

*The Journal of the
Lay Cistercians
of Gethsemani Abbey*

Issue 4 – Season of Advent 2018



Enhanced Photo by Randy Cox

The Journal of the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey

The stability of the monastic enclosure, combined with centuries of tradition, provides a structure and model for growth that offers support and guidance, as well as rich resources for contemplation.

Non-cloistered contemplatives, however, face different challenges in respect to the environment and the companions with which their search for God takes place. Since they do not live within the walls of a monastic building, they must personally define a comparable place and fashion a practice of prayer, contemplation and spiritual companionship that complements their monastery-without-walls.

The primary purpose of this on-line publication is to contribute to the formation of such an enclosure. Ideally, the *Journal* is a context in which members and candidates explore and share aspects of their spiritual journeys and the role of the Cistercian charism and the monastery of Gethsemani in those journeys.

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Introductory Note

The challenge of putting together a journal that reflects religious experiences is to remain open to the ways in which contributors write or paint or photograph or sing their message. It is difficult to reveal intimate conversations with or about anyone. Sharing one's feelings about God requires daring, openness and trust. It is my hope that the contents of this fourth Journal issue will encourage other members of the Lay Cistercian community to accept the risk of sharing their experiences, ideas and impressions in whatever form they feel most comfortable. There are no correct ways to write about the contemplative search. The more we lose our fear of revealing our encounters, the more varied and complete our community.

Bill Felker

Evening Angelus (for Brother Paul)

by Randy Cox

The evening angelus chimes
Ring their sumptuous chants
From the womb of the bell tower
Calling nearby hills to liturgy

Overtones die in open fields
Recently ripened in accord
With the proper season and sensibility
Of the winds and rains and furrowed plow

The little moon is an early riser
None the brighter or best enchanter
As the night's pulling and tugging
And flamboyant sightseeing eyes



Photo by Randy Cox

Poem

by Larry Wilson

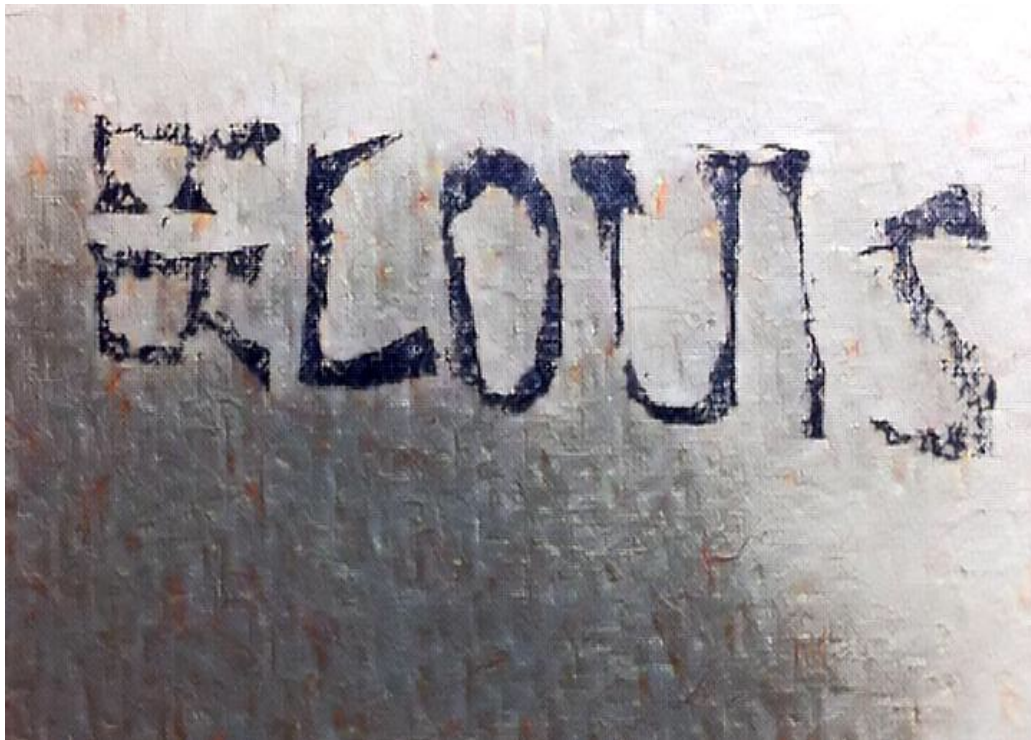
I walked in the woods today, in the snow, following the same trail I've been walking for years. It's always the same but always different. I followed the footprints I left yesterday and the yesterday before, alone with God in Nature. Lonely?...a little. Walking with God alone in the snow, step after step. Is this all there is for me, Lord?...and I walk on knowing in my heart this is my trail. I must go on...but then they begin to show themselves just a little...My community.

I begin to see the hoof prints in the snow crossing my path, and I walk on...more hoof prints appear down my trail and they veer off to the left and some to the right and more keep crossing my path. I very seldom see them really, but I know they're here...just out there in the trees somewhere watching me...giving me the space I need. I walk on and prints become more numerous.

Then for a while my trail in the snow becomes one...and I walk alone no more. My community and I are one and I feel safe and alive. We walk on together for a while. No real words are spoken except what comes from deep within the silence. I am at home and at peace with my community as we walk on. Oh happy day! I am grounded with my community when we're walking together, but it is only for a few more steps and then their prints veer off into the woods in all directions and I stand in my tracks alone attain, but not really.

They are always with me just beyond my sight gently watching me with their soft brown eyes guiding me along my trail. I actually saw one once. He stopped a short distance away...a tall

magnificent one. He talked to me about “God Alone.” He shared his books and his life, and then he bounded off back into the woods. His prints are still in the snow. I’ll see them there everyday forever. I walk with only my own prints again as I leave the woods today, alone with God, secure that my community is just inside the woods watching, silently praying, allowing me to become what God alone has created for me in this Cistercian vocation.



Fr. Louis' Personal Stamp
Photo by Randy Cox

MERTON'S TIMELESS CONVERSION By Scott Gilliam

In September 2017, I made a pilgrimage to Corpus Christi Church in NYC, near the campus of Columbia University with Sr. Mary Lanning, my mentor in ministry to the homeless. A friendly young woman named Sarah answered the rectory doorbell and cheerfully accommodated our request to visit the sanctuary and the baptismal font where Merton made his conversion to Catholicism. Sarah also invited me to visit the room in the rectory where Merton first talked to the parish priest about converting to Catholicism. I was mesmerized by the carving of Christ's baptism on the front of the font (see the accompanying picture), which planted the seed for this haiku.

"The Spring of Life"
By Scott Gilliam | Haiku Poet
September 20, 2017

Sacred marble font.
Hidden in the back of a
Small neighborhood church.

I dipped my fingers
In its cool pool of water
And signed my forehead.

Thoughts of the countless
Pilgrims who have made this trek
Filled my head and heart.

Thousands united
By the waters of the spring
Which join us to God.

Such a powerful
Symbol of our journey to
Daily conversion.
I wetted my hand
And returned to the pews where
My friend was seated.

I touched her forehead
With my wet hand and whispered
"From the Merton font."

Sister Mary smiled
And acknowledged my gesture.
We sat in silence.

I wonder how that
Future Trappist monk felt the
Day he met the font?

Energized? Alive?
Like a beloved child of
Our great Creator?

I made a deep sigh.
Time to return to the world.
But with renewed calm.

I left with deep joy.
With my batteries recharged.
God still reigned in me.

Thank you, dear Thomas.
Your baptismal courage has
Blessed many pilgrims.



Photo by Scott Gilliam

My Monkish Twin: A Novice Tale

By Ray Geers

Chapter 6 Count It All Joy

*My sisters and brothers, count it all joy when you
fall into various trials,
knowing that the testing of your faith produces
patience.*

James 1:2-3

After my family left me at Gethsemani and drove away, I was shown to my room – which is called a “cell” in both monastic and prison traditions. In biology, the cell is the basic unit of life. For one who had grown up in a converted three-bedroom house with up to twelve inhabitants, my cell seemed a rather generous personal living space: a rectangular room squared by cement blocks, a drop ceiling and a hard terrazzo floor. This was my new abode, my “paradise,” per Master Romuald of medieval Europe. Here is where I was to go and sit and be taught everything a monk needs to know, as per the ancient Egyptian Abba Moses.

For a room color, I would have preferred white, which was the monochrome scheme of the church, the cloister halls, the gatehouse and nearly everything else in this Cistercian spiritual greenhouse. The color white reminded me of a rambling chapter from Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* entitled simply "The Whiteness of the Whale":

“...symbolize whatever grand or gracious thing he will by whiteness, no man can deny that in its profoundest idealized significance it calls up a peculiar apparition to the soul.”

Peculiar apparition indeed! It recalled for me, on the one hand, the purity of the Trappist monk's life, of the single-minded intention inscribed in stone above the Gethsemani guesthouse entrance: "God Alone". Like the color white, which contains and underlies all the wavelengths of the possible spectrum so that no hue can escape its influence, God always has to be reckoned with. At the same time, I could sense the ambivalence of the color white. Whiteness is both holy and dangerous because, among other things, whiteness sets itself up for the challenge of eventual stains. What this observation meant in terms of my own spiritual quest, with its searching for a “heart of gold”, will need to be more fully explored as we continue this narrative. But the cells in the novice wing of the monastery were not painted in conformity with the church. Disappointingly, these walls had been rolled over with a light-yellow hue that tended to lose its strength and its ability to inspire hope over time.

My one rather large window opened out to the backyard, so to speak of Gethsemani. This was the busier, working side of the monastic complex. From my window, I could see the farms building which housed the mail order business. I could also see the bakery, the library and the horse barn situated along the sides of the roadway that dead-ended at the shops building where the cellarer Brother Ephraim supervised a warehouse of all the monastery's work tools and heavy equipment. There was also a wood shop, where Brother Joachim spent his free time, and the

cheese factory building, dubbed the "slime pit" by the novices who were drafted to work there after saintly old Brother William injured his back. Mine wasn't as quiet a view as the rooms across the hall had. These looked down on the inside of the cloister quadrangle of buildings. To my mind, this inner court was the center, the "*still point of the turning world*" of the Gethsemani complex. Here I imagined that the small trees below us were in constant vigil, forever praying among cobblestone pavers. A curved path cut through and divided the enclosure into yin and yang areas. In the center was a perpetually trickling fountain under an aged ginkgo tree.

When the door was close and I sat down, I was finally alone in my cell. An unbelievable feeling of excitement rose in me again for several minutes. I felt I was at home and about to settle for the last time in my life. All was quiet on the monastic front.

This quietness lasted until the terrazzo floor underneath me creaked from the weight of some unknown mover in a room nearby. Outside my window I saw a monk in blue jeans and a cobalt blue shirt pushing a wheelbarrow down the lane towards the old horse barn. That was Brother Rene, the under master. He must have been on his way back from some work project or other.

An under master is a mature monk whose job it is to look after the working life of the novices and the seekers who stay at the monastery for an extended stay. This was never really explained to me, but it's what I gathered as I went along with the life at Gethsemani. We relied on Brother Rene, day after day, as if he were our scout master and we the new bear cubs working on merit badges.

Brother Rene was ever the optimistic monk as far as I could tell. He had a round head on a small muscular body. His blue gray

eyes were big and almost sad except when he smiled. If pressed to place Rene as one of Walt Disney's seven dwarfs from the movie *Snow White*, he's hands-down "Dopey", the most lovable one – with more than just a touch of "Bashful" as well. This may be because Rene had a quiet way of exuding a love that also managed to keep him humble. His smile was always like a blush. But Rene also had a steel side to him as well. If he had a motto, for Rene it would have been: *never do a job the easiest way!* He never hesitated to take on the hardest and least desirable jobs in the monastery. I guess that's why he took on the novices. Even when we screwed up or when one of us protested and said something like "Shouldn't we be using *safety equipment* for this job?" Rene never showed his anger. He was patient with us even when we weren't with him.

At odd moments Brother Rene would let out a nervous kind of laughter accompanied by a grin and a slight bobbing of the head, his eyes wide and white against the leathery tan of his skin. I don't know how Rene developed this peculiar laughter. It seemed only the tip of a mountain of primal joy or fear, or perhaps a mixture of both. Every time I experienced Rene's suppressed laughter I wondered – is this a kind of madness? But mad or not, I knew him to be harmless; in fact, he was the opposite of harm except for some of the crazy jobs he gave us to do.

In the spring it was traditional for the monastery to plant sweet potatoes in the field behind the library. It was the novices' job, with Rene's direction and know-how, to plant, harvest and store the sweet potatoes. I ran the tractor with the plow. I planted the little sweet potato plants. I did it all – we all did. The sunshine was buzzing with the sound of the ripening seventeen-year cicadas, but we paid them no mind while working those early spring days planting and talking as we squatted in the dirt.

In the fall of my first year at Gethsemani, several of the veteran monks came to help us harvest the sweet potatoes and the regular potatoes. Even the abbot, Timothy Kelley himself, was there. The atmosphere was like a barn raising as everybody pitched in to get the potatoes dug up with a blade on the old Allis Chalmers tractor, placed into boxes and stacked onto the flatbed truck before it was time for prayer and the evening meal.

The sweet potato crop was a huge success that year. We had so many sweet spuds and white spuds that Brother Rene wasn't sure where to go with all of them. Somebody came up with the idea that we should store part of the bumper crop in a cave cut in sedimentary rock along a ridge of the monastery's property to the east. So that's what we did. But the cave didn't keep them fresh. In a short time they were mostly rotten. As happy as we were to plant and harvest them seemed as nothing compared to the disgust we felt at the look and smell of them coming, like some half-dead Lazarus, out of the cave.

"I can't believe anyone would still want to eat these things!" exclaimed Father Denis as he stood with his elbows on the flatbed and performed radical surgery to a pinkish gray spud, it's diseased-looking puss squishing in response to the knife cuts.

"Oh Brother! But don't you know that the monk cooks can use anything to put in their steam pots to make us our soup?" The reply was from Brother Robert, a former missionary brother now trying out the Trappist as a possible second career.

"Yeah, but this is ridiculous" said Gabriel who by now had stopped using his knife and was holding his nose with a handkerchief. Gabriel was usually the first one to stop working on any of Rene's projects for the novitiate. He refused to press wet mortar into the cracks of an old fountain in the courtyard behind the

gatehouse, as Rene instructed us to do, using only our bare hands – an excellent way to turn skin into leather. And when Rene volunteered the novices and himself for the job of emptying the crap out of the solar house latrine, Gabriel suddenly came down with the flu. True to form, Rene did the worst parts of this job himself.

For Brother Rene, the spoiled potatoes were still God’s gift to those with a pure and grateful heart. Cleaning them up was a teachable moment. “Do you know what Brother Francis of Assisi would say about this?” he asked with a beatific smile on his face. “Count it all joy brothers! Count it all joy!” Gabriel glanced at Father Denis and then at Gary. There was wordless agreement between them – to count it all crazy, insane! And in the future, to *count them out!*

I just kept up with the cutting and peeling; the smell of vegetable rottenness was revolting, but, like all smells associated with the monastery, it was becoming tolerable to me. I already spent my days smelling like onions. I had never eaten so many onions in my life! The very pores of my skin were excreting the aroma for anyone who got within inches of me. And as for other bodily odors, in the choir stalls for instance, well – you can probably imagine it yourself. By and large our new monks’ bodies were having a hard time dealing with a vegetarian diet of mostly pasta and beans.

When the novices had finally finished with a whole afternoon of peeling and cutting out the cancerous growth from the spoiled sweet potato crop, it was time to head for the showers. The lower level of the main monastery building consists of long hallways and many rooms including storage rooms, a dishwashing area, a laundry room, storage sections and the locker and shower room. There must have been some monastic designation for the locker and shower room, but I can't recall it. Anyway, it was here that the five novices

came to clean up from the day's work prior to prayer and dinner. Veteran monks were also coming in and out, some chatting a little with each other or quietly joking with the novices. Others kept their habitual silence with maybe a grin here and there, but sparingly, remembering the Holy Rule of Saint Benedict.

“Count it all joy brothers!” was the joke between the novices. Not many were taking Rene's Saint Francis story to heart. The whole novitiate was growing wiser in the ways of the "monastic world" and sometimes, it seemed to me, a bit cynical. It was a monastic boot camp with Brother Rene leading the somewhat skeptical troops up the steps of humility and down the steps of privation and adaptation. Some of us, like Father Dennis and Gabriel were ascending and descending that ladder with dragging and kicking feet. Others, like Brother Robert, made their way with humor and wit. I was still the same serious kid on the inside who worried about God and perfection and a hell of a lot of other things. Superficially, I chuckled with the others, but really I was a divided house within. “Count it all joy” I kept saying to myself, like it was a riddle or a Zen koan, and I decided I simply had to live the thing out, perhaps to the dregs, in order to solve it once and for all.

Whether he was guiding our hands towards making bread for the body of Christ or towards molding cement to lay brick or patch up cracks, I just simply and instinctively respected and loved Rene. Unprofessional at times? I gave him a pass on that. A little dangerous to our comfort-seeking selves? What in the heck did we expect and what else were we here for? Trusting in God sometimes translated into this kind of trust. My relationship to Brother Rene echoed the one I always had with my dad; it especially resonated with Dad's “try your best and don't worry about the results” approach to life and work. If Rene said to “count it all joy” while

doing unpopular and unpleasant things around the monastery, then I would hold my nose and try my best to count it the same way that he and Saint Francis did.



Enhanced Photo by Randy Cox

GETHSEMANI RENEWS ME AGAIN

By Scott Gilliam

My connection with Thomas Merton led me to the Abbey of Gethsemani in June of 2012. Since then, my Merton-inspired connection with Gethsemani has led to many wonderful retreats at the Abbey. It also drew me to the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani, the lay monastic group affiliated with the monastery. When I visit Gethsemani, I never fail to be inspired to write a haiku. Here is one that overtook me on a summer visit to Gethsemani as I walked the Stations of the Cross below the church.



“Gethsemani
Renews Me Again”

By Scott Gilliam
Haiku Poet
July 10, 2016

Weary bones, rejoice!
Back on sacred ground
at last.
Oh, Gethsemani!

I bow to the walls.
Inside, I let my guard
down.
Solitude abounds.

Birdsong calms my
soul.
I trod the paths in
silence.
Inner me settles.

Church bell detects me.
Sends forth a tonal
greeting.
My ears drink it in.

Sacred "now" delights.
Each moment here is
prayer.
Broken me feels hope.

I seek God alone.
Invisibly he holds me.
In his arms I rest.

Worries fade away.
Clarity of mind returns.
Christ takes back my
heart.

Refreshed once again.
My pilgrim soul is
renewed.
Oh, Gethsemani!

Sin, Temptation and Spiritual Growth

By Ed Salerno

The number of sins that one commits on a habitual or repetitive basis is many. Some people get stuck in the cycle of divorce and remarriage, actually marrying the “same” person over and over. Of course, it is not the same person, literally, but their personalities are quite similar, and there are other features that are alike as well. There are other sinful habits that plague us throughout our walk with Christ, behaviors of a sexual nature, losing one’s temper, gossiping, envy, greed, pride, gluttony, numerous addictions. It is worth noting that they all carry with them certain rituals to deal with the guilt like simply explaining them away as, “This is simply the way I am.”

Within the Catholic tradition, going to Confession following each habitual misbehavior or sin is perhaps the most common intervention. Of course, that works for a while as God’s grace is ever available through His merciful love, but in the end the sin returns and the process is repeated all over again. Like Sisyphus, forever pushing that rock up the hill only to have it roll down again just inches from the top, or perhaps like St Paul’s proverbial thorn in the side.

Some persons are resigned to this drudgery as simply the way things are. They are, of course, thankful for God’s mercy, which is present to see them through each time the sin is repeated and for the grace that heals their guilty heart. Others, it is sad to say, give up altogether, resigned to their life and its struggles, putting their “Faith” on the back burner.

Perhaps there is another way to approach this all-too-

common conundrum in our Christian walk. It begins with understanding that we are all called to be “perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.” From the day of our baptism we are not only to grow physically, intellectually and emotionally, but we are called to grow spiritually, as well. For all Catholics, and for Lay Cistercians in particular, the Church provides countless tools, or sacramentals as some call them, for the unfolding of that process toward union with God, being one with the Father or coming to know who we are in Christ. For Lay Cistercians, it is the Plan of Life; prayer, work, sacred reading, *lectio divina*, conversion of manners and being guided by *The Rule of St. Benedict*.

This is not just a journey for the few, for just the priest, monk, nun or lay monk. All Christians, Protestants and Catholics, Quakers, atheists, too, and Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, all humanity are called to grow up spiritually.

But oh, how our world has wooed us from this essential piece of our maturation with endless advertising on any and every form of media, including the sophisticated analysis of our individual likes and dislikes through the electronic playgrounds of Face Book, Amazon, Twitter and the like. All of this manipulation causes us to drift further and further from God so that now we too often replace growing up, let alone spiritually, with the endless cycle of buying and selling. A well known quote from Psalm 95, “Oh that today you would hear His voice!” is drowned out by the corporate world’s answer to our insatiable desires, causing us to believe that we have to have more and more “stuff”, now.

These desires are encouraged by the very corporations that make these products for their own personal profit. Yes, they constantly teach us, tell us and sell us that if you have all the “stuff” you want you will be happy. Most commercials tell us very

little about the product being advertised. Rather, they show us people simply enjoying life. And if today you don't particularly want anything, they will create a need and provide the product to fill it. The truth is we will never ever be able to have enough stuff. And never being able to have enough stuff is a truth the corporations prey on again and again for their own profit, of course. Capitalism?

On the other hand, this never being able to have enough stuff is also a truth that can lead us right back to God. Realizing the futility of trying to satisfy our acquisitive nature, we can discover true detachment. It can be said that once we are detached from such worldly wants, we are free to pursue our deeper need to know God. We can see that the goods of the world are there for us to have or to leave as we choose. Our surrender to God creates this freedom. This is an interesting paradox in which surrender to God's will actually sets us free. And that freedom puts us on the path to genuine union with God, a path that requires us to continually surrender our old ways or the "old man/woman" as St Paul says so as to put on the "new man/woman" in Christ.

For those who choose such a path, especially for us Lay Cistercians, there is the recognition that this movement away from "forever having to have" into the "freedom of surrendering to God's will" is a call of God through His Son Jesus Christ, the love of the Holy Spirit and the grace of the sacraments.

And now it is in the midst of such a freely chosen direction that we come up against these repetitive sins in our lives. Just when we thought we were on our way! The way, of course, is a slow process of cleaning up our "ACT". And a big part of that "ACT" that needs cleaning up are our habitual sins. All too often, such sins can become a serious roadblock to the very spiritual

growth we are consciously seeking. Those very roadblocks cause too many to simply give up, throw in the towel, the chasuble, the habit, or any other outer garment we might use to cloth our sins behind a veil of deception, our “ACT”. In the end, of course, God is not fooled by our efforts to hide ourselves; in fact, there is no place to hide.

Now, there are many ways to grow up spiritually. For some time, I have been moved by the way Zen Masters in the Buddhist tradition call their students out of their rut, back to deeper practice and toward awakening. This practice in which I engaged under Zen Master Dae Gak for some ten years is as Thomas Merton says a “No nonsense approach to spiritual growth.”

The seemingly countless Zen Koans are one tool used by Zen Masters in this regard. These are simply stories from ancient China and Zen Masters urging their students to go deeper into their practice, to wake up. For example: A monk asked Yun Men, “How is it when the tree withers and the leaves fall off?” Yun Men said, “Body exposed in the golden wind.” (Taken from The Blue Cliff Record, translated by Thomas Cleary and J.C. Cleary) The question might be, what is “body exposed in the golden wind?” The only answer is to Sit and Sit, dig and dig, on and on into that very question to the very bottom (which is no bottom) to that moment in which one sees for oneself.

That deep determination to grow, coupled with deep faith in Zazen or Just Sitting, is, it seems to me, where Lay Cistercians and Zen Buddhists meet. Our deep faith is in God and our deep determination is in living out His will in our lives through Jesus Christ in and through the power of the Holy Spirit, a profound surrender of one’s will.

I must emphasize here that there is one very important point

of difference between the Zen and Christian approaches to spiritual growth. With the practice of Zen (Zazen) you are on your own. The master guides you but as Zen master Edo Roshi told me, “There is no God to help you.” In Christianity, Christ is our ever present help. We do not, can not, cross the threshold into the joy of union with God from any sin, especially repetitive sins, without Him.

That being said, given these factors of faith and determination, how do we move through and beyond repetitive sin? Allow me to offer this explanation. Like Job, God, who truly wants us to grow up, allows us to be tempted. Like Job, we face advice from friends and or spouses about how to handle these temptations; in fact, the advice is often another temptation. But, unlike Job, we too often ask forgiveness and go right back to our old ways or we buy into the advice of those “friends and spouses”. We don’t move through and beyond the situation to a new way to live, to the new man/woman.

I believe that God, in a loving effort to grow us, allows us to be tempted over and over again always at our weakest point. And since He is allowing such temptations to occur He is also offering endless forgiveness through His profound mercy and love till one day we get it, awaken and grow beyond the cycle.

In the words of the Desert Fathers, “Abbot Pastor said that Abbot John the Dwarf had prayed to the Lord and the Lord had taken away all his passions, so that he became impassible. And in this condition he went to one of the elders and said, ‘You see before you a man who is completely at rest and has no more temptations.’ The elder said, ‘Go and pray to the Lord to command some struggle to be stirred up in you, for the soul is matured only in battles.’ And when the temptations started up again he did not

pray that the struggle be taken away from him, but only said: 'Lord, give me strength to go through the fight.' ” Wisdom of the Desert Fathers, Thomas Merton

During the 1970's it was common to repeat the phrase, “No pain, no gain.” This, of course, is the same truth the Desert Fathers and Zen Masters knew about and lived by thousands of years ago.

So it is that we are called not only to grow up spiritually through our dealings with repeated sin but to do so by carrying our crosses right across that battlefield. For our struggles are not with flesh and blood but with a host of demon powers. Jesus tells us in Matthew 15:17 ff, “...everything that enters the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled into the latrine? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile. For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, unchastity, theft, false witness, blasphemy. These are what defiles a person....” Too many of these are our repetitive sins from which God wants to free us. So we are called to grow up brothers and sisters, and such is the, “Working out of our salvation with fear and trembling.”

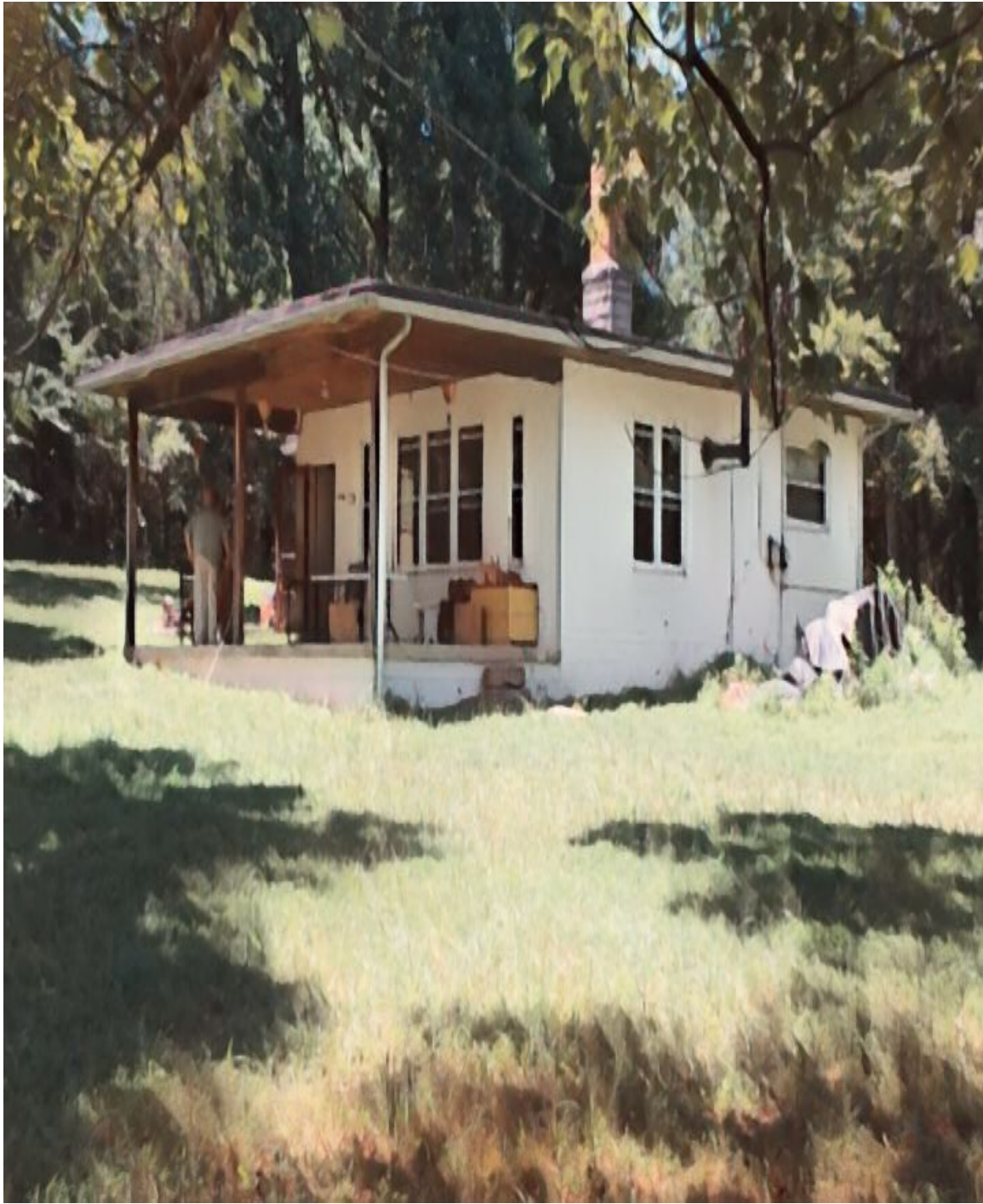


Photo by Randy Cox

A Letter to Jim: Notes on a Meeting of the Cincinnati LCG Community

By Ed Salerno

Dear Jim,

All that talk about the desert yesterday got me to thinking/reflecting. You spoke about the desert being encountered during your travels out West, not just in a sandy, cactus-ridden, arid place but in airports, restaurants, crowded byways and so on. I thought when you said that about airports and so on that you might be referring to the “world” crowding in on the Spirit, making it that much more difficult to discern God’s presence. The darkness struggling to overcome the light. I believe you also said that you encountered so many kind people, simple plain people, waiters, servants and so on who dispelled the darkness by their caring and kindness.

I also thought as you spoke about the desert out there, that the desert is within us. It is that deep barren, empty, desolate, place that when encountered, seen, or felt drives us to seek relief, rest, peace from this intensely lonely condition to find “the face of God”. Like the biblical Cain, driven from the face of the earth, a fugitive, a vagabond, “My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, thou hast driven me from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid...” Gen 4:14 KJV

I also thought about an old saying of Mohamed, “If you go to the mountains you take your troubles with you.” Those mountains are a deserted place, a desert. Seeing such a place without reflecting on it, meditating on it in the midst of it, opens us up to

the presence of God within us. Seeing Cain's darkness within, we let God light our way through it to His face. "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Thomas Merton speaks of such emptiness and so do the Zen Masters I have known. Meister Eckhart von Hochheim a German mystic, of whom both Thomas Merton and Zen Master Edo Roshi speak quite highly, points out that to come to grips with God, one must reject all thoughts, definitions, feelings, conceptions and perceptions about God, wherein God will reveal Himself. In other words, "Create in me a clean heart of God." Shuryu Suzuki says to sit Zazen, one must cultivate a beginner's mind, clear, clean, like the mind of a child.

To my way of thinking, these are all images of the desert, that supremely quiet place within, that once experienced can be drawn upon, regardless of where one is, a busy airport or street corner, Gethsemani or Furnace Mountain Zen Monastery in Kentucky. And they speak of the darkness in which we too often live searching for a handle, to get a grip to get out into the light.

So, it seems this "DESERT" is both desolate, empty, dark and also Divine, Wondrous, LIGHT. Oh that we would taste and see the light!

Thank you so much of your insights, Jim.

The Knobs' Cloak

By Randy Cox

Up before dawn
Kentucky knobs
are cloaked in a
Hula hoop
of mist
ringing their peaks
and
flooding the valleys
Below

Like a thousand
Bonfires on a thousand
Sacred altars
Sacrificial pyres
greet the morning

Only the Sun chases
these spiraling wisps

Night's Vigils
must end
until
the evening's silent
retreat
stirs again the
cloaking smoke
of valleys and knobs

Who Knows Where the Time Goes?

A Folk Song Meditation

by Ray Geers

This morning, I played with a song called *Who Knows Where the Time Goes?* by Sandy Denny. I imagined the performer up on a stage with an intimate audience around her. As she began to sing, I was transported beyond the stage into another world, one which, I think, we all have passed through before at one time or another.

*“Across the morning sky, all the birds are
leaving
But how can they know it’s time for them to
go?”*

We are walking on the shoreline of sand and water; a quiet commotion of migrating birds swarms over our heads. Our hearts are touched in a place prior to words and thoughts, and we are neither sad nor glad, just awake and open to the movements of life and nature swarming before, above and around us. Somehow the birds know that it is time to move on. It is a knowledge which is invisible to most of us, an obedience to a greater wholeness which simply knows and goes, that goes because it knows. What about the songwriter and her audience? How can we know when it’s time for us to move on as well? And, move on to where?

*“Before the winter’s fire, I will still be dreamin’
I have no thought of time”*

The fire represents a place of warmth and fellowship, but it is also a “winter’s fire”, which gives warmth to one side of the body while the opposite side gets cold. We find ourselves rotating before the fire so as to keep our unexposed sides from numbness. Good friends learn to do this through the give and take of human conversation and ritual-like dances which keep us connected and

“circulating” in healthy ways. If we are lucky, we learn to do this mindfully and playfully, passing through our vulnerabilities at the same time towards acceptance and joy.

The brilliant flames have a trance-like quality to them. They are as delightful as the dreams of sleep, but the dreamer must eventually wake up to other callings and other purposes. Time to move about because life is more than dreaming about it. We have little thought of time when we are busily engaged with the work tasks that follow our retreats and vacations. Perhaps, once in a while, we have a sense of “no time,” or eternal time, while we are back in the thick of things around our work and family life.

The chorus asks the question:

*“For who knows where the time goes?
Who knows where the time goes?”*

Nobody knows where time goes or even what time really is. In Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain*, the main character prepares to visit an asylum for the sick for three weeks but ends up staying for seven years. During his visit, time loses all meaning for him. When I was twenty-two years old, I entered a monastery and proceeded to spend the entire twenty-third year of my life there. Now I look back and realize – that year took place almost thirty years ago! Where did the time go? Did it go? Who knows!

*“Sad, deserted shore, your fickle friends are
leaving
And yet they know it’s time for them to go”*

Loved ones from our past are leaving. In Mann’s novel, some folks succumb to their illness and die; others return to the “flat lands” below the magic mountain and slip back into the struggles, hopes and dreams of the common human lot. Using the images

from the Denny's song, I notice myself feeling the impact of the departures of both the birds (signaling changes in nature) and of the poet's friends (signaling changes in human relations). Life is moving on to new places beyond our understanding. Like the songwriter, I can trust that these "know it's time to go." My mother, for example, told me before her death that she was ready to go. Mom was no "fickle friend," but part of me is still left standing on the shores of our last meeting; in my mind, I'm still gazing on spot where we had our last conversation.

*"But I will still be here, I have no thought of
leaving
I do not count the time"*

I find myself wondering what exactly is this "here" that Denny is singing about. Does she mean that, unlike the friends who moved on, she will remain within the bonds of friendship? Or, do these words indicate that Denny is a "lover of the place," one who remains steadfast in her situational commitments while different people arrive and depart, like a new crop of birds, year after year? I think both meanings are implied, but, for me, "*I will still be here*" means above all a way of embracing a new kind of "here" that steadfastly remains awake, alert and open to the newest present moment. Such a present moment awareness is a "here" that never comes and never goes; it is one that says: "*I do not count the time.*"

*"And I am not alone, while my love is near
And I know it will be so until it's time to go
So count the storms of winter and then the birds in
spring again
I have no fear of time"*

I am never truly alone as long as "my love" is near me. This could mean my lover-spouse-friend Jeanne, or any of the people I have a

loving relationship with. This is already pretty deep stuff, but it could also mean something more. “Love” is potentially with me even when I’m alone on a deserted landscape, where feathered friends have departed and the fires of a more youthful past are only fond memories. The love in my heart remains burning through the cold of winter’s changing landscape. Eventually, I too must move on from this place.

Once again, I sense a tension here: what is the intended message of the songwriter? Sandy Denny died in the prime of her life, but she left a lasting impression, certainly for me, through this song. I will pass on, even while living my vows of stability to my marriage, my family, my friendships and communities. I sense a need for some permanent aspect of my journey to survive me. I admit it: I do have a fear of time. I notice this as I watch so many parts of my life, and so many people I once celebrated my life with, just pick up and leave. Denny’s song suggests we need have no such fear. The reader can make up his or her own mind about how convincing the songwriter’s words are here. Perhaps only the simple harmonies of folk music can allow such sentiments to slip past our habitual defensiveness and find a home in our heart. That, in any case, is what has happened to me this morning.

The storms of winter will come and go, again and again, each time fanning the flames of joy and friendship up high and then down low. Older dreams change and depart for newer ones, but the dreamer moves on, and, when the winter is gone, the birds of promise will arrive with spring again. This is a deep hope and a conviction which survives only because of a persistent need to love.

*For who knows how my love grows?
And who knows where the time goes?*

Indeed, nobody knows how love grows except through love lived in time, through the seasons and across our morning skies for as long as we are able to behold such beauty.

October 27, 2017

² Reference to James Thurber's work entitled *My World — And Welcome to It*.



“Thirsting” by Ray Geers

VAPOR TRAIL GRACE

By Scott Gilliam

I had a few amazing days with God alone at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Trappist, KY in April of 2017. By the grace of God, I snapped this incredible photo of the skies above the Abbey Church after Compline one night. As I reflected upon the photo it did not take long for this haiku to bubble up. It is a great summary of Thomas Merton's incredible influence on me

"Vapor Trail Grace"

By Scott Gilliam | Haiku Poet

April 24, 2017

Vapor trail lingers.
Marks a place filled with much
grace
Where all are welcome.

Abbey Church below
Willingly accepts this mark
Of Christ from above.

Merton would be pleased.
Pilgrims passing overhead.
Crisscrossing journeys.

Better than bombers
Which rattled the unquiet
Nonviolent monk.

A revelation
Rises in me, prompted by
Street corner Thomas.

Airborne travelers.
Unaware of the floating
Cross they've made for me.

We may never meet.
But I feel that I know them.
They shine like the sun.



Pangur, White Pangur

By Bill Felker

*Pangur, white Pangur,
How happy we are
Alone together, Scholar and cat,
Each has his own work to do daily,
For you it is hunting,
For me study.
Your shining eye
Watches the wall; my feeble eye
Is fixed on a book.*

“White Pangur,” translated by W.H. Auden

Last November, a friend of mine sent me the “Hermit Songs” of anonymous Irish monks and scholars who, a thousand years ago, scribbled their verses in the margins of the manuscripts they were copying.

This fall, I linger again within the medieval mood of these poems, happy to adopt their spirit and enter into the isolation of winter, hunkering down into January withdrawal. And I sit and write these notes with the family cat named Monk lying across my forearms. I embrace the contentment of the ancient cleric:

*Thus we live ever
Without tedium or envy.
Pangur, white Pangur,
How happy we are.*

The Irish author found his peace in what I imagine to have been a stark and lonely habitat, warmed only by a fireplace. Within the context of his song, the true cenobitic community is not only one of fellow monks and Pangur, but is also a community of lone workers, seekers, survivors.

The cell of winter and the companionship possessed there are rare gifts of seclusion, gifts of the silent journeying into contemplation or study, rewards of waiting in friendship with others for an elusive prize, without a sense of tedium or envy, happy, from inside the shelter of shared hope.



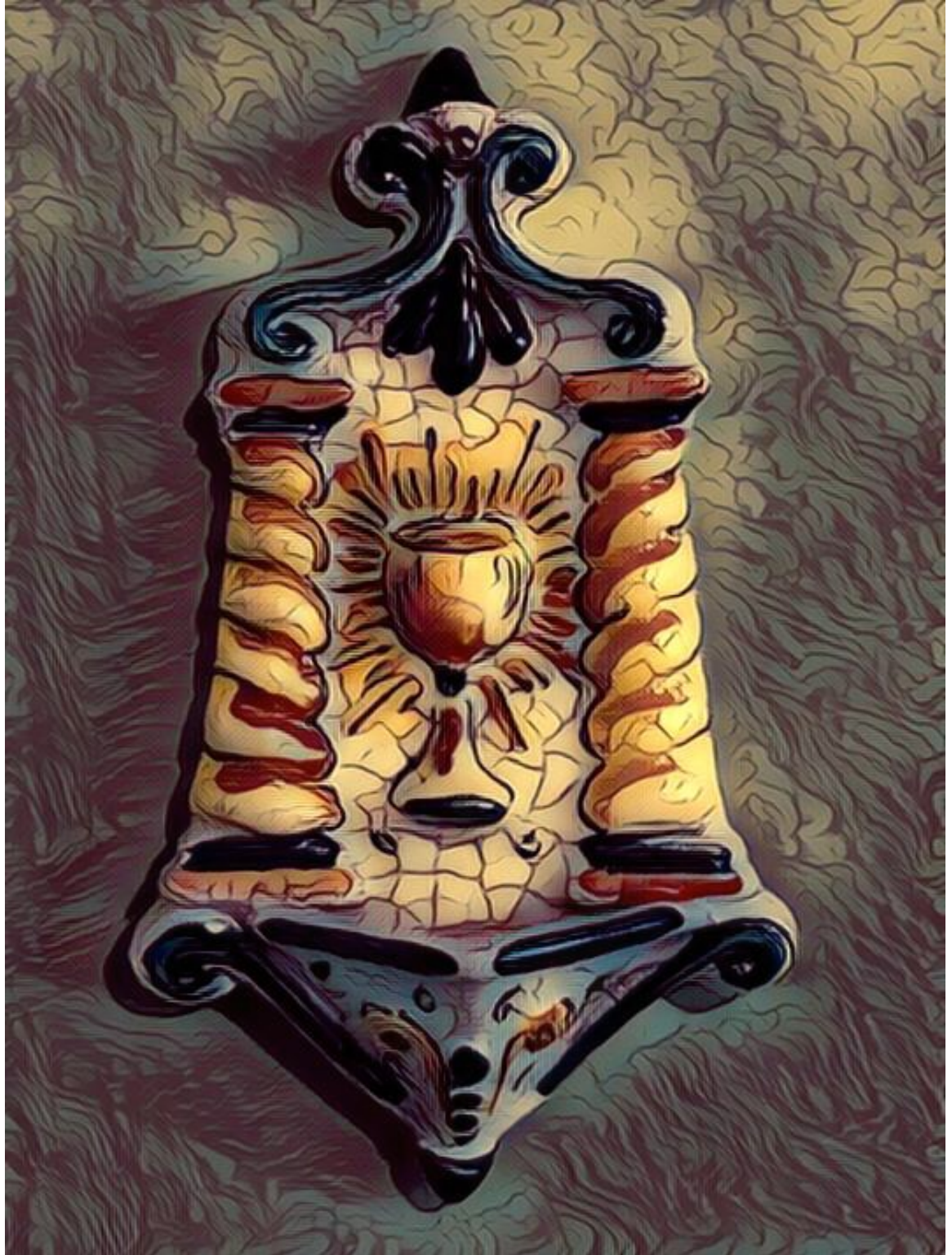
Art by Ray Geers

A CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS
The Journal of the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey

The *Journal of the Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani Abbey* invites different forms of reflection through essays, poetry and other written narratives, as well through art, photographs or video presentations. The *Journal* also encourages book reviews and scholarly submissions, such as studies and reflections about Cistercian writers or themes. Monks of the Abbey are also invited to submit their works to the *Journal*.

An editorial committee reviews submissions, may make suggestions for corrections or changes, if needed, and attempts to compose a balanced selection of material for each issue of the on-line periodical. The *Journal* will be posted when sufficient material has been accepted. Volunteers to help shape the *Journal* and assist with editorial committee reviews are welcome!

For further information or to submit work for consideration, contact Bill Felker, Journal Committee Coordinator, at wlfelker@gmail.com or (937) 767-7434.



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Italian Holy Water Font
Photo by Randy Cox

