

+EXPERIENCIA: A Program of Reflection and Sharing

19 April 2020

Fr. Michael Casagram

The following is a presentation on the Experientia Project as it was experienced at Gethsemani this past year and how it might serve to deepen your own experience of the Cistercian Charism. What I hope to do here is share with you something of how the Gethsemani community responded to the project and what may be helpful toward refreshing your own spiritual lives as associates of Gethsemani.

Lest I try to cover too much material in this presentation, I thought to touch on the first five Units of the Program and if this is helpful in your groups, I will work with the last five units at a later date.

In the Foreword to the Experientia Program, Dom Eamon Fitzgerald sums it up in a couple sentences: "It is aimed at enabling monks and nuns of today to reflect on their lived experience of monastic life and then to confront that experience with texts chosen from the Cistercian and monastic tradition. In this way, the long experience distilled in our tradition can shed light on our present-day experience and offer us encouragement, motivation and direction in living the Cistercian grace in our contemporary world." From all that I have heard, it seems the program has done just this, offering many monks and nuns and their communities encouragement, motivation and direction in our life today.

I've seen this happen in my own community here at Gethsemani. Starting about a year ago, we took one unit a month, reading the different selections offered in the unit twice, with two or three weeks between each reading in the refectory during the noon meal. Then in small groups we dialogued on that unit. Originally after the small group dialogues, we came together as a community and each group gave a report on what went on during their time of personal sharing. The difficulty of giving such reports, covering what went on in the small groups with a limited time to report, led to our dropping these community reports and staying with the small group sessions alone. This ended up allowing more freedom in the small group session with the result of greater honesty and openness. We did have the groups change their participants each time we dialogued so that each of the monks became better known by all the community.

The openness and honesty in these small groups of seven or eight monks was some of the most refreshing experiences of community sharing that many of us have had over the years. The Experientia Program has led both to a greater appreciation of one another and the way of life to which each of us has been called.

Fr Michael Casey does a wonderful job at the beginning of the Program of giving us the main objectives for which it was undertaken. The first he gives is that it is **"to help you (us) to reflect on our own monastic experience and to find words to express what you have experienced during the time of your monastic life."** Many of us in the monastic life as I'm sure in your own living of the Christian life don't always take the time we need to reflect on our lived experience. We have a strong tendency to want to

get things done, to meet expectations of fellow monks, of family, or of coworkers in a business venture.

Michael Casey is clear about the importance of taking time with the Program.

“For the program to bear fruit, it will be necessary for each monk and nun to invest a good amount of time in formal reading and reflection. It is not a matter of getting each part of the program finished as quickly as possible, so that other tasks, deemed more important, may be undertaken. The optimal way of deriving fruit from the program is not merely to dedicate a period of time to it, but to live with the questions throughout the day, pondering them in the heart, allowing them to serve as a background and context for *lectio*, prayer and liturgy. As we all know from experience, insights may occur while we are doing something else: at work, at leisure, even as we rest.”

What Casey is reminding us of, is how the working of grace takes place. It is when we have deeply engaged some aspect of the spiritual life and then allowed ourselves to have some empty space, that God speaks to us. It's all about taking the time to develop interiorly sensitive hearts, allowing the Christ who lives within to speak intimately in the depth of our being.

“Living with the questions throughout the day” as Casey suggests was one of the ways here at Gethsemani we encouraged personal reflection and sharing as came out in the small group dialogues. At the beginning of each Unit of the Program there are a group of questions. In preparation for the dialogues we asked each group to focus on what our dialogue committee thought to be the most helpful of these questions. For example, on the second page of Unit Two there was the question: “What was I seeking in coming to the monastery? Have I found in the monastery what I was seeking? Have there been pleasant surprises? Have there been moments of grace? Have there been periods of decline?” This is a series and so we used only the first two parts but this led to some very personal thought and comment that encouraged all who listened.

Having participated in a number of your own group discussions I have been pleasantly surprised how personal you all can be and I've noticed how life-giving this to each of the groups. This does mean becoming vulnerable, allowing oneself to be possibly misunderstood or misrepresented but I think this is the risk we need to take if the action of grace in our lives is going to touch that of others. Dialogues will disintegrate if we get into comparing ourselves to others or trying to excel in the group. On the other hand, it is amazing what we can draw out from one another if we are sensitive and open to the divine working in their lives.

A question you might ask in your own lives, similar to the one asked above by monks and nuns would be: What was I seeking as a Christian? What was I looking for by desiring to become a Lay Cistercian? What have you encountered on a visit or retreat at Gethsemani that is valuable for your daily living? I must admit I was a little surprised when I heard from fellow monks what they were seeking in coming to the monastery. While it may have been very different from what drew me, it was clearly God's way of drawing this person into a path that leads to communion with the Divine.

It can be a wonderful experience to see how God works in different lives, adjusting to each person's unique background and leading us all to a sharing in divine life. As awful as the pandemic has been for many families, I have a sense that our common suffering is bringing us closer together, giving us a new appreciation of one another that is so easily lost in our work-a-day world. The way to move beyond the pandemic will be a collaborative work, of letting go of our particular interests for the sake of bringing about some large-scale shifts in how our society functions. As so many of you are more aware than I am, happiness in family life all depends on sensitivity to another's needs. I see this happening again and again in my own community life. The basis of it all, it seems to me, is the very life of God as Holy Trinity where God is one and yet three divine persons.

Let me move on to Unit Four of the Program and questions that are asked there. One is the most fundamental of all: Who am I? If I am not my thoughts, my feelings or trouble, from what sources do I draw elements of my identity: family, education, friends, experiences, vocation, position in the community? Then it moves on to ask how my experience of self is illuminated by the traditional doctrine of our having been made in the image and likeness of God? Needless to say, these questions caused a lot of reflection and sharing in our small dialogue groups. In a world where wealth and power are so often decisive in how one evaluates one's self, our monastic experience highlights an entirely different perspective. For so many of us in the monastery, it has been our faith experience that opened our eyes to who we are as children of God, made in God's very own image and likeness. Etienne Gilson has a wonderful book on the Theology of St Bernard where he developed Bernard's understanding of our having been made in God's image and likeness. Through sin we lost our likeness but through a slow process of conversion, it is regained. The image of God in us is never lost but it is fully realized only as we let our likeness to God shine through every fiber of our being.

Thomas Merton developed a whole spirituality around his understanding of the true and false self. Jim Finley, in his book, **Palace to Nowhere**, writes all about this inner journey of Merton, a journey that went on throughout his life. What I have come to see is that getting in touch with this inner tension, the division within us of the true and false self, is the path to freedom. We talk so much about freedom in our US society and within the Church but do we really know what we are talking about? I was asked to be the principal celebrant at the Eucharist yesterday morning on the memorial for St Anselm. The gospel for the day was from St John where Jesus says: "the wind blows where it wills, and you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." The life of St Anselm was full of unexpected movement and for me he is an example of what real human freedom has to show us. Jesus as presented by John 3: 7-15 reveals to us what finding the true self really means. It is all about being born of the Holy Spirit, the free gift of God at work in each of our lives if we are interiorly attentive. It is so easy for all of us to want to program, to determine God's presence and action in our lives. God has something much more creative in mind.

Unit Four has a Sermon of Isaac of Stella for the 3rd Sunday of Lent. I had difficulty at understanding what he was getting at. But as I took the time and had read Abbot Elias'

commentary earlier on, the Sermon began to open up for me. Isaac talks about demons and most of us are not at ease with this kind of language when looking at forces guiding our own lives.

We are all inflicted by various thought patterns or human desires that undermine our spiritual interests. We must struggle with them and there is no way around this, however much we want there to be a simple way out. What I have learned is that in this very struggle is where we truly learn the meaning of faith and what it is to really trust in God. We talk a lot about faith and trust but the actual exercise is much more demanding, a matter of life or death. Our real enemies are not at all where we usually think them to be. They are all those things that draw us away from relying on the living God, that keep us from opening our hearts to the life-giving Holy Spirit.

The “Lay Cistercian Experience” has a lot that can be used by each of your groups kind of how we have used the Experientia program in our monasteries. But the main thing for each group to deal with the questions in a personal way, to allow yourselves to really reflect interiorly on the questions and then share your personal experience with one another.