LECTIO DIVINA: Contemplative Awakening and Awareness	Christine Valeers Paintner, Obl.SB Lucy Wynkopp, OSB	38
THE MONASTERY OF THE HEART: An Invitation to a Meaningful Life	Joan Chittister, OSB	39

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Benedictines is published semiannually Spring/Summer, Fall/Winter by Mount St. Scholastica. Subscription price, $15.00; Foreign subscriptions, $20.00; Canada and Mexico, $18.00. Subscription form is on back page of each issue.

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Address all communications to: The Editor, Benedictines Magazine; 801 South 8th St., Atchison, KS 66002 or call (913) 360-6200. Deadline for manuscripts for the Fall/Winter issue is September 1; for the Spring/Summer issue the deadline is March 1. Manuscripts should be in Microsoft Word, double spaced, with only essential formatting, and e-mailed to: benmag@mountosb.org. Poetry should be sent to the Poetry Editor, Diana Seago at diana@mountosb.org.

Regaining Hope in a Changing Church

"Hope arouses, as nothing else can arouse, a passion for the possible."

— William Sloan Coffin

I look nostalgically on the exciting days of the Second Vatican Council and the changes in the liturgy and religious life and theology that it brought about. Pope John XXIII truly brought a breath of fresh air into a sometimes stuffy and stodgy Catholic church. He opened doors too long shut, changing Latin to the language of the culture, bringing the celebrant of the Eucharist to face the people, challenging religious orders to rekindle the spirit of their founders, calling the laity to reclaim their baptismal priesthood. Now, after almost fifty years, some feel we are losing ground and in some cases returning to the pre-Vatican II days of lock-step obedience and hierarchical control.

How do we remain hopeful in a divided Church? Sister Mary Collins, OSB, liturgical theologian and scholar, offers some glimmers of hope in her article, "Recovering Hope under Dim Ecclesial Horizons." She recalls past controversies in the church such as Paul's disagreement with Peter over obedience to the law of Moses and the new covenant of Jesus. She uses the experiences of Elie Weisel, Dorothy Day, Julia Kristeva, John Donne, and Ernst Becker to show how they too struggled courageously in the midst of opposition and confusion in the church. As monastics we too struggle to be faithful to our church battered by scandal and controversy. "Church history indeed tells us the story of frequent false turns among pilgrims, yet every generation gives us reason to trust the way of Christ despite our discouragement," Sister Mary reminds us. Always "grace abides" no matter how murky and cloudy the horizon.

John Dear, SJ, also finds his stance of non-violence frequently at odds with church leaders. He has studied Thomas Merton's writings extensively and shares five callings he has learned from Merton. Although Merton was writing in the 50s and 60s, his words on non-violence still resonate today. "The empire wants the church to be indifferent and passive, to be divided and fighting and silent, even to bless wars and injus-

tice," Dear writes. But Merton, through his study of Gandhi, believed that "non-violence is a life-force more powerful than all the weapons of the world, that when harnessed, becomes contagious and disarms nations." Dear tells us not to be discouraged, not to be afraid, but to "become contemplatives, teachers, apostles, prophets and visionaries of Gospel non-violence."

Five Benedictine leaders share their reflections about hope in the face of the challenges they face at the beginning of the 21st century. They speak of what is life-giving, how they view the vocation crisis, and how Benedictines influence the Church and society. Abbot Jerome Kodell believes that in our noisy technological society, the main monastic task is to help people come into quietness and experience God's presence. Sister Patricia Henry, prioress of a small Benedictine community in Mexico, says that her sisters "are striving to inculturate the monastic charism and at the same time to be counter-cultural." Abbot Gregory Polan thinks that the monastic commitment to Liturgy of the Hours, Eucharist, *lectio*, work, and community of goods are "prophetic in an age of rampant individualism." Sister Anne Shepard hopes that "our history will include contributions in ecology, environmentally-friendly practices, best health care practices, liturgical music, efforts to confront injustices on many levels, spirituality training, advocacy for women and children in need." Abbot John Klassen sees interreligious dialogue as one of the great contributions monastics make to the Church. All of them agree that we monastics must be authentic, must be who we say we are, faith-filled, contemplative men and women who pray for and serve the real needs of people.

And so we continue the struggle to be faithful to the Gospel and the Church founded by Christ. It is never easy to live in the midst of conflict and controversy. But we have the assurance that the Holy Spirit abides with us as we strive to listen to God's will for us in this age of cell phones and iPads, Facebook and Twitter, smart phones and e-readers. We need always to be open and supportive of one another on this journey of faith. Can we keep reaching out and connecting with those who think differently and to remember that we are all children of the same God who allows rain to fall on the just and the unjust, who lavishes His love on all His creatures?

Barbara Mayer, OSB

Recovering Hope Under Dim Ecclesial Horizons

by Mary Collins, OSB

Sister Mary Collins raises questions regarding our existential fears, especially of dying and "the Other," as we cling to hope in the midst of conflict and controversy in our Church and in our world. She delivered this address to retreat directors at Sophia Center in Atchison, Kan., in August 2011.

Spending our time viewing the "dim horizon" can be seductive. It is certainly more newsworthy to focus on the dim horizon for the morning news, the evening news, and the 24-hour news keep reminding us of how badly things are going in society and in the Church. Teresa of Avila once observed — even without the twenty-four hours news feed — that "Life is a night spent in a disorderly inn." On the other hand, Julian of Norwich was more encouraging: "The worst has already happened and been repaired." These two holy women were comforters to our contemporary Dorothy Day, whose life experience confirmed the wisdom of both. Meanwhile, we face the reality of the abiding chaos: continuing wars and rumors of wars, fraud and deception, murder and mayhem, impending economic disaster, and yes, our divided Church. The media make clear for us, if we had any doubt, that the "evil that men do," as Shakespeare's Marc Anthony named it, is almost limitless.

The Hope We Have

Most of us would prefer to avoid thinking about the daily acrimony within our divided Church – "a bitterness most bitter" (Is.38:17). Given the mess, can we still dare to hope? Our sad ecclesial reality surely has led you to ask in your own dark moments: what is the basis for the assumption we in this room share that we have sure access to a reservoir of tranquility to which we can lead others? For it surely seems that the ecclesial Body of Christ, of which we are all members one of another, is being torn to pieces from within.

The problem of disorder in the church is not new. This spring and summer I've been reading the recently published letters and diaries of Dorothy Day. The two volumes, more than a thousand pages, are a compilation of Dorothy Day's personal and mostly unpublished writings over the course of more than forty years. During those years she notes often her heartbreak about the state of the Church she loved. Yet she was not afraid to draw upon the divinely inspired imagery of the prophet Hosea to name "mother church a harlot," during an era when the bishops of every nation uncritically supported the arms race and unlimited warfare. Discouraged, Dorothy Day never lost hope.

Her lamentations were not simply over the hierarchy. She lamented just as much the numbers of naively idealistic Catholic Workers who left the Church in the later decades of the 20th century because they were disillusioned, feeling betrayed by senior churchmen who were supposed to be leading the way toward justice and peace. Nor did Dorothy think of her own behavior as impeccable. Her diaries record without flinching her own judgmentalism, harshness, impatience, and bluntness with others. How could anyone who knew her think of her as saint? What is remarkable is the hope that flourished in her heart as she grew more and more to trust the power of God's love.

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When church life is playing some days as a bad reality show, I myself recall St. Paul's lament near the end of his letter to the Galatians. He observes, "If . . . you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another" (5:15). This good advice — still relevant today — was originally offered when Paul had to intervene during an uproar in the not-well-evangelized Galatian church he himself had founded just a few years earlier in a not-terribly-important province in Asia Minor. When I am discouraged by our seemingly endless and sometimes slanderous petulance, I can again find my best reason for hope in Paul's conversation with the Church at Galatia. Reread it if you haven't looked at it straight through recently. His tone as he begins his letter is surprisingly quarrelsome, bitter and argumentative. So it is all the more instructive to listen to it —tone and all — as the inspired Word of God.

First, Paul goes after troublesome members of the Galatian church who advance a viewpoint about the way of salvation that is contrary to his own. He flexes his ecclesial muscle, reminding the young church of his apostolic credentials in order to establish his God-given authority among them. He means to show them that he is a formidable presence with an impressive track record, having come out on top, by his account, of how in an earlier disagreement, he had confronted notables like Peter, James, and John. ("*When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face* …" Gal 2:11). Nor was he afraid to call their behavior "their hypocrisy."

Then, like a nimble bantamweight boxer, Paul feints, suddenly coming at the dissenting Galatians from another direction where they have no guard up. He launches into a rabbinic-like theological reflection on obedience to the law of Moses in order to contrast it with the power of the Gospel he had preached. Here he is evidently aiming to impress and to overwhelm these Gentile converts with his erudition, reviewing the Mosaic tradition for them and contrasting it with the Jesus' tradition as he received it from the Holy Spirit and had personally handed it on to them.

Just as suddenly he changes direction a third time, perhaps sensing, as he listens to himself, that in the end neither his proud authority nor his esteemed erudition will wear down the resistance of those who disagree with him. He now calls the disruptive Galatians his "friends" and clearly and peacefully restates the vision of what God intends for the Galatians and for all who belong to the Church of Jesus Christ.

Too many called to be leaders in their communities let themselves be diverted from the gospel way and onto the way of self-advancement.

Well, what does God intend, according to the now-less-argumentative Paul? He starts by pointing out what should be obvious to every disciple of Jesus. Each of us must first look to our own selves to examine our self-justifying behavior. Have they who are now promoting returning to the Law of Moses forgotten that "the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." It is not their love of the first covenant (under which of course, they had never lived) but their own proud self-righteousness that makes

them so ready to "bite and devour" one another.

To underscore his point, Paul goes on to itemize a whole arsenal of mutually destructive behaviors that humans typically employ in order to protect and assert themselves: fornication, impurity, every kind of licentiousness, idolatry, making enemies, infighting, jealousy, anger and quarreling, dissension, factions, and worse. Certain that these can have no positive outcome for the community, Paul advocates instead what he names "the fruits of the Spirit." These are the attitudes and behaviors proper to Spirit-filled disciples of Christ. They are in sharp contrast to the human strategy to use self-righteousness as a means of self-promotion. Where the Holy Spirit of the Risen Jesus is guiding, so Paul says, there will be "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

Lest he himself had sounded too self-righteous in his admonishing the Galatians, Paul now admits to those he has been chastising that honoring the way of discipleship is not easy. He calls his own efforts to live like Jesus "the cross of Christ." From first-hand knowledge of his own failures, he acknowledges how hard the cross of Christ is, gently encouraging the quarreling Church, "… let us not grow weary in doing right, for we will reap at harvest time if we do not give up." Paul's message to the Galatians in the first Christian century resonates for me today as I try to pay attention and not grow weary. The way to find hope in difficult times – whether in our monastic communities, our family households, our local parishes and dioceses, and in the universal Church, as well – is identifiably "the cross of Christ" in the form of self-emptying. Yet self-promotion, self-protection, self-aggrandizement, self-obsession, and self-assertion to the point of aggression are high values in a culture of individualism, and we have not escaped being formed in that culture as Americans.

It is not just modern and post-modern western culture that wears the mantle of self-assertion. The Church of Christ lost its way in earlier centuries when it cultivated a clerical subculture and sustained structures of dominance in classical and medieval culture. It continues to wander in the diverse global cultures of the twentieth century. The uncritical assumption of higher and lower status among Christians has wittingly or unwittingly fostered the self-aggrandizement of community leaders, teaching them to be proud that God had called them to take responsibility in the church. Too many called to be leaders in their communities let themselves be diverted from the gospel way and onto the way of self-advancement. They are frequently bewildered or even angry that the ones they assumed were sheep are going off without them.

Individualism and elitism are certainly cultural escapes from the way of the cross, the way of self-emptying. Yet societies formed to value the common good, even monastic communities, are not necessarily better off than cultures of self-protective individualism in responding to the message of Jesus.

I have been haunted by the story of the Rwandan Benedictine Sisters in the l980s during the tragic period of ethnic cleansing. When the prioress of the indigenous monastery was faced with desperate neighbors seeking asylum in

the monastic compound, she and her council admitted the neighbors standing at their doorstep. But then armed gangs arrived whose tribal members were dominant among the community's leaders. They demanded that the women who were their sisters and clan members give them access to the minority tribe, the "others" who crouched in fear in the monastic church. The prioress was torn. What to do? Fearing for herself and her clan members and trusting their own tribal loyalties to save them, the prioress ordered the gates open and let the slaughter begin.

The Belgian sister from whom I first heard the story in detail rued her failure as she recounted the tragedy of the Rwandan Benedictines. "Our Belgian community trained them to be religious," she said, "but we failed to evangelize them." I have thought about that conversation often and now judge that she took too much responsibility. We have all been evangelized, and we listen to the Word of God daily. But fear is powerful, and our fall back position when we are deeply afraid of standing alone, apart from the crowd, is the decision to do what we need to do to survive with ourselves intact. In all the circumstances of our lives, we may try not to grow weary. But we are all vulnerable when we are afraid at the core of our being. We live now in a church, in a society, even in communities who carry fear at our core.

St. Paul has shown in his own life that the way to find hope even in the darkest moments is to embrace "the cross of Christ." I would like to probe more deeply the question of our fears, for it is our fears that cloud our sense of hopefulness. It is a deep-seated fear for our own existence, safety and well-being that is the source of our contemporary spiritual impasse as a church of disciples

We consciously or unconsciously calculate what we have to lose if we are not self-protective or self-assertive.

of Jesus, as I hope to show even if all too briefly. We consciously or unconsciously calculate what we have to lose if we are not self-protective or self-assertive. Who has not wondered, "Will a difficult decision cost me (us) my (our) reputation, the esteem others show (us) me, what I (we) most value and enjoy, perhaps even my health and my life?

My goal in thinking about something as gloomy as fear that can overwhelm hope is to take note that the retreat guests who come to our spirituality centers cannot but arrive with their own bundle of fears. The guests consistently tell you they are attracted to our Benedictine communities because they find us peaceful, safe places for them to be. But we, too, have our personal and communal fears of loss and failure, often unrecognized and so unacknowledged. Without our being alert and making solid choices about what a Benedictine retreat center can (and cannot) do, we may fail those who come to us.

If the retreatants' affirmation of our Benedictine peace has any truth, we must trust it is because we are living what St. Paul calls "the cross of Christ" with our monastic brothers and sisters. We do it as authentically as we can under the

guidance of the Gospel and the Rule of Benedict as part of a Church at odds with itself about its identity and purpose, surrounded by a self-protective and combative society. Consider this.

A recent guest here at the Mount for several days made the observation that we were "too good to one another." Could she have noted that some among us acted selfishly, or thoughtlessly, even boorishly and got away with it? As she saw us, we were clearly covering for or overlooking bad behavior in the monastery when by her standards the behavior should have been confronted. Perhaps we are guilty as charged. Are we really too good to one another?

Dorothy Day struggled with receiving such criticisms whether she failed to challenge and when she ventured to challenge Catholic Worker members, volunteers and guests. Dorothy, like St. Paul and St. Benedict, knew what were the behaviors into which we who want to mature in Christ have to grow: respecting one another, not striking one another, doing what is good for the other and not simply for oneself, and coming to cherish Christ above all else.

Individualism and elitism are certainly cultural escapes from the way of the cross, the way of self-emptying.

Perhaps, despite our foibles, our retreatants' being attracted to the monastic community can be a means to their maturing in Christ. But we are no more than a means; only "the cross of Christ" is the way. I have come to believe that deep existential fear for ourselves is the great obstacle to living life in Christ.

In the next section, we will be leaving the world of biblical discourse and monastic wisdom temporarily, in order to look at our subject of hope and fear from the viewpoint of five different late twentieth century writers. Our sources are each focused on fear, asking "what is going on here?" They have distinct starting points and use different lenses to survey the human condition of fearfulness empathetically, non-judgmentally yet with unflinching realism. Each one makes only a cameo appearance.

Existential Fear

Human horizons have always been cloudy and unsettled, whether for cultures or nations, for families or communities. The prevailing storminess of the human condition — since the time of St. Augustine we have named it *original sin* —- obscures our vision and impedes any reason for optimism or dreams of progress. Whatever grace sustains our Catholic church, the church of Jesus Christ has never escaped that human condition.

We'll look at deep existential fear first by drawing on Elie Wiesel's one-act stage play *Zalman, or The Madness of God.* Wiesel you recognize as a Holocaust survivor, Nobel Peace Prize winner, and a master story teller. His play's setting is a small synagogue some place in Soviet Russia sometime after the rise of the totalitarian state. The day of the action is the eve of the great Jewish feast of Atonement, Yom Kippur. The Day of Atonement itself is a time for the

covenant people to humble themselves, acknowledging their sins before God, those known but even those sins committed unwittingly.

Tired of the villagers repenting in their all-too-routine and ritualistic ways, the old rabbi starts the feast with a jolt. He publicly cries out against the State's injustice. In doing so he means to give the people the permission to stand up, speak the truth, and with him to acknowledge their complicity with evil. They are all culpable not because they are evil but because they see the suffering caused by the tyranny of others and do nothing. The leaders of the synagogue community are shocked. How could the rabbi have put them all in danger by denouncing authority in such a public act?

A group of officials show up to interrogate the synagogue members, who tell the Soviets that the rabbi had acted without their support or involvement. The synagogue president assures the visitors that there will be no further outbursts against the State forthcoming. These Jews are peaceful people, he tells them, and have no intention of revolting. The rabbi had acted impulsively and on his own. Asked how he can be so sure, the synagogue leader explains, "Because they are afraid. It is as simple as that." He clarifies even further. "I know my people. I know the boundaries of their courage… Fear is the safest of boundaries."

As the drama unfolds the men of the village one after the other explain how they are busy, not involved in the rabbi's world. They only participate in the synagogue rites as the holy days roll around; otherwise they mind their own business. The Soviet inspector is assured by listening. As he leaves, he lectures the abandoned rabbi: "I pity you. You were beaten from the start ... And now you know it. You know that you cannot count on anyone, and what's more, that you don't count for anyone … It is as though [your outburst] *simply did not take place!"* The playwright's message: Our fears of impending danger keep us in line. Do they? Wiesel's story establishes a context for others who want to say something about the power of fear.
Our existential fear as humans is the fear of death, although we face many lesser fears along the way. Holy Cross priest, teacher and spiritual writer John Dunne explored the matter at length by looking at a cross section of ancient civilizations. On the basis of what he says, he proposed that the journey of every life, in every civilization, is our answer to the question, *"If I must die, what can I do to satisfy my desire to live?"*

Similarly Ernest Becker, a mid-twentieth century contemporary of Dunne's pursued a similar line of thought. What motivates humans' existential fear? He based his approach more narrowly on his years of clinical practice as a psychologist in the United States. The argument of his work *The Denial of Death* is that male members of world civilizations have typically made it their life's work to create something that will burn them into the living memories of later generations after they are gone. (Do you hear Dunne's question here: *"If I must die, what can I do to satisfy my desire to live?")*

These authors made some impact on my thinking, enough for me to recall Becker and Dunne's accounts of the inner drive to head off human fear of non-existence when I visited the medieval town of Hildesheim in the rural north of Germany, some years later. The modern provincial town of a few thousand people has three monumental and brilliantly decorated Gothic churches in very short walking distance from one other. There had never been the population density in the region to fill them, so these vast architectural wonders dedicated to worship had never been "necessary" in any public service sense. They came into existence from the 9th to the 14th centuries as extravagant equivalents of the "Kilroy was here" graffiti that ordinary American foot soldiers had left across western Europe at the end of World War II. Someone's bold efforts to be remembered worked, for as a tourist I found myself asking, "Who built these?" And it was easy to find the answer. They all but shouted "Remember Emperor Louis the Pious. He started this," and "Bishops Gunthar, Bishop Gotthard, and Bishop Heinrich have been here too!" The assembled stones proclaimed, "See what we have done!" And I had marveled appropriately.

Next, we turn to look at a complementary viewpoint from a woman author. (Does gender make a difference?) Twentieth-century Romanian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva writes of our existential human condition just as concretely as did Wiesel, Becker and Donne. While the first three had each named the drive that grows from the human fear of falling out of existence, Kristeva looks at the existential terror that lies behind the drive to survive. She writes at length, but boils down her insight in the sentence, "I who am speaking defecate." These five words sum up the realization that no matter how gifted, creative or blessed I am, I am mortal. My life will come to an end, and I will indeed die.

For Kristeva, this is not an abstract thought. She finds it no wonder we humans are bewildered and fearful as we both notice and conceal the fragility and mortality of our bodies, which constantly leak bodily fluids and sometimes bleed. From birth we have been disintegrating, coming apart bit by bit. But we who are embodied spirit, conscious of what is going on, yearn for more. Call it salvation; she doesn't, being part of a secular French society. But she agrees that we want to transcend our human condition, to escape our finitude. (Doesn't this resonate with the biblical story of Adam and Eve?) With good reason, we fear being vulnerable, fear being found worthless and abandoned, and ultimately fear dying. Who or what can save us? Is there anything I can do to save myself?

Wiesel, Dunne, Becker, and Kristeva have made cameo appearances, each suggesting how our existential fear weighs against hope that all will be well and drives the human quest for self-protection through self-promotion. My fifth and final voice is that of another eastern European post-Holocaust-survivor-become philosopher named Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas, the problematic issue for us as humans, what we fear, is relationship. The paradox is that we all depend on relationship for survival. Yet relationship places daily danger before us. He names

the paradox abstractly, as fear of "the Other."

What is the problem with an "Other?" The question was not an abstract one for Levinas, a Lithuanian Jew who like Wiesel was caught up in the Nazi drive to exterminate Jews. Jews like him and Wiesel were among the dangerous "Others" whose very existence was perceived as threatening the being and well-being of a presumed pure Aryan culture. Jews were foreigners, impure and unclean, outsiders. That outsider status of the "Other" is the lot of most of us at one time or another, so we have some inkling of what Levinas is talking about. Some "Other" at some time perceived us or our families as threatening or dangerous because we are not "the Same" as they.

Irrational fear of difference has often had lethal consequences, history shows over and over again – in Rwanda in our lifetime, in Nazi Germany, most recently in Oslo, Norway, the city where the Nobel Peace Prize is awarded, recently attacked for fear of "the Muslims." So the question "what is the problem with fearful Others?" is a life and death question. Every Mexican or Guatemalan living near the southwest border of the U.S. knows this. By contrast, consider what is it about our Benedictine retreat centers that makes guests feel "safe" and "at home?" Back to Levinas. For a brief time linger before returning to that question. He reminds us that every person we meet is inevitably an "Other," for no two of us are the same. Every "Other" is a "not me." If I dare to enter into relationship with a human "Other," – starting with the mother / child pair – I am faced with what Levinas has named an *always already impossible relationship.* What is he getting at? Is it really true that each new relationship and also every continuing relationship is "impossible?" To open myself to relationship, I must be prepared to die a bit to my self-preoccupation, to be frustrated in my self-assertion. In short, Levinas is naming from another vantage point what Paul had recognized in himself and in that early Church in Galatia. The real engine driving our perception of menace is the threatened self. Who can be trusted to respect me and not to harm me?

Does that sketch of the human condition seem too extreme? We need only consider the matter of unwanted pregnancies in our self-concerned society. Why would a harmless baby threaten an adult — unless the "I" I have made of myself must die? Expectant parents must themselves face loss of the carefully constructed self. They must make room in their world for an "Other." The parent cannot simply stay the same "I" of an earlier life and also enter into real relationship with a dependent infant. Or consider the all-too-recurrent erosion of family ties. Why is divorce so common and previous commitments so readily abandoned? Why are children abused?

To open myself to relationship, I must be prepared to die a bit to my self-preoccupation, to be frustrated in my self-assertion.

Given the reality of the vulnerable human condition which makes us keep up our guard, letting that guard down to

make room for welcoming an "Other" is an *always already impossible relationship.* How can two frightened, vulnerable selves — the father as well as the son, for example — dare to remove whatever armor protects each one from the "Other's" seeing how vulnerable each really is? Yet despite our best defenses we all know down deep that we are not the self-possessed persons we parade in our public presentations of self. We know the real truth — that "I who am speaking am mortal." Yet I want to live — forever. Many who arrive at Benedictine retreat centers come because they know this. Others come hoping we will help them conceal what they do not want to face.

We can go on and on about the endless manifestations of our human defensiveness. But enough of the bad news about the human condition. It is time to look beyond ourselves to the dawning reign of God, toward the horizon where hope is to be found despite our human condition. Yes, it is reasonable to fear. But fear does not have the last word. We believe there is a way to move beyond the hidden terror that will not simply disappear as we work to conceal it.

Deliverance for Believers

By faith we have come to know that our deliverance comes through Jesus Christ, in whom God has revealed the mystery hidden for all ages. Trusting in the revelation, that is Jesus himself, we see acted out in time and place the drama of Jesus' relationship to his Abba. We see at its core both "the cross of Christ" and the boundless love that gives hope. Ours is a marvelous salvation story. Yet we cannot help our occasional doubt that the story might be too good to be true, if we consider our own behaviors and attitudes as well as those of our companions in the community of Jesus' disciples. We who aspire to be disciples of Jesus find others of his disciples threatening. Although "Die to myself" is the summons addressed to each of us, we are ready to hedge our bets with the response, "Okay – but you go first!" Jesus once asked during a hard time with his disciples. "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith upon the earth?"

Dorothy Day grew in hope and holiness when things around her often seemed hopeless. What gave her courage to trust? By her own account, she was often bewildered and grieved in the 1940s and 1950s, the 1960s and 1970s, when so many Catholics, even priests and laity among the Catholic Workers, were abandoning the sacraments, effectively giving up on the Church to commit itself to non-violence in the pursuit of justice and peace. She would undoubtedly be even more grieved looking at the church in the 21st century, for she had a radical faith in the sacraments to protect us from our worst foible – trusting in ourselves more and in God less. For Dorothy the sacraments were about the relationship that gives us our deepest identity.

Perhaps because Dorothy was a convert, she had not learned about the sacraments in conventional ways. For example, you'll find nothing in her writing about sacramental character as an indelible mark on her soul, nothing about sacramental character at all. Still she clearly believed in a relationship that had given her a new identity. She trusted that

she had sealed a new relationship when she was baptized and she had invested herself in it. She knew she had been welcomed into profound relationship with the God of Jesus Christ and she trusted it as she grew in it. She had no naive presumption that the waters of Baptism, the chrism of Confirmation, the unction of Holy Orders magically eliminated the human condition. Nor was she cynical about trusting the sacraments as magic. She simply knew from her experience that daily engagement in prayer and ritual celebration with a community of living faith gave her reason to hope in Jesus' promise. Daily acts of the wounded but living Church – both its prayer and its dying to self through ordinary good works – guided her into the saving relationship with God that we all seek.

Core Identity

What the concept of "sacramental character" points to is the permanence of the divine-human relationship as it is mediated and sustained by a relationship with living ecclesial communities. Your retreatants know that, whether consciously or intuitively. Sacramental character speaks to identity formed through relationship with Jesus and his disciples, and this is all it guarantees – ecclesial identity, not any superiority. How many have been misled by thinking otherwise! To enjoy baptismal character is to have a share with others in the Holy Spirit of Jesus and to be sent with them to bring Good News to the world. To enjoy the character of ordination is to maintain and be fed still by the network of relations among the baptized, but also to grow into a new network of all those, ordained and lay, who have undertaken pastoral ministry – teaching, guiding, and correcting, by example and "by word if necessary," as St. Francis of Assisi taught his brothers.

For it surely seems that the ecclesial Body of Christ, of which we are all members one of another, is being torn to pieces from within.

We have heard words about character making us ontologically – whatever we thought that meant – "better than" lesser folk. I heard it interpreted most tragically in a summer school classroom thirty years ago. During a discussion about ordination and ministry, a young priest blurted out in anguish – shocking the whole room in turn – "If I am not better than ordinary Catholics because of my ordination, I have wasted my life!" How tragic a misunderstanding. What is new about our "being," our ontological difference upon being baptized or being ordained, is the irrevocable transformation in us because of our new way of being in Christ and in the church. It gives us a radically new core identity.

Our monastic communities may be getting smaller; our members may be getting older. Yet our experience as maturing ecclesial men and women has told us that we are not superior to others in our generation. We struggle to be faithful, even as many of our contemporaries are disillusioned by our struggles and mock the Church. Church history indeed tells us the story of frequent false turns among pilgrims, yet every generation gives us reason to trust the way of Christ despite our discouragement. Every generation shows its own measure of "pilgrims' progress"

not because we monastics are good or "better than" but because God, who has irrevocably chosen us to embody the Good News, is faithful.

We tell the story of Jesus as the one who is "like us" — yet with the significant proviso "like us in all things but sin." Jesus is remembered and cherished among us as the one who trusted himself totally to the one he called "Abba." Even when he faced scorn, humiliation and the threat of death, he trusted as reliable what had always been a mutual relationship of love. Jesus shows us that his relationship with his Abba was never an "always already impossible relationship." He knew that early, with the elders in the Temple, at the river Jordan, at Gethsemani and at Calvary. That loving relationship was at the center of his identity, and so centered, Jesus never lost his bearings.

We who aspire to follow his way are, by contrast, pulled in various directions whenever we succumb to self-protective fear and try to provide for our own well-being. Although we know, because we have been told, that God is indeed nearer to us than we are to ourselves and that we are irrevocably loved by the God who created us and saves us, humans are caught up in and add to the sins of the world. When we become frightened by others or by the world around us, we try to take control. Although we firmly believe that Jesus has given us a share in his holy Spirit, sometimes things go poorly. In our very human households and families, in our very human ecclesial communities as within our all-too-human monastic communities, we know what it is to abandon that Spirit and so betray our core identity. In his wisdom St. Benedict recognized a role that wisdom figures in the monastery must play in helping wayward companions from getting lost. Wise family members and friends do the same. So also do people involved in Benedictine retreat ministry – which is always a ministry of the whole community.

Some Final Thoughts

Most members of the local monastic community will never have occasion or adequate fluency to put into words for retreat guests the doctrinal, theological and ethical convictions that are embodied in their own life stories. So few can or will say these things to retreatants. Those who direct Benedictine retreat centers for their communities may be equally conscious of their own inadequacy in finding words of encouragement for those who come for a short stay among the monastic community. But the local brothers' and sisters' ways of being and living together – whether in the refectory, serving meals and doing dishes, at the front door, in the hallways and in the library, and at times of prayer – is sure ground for the hope they have for their ministry. If the solid ground is not there, the most brilliant programming cannot make up for the missing foundation. So our own life with and within a "pretty good community," – not a perfect one to be sure – gives us reason enough for our guests to hope that, despite the burdens they arrived with and are probably carrying home, "all will indeed be well." Grace abides. It will be seen embodied in joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, and that should be enough reason to hope.

Thomas Merton and the Wisdom of Nonviolence

by John Dear, SJ

Father John Dear has devoted his life to the Gospel of nonviolence. He urges us not to be concerned about results, but to be faithful to Jesus' admonition, "Put down the sword," and to realize that violence only begets further violence.

Thomas Merton and the Wisdom of Nonviolence

When I entered the Jesuits, I was on fire with a desire to pursue the life of peace and justice. I started to study the writings of the great peacemakers, such as Gandhi, Dr. King, Dorothy Day, the Berrigans and from day one, Thomas Merton. I've been reading Merton ever since. I think I have read everything that he has published, and I am amazed how he still speaks to me. In contrast to the culture, to the TV, even the whole world, Merton remains a voice of sanity and reason and faith and clarity and hope, and I cannot put him down.

The God of peace is never glorified by human violence.

I agree with what the great theologian David Tracy said recently when he was asked what the future of theology in the U.S. would look like. He answered spontaneously, "For the next 200 years, we'll be trying to catch up with Merton."

Over the years, Merton has helped me not only in my work for peace but also in keeping me in religious life and the church because whenever I get in trouble for working for peace and justice, or whenever I get discouraged about the church or religious life, I recall how much trouble Merton was in for writing about war, racism, nuclear weapons and monasticism, how he stayed put, remained faithful, did what he could, prayed and carried on. So I take heart from Merton because he endured it all with love, with a good heart, and now we see how his life and sufferings and fidelity have born great fruit. I think we can all find new strength and courage from him to carry on and be faithful in our service to the God of peace.

When I think of Merton's "Revelation of Justice and Revolution of Love" and what Merton has taught me, I return once again to the wisdom of nonviolence. I would like to share five simple callings that I have learned from Thomas Merton.

Contemplatives of Nonviolence

First, Merton invites us to become contemplatives, mystics, of nonviolence. Merton's whole life was based on prayer, contemplation and mysticism, but it was not so that we could go and hurt others, or bomb others, or dominate the world, but so that we could commune with the living God. I spent my first ten years as a Jesuit praying by telling God what to do, yelling at God for not making the world a better place, until finally, a wise spiritual director said, "John, that is not the way we speak to someone we love." A light went on in my mind: prayer is about a relationship with someone I love, with the God of love and peace. So my prayer changed to a silent listening, a being with God, which is what contemplative nonviolence is all about.

Merton knew that prayer, contemplation, meditation, adoration and communion mean entering into the presence of the God of peace, dwelling in the nonviolence of Jesus, in other words, that the spiritual life begins with contemplative nonviolence, that every one of us is called to be a mystic of nonviolence.

Father John Dear, SJ, is a peace activist who was nominated for the Nobel Peace prize by Archbishop Tutu in 2008. He is the author of Living Peace, Put Down Your Sword*, and his autobiography,* A Persistent Peace*. See his website: www.johndear.org*

So in prayer, we turn to the God of peace, we enter the presence of the one who loves us, disarms our hearts of our inner violence, transforms us into people of Gospel nonviolence, and then sends us on a mission of disarming love and creative nonviolence.

Nonviolence is much more than a tactic or a strategy; it is a way of life.

Through contemplative nonviolence, we learn to give God our inner violence and resentments; to grant clemency and forgiveness to everyone who hurts us; to move from anger and revenge and violence to compassion, mercy and nonviolence so that we radiate personally the peace we seek politically.

Conversion to Compassion

In the end, as Merton knew, peace is a gift from God. As the Twelve-Step model teaches, if we are addicted to violence, we need to turn to our Higher Power, confess our violence, support one another through communities of nonviolence, and become sober people of nonviolence."The chief difference between violence and nonviolence," Merton writes, "is that violence depends entirely on its own calculations. Nonviolence depends entirely on God and God's word."[1]

When Jesus calls us to love our enemies, he said we should do so because God does so. God lets the sun shine on the just and the unjust, and the rain fall on the good and the bad. God is compassionate to everyone. This is the heart of contemplative nonviolence. Then we are able to see everyone as a human being, and to see God and become like God.

As we pursue contemplative peace like Merton, we learn, contrary to what the Pentagon tells us, that our God is not a god of war, but the God of peace; not a god of injustice, but the God of justice; not a god of vengeance and retaliation, but the God of compassion and mercy; not a god of violence, but the God of nonviolence; not a god of death, but the living God of life. We discover a new image of God. As we begin to imagine the peace and nonviolence of God, we learn to worship the God of peace and nonviolence; and in the process, become people of peace and nonviolence. "The great problem is this inner change," Merton writes. "We all have the great duty to realize the deep need for purity of soul, that is to say, the deep need to be possessed by the Holy Spirit."[2]

On his way to Asia, Merton told David Steindl-Rast that "the only way beyond the traps of Catholicism is Buddhism." In other words, every Catholic has to become a good Buddhist, to become as compassionate as possible, he said. "I am going to become the best Buddhist I can, so I can become a good Catholic."[3] That is the wisdom of Merton's contemplative life, to become like Buddhists, people of profound compassion, deep contemplative nonviolence.

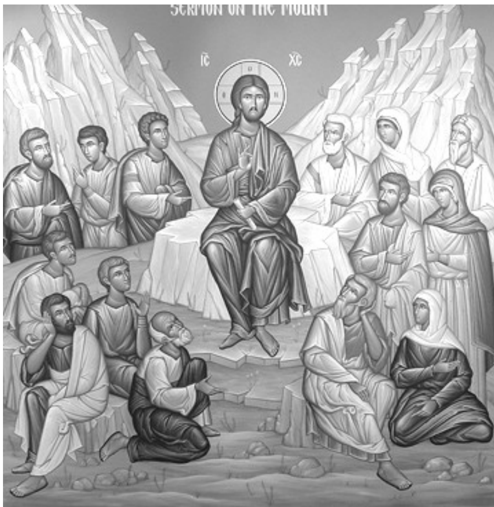
This is what Merton meant when he wrote about Gandhi: "Gandhi's nonviolence was not simply a political tactic which was supremely useful and efficacious in liberating his people. On the contrary, the spirit of nonviolence sprang from an inner realization of spiritual unity in himself. The whole Gandhian concept of nonviolent action and satyagraha is incomprehensible if it is thought

to be a means of achieving unity rather than as the fruit of inner unity already achieved.[4]

Students of Nonviolence

Second, Merton teaches us to become students and teachers of nonviolence. Merton was not just a great teacher, but the eternal student. He was always studying, always learning, always searching for the truth. So when he started reading Gandhi in the 1950s, and then meeting peacemakers like Daniel Berrigan and the folks from the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Catholic Worker, he became a student and teacher of Gospel nonviolence, and I think that is what each one of us has to do — to study, to learn, practice and teach the holy wisdom of nonviolence.

The lesson starts off with the basic truth: Violence doesn't work. War doesn't work. Violence in response to violence



always leads to further violence. As Jesus said, "Those who live by the sword, will die by the sword." Those who live by the bomb, the gun, the nuclear weapon, will die by bombs, guns and nuclear weapons. You reap what you sow. The means are the ends. What goes around comes around.

War cannot stop terrorism because war is terrorism. War only sows the seeds for future wars. War can never lead to lasting peace or true security or a better world or overcome evil or teach us how to be human or as Merton insists, deepen the spiritual life.

Underneath this culture of war and injustice is a sophisticated spirituality of violence, a spirituality of war, a spirituality of empire, a spirituality of injustice that has nothing to do with the living God or the Gospel of Jesus. In this false spirituality, we believe violence saves us, war brings peace, might makes right, nuclear weapons are our only security, God blesses wars, we seek not forgiveness and reconciliation but victory and domination, and the good news is not the love of enemies but the elimination of enemies. This is heresy, blasphemy and idolatry. The empire always tries to instruct the church on sin and morality, telling us that certain personal behavior is sinful or immoral, while saying nothing about the murder of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis in recent years, as if that were not sinful or immoral.

In a spirituality of violence, the Church rejects Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount as impractical, takes up the empire's just war theory, launches crusades and blesses Trident submarines and remains silent while Los Alamos churns out nuclear weapons and enjoys

the comforts of the culture of war and injustice rather than taking up the cross of Gospel nonviolence. Adherents of this kind of the spirituality of nonviolence have a private relationship with God, fulfill their obligations and go right along with the mass murder of their sisters and brothers around the world.

The empire wants the Church to be indifferent and passive, to be divided and fighting and silent, even to bless wars and injustice. Unless we speak out and teach the wisdom of peace and nonviolence, the church will become like Hazel Motes' church in Flannery O'Connor's book *Wise Blood,* the "Church without Christ," where the lame don't walk, the blind don't see, the deaf don't hear, and the dead stay dead. That's what Merton learned.

The wisdom of nonviolence teaches that war is not the will of God. War is never justified. War is never blessed by God. War is not endorsed by any religion. War is the very definition of mortal sin. War is demonic, evil, anti-human, anti-life, anti-God, anti-Christ. For Christians, war is not the way to follow Jesus. "The God of peace is never glorified by human violence," Merton wrote. In other words, peaceful means are the only way to a peaceful future and the God of peace.

So like Merton, we have to study nonviolence, define it, talk about and think about how each one of us can become more nonviolent, and how we can create a church of nonviolence, even a new world of nonviolence. So Merton studies it and concludes: "What is important in nonviolence is the contemplative truth that is not seen. The radical truth of reality is that we are all one."[5]

Merton's Vision

Merton's nonviolence begins with the vision of a reconciled humanity, the truth that all life is sacred, that we are all equal sisters and brothers, all children of the God of peace, already reconciled, all already united. The inhabitants of such a vision could never hurt or kill another human being, much less remain silent while their country wages war, builds nuclear weapons, and allows others to starve.

Nonviolence is much more than a tactic or a strategy; it is a way of life. We renounce violence and vow never to hurt anyone again. It is not passive but active love and truth that seeks justice and peace for the whole human race, resists systemic evil, persistently reconciles with everyone, insists that there is no cause, however noble, for which we support the killing of any human being. Instead of killing others, we must be willing to undergo being killed in the struggle for justice and peace; instead of inflicting violence on others, we must accept and undergo suffering without even the desire

to retaliate as we pursue justice and peace for all people.

Nonviolence is active, creative, provocative, and challenging. Through his study of Gandhi, Merton agreed that nonviolence is a life force more powerful than all the weapons of the world, that when harnessed, becomes contagious and disarms nations. Nonviolence begins in our hearts, where we renounce the violence within us, and then moves out with active nonviolence to our families, communities, churches, cities, our nation and the world. When organized on a large national or global level, active nonviolence can transform the world, as Gandhi demonstrated in India's revolution, or as Dr. King and the civil rights movement showed.

“What is important in nonviolence is the contemplative truth that is not seen. The radical truth of reality is that we are all one.”

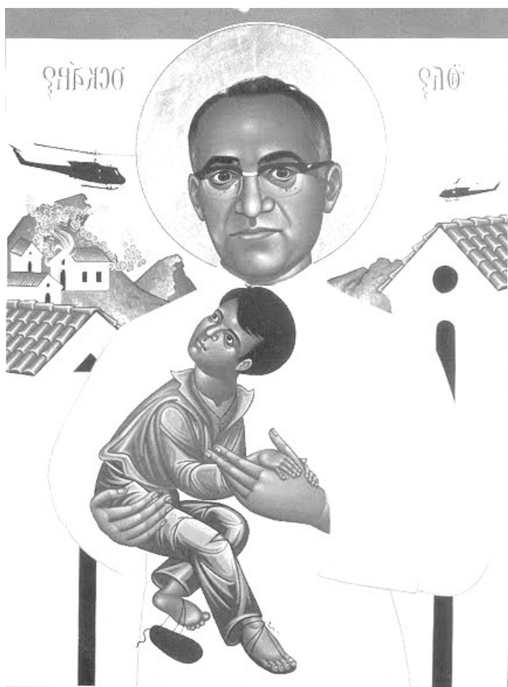
I worked for several years as executive director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), which I think through John Heidbrink, helped to bring Merton and the Berrigans into the work for peace in 1960 and 1961. I learned like Merton that all the major religions are rooted in nonviolence. Islam means peace. Judaism upholds the magnificent vision of shalom, where people beat swords into plowshares and study war no more. Gandhi exemplified Hinduism as active nonviolence. Buddhism is all about compassion toward all living beings. Brace yourselves, Merton teaches, even Christianity is rooted in nonviolence.

Nonviolence of Jesus

The one thing we can say for sure about Jesus is that he practiced active, public, creative nonviolence. He called us to love our neighbors, to show compassion toward everyone, to seek justice for the poor, to forgive everyone, to put down the sword, to take up the cross in the struggle for justice and peace, to risk our lives if necessary, in love for all humanity, and most of all, to love our enemies. His words to the community, to the Church, to us, as the soldiers dragged him away, could not be clearer or more to the point: "Put down the sword."

Some might say this is the one moment where violence is justified. Peter was right to take up a sword, to kill to protect the Holy One. But Jesus issues a new commandment: "Put down the sword.” That is why they run away; they realize he is serious about nonviolence, that they follow a martyr. Jesus dies on the cross saying, "The violence stops here in my body, which is given for you. You are forgiven, but from now on, you are not allowed to kill." And God raises him from the dead, and he says, "Peace be with you." Then he sends them forth into the culture of violence on the mission of creative nonviolence.

In one of his journals, in the early 1960s, Merton calls himself "a professor of nonviolence," determined to teach the church, even the world, the wisdom of nonviolence. We too need to teach nonviolence, and to call the church to practice the nonviolence of Jesus, and to help it reject the just war theory and accept the risen Christ's gift of peace.



Apostles of Nonviolence

T***hird, Merton invites us to become apostles of nonviolence.*** We remember Merton's famous article for Dorothy Day and *The Catholic Worker*, where he wrote: "The duty of the Christian in this time of crisis is to strive with all our power and intelligence, with our faith and hope in Christ, and love for God and humanity, to do the one task which God has imposed upon us in the world today. That task is to work for the total abolition of war. There can be no question that unless war is abolished the world will remain constantly in a state of madness and desperation in which, because of the immense destructive power of modern weapons, the danger of catastrophe will be imminent and probable at every moment everywhere. The church must lead the way on the road to the nonviolent settlement of difficulties and toward the gradual abolition of war as the way of settling international or civil disputes. Christians must become active in every possible way, mobilizing all their resources for the fight against war. Peace is to be preached and nonviolence is to be explained and practiced. We may never succeed in this campaign, but whether we succeed or not the duty is evident."[6]

I think we are called to be activists for peace like Thomas Merton. Jim Douglass told me that Merton, alone in his hermitage in the woods, did more for peace than most peace activists. I think that whatever we do, wherever we are, we have to be involved in the movements for peace and justice. None of us can do everything, but all of us can do something, like Merton, whether through our prayer vigils, marching, leafleting, protests or civil disobedience.

Visionaries of Nonviolence

F***ourth, Merton invites us to become visionaries of nonviolence.*** One of the many casualties of the culture of war is the imagination. People can no longer imagine a world without war or nuclear weapons or violence or poverty. They can't even imagine it, because the culture has robbed us of our imaginations.

We live in a time of terrible blindness, moral blindness, spiritual blindness, the blindness that will lead us over the brink to global destruction. Our mission is to uphold the vision of nonviolence, like Merton, to point the way forward, the way out of our madness, to lift up the light, to lead us away from the brink.

We need to be the community of faith and conscience and nonviolence that lifts up the vision of peace, to help others imagine a world without war or nuclear weapons, the vision that teaches us to resist our country's wars and nuclear arsenal.

Merton teaches us, like Ezekiel and all the prophets, that whether we are heard or not, whether our message is accepted or not, our vocation is to speak the truth of peace, to become prophets of nonviolence, a prophetic people who speak for the God of peace.

All my life, I have been trying to uphold a vision of a world without war, by serving the poor and homeless, visiting the war zones of the world, organizing protests and getting arrested 75 times, engaging in a Plowshares action, and working at the Fellowship of Reconciliation. We all need to become new abolitionists who imagine a world without war, poverty or nuclear weapons.

Prophets of Nonviolence

F***ifth, Merton invites us to become prophets of nonviolence.*** Here is one of my favorite Merton quotes: "It is my intention to make my entire life a rejection of, a protest against the crimes and injustices of war and political tyranny which threaten to destroy the whole human race and the whole world. By my monastic life and vows I am saying *no* to all the concentration camps, the bombardments, the staged political trials, the murders, the racial injustices, the violence and nuclear weapons. If I say *no* to all these forces, I also say *yes* to all that is good in the world and in humanity."[7]

I think that just as Merton learned to make his life a rejection of war by speaking out for peace, we must do the same thing and make our entire lives a rejection, a protest against the crimes and injustices and wars and nuclear weapons of our country and so become prophets of nonviolence to the culture of violence.

Merton teaches us to break through the culture of war and denounce the false spirituality of violence and speak the truth of peace and nonviolence. He once wrote to Jean Le Clercq that the work of the monastery is "not survival but prophecy," in the biblical sense, to speak truth to power, to speak God's word of peace to the world of war, to speak of God's reign of nonviolence to the anti-reign of violence. I believe that is our task too — not survival, but prophecy.

Merton wrote to Daniel Berrigan in1962, "If one reads the prophets with ears and eyes open then you cannot help recognizing our obligation to shout very loud about God's will, God's truth and God's justice.[8]

I am sure Merton would have something to say about everything that is happening in the world today, in this whole culture of war. So like Merton the prophet, our job is to call for an end to war, starvation, violence and nuclear weapons; to say, bring the troops home, end the U.S. occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, cut off all military aid to the Middle East and help the U.N. pursue nonviolent alternatives to these crises.

Siding with the Poor

"I am on the side of the people who are being burned, bombed, cut to pieces, tortured, held as hostages, gassed, ruined and destroyed," Merton wrote in the 1960s. "They are the victims of both sides. To take sides with massive power is to take sides against the innocent. The side I take is the side of the people who are sick of war and who want peace, who want to rebuild their lives and their countries and the world.[9]

Like Merton, I think we too have to take sides. We have to side with the poor and the children, with the innocent, with our enemies, and be like Christ, who took sides when he said: "Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me."

"It is absolutely necessary to take a serious and articulate stand on the question of nuclear war, and I mean against nuclear war," Merton wrote in the 1960s to his friend Etta Gullick. "The passivity, the apparent indifference, the incoherence of so many Christians on this issue, and worse still the active belligerency of some religious spokesmen is rapidly becoming one of the most frightful scandals in the history of Christendom.[10]

Speaking the Truth

Merton teaches us, like Ezekiel and all the prophets, that whether we are heard or not, whether our message is accepted or not, our vocation is to speak the truth of peace, to become prophets of nonviolence, a prophetic people who speak for the God of peace.

Merton concludes his great essay, "Blessed are the Meek" on the roots of Christian nonviolence, by talking about hope, saying our work for peace and justice is not based on the hope for results or the delusions of violence or the false security of this world, but in Christ. Our hope is in the God of peace, in the resurrection.

We need to be the community of faith and conscience and nonviolence that lifts up the vision of peace, to help others imagine a world without war or nuclear weapons, the vision that teaches us to resist our country's wars and nuclear arsenal.

Merton gives me hope, hope to become a contemplative and mystic of nonviolence and commune with the God of peace; hope to teach the wisdom of nonviolence to a culture of violence; hope to practice active nonviolence in a world of indifference; hope to speak out prophetically for peace in a world of war and nuclear weapons; hope to uphold the vision of peace, a world without war in a land of blindness and despair.

Merton's concluding advice to Daniel Berrigan in one of Merton's letters can give us all encouragement: "You are going to do a great deal of good simply by stating facts quietly and telling the truth," Merton wrote to Berrigan. "The real job is to lay the groundwork for a deep change of heart on the part of the whole nation so that one day it can really go through the metanoia we need for a peaceful world. So do not be discouraged. Do not let

yourself get frustrated. The Holy Spirit is not asleep. Keep your chin up."[11]

We must not despair, not be afraid, not give in to apathy, not give up, but instead, become contemplatives, teachers, apostles, prophets, and visionaries of Gospel nonviolence, to take up where Merton left off, to go as deep as Merton did, to stand on Merton's shoulders, to transform the church and the world into the community of Gospel nonviolence, so that we might do God's will, and announce like Merton, with Merton, the revelation of justice, the good news of the revolution of love.

(Excerpted with permission from the website of Father John Dear, SJ.)

Endnotes

[1]Thomas Merton, "Blessed are the Meek," in *The Nonviolent Alternative*, (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York, 1971) 216.
[2]Jim Forrest, *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton (*Orbis Books, 2011)
[3]David Steindl-Rast, *Thomas Merton/Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, ed. Patrick Hart. (Cistercian Publications, 1983)79-89.
[4]Thomas Merton, *Gandhi on Nonviolence*. (New Directions, New York, 1964) 6.
[5] "Blessed are the Meek."
[6] Forrest, 152-53.
[7] Forrest, 154.
[8] Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love, Letters of Thomas Merton*, Vol. 1, ed. William Shannon, 78.
[9]Forrest, 155.
[10] *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 349.
[11] *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 94.

Circus of Faith

A squirrel scampers through a circle of trees,
    chattering vociferously
    as branches give way.
Balancing precariously, she flies
    between earth and sky.

Does she catch a glimpse of the hawk
    circling majestically
    above her?
Does she long for the wonder
    of being held
    on the wings of the wind?

Or is she content
    with the daily challenge
        in her trapeze
        act of faith?

Lillian Englert, OSB
Cottonwood, Idaho

Monastic Leaders Comment

In this article, five Benedictine leaders respond to three questions about monastic life today. Three of the responders are abbots, Jerome Kodell, Gregory Polan, and John Klassen; two are prioresses, Anne Shepard and Patricia Henry. Their insights are thought-provoking, challenging and hope-filled.

Abbot Jerome Kodell looks at the questions as a unit; the other four respond to each one individually.

Monastic Leaders Comment

The questions posed to the five leaders were:

1. What do you see as life-giving in monastic life at the beginning of the 21st century?

2. What do you think is the key to attracting more vocations to monastic life?

3. How can Benedictines have a greater impact on the Church and society?

Abbot Jerome Kodell:

In my view, a lot can be learned from the Christian elder's story of the hounds and the rabbit. A dog saw a rabbit and took chase, at the same time barking loudly. The dogs in the neighborhood did not see the rabbit, but they knew what the barking meant and they took chase as well. The rabbit ran through thickets and briars to elude the dogs, and as they became tired and scratched, one after another the dogs began to turn back. Eventually only the dog which had seen the rabbit continued the chase. The rabbit is Christ, said the elder, and only the one who keeps his eyes on Christ will keep up the chase.

This story has an echo in a report from a Catholic studies program conducted by a religious order in India some years ago when it was found that some participants were visiting a Hindu guru for spiritual direction. When the students were asked why they didn't seek the spiritual help of their priest professors, they replied, "Oh, we mean no disrespect. Your classes are marvelous and we are learning so much about spirituality. But the guru is teaching us how to pray."

We have had a lot of surprises in the post-Vatican II Church. Those of us who entered religious life before 1970 are surprised that some of the elements of the life that attracted us have lost their appeal to the generations coming after us.

In any event, a key difference between the youth of this time and that in the western world is the sense of church. We were very conscious of being Catholic, and the Church had intact credibility for us. Our Catholic culture not only supported but esteemed vocations to the religious life. We were not so much conscious of giving something up as of responding to a divine call to something great.

We did not, however, have a deep understanding of the spiritual life or the meaning and place of personal prayer in our vocation. Our spirituality was very

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communal in family and parish. We participated in and performed all the religious rituals, and we did not do so only by rote or superficially. We believed in what we were doing. When we perceived a call to the religious life, it was as members of a faith community. The radical sense of individualism in our world developed later.

That communitarian sense was not a bad thing. The Church and the monastic community carried us along and gave us a context and support in which to sink the deeper roots of prayer in the search for God. When the wheels came off in the 1960s that support fell away and we had to scramble, and we did so in many different directions. Those of us who stayed had to find the main support for our vocation internally from then on.

That continues today. Karl Rahner said the Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist. A mystic is not an esoteric figure, but just a believer who seeks to know the Mystery more and more. In earlier times we could depend much more on the Church or the monastic community to carry us in that search. The faith community still gives important support, but from now on the search will have to be intensely personal. No matter what the other dogs do, those who want to stay the course will have to keep their own eyes on the rabbit. The Christian and the monk of the future will have to pray, and the role of the monk on behalf of others will be, as it has always been, to provide a place for people to seek God, and even more than in the recent past, to help people learn to pray.

We are still way too intellectual in our approach to the search for God. That is understandable; it is our history and how we were raised. We think the more we understand the holier we will be. Youth of today are not anti-intellectual, but they are much more interested in the direct experience of God. They are of the information age, and they know that no amount of information will give them what they are seeking.

Lectio divina was dropped into our laps after Vatican II as a very effective method to lead people into that experience, but it has been only partially successful because much of our focus has been on the intellectual aspect. The late Mother Kathryn Sullivan, RSCJ, a pioneer in the renewal of Scripture study after Vatican II, was in her 90s in the infirmary when a physical therapist asked her, "How can I know that I am reading Scripture properly?" Mother Kathryn replied: "You will become very quiet." Helping people come into that quietness is the main monastic task on the horizon.

What do you see as life-giving in monastic life at the beginning of the 21st century?

John Klassen: Benedictine monastic life is focused on creating and sustaining a healthy community life that is focused on a Trinitarian faith and nurtured by a life commitment to praying the Liturgy of the Hours and Eucharist in common, *lectio divina*, work, and a community of goods. These commitments are prophetic in an age of rampant individualism – "you pick your god and I'll pick mine."

In an age of post-modern thought, where there is less and less confidence in a larger narrative that gives meaning and purpose to life and to a spiritual journey, as Benedictine monks we are convinced of the Christian story, the Christian and monastic narrative. We believe in stories, big ones

and little ones. It is a fundamental mode of communication for us.

In a loud, chattering age, we believe and practice silence and contemplative prayer. These are life-giving practices and heal the soul, the body, and the mind.

Anne Shepard: In the preface to their book*, The Benedictine Rule of Leadership: Classic Management Secrets You Can Use Today,* economists Craig and Oliver Galbraith suggest that "The Benedictine influence has gone much deeper than most people realize. The modern international banking system, the preservation of ancient documents, the great medieval universities that became the models for higher education in the Western world, many of our advanced farming and construction techniques, the design of the modern hospitals, and the treatment of non-combatants in war are just a few of the contributions that can be traced to the influence of the great monastics."

We Benedictines balance the old and the new and in doing so we make history creative, alive and energizing. The accomplishments of the past, including so much in the fine arts, are recorded because we have always met the needs of the church and society in simple, practical ways. Years from now our hope is that our history will include contributions in ecology, environmentally friendly practices, best health care practices, liturgical music, efforts to confront injustices on many levels, spirituality training, advocacy for women and children in need. Scholarship in theology, religious studies and liturgy will continue.

Many aspects of Benedictine monasticism give life to our members and our public. Our fidelity to common prayer is a source of strength and the focus of our lives. Throughout the day we pause to pray together for the needs of the universal church, our communities, our world and our planet. Our guests comment on the sacredness of the Divine Office, the chant that is sung softly and as one voice, the intentions for the expressed needs of our family and friends. The prayer is peaceful and holy.

Fidelity to community gives witness to our living with differences, our ability to resolve conflicts respectfully and nonviolently. We are an intentional group of religious women seeking God together.

We model how to disagree without demonizing the other. We welcome respectful dialogue which is a result of serious study and critical thinking.

Hospitality is a hallmark of our lives. I have often said that if the day comes when we can no longer be hospitable, that is the day we close our doors. By receiving all as Christ we are awakened to so many new possibilities. We reconnect with friends and family. We are introduced to people who are curious about who we are and how we function.

Gregory Polan: In recent years, we have received several fine young vocations to our monastic community. These are young men filled with joy and hope, zealous for the Work of God, and generous in their service to others. Knowing that there are young men and women like this who see Benedictine life and its values as a vision for the future is a great source of life for me. It is also wonderful to see the number of people who come among us, not just

here at Conception Abbey but to so many monasteries, because of the spirit of prayer and hospitality we foster and the spiritual ideals we embrace.

Patricia Henry: I find many things life-giving in our monastic life today. My response is both very local (my own monastery) and broadly international (International Conference of Benedictine Prioresses- CIB). In my own small community we are striving to inculturate the monastic charism, and at the same time be counter-cultural, and this challenging double effort nourishes and strengthens me.

Our *inculturation* takes the form of living in a low-income, working class neighborhood. While not living in a manner identical to our neighbors, we do share some of their hardships, such as the lack of security in the midst of violence that has led to innumerable kidnappings and deaths. In our case, inculturation takes the form of living in close quarters with our neighbors, with only a fence to separate us and no green lawn or woods so conducive to prayer and meditation surrounding our monastery. In this semi-desert, densely populated urban sprawl that we call home, we have learned to create our own interior silence even as the gas trucks, street games, barking dogs, car stereos and hawkers carry on their unceasing medley that floats through our windows well into the night.

Some people have said that we can't live monastic life in such a setting, but in a country in which almost half of the population (close to 50 million people) lives in poverty, most of them in conditions much more difficult than ours, I say we are called to live monastic life in this setting.

We also share in our neighbors' joys: when they celebrate the feast of their favorite saint, especially of Mary, by closing off the street, making a temporary altar, dancing sacred dances, praying the rosary and cooking enough food for everyone to share. We rejoice with them when they receive the phone call assuring them of a son's safe border crossing with the hope of finding work in the United States; when a daughter or son is married or when a healthy newborn comes into the world.

I have been strengthened by their faith in the face of apparently insurmountable obstacles, especially ill health and the loss of loved ones; by their ability to laugh and enjoy life in the midst of hardships; by the women who have discovered their dignity as beloved daughters of God as we pray and reflect and work together. I am in awe as they move forward and courageously begin to transform the inhuman situations in which they live.

I also find our monastic values that are particularly counter-cultural at this time in history, to be life-giving to me and to those around us. Let me mention only a few:

- We have developed and shared with others the ability to find silence and cultivate a listening heart in the midst of our noise-addicted society.

- Monastic communities are one of the few groups who continue to

come together day after day to listen to God's Word in prayer and *lectio*, to share a meal, to support the members, to bear one another's burdens;

- Leaders, both elected and appointed, in the spirit of the Rule of Benedict, listen to the Spirit *with the ear of their heart*, see their office as truly an opportunity to serve; encourage growth as each person discovers her gifts and develops them for the common good; empower others within community and in ministry.

- Our stability in community encourages honesty in our relationships. It is almost impossible to hide who we are over the long haul, when we share our lives day after day, year after year. As we grow in our ability to accept the truth about ourselves (sometimes not so gently expressed by our sisters or brothers) we tend to let go of our self-deluding fantasies and face reality. This honesty helps us to *walk humbly with our God* and avoid the pitfalls of self-justification and the cognitive dissonance so prevalent in our Church and society today.

- We care lovingly for the elderly in our midst and they, in turn, encourage and support the newer generations.

- We strive to be a hospitable presence to those in need, to others who are different from ourselves, to those who are overcome by fear in our extremely hostile society.

This is not an exhaustive list, but rather a sampling of what is life-giving to me in our monastic communities today. I am nourished by this both at home and in other monasteries that I have the opportunity to visit. When our federation comes together I am encouraged and inspired by the vision of the Benedictine women who are facing these challenging times with wise minds, open hearts and helping hands. In September of 2010, I had the opportunity to participate in the VI Symposium of Benedictine Women from around the world. (CIB) As we reflected together on hope — young and old, active and cloistered nuns, from every continent, very diverse and yet with a unifying core, — my spirit was nourished and enriched by what I saw, what I heard, and what I was able to share.

What do you think is the key to attracting more vocations to monastic life?

John Klassen: We have to be truly unified and "walk the talk." We have to do and be what we say we are. We have to have a strong visual identity, for at least some of our prayer together. This visual identity is not about power but service.

We have to have a presence on the web – prospective candidates have to be able to glimpse into our lives with U-Tube clips of important rituals and visual cues that communicate what we are about, what matters. Each community needs to have ways to connect with people in their 20s and 30s.

I think that it is very important for us to be clear that, in good times and in hard times, we are "in the Church." We understand its humanness, we believe that it is

Spirit-guided, we understand from an historical point of view how the Church lumbers and staggers through history. We understand how the Church struggles with issues of fairness and justice, clericalism and other ills, and we aim to transform the Church from the inside out.

Anne Shepard: If there were a single key we would have found it. In my opinion we need to be patient and continue to pray that young women answer God's call. We can and must be intentional in our inviting women to get to know us. We reach out to where the women are and not expect them to find us randomly. It will help if we understand their world of technology. Vocation is not a result of hard work or the worthiness of a community. It is a calling by our generous God to serve in a special way of life. If we continue praying and serving, we will attract new members.

Gregory Polan: The key to attracting vocations to the monastic life is that the monastic life be lived authentically, and by that I mean in the spirit of *The Rule of St. Benedict* with appropriate adaptations for our own times. Second, a strong common life of prayer, work, and recreation together, showing in all of these things a love of God and neighbor, will attract new vocations to a monastic community; there is no stronger force in the world than true and authentic love. And third, it is essential to keep the liturgy central in our life, fulfilling St. Benedict's precept, "Nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God."

Patricia Henry: I think we need to have a clear, united vision of what monastic life looks and feels like in our community, and that vision needs to be genuine and evident to those who come to the monastery as guests, as workers, as oblates, as candidates, in whatever capacity.

In this age of communication and corporate image, we need to get a message out to those who are seeking God and for whom monastic life might be an option. When I speak of image I am referring to the manner in which we are perceived by outsiders. It is more than our reputation or our beautiful buildings. It has to do with what others see and hear when they watch us interrelating, praying as a community, serving within and beyond the monastery.

You may wonder how I can talk about being counter-cultural in one paragraph and having a "corporate image" in the next. Our community image should contain two elements that distinguish it from many others. It needs to reflect solid monastic content as well as integrity. We are not about (or should not be about!) slick advertising, but rather seriously striving to *be* and *do* what we *say* we *are*.

How can Benedictines have a greater impact on the Church and society?

John Klassen: We need to provide spiritual resources, homegrown, that serve our respective oblates, friends, alums, and others in the local diocese. We have to share in a variety of ways, complex and simple, the fruits of our *lectio,* silence, and prayer.

I think we need to be praying communities for the real needs of people we know and are close to. I think that people of all faiths respect prayer and those who do it. It is a real service.

In our time many leaders in our Church are not of an ecumenical or inter-religious bent. We must be. Our charism of hospitality is a gift for Christians from different churches, to provide a space to pray, to listen to the Word together, speak openly about religious experience in the first person. For interreligious dialogue, our commitment to centering prayer and silence allows us to speak from a shared experience.

Anne Shepard: If our intention is to have a greater impact, then we will not. I believe it is our life of humility and obedience to the will of God, our commitment to gospel values and our monastic heritage that will impact the Church and society. We must stay real, stay authentic and not cave in to ecclesial or societal requests that do not make sense or that damage our inner life of prayer, community and service. We impact the church by our bold refusal to perpetuate unjust practices, by our work to change unjust systems. We impact the church by having strong lives of prayer, both communal and private.

Gregory Polan: When we live the monastic life with joy and fervor, it is an invitation for people to see how *The Rule of St. Benedict* can speak to their lives in our own day and age. Monasteries are essential places in our society and culture today, as they provide a place for people to step aside from their very busy and intense lives to pray, to be silent, and to reflect in an atmosphere of peace.

Patricia Henry: I think we will have an impact by continuing to be inculturated and at the same time counter-cultural. It's not a matter of just stating a position in our community philosophy. We need to live this way in our personal lives, our community and our ministries. We also need to ask ourselves periodically why we do what we do. In the light of our answers, we can share with others the value of the many facets of the Benedictine charism for our Church and society today.

I believe it is important to give our new community members a solid preparation in theology and monastic studies; and that those who have the ability to do so, be given the opportunity to continue their academic formation and go on for advanced degrees. Our Church and our society are desperately in need of persons and communities with a well-grounded, coherent monastic spirituality combined with a strong academic formation.

There is an abundance of literature about St. Benedict on the market today, some of it written by lay people. We can find everything from exhaustive exegesis on the Rule in books like *Around the Monastic Table* by Sister Aquinata Böckmann, OSB, to *St. Benedict's Rule for Business Success, a "*How To" book that offers tools for organizational improvement. But I am not so sure that our communities are always vibrant centers where people can come and drink deeply of Benedict's spirituality. I know there is a certain amount of romanticism surrounding many writings on monastic life, and the real thing can come as a shock to those who come to our communities searching for a utopian ideal. But there are also some sincere well-meaning seekers in our Church and our society who want to drink from the monastic well in a real monastery. Let us be sure there is good, clean water in our wells!

Book Reviews

WORK: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor. By Ben Witherington III. Grand Rapids, Mich. William B. Eerdmans, 2011, $18.00.

On the day I finished reading Ben Witherington's *Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor*, I had devoted several hours to trimming hedge near the monastery. It was hot and humid. I like this kind of manual labor. Helping other monks in their grounds work gives me satisfaction, and as one of our elders used to say, "[Work] Lets others know someone lives here."

Witherington's small book gives the reader an opportunity to reflect on work as something all of us do, and helps us see it as a vocation, as a call from God, a means of establishing the Kingdom through ministry. His book, both direct and approachable, is based on scripture and is aptly supported by contemporary authors such as Gene E. Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (2002) and B. Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, (2009). He quotes Taylor's personal experience of a calling during her seminary studies in which God said to her, "Do whatever pleases you, and belong to me. You see, if we belong to the Lord, then we know that what truly will please us is the residue of what God has placed in our hearts, what God has meant for us to be."

Witherington's optimistic Christian views help the reader gain an enriching perspective on the value and perspective of his or her work. "It is right to take

satisfaction from a job done well … It is no accident that there is a dialectic established in Genesis between work and rest, between work and play, between work and worship. Work should never be a be-all and end-all experience, or else it will indeed be the end of us all, prematurely, as we work ourselves to death."

The organization of the book allows for a natural flow of the topics which include "The Goodness of Work," "Vocation," "Slackers and Sloths," "Work as Ministry," "Work as Culture Making," and finally, "Finding Balance."

"Seeing the World from the Crouch Position: Work as Culture Making," is the author's title for chapter six. This begins with a brief summary of Niebuhr's classic 1957 book on *Christ and Culture*, with its five basic understandings of the relationship between Christ and culture. Witherington quotes Christian Smith, a professor of sociology at the University of Notre Dame, "American evangelicals in the last hundred years have found it easy to condemn culture, critique culture, copy culture and consume culture. It has been much harder for them to actively and imaginatively create culture."

Witherington knows the world of seminary teaching in which the future minister will be challenged to deal with people who work daily and express

satisfaction or despair, seeking the Christian value of work and its relationship to the mission of sanctification. However, it is a book quite easily read by readers with a wide range of interests.

Some Benedictines might take exception to his reference to the Rule and his comments on the hours of work done by monks each day, concluding that Benedict's monks were not very contemplative. One might respond that the Benedictine cenobitic life which respected both work and prayer, brought culture and civilization to Western Europe. It was, after all, a cenobitic value to be active in the lives of those around them and to retain community prayer and *lectio divina* as essential to their spirituality.

Witherington's book reflects the desire of a man in ministry to help others see that the world is good and that the "lifeboat mentality" of our Church is limiting and unattractive to many. We are called to actively engage others in building the Christian kingdom and sharing with them our own enthusiasm for the work that is involved.

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NUMBERS, By Irene Nowell, OSB. *New Collegeville Bible Commentary*. O.T., vol. 5. Series editor, Daniel Durken, OSB. Collegeville, MN:Liturgical Press, 2010.

If you are somewhat put off by the thought of reading something in the Old Testament called *The Book of Numbers,* I dare you to read the Introduction to this commentary. It will be hard for you, I think, not to feel hooked. In six pages, complete with cross-references, a table of chronology and an itinerary for Israel's trek through the Sinai desert, a quick look at sources and content, and a succinct "why" for reading this book, Sister Irene accomplishes a compelling biblical invitation. Her clear focus and lucid exposition will allow you to follow the shaping of a people, and her cross-references to other Biblical texts enhance understanding of Scripture. Her commentary on the trials of Moses and the people, failures and successes, their trying to follow (or not) what is perceived as God's will helps us to appreciate the *idea* of desert, where God lures us and speaks to our hearts. Perhaps think about *The Book of Numbers* as the "book for Lent" that Benedict suggests.

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WELCOME TO THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD: **And Its Meaning For You.** By Joan Chittister. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007, 186 pages, $15, ISBN 978-0-8028-6646-2.

It is always interesting to see what another Benedictine sister writes, since often our formation and community life experiences have so many similarities. This book is not disappointing. Chittister has used a novel approach to share her wisdom. In this volume she starts from dual interests. One interest is the five major religions of the planet: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Muslim.

The other interest is the universal questions that the earth's inhabitants share. The questions vary from what is happiness and where is God, to how can I learn to let go of the past and what does it take to succeed.

The questions alone make one feel that here is the ultimate self-help book. If one had the answers to these questions our problems would be solved and we could coast through our remaining years. Alas, an assumption that having the answers solves our problems is misleading. Living the answers given in this book becomes the real challenge for all humans on a serious spiritual quest.

In probing the universal insights of the great religions, Chittister does not judge or compare the wisdom of the various traditions. Rather she provides a peek into the depths that a serious seeker of truth and wisdom develops when living a reflective life. The insights in this book illustrate the common wisdom of these faiths.

Through carefully chosen stories, myths, old tales and parables from each tradition, the question posed in each chapter invites us into a deeper look at its meaning for today as well as a realization that generations past and earlier ages wrestled with the same issues, though in different outer aspects.

This book would serve well as an introduction for those wishing to better understand other faith traditions. The basis of each tradition is given in a brief explanation that is easy to read. Each tradition is treated with the respect their ancient wisdom deserves.

At times the author over-explains the meaning of a tale or example, but it is worth the repetition for the conclusive challenge that emerges near the end of each short chapter. A few quotes illustrate such insights. From Buddhism: "Rigidity is simply another kind of pride." And, "The truth is that we grow into goodness by being good to others, by being willing to start over again ourselves every time we do less than the world deserves and decency demands."

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LECTIO DIVINA: Contemplative Awakening and Awareness. By Christine Valeers Paintner and Lucy Wynkopp, OSB. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008, 209 pages. $18.95.

St. Benedict's invitation "to listen with the ear of the heart" finds a worthy companion in the book *Lectio Divina: Contemplative Awakening and Awareness* by Christine Valeers Paintner, a Benedictine oblate, and Lucy Wynkopp, OSB.

People have a tendency to separate the seeking for and listening to God from ordinary life. This dualism places our seeking of God in a different realm from our "real" life. Often the result is that God becomes pushed further away from our consciousness, and the voice of God becomes drowned in a sea of disconnected activity.

It is refreshing to read a book that connects the different movements of daily life: Scripture and other spiritual reading, as well as journaling, movement,

music, film, art, and life experience with the seeking for God. The book includes a good background of *Lectio Divina* from classical to contemporary voices. Sometimes after being in the monastery for a number of years, or being close to a monastic community, we forget the reason why we do things. This slipping into formalism takes away from the savor of the moment.

Even more important, the authors expand our horizons. The subtitle is informative of the nature of the book. To awaken and be aware are daily steps for each of us. If we ever stop awakening daily, we will simply go through life asleep, on automatic pilot. But the second part of the subtitle is equally good: awareness. The awareness of God's presence in every aspect of life frees us to trust in that goodness that surrounds us. The book includes a wonderful quote from Thomas Merton on awareness: "[It is] an awakening to the real that is within all that is real. A vivid awareness of infinite Being at the roots of our own limited being…Contemplation is also the response to a call: a call from Him Who has no voice, and yet Who speaks in everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being: for we ourselves are words of His."

We can feel guilty for trying to find God's actions in such beautiful activities as listening to a piece of music, watching a film, engaging in motion, or in pondering our life experience. Especially in a culture that prizes doing over being. As the authors say: "When your heart is filled with gratitude at the beauty of the world and God's gifts, you have become fire."

Perhaps my favorite feature of this book is the Appendix, where the authors give a summary of ways to practice *Lectio Divina* from each chapter. This could be a great aid for one's own personal prayer life, as well as for helping plan retreats to guide others to a greater contemplative awakening and awareness.

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THE MONASTERY OF THE HEART: An Invitation to a Meaningful Life. By Joan Chittister, OSB. BlueBridge: United Tribes Media, Inc., 2011.

This book is, in a sense, unlike what Sister Joan has previously written. At first glance, its layout might tempt one to see a book designed to help speedreaders. Its wide margins on both sides of centered lines might lead one to think that by reading straight down the center of the page, one will be able to get through the book in a hurry. Wrong! Each thought is a precious nugget not quickly mined, linked to its adjacent ideas by an invisible golden thread spun by someone whose understanding of the Rule of Benedict comes to readers from her own "cave of the heart."

In addition, *The Monastery of the Heart* has prompted a study guide whose use is encouraged by those who have begun the movement known as "monasteries of the heart" (either on site or online) – small groups of those who wish to live the values expressed by Benedict and who are guided/helped/inspired by the book and by participating Benedictines of the Erie, Penn., commu-

nity. This daring, innovative use of technology blends the possibilities of distance learning and/or face-to-face sharing the search for Benedictine values that people want to live by. It is not a mere intellectual pursuit; we are meant to change and be changed. (More than two hundred people are already part of the "monasteries of the heart.") Further information is available on its website and those interested are encouraged to acquire the guide which may be downloaded free of charge. (www.monasteriesoftheheart.org)

In her introduction, Sister Joan acknowledges that every age seeks to provide ways of seeking truth, God, the One – with language and symbols, with a lifestyle that it could understand. Benedict maintained that "the spiritual life lay in simply living *this* life, our *daily* life, well." (viii) Her book "is meant to be a new way to live a meaningful spiritual life in the center of the world today, rather than withdraw from it . . . anchored in the Rule, rooted in its values." (ix) "May the women and men, the families, the intentional communities who seek to create within themselves a Monastery of the Heart, find there the God who is forever seeking them."(x)

Six major sections provide the general outline for this 'small guide': *Our Search, Our Interior Life, Our Community, Our Service, Our Promise, Our Spiritual Growth*. Some 25 chapters address major Benedictine values. The language and its rhythm is the rhythm of a life lived seeking the values that Benedict embraced, who treasures the seeking, and delights in sharing a way of life. If readers let the language wash over them, if they surrender to the simple, gentle, yet passionate invitation to find God according to Benedict, lives will be changed. Even if the reader lives alone, as many seekers do, the possibility of a virtual community is promise of understanding, vision, support and strength that community discussion and living can provide.

A reader new to Benedict will begin to see what values are emphasized; those familiar with the Rule will recognize the chapters/ideas furnishing sources for major themes (the prologue, chapters 1-7, 20, 48, 71-72). In addition, the familiar themes of work, hospitality and community service occur throughout (48, 53, 57,

66), as do community living and caring (31, 32, 33-41) and the loving concern of the abbot/prioress and the monastic's individual responsibility (2, 3, 21, 64).

The citations listed above are really unnecessary for one to appreciate the message of this book. Its overall impact on the reader could well be its poetic evaluation of a lifestyle revered, practiced, and loved by one who shares its Scripture-based story of human relationships and who invites readers of many types to take part in a 'monastery of the heart.' In her ending, Sister Joan reiterates Benedictine values. She writes:

These values are clear ones:
community,
prayer,
stewardship,
equality,
conversion,
peace—
all make for communities of love. . . .

community out of a collection of strangers
a slice of life
that crosses age levels,
economic backgrounds,
and ethnicities—
to where differences
can be honored,
and differences
can be broached,
and peace can come
to both the person
and to an entire population
at the same time . . .
(209-211)

One comes to realize that this book is a present day wisdom psalm, crafted in praise and thanksgiving, to be shared in every "Monastery of the Heart" by readers of Benedict and Sister Joan.

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Benedictines

Index- 1999-2010

The three numbers indicate volume, number and initial page, respectively.

Articles

Authors Index (1999-2010)

Becker, Jane, OSB. An Historical Turning Point LVIII.2.6
Böckmann, Aquinata, OSB. Perspectives on the Holy Rule and Monastic Life LV.2.44
Böckmann, Aquinata, OSB. RB 72: Benedict's Last Testament LVII.1.18
Böckmann, Aquinata, OSB. Seeking Truly God LVI.2
Böckmann, Aquinata, OSB. Wisdom Leadership According to Benedict LX.1.6
Bracamontes, Maricarmen, OSB. Benedictine Charism: A Gift that Recreates Persons LIV.2.24
Chittister, Joan, OSB. Prophetic Dimensions of Obedience LV.2.6
Chittister, Joan, OSB, Remember the Vision: Embrace the Dream LX.2.30
Dabalus, Mother Irene, OSB. Benedictine life in the Third Millennium – I L.III.2.22
Dabalus, Mother Irene, OSB. A Culture of Peace and Non-Violence – II L.III.2.32
Driscoll, Martha, OCSO. New Equalities: Monks/Nuns LV.1.6
Dwyer, Cecilia, OSB. Wisdom Leadership from an American Prioress's Perspective LX.1.20
Elms, Judith, OSB. The Prioress/Monastic Relationship: An Alternative Vision LII.2.32
Fangman, Esther, OSB. Listening Turns the Soul to God LXIII.2. 6
Farabaugh, Michelle, OSB. The Rule and Renovations LVII.2.30
Fox, Ruth, OSB. Integration of New Members into Community LIV.2.8
Gioia, John Obl. SB. A Pentecostal Experience – Two Perspectives LIX.1.32
Haghirian, Bonnie, Obl. SB. World Congress of Oblates LIX.1.32
Hazzard, Sr. Barbara & Mayer, Sr. Barbara, OSB. A Unique Expression of OSB Life LXI.1.36
Henry, Patricia, OSB. Hospitality Toward Other Cultures – Part I LIX.1.6
Henry, Patricia, OSB. Personal Decision Making in the Monastic Context LV.2.30
Henry, Patricia, OSB. Opening Ourselves to People of Other Cultures — Part II LIX.2.28
Holthaus, Joachim, OSB. Music Delights and Enriches Spiritual Life LXIII.1.32
Honeygosky, Stephen, OSB. Monastic Witness and Credibility in a Post-Modern World LIII: I. 6
Jackson, Teresa, OSB. The Transforming Power of Silence in the Rule of Benedict LX.2.24
Jamieson, Joanna, OSB. Leadership: My Experience LX.1. 32
Jamieson, Joanna, OSB. Good Zeal and Prayer: Making the Rainbow LVI.1. 6
Johnson, Richard, Aging Well: Soul Experience of the Illumination Years (66+) LXIII.2.20
Jung, Virginia, OSB. Japanese Flower Arrangements Create Contemplative Space LXIII.1.22

Kalmogo, Henriette Wendbala, OSB. Benedict's Good Zeal in West African Monasteries LVI.1.28
Klassen, John, OSB. Towards a Theology of Oblation LXI.2.18
Klassen, John, OSB. The Rule of Benedict and Environmental Sustainability LIX.2. 6
Kodell, Jerome, OSB. Good Zeal and Asceticism in Community LVI.1.14
Kodell, Jerome, OSB. The Meaning and Purpose of this Monastic Moment L.III.2.6
Kodell, Jerome, OSB. Monastic Sacraments LXII.1.6
Lacey Benedictine Sisters (The):Circles of Grace: An Inter-Community Experience LV.1.28
Leavey, Matthew, OSB, et al. Qualities and Skills for Monastic Life: One Approach LIV.1.6
Lindstrom, Susan Marie, OSB. Inside Every Monastic is An Artist Waiting to Create LXIII.1.6
Lindstrom, Susan Marie, OSB. Putting on the Subprioress's Hat LXI.1.30
Malone, Margaret, SGS. An Adventure Tale of Divine Love LVI.2.22
Mananzan, Mary John, OSB. Intercultural Encounter, Ecumenism and Solidarity LIV.2. 24
Mananzan, Mary John, OSB: The Jubilee: An Asian Woman's Perspective L.III:1:22
Mika, Susan, OSB. The Hidden Power of Our Portfolios LVIII.2.34
Miller, Amata, IHM. The Economic Crisis and Catholic Social Teaching LXII.2.6
Mitchell, Nathan D. The Struggle of Religious Women for Eucharist LII.2.12
Moss, Brendan, OSB. Forming the Monastic Heart: The Fruits of *Lectio Divina* LVII.I.34
Naughton, Michael, OSB. Vocation and Aging: It Isn't Over Until It's Over LIV.1.36
Nowell, Irene, OSB. Benedict's Use of Scripture in RB 27: A Question of Context LVII:1. 6
Olivera, Bernardo, OCSC. Five Lessons Learned in 18 Years as Abbot General LXII.1.22
Pearson, J. Stephen. Diasporic Monasticism & Inclusive Hospitality in K. Norris's Cloister Walk LXI.2.26
Purcell, Owen, OSB. Accedia and the Now LXII.1.14
Rinear, Kathleen. The Hospitable Heart: Ben/Zen Spirituality. LVI.2.6
Ryan, Antonia, OSB. Historical Windows on Monastic Architecture, Art, & Renovation LVIII.1.6
Ryan, Antonia, OSB. Intergenerational Monasticism: Many Views, One Horizon LVII.I.26
Schnoebelen. Miriam, OSB: Shaping our Future LXII.2.36
Seago, Diana., and Herndon, Linda, OSB. Webkeepers, Twenty-first Century Monastic Porters LII.2. 6
Smith, Lynne W. New Monastics for a New Millennium L.III.2.44
Smith, Susan Marie, Obl.SB, *et al. Alternative Benedictine Communities* LVIII.2
Smith, Susan Marie, Obl.SB. The Church's Sin of Omission: Failing to Pray for Creation LXII.2.18
Smith, Susan Marie, Obl.SB. Strangers at the Table LVII.2.14

Benedictines

Sutera, Judith, OSB. Vocations on a New Frontier LIV.1.14
Terrell, Brian. Prayer and Work, Hospitality and Revolution LIII.1.36
Thompson, Phyllis, Obl.SB. On the Sacredness of Cooking Pots and All Creation LVIII.2.42
Thompson, Phyllis, Obl.SB. Oblates – Stretching the Benedictine 'Tent' LV.1.18
Varela, Ramona, OSB. Creating a Positive Future LVII.2.36
Vest, Norvene, Obl.SB. Monastics and Oblates: Mutual Blessings LIX.1.16
Visel, Jeana, OSB. In the Image of God: The Spirituality of Iconography LXIII.1.40
Vladimiroff, Christine, OSB. Exploring Our Prophetic Tradition LXI.2. 6
Vladimiroff, Christine, OSB. The Challenge of Monastic Obedience LV.2.20
Wagner, Sonia, OSB. Good Zeal as Love LVI.1.40
Walgenbach, Mary David, OSB. My African Experience LV.1.36
Walker, Maxine E. The Saint and the Poet: Time & Space in School of Holiness LXII.1.32
Warden, Gilda. Scholastica's Christological Praxis LIX.1.24
Wassmuth, Carol Ann, OSB. The Benedictine Charism and Ecology LIX.2.16
Whipple, Lou, OSB, *et al. Younger Monastics Find Reasons to Hope* LX.2. 6
Wiederkehr, Macrina, OSB. Living Mindfully LXI.1.24
Wilkes, Paul. Stability – A Sense of Where You Are LIV.1.22
Wolf, Notker, OSB. Challenges Facing Benedictine Monasteries in the 21st Century LVIII.1. 4
Zalot, Charlotte Anne, OSB. Frank Kacmarcik: Faithfulness to Vocation LVIII.1.30
Zuercher, Suzanne, OSB. Thomas Merton: An Artist of the Monastery LXIII.1.13

Title Index (1999-2010)

Alternative Benedictine Communities. Susan Marie Smith, Obl.SB, *et al.* LVIII.2.12
A Pentecostal Experience: Two Perspectives. John Gioia, Obl. SB. LIX.1.32
A Practical Monastic Theology of Aging. Raymond Studzinski, OSB LX.1.6
A Unique Expression of OSB Life. Barbara Hazzard and Barbara Mayer, OSB LXI.1.36
Accedia and the Now. Owen Purcell, OSB LXII.1.14
Aging Well: Soul Experience of the Illumination Years (66+). Richard Johnson LXIII.2.20
An Adventure Tale of Divine Love. Margaret Malone, SGS LVI.2.22
An Historical Turning Point. Jane Becker, OSB LVIII.2.6
Benedict and the Winnowing Dish: A Story of Our Lives. Rachel Srubas, Obl.SB LIX.2.22
Benedict's Good Zeal in West African Monasteries. Henriette Wendbala Kalmogo, OSB LVI.I
Benedict's Use of Scripture in RB27: A Question of Context. Irene Nowell, OSB LVII.1.6
Benedictine Charism: A Gift that Recreates Persons. Maricarmen Bracamontes, OSB LIV.2.24
Benedictine Life in the Third Millennium – I. Mother Irene Dabalus, OSB LIII.2.22
Challenges Facing Benedictine Monasteries in the 21st Century. Notker Wolf, OSB LVIII.1.4
Circles of Grace: an Inter-Communnity Experience. Lacey Benedictine Sisters LV.1.28
Creating a Positive Future. Ramona Varela, OSB LVII,2,36

Diasporic Monasticism & Inclusive Hospitality in K. Norris's Cloister. Stephen Pearson LXI.2.26
Exploring Our Prophetic Tradition. Christine Vladimiroff, OSB LXI.2.6
Five Lessons Learned in 18 Years as Abbot General. Bernardo Olivera, OCSC LXII.1.22
Five Meditations on the Holy Rule. Rachel Srubas, Obl.SB LVIII.1.38
Forming the Monastic Heart: The Fruits of *Lectio Divina. Brendan Moss, OSB* LVII.1.34
Frank Kacmarcik: Faithfulness to Vocation. Charlotte A. Zalot, OSB LVIII.1.30
Good Zeal and Asceticism in Community. Jerome Kodell, OSB LVI.1.14
Good Zeal and Prayer: Making the Rainbow. Joanna Jamieson, OSB LVI.1.6
Good Zeal as Love. Sonia Wagner, OSB LVI.1.28
Good Zeal in West African Monasteries. Henirette Wendbala Kalmogo, OSB LVI.1.28
Historical Windows on Monastic Architecture, Art & Renovation. Antonia Ryan, OSB LVIII.1.6
Hospitality Toward Other Cultures – Part I. Patricia Henry, OSB LIX.1.6
How Can This Be? The New Mystery of Monastic Vocation. Susan Sullivan LII.2.26
In the Image of God: The Spirituality of Iconography. Jeana Visell, OSB LXIII.1.40
Inside Every Monastic is An Artist Waiting to Create. Susan Marie Lindstrom, OSB LXIII.1.6
Integration of New Members into Community. Ruth Fox, OSB LIV.2.8
Intercultural Encounter, Ecumenism and Solidarity. Mary John Mananzan, OSB LIV.2.24
Intergenerational Monasticism: Many Views, One Horizon. Antonia Ryan, OSB LVII.1.26
Japanese Flower Arrangements Create Contemplative Space. Virginia Jung, OSB LXIII.1.22
Leadership: My Experience. Joanna Jamieson, OSB LX.1.32
Listening Turns the Soul to God. Esther Fangman, OSB LXIII.2.6
Living Mindfully. Macrina Wiederkiehr, OSB LXI.1.24
Maintaining Spirituality in the Mature Years. Raymond Studzinski, OSB LIII.2.32
Monastic Sacraments. Jerome Kodell, OSB LXII.1.6
Monastic Witness and Credibility in a Post-Modern World. Stephen Honeygosky, OSB LIII.1.6
Monastics and Oblates: Mutual Blessings. Norvene Vest, Obl.SB LIX.1.16
Music Delights and Enriches Spiritual Life. Joachim Holthaus, OSB LXIII.1.32
My African Experience. Mary David Walgenbach, OSB LV.1.36
New Equalities: Monks/Nuns. Martha Driscoll, OCSO LV.1.6
New Monastics for a New Milennium. Rev. Lynne W. Smith LIII.2.44
Oblates - Stretching the Benedictine 'Tent'. Phyllis Thompson. Obl.SB LV.1.18
On the Sacredness of Cooking Pots and All Creation. Phyllis K. Thompson, Obl.SB LVIII.2.42
Opening Ourselves to People of Other Cultures – Part II. Patricia Henry, OSB LIX.2.28
Personal Decision Making in the Monastic Context. Patricia Henry, OSB LV.2.30
Perspectives on the Holy Rule and Monastic Life. Aquinata Böckmann, OSB LV.2.44
Prayer and Work, Hospitality and Revolution. Brian Terrell LIII.1.36
Prophetic Dimensions of Obedience. Joan Chittister, OSB LV.2.6
Putting on the Subprioress's Hat. Susan Marie Lindstrom, OSB LXI.1.30
Qualities and Skills for Monastic Life: One Approach. Matthew Leavey, OSB, *et al.* IV.1.6

Benedictines

RB 72: Benedict's Last Testament. Aquinata Böckmann, OSB LVII.1.18
Remember the Vision: Embrace the Dream. Joan Chittister, OSB LX.2.30
Scholastica's Christological Praxis. Gilda Warden LIX.1.24
Seeking Truly God – According to St. Benedict. Aquinata Böckmann, OSB LVI.2.32
Shaping our Future. Miriam Schnoebelen, OSB LXII.2.36
Stability: A Sense of Where You Are. Paul Wilkes LIV.1.22
Storing Up Riches. Rose Marie Stallbaumer, OSB LVII.2.6
Strangers at the Table. Susan Marie Smith, Obl.SB LVII.2.14
The Benedictine Charism and Ecology. Carol Ann Wassmuth, OSB LIX.2.16
The Challenge of Monastic Obedience. Christine Vladimiroff, OSB LV.2.20
The Church's Sin of Omission: Failing to Pray for Creation. Susan Marie Smith, Obl.SB LXII.2.18
The Economic Crisis and Catholic Social Teaching. Amata Miller, IHM LXII.2.6
The Hidden Power of Our Portfolios. Susan Mika, OSB LVIII.2.34
The Hospitable Heart: Ben/Zen Spirituality. Kathleen Rinear. LV1.2.6
The Jubilee: An Asian Woman's Perspective. Mary John Mananzan, OSB LIII.1.22
The Meaning and Purpose of this Monastic Moment. Jerome Kodell, OSB LIII.2.6
The Prioress/Monastic Relationship:An Alternative Vision. Judith Elms, OSB LII.2.32
The Rule of Benedict and Environmental Sustainability. John Klassen, OSB LIX.2.6
The Rule and Renovations. Michele Farabaugh, OSB LVII.2.30
The Saint and the Poet:Time & Space in School of Holiness. Maxine E. Walker LXII.1.32
The Struggle of Religious Women for Eucharist. Nathan D. Mitchell LII.2.12
The Transforming Power of Silence in the Rule of Benedict. Teresa Jackson, OSB LX.2.24
Thomas Merton: An Artist of the Monastery. Suzanne Zuercher, OSB LXIII.1.13
Towards a Theology of Oblation. John Klassen, OSB LXI.2.18
Vocation and Aging: It Isn't Over Until It's Over. Michael Naughton, OSB LIV.1.36
Vocations on a New Frontier. Judith Sutera, OSB LIV.1.14
Webkeepers, 21st Century Monastic Porters. Diana Seago & Linda Herndon, OSB LII.2.6
Wisdom Leadership According to Benedict. Aquinata Böckmann, OSB LX.1.6

Wisdom Leadership from an American Prioress's Perspective. Cecilia Dwyer, LX.1.20
World Congress of Oblates. Bonnie Haghirian, Obl. SB LX1.32
Younger Monastics Find Reasons to Hope. Lou Whipple, OSB. *et al.* LX.2.6

Book Review Index (1999-2010)

Allen, John L., Jr.: *Cardinal Ratzinger: The Vatican's Enforcer of the Faith,* (Joachim Holthaus, OSB) LVIII:2, 53-54
Armstrong, Regis J.; Hellmann, H.A.; & Short, William J.; eds: *The Francis Trilogy of Thomas of Celano*, (Joan Offenburger, OSB) LVIII:1, 46
Barron, Robert: *Word on Fire: Proclaiming the Power of Christ, (Janelle* Maes, OSB) LXII:2, 46-47
Bellitto, Christopher M.: *The General Councils: A History of the Twenty-One Church Councils from Nicaea to Vatican II,* (Joan Offenburger, OSB), LVI:1, 52-54

Bőckmann, Aquinata; Haudl, Matilda & Burkhard, Marianne, translators: *Perspectives on the Rule of St. Benedict: Expanding our Hearts in Christ*, (Joan Offenburger, OSB) LIX:2, 41-42

Boles, Martin & Cernea, Anthony J., ed.: The Contributions of Monastic Life to the Church and The World: Essays in Celebration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of Mount Saviour Monastery, (Joan Offenburger, OSB) LIX:2, 43-44

Brophy, Donald: *Catherine of Siena: A Passionate Life*, (Barbara McCracken, OSB) LXIII:2, 42-43

Buckley, Suzanne; ed.: *Sacred is the Call: Formation and Transformation in Spiritual Direction Programs, (Micaela Randolph, OSB)* LIX:2, 44-45

Byassee, Jason: *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine*, (Irene Nowell, OSB) LXII:1, 48-49

Campbell, Cathy C.: *Stations of the Banquet: Faith Foundations for Food Justice* , (Angela Ostermann, OSB) LVII:2, 43

Cannato, Judy: *Field of Compassion: How the New Cosmology is Transforming Spiritual Life*, (Richard Brummel, Obl.SB) LXIII:1, 53-54

Carden, John: *A Procession of Prayers: Meditations and Prayers from Around the World*, (Joan Offenburger, OSB) LII:2, 38-39

Carroll, Colleen*: The New Faithful: Why Young Adult are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy*, (Joan Offenburger, OSB) LVIII:1, 46

Casey, Michael, OCSO: *Strangers to the City: Reflections on the Beliefs and Values of the Rule of Saint Benedict,* (Owen Purcell, OSB) LIX:2, 40-41

Cazabonne, Emma: *A Light to Enlighten the Darkness*, (Janelle Maes, OSB) LXII:1, 49-50

Cheripko, Jan: *Brother Bartholomew and the Apple Grove*, (Antonia Ryan, OSB) LX:1, 40-41

Chittister, Joan D., OSB: *The Story of Ruth: Twelve Moments in Every Woman's Life, (Regina Hansen, OSB)* LIII:2, 47

Chittister, Joan, OSB: *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*, (Regina Hansen, OSB) LVII:1, 45

Chittister, Joan, OSB: *In the Heart of the Temple: My Spiritual Vision for Today's World*, (Regina Hansen, OSB) LVIII:1, 44

Chittister, Joan; OSB: *25 Windows into the Soul: Praying with the Psalms*, (Micaela Randolph, OSB) LX:2, 45-46

Chittister, Joan; OSB: *In Search of Belief*, (Joachim Holthaus, OSB) LXI:1, 40-41

Chittister, Joan; OSB: *In My Own Words*, (Barbara Mayer, OSB) LXI:2, 40

Chittister, Joan; OSB: *Welcome to the Wisdom of the World: And Its Meaning for You*, (Marcia Ziska, OSB) LXI:2, 40-41

Claassen, William: *Alone in Community: Journeys into Monastic Life around the World*, (Paula Howard, OSB) LIV:1, 43-44

Collins, Gregory, OSB: *The Glenstal Book of Icons*, (Paula Howard, OSB) LVI:2, 47-48

Conference of Benedictine Prioresses; Collins, Mary, OSB, ed.: *Wisdom From the Tradition: A Statement of North American Benedictine Women in Response to Our Times*, (Joan Offenburger, OSB) LIX:2, 43

Benedictines

Cornwell, John: *Breaking Faith: The Pope, the People, and the Fate of Catholicism*, (Sharon Murray, OSB) LV:1, 41

Cozzens, Daniel: *Sacred Silence: Denial and the Crisis in the Church*, (Chris Kean, OSB) LVII:1, 44-45

Crysdale, Cynthia S. W.: *Embracing Travail: Retrieving The Cross Today*, (Theresa Torres, OSB) LIII:1, 46-47

Dallayr, Fred: *Peace Talks—Who will Listen?*, (Barbara McCracken, OSB) LIX:1, 40-41

de Waal, Esther: *Lost in Wonder: Rediscovering the Spiritual Art of Attentiveness*, (Joan Offenburger, OSB) LVII:1, 42-43

Deffenbaugh, Daniel G.: *Learning the Language of the Fields: Tilling and Keeping as Christian Vocation*, (Carol Ann Wassmuth, OSB) LX:1, 41-42

Derkse, Wil: *A Blessed Life: Benedictine Guidelines for Those Who Long for Good Days,* (Janelle Maes, OSB) LXIII:2, 41-42

Draves-Arpaia, Neil J.: *Come Light Our Hearts: General intercessions for Ritual Celebrations*, Feast Days, and Civic Holidays, (Cecilia Olson, OSB) LII:2, 38

Egan, Eileen: *Peace Be With You: Justified Warfare or the Way of Nonviolence*, (Joan Offenburger, OSB) LVI:1, 52-54

Elie, Paul: *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, (Barbara McCracken, OSB) LVII:2, 42-43

Feiss, Hugh: *Essentials of Monastic Wisdom: Writings on the Contemplative Life,* (Joan Offenburger, OSB) LIV:1, 45-46

Field, Anne, OSB: *The Monastic Hours: Directory for the Celebration of the Work of God and Directive Norms for the Celebration of the Monastic Liturgy of the Hours*, (Erin Ryan) LIV:1, 44-45

Fitzpatrick, Mother Gail, OCSO: *Seasons of Grace: Wisdom from the Cloister*, (Joan Offenburger, OSB) LIII:2, 49

Forman, Mary, OSB: *Praying with the Desert Mothers*, (Antonia Ryan, OSB) LIX:1, 45

Forest, Jim: *The Ladder of the Beatitudes*, (Joan Offenburger, OSB) LII:2, 40

Fox, Ruth, OSB: *Wisdom Leadership: Reflections on the Ministry of Monastic Leaders*, (Coleen Haggerty, OSB) LVII:1, 40-41

Fox, Thomas C.: *Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church*, (Joan Offenburger, OSB) LVI:1, 52-54

Funk, Mary Margaret, OSB: *Tools Matter for Practicing the Spiritual Life*, (Joan Offenburger, OSB), LV:1, 42-43

Funk, Mary Margaret, OSB: *Islam Is…an Experience of Dialogue and Devotion, (Joan Offenburger, OSB)* LVII:1, 46

Funk, Mary Margaret, OSB: *Humility Matters For Practicing the Spiritual Life, (Joan Offenburger, OSB)* LIX:2, 42-43

Funk, Mary Margaret, OSB: *Thoughts Matter: The Practice of Spiritual Life*, (Joan Offenburger, OSB) LVI:1, 45-46

Gaillardetz, Richard R: *By What Authority? A Primer on Scripture, the Magisterium and the Sense of the Faithful, (Theresa Torres, OSB)* LVI:2, 50

Glazier, Michael & Hellwig, Monika; eds: *The Modern Catholic Encyclopedia, Revised and Expanded Edition, (Joan Offenburger, OSB)* LVIII:1, 46-47

Glenstal Abbey: *The Glenstal Book of Prayer: A Benedictine Prayer Book, (Regina Hansen, OSB)* LV:1, 42

Grőning, Philip; Dir.: *Into Great Silence, (Richard Brummel, Obl.SB)* LXI:2, 41-42

Hart, Patrick; ed.: *A Monastic Vision for the 21st Century: Where Do we Go From Here?, (Paula Howard, OSB)* LX:2, 46-47

Hays, Edward: *Little Orphan Angela, (Joan Offenburger, OSB),* LIII:2, 48-49

Henry, Patrick; ed.: *Benedict's Dharma: Buddhist Reflect on the Rule of Saint Benedict, (Joan Offenburger, OSB)* LVI:2, 46-47

Holtz, Albert, OSB: *Downtown Monks: Sketches of God in the City, (Joan Offenburger, OSB)* LIII:2, 49

Holyhead, Verna A., SGS: *The Gift of Saint Benedict, (Joan Offenburger, OSB)* LV:2, 53-54

Homan, Daniel, OSB: *Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love, (Barbara McCracken, OSB)* LVI:2, 48

Hopper, Kim: *Reckoning With Homelessness, (Barbara McCracken, OSB),* LVII:1, 43-44

Hutchison, Joyce: *May I Walk You Home? Courage and Comfort for Caregivers of the Very Ill, (Evelyn Gregory, OSB)* LXIII:1, 50-51

Hutchison, Joyce: *Now That You've Gone Home: Courage and Comfort for Times of Grief, (Evelyn Gregory, OSB)* LXIII:1, 50-51

Hopper, Kim: *Reckoning With Homelessness, (Barbara McCracken, OSB),* LVII:1, 43-44

Hutchison, Joyce: *May I Walk You Home? Courage and Comfort for Caregivers of the Very Ill, (Evelyn Gregory, OSB)* LXIII:1, 50-51

Hutchison, Joyce: *Now That You've Gone Home:Courage and Comfort for Times of Grief, (Evelyn Gregory, OSB)* LXIII:1, 50-51

Jackson, Donald (Handwritten and Illuminated): *The Saint John's Bible: Psalms, (Antonia Ryan, OSB)* LXI:1, 45

Johnson, Elizabeth: *Truly Your Sister: A Theology of Mary in Communion of Saints, (Janelle Maes, OSB)* LVII:2, 40-42

Johnson, Elizabeth: *Quest for the Living God, (Janelle Maes, OSB),* LXI: 2, 38-39

Johnson, Richard P.: *The Nun and The Doctor: A Conversion Love Story at Midlife, (Jan Futrell, OSB)* LXIII:2, 44-46

Kardong, Terrence G.: *Day by Day with Saint Benedict, (Antonia Ryan, OSB)* LXI:1, 44-45

Kidder, Annemarie: *The Power of Solitude: Discovering Your True Self in a World of Nonsense and Noise, (Paula Howard, OSB)* LX:2, 47-48

Kilmoski, Victor J; O'Neil, Kevin J., CSsR; Schuth, Katarina M. OSF: *Educating Leaders for Ministry: Issues and Responses*, (Suzanne Fitzmaurice, OSB) LIX:1, 41-42

Kownacki, Mary Lou, OSB: *Between Two Souls: Conversations with Ryokan, (Joan Offenburger, OSB)* LVII:2, 44

Kownacki, Mary Lou; OSB: *A Monk in the Inner City: The ABC's of a Spiritual Journey, (Barbara McCracken, OSB)* LXI:2, 43

Liturgy Training Publications: *Eucharistic Document for the New Millennium/Documentos Eucaristicos Para El Nuevo Milenio*, (Joan Offenburger, OSB) LVIII:1, 46

Marett-Crosby, Anthony, OSB, ed: *The Benedictine Handbook, (Joan Offenburger, OSB)* LVII:1, 45-46

Benedictines

Markey, John J., OP: *Creating Communion: The Theology of the Constitutions of the Church, (Joan Offenburger, OSB)* LVI:1, 52-54
McDonnell, Kilian, OSB: *Swift, Lord, You Are Not, (Joan Offenburger, OSB)* LVI:2, 49
McGann, Mary E.: *A Precious Fountain: Music in the Worship of an African- American Catholic Community, (Susan Barber, OSB)* LVIII:2, 55
McGinnis, Mark: *Wisdom of the Benedictine Elders*, (Joan Offenburger, OSB) LVIII:1, 44-46
Meehan, Bridget Mary: *Praying with Visionary Women, (Irene Nowell, OSB)* LIII:1, 45-46
Monroe, Catherine: *The King's Nun*, (Antonia Ryan, OSB) LX:1, 43-45
Montaldo, Jonathan & Toth, Robert; eds.: *Bridges to Contemplative Living with Thomas Merton: A Series*, (Gabrielle Kocour, OSB) LXII:2, 43
Murk-Jansen, Saskia: *Brides in the Desert: The Spirituality of the Beguines. Traditions of Christian Spirituality*, (Irene Nowell, OSB) LIII:1, 45-46
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Schmidt, Joseph; F.F.C.: *Everything is Grace: The Life and Way of Thérèse of Lisieux*, (Noreen Hurter, OSB) LX:2, 48-49
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Skloot, Rebecca: *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, (Linda Herndon, OSB) LXIII:2, 43-44
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Swenson, Kristin M.: *Living through Pain: Psalms and the Search for Wholeness*, (Barbara Conroy, OSB) LX:1, 42-43
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Tisdall, Maria: *The Convent Cook: Divine Meals for Families Large and Small*, (Angela Ostermann, OSB) LV:2, 52
Tobin, Jacqueline L. & Dobard, Raymond: *Hidden In Plain View: A Secret Story of the Underground Railroad*, (Joan Offenburger, OSB) LIII:21, 47-48
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