

THE JOURNAL OF THE
Lay Cistercians of Gethsemani
Abbey



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an introduction

This is a special edition of the Journal for a few reasons. One, since it has been some time since a volume was created, this one will allow all the information and writings that have been accumulated to be presented. As of this compilation, there are four regular contributors to this publication, those being William Felker, Linda Boerstler, Randy Cox, and Ray Geers. These individuals have been graciously putting things together to keep the Journal vital and relevant to the Cistercian way of Life. But we would like to see more contributors get involved.



Please note: It is not necessary to be a professional writer, photographer, or artist to contribute to this journal. In fact, it is not necessary to be a professional "anything". Our hope is that through the regular sharing of our members and friends, we can all share the joy and belonging to the organization, and the association that we have with the Abbey and the monks that reside there. It is the way to learn from one another as we travel together navigating the Cistercian Charism and the way of life.

We all come from different walks of life. We live in various parts of the country. The Abbey of Gethsemani provides us with a way to center ourselves within a community without walls. It unites us as a family, part of the Body of Christ, and gives us a sense of belonging to something that is bigger than ourselves. It gives us a place to "be" in the daily parameters of our lives, and peace within the paradox of living.

And what a heritage that aligns with us, connects us to, and provides us with a foundation! Chambered within the stone walls of history are the prayers of thousands of voices rising like the mist of incense before the throne of God and the many that have gone before. We are extremely fortunate to have this accessible to us -- the legacy, the knowledge, and the experience those who sought what we are seeking now; the closeness to the heart and soul of our Lord Jesus Christ! Can there be a more valuable treasure than this? GOD ALONE!? I think not.

What has our involvement here garnered for us? What has it taught us? I am sure that each of us could answer these questions in diverse ways. God speaks to all us, that is for sure. And we rely on His voice in every aspect of our being. But, at the same time our individual relationship with Him is just that, individual, unique, and especially driven by the heart that wants to hear what He has to say, or show, or reveal within the scope of our level of love and spirituality. There is no judgment

here; only the reality that God's love for us is the life within us, His heart, His spirit, His love, His mystical presence within and without.

By grasping the understanding the familial bonding, it is our hope, through the continual development of this Journal to provide a venue by which we can share the individual experiences and encounters that we have with God and with each other in the spiritual family. This primarily will do two things: first, it will unite us to be a part of a group of people that are of the same mind and have the capability of hearing and understanding the same thoughts, knowing a lot of what has already been experienced and established with each of us standing on the same foundation. Isn't it refreshing to have a discussion with a group of people who already know the concepts of contemplative Christianity, lectio divina, centering prayer, and the monastic/Cistercian way of life? In that sense we need each other to foster growth, develop like-minded conversation, and provide a way for support and faith-building.

Secondly, the Journal gives us a way of open expression (in the sense of the arts), and discussions among ourselves, regarding how this charism affects our daily lives. We are not cloistered in a monastery and the challenges we face as we live in our families, our workplaces, handle our own spiritual discernment can sometimes be daunting. How does one, who has a professional career that is sometimes all-consuming, live a contemplative life with the chaos? How about in an active household? Where is the peace and the solitude? And as we grow older, how do things change for as the dynamics of our lives morph into another shape? How do your prayers change? What is the difference? What is the same?

This edition of our has an article from Linda Boerstler about her first visit to the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1996. What led her there? How did she live as a non-Catholic, yet find herself drawn to the beauty of the

liturgy, and the fullness of the History of the Church? Why does she continue to come time after time? How did that change her life leading her into become a Lay Cistercian and a Catholic?

Also, included is a homily given by Father Michael Casagram. WHAT DO YOU SUPPOSE THAT I AM? A TRIBUTE TO JOHN THE BAPTIST. How do we freely embrace who God is? And furthermore, who are we when we dwell in Him, and He dwells in us? How do we become willing to enter a divine view of what is really going on? In addition, he also sent along a copy of a talk he gave in June about Lectio Divina with some suggestions regarding that spiritual exercise and some materials that we might consider looking into.

There are also some poems and beautiful images submitted by Randy Cox, Linda Boerstler and Ray Geers. I have also included a Homily, written by St. Basil the Great, "Be Attentive to Yourself," and lastly a book review on TO LOVE AS GOD LOVES; Conversations with the Early Church, by Roberta C. Bondi, a book I am reading for a class that I am currently taking.

In Conclusion:

It has been a joy to have prepared this Journal Issue and I would welcome any feedback from anyone who would like to share that with me. I am hoping that I have included things that represent our Cistercian thinking and that you will be blessed by reading them the same way I was blessed by presenting them and sharing them.

I am currently collecting materials for an upcoming edition that I am hoping to be an Advent issue. Please feel free to send along anything that you would like to share with us. And may your days be filled with the Blessings and the Peace that God gives to you.

Linda

My first visit to the Abbey of Gethsemani

At the Abbey and I am awestruck. It far exceeds anything I could have imagined. Just entering here, I feel enveloped with a wondrous sense of peace. The gardens, even at this time of the year, are immaculate and the sense of order and discipline cause me to be reverent and obedient of whatever God might choose for me. I haven't been to service yet but, am trying to imagine what they must be like. It is as if the whole rest of the world does not exist, or ever existed, with my battle scars the only proof of my involvement with it.

I was glad that C____ was here to share my first reaction, my first impression. Then I became torn between wanting him here to partake in such a holy and joyous place and wanting him to leave so that I could make this experience truly and solely my own. I never understood what it meant to set myself apart from the world until now, until here and I can hear my soul trying to speak, because now, it has a chance to.

For the next 3 ½ days the only words I will speak will be those spoken to God, and words unspoken will seek to be made known to Him. My heart seeks its healing from the negative influences and scarring that it has been accustomed to. Never would I have believed that silence, such pure and directed silence, to this be so joyous and liberating. Never would I have believed that time spent alone with God was something to be zealously desired and that this hidden piece of land in the hills of Central Kentucky should be so sacred.

The world has not a clue about the love, the joy it dispossesses by ignoring the God of all Creation. The reverence, the holiness of the worship, the liturgy, honor God with the respect that it due to Him. We Protestants (this was before I became Catholic) who tend to pooh-poo the seriousness of the Catholic Church would do well to learn some lessons here. The issue of doctrine is not what is being discussed here. What I am seeing is an order and a discipline, a structure that allows the focus on God to be pure and undistracted.

The monks here all work towards one common purpose, and that purpose, to glorify God. There is no self-seeking, self-satisfying motives here. There is no need to work harder, or longer, or gettier than someone else as all strive to work according to what the Lord expects of them. There is no ambition to "climb the ladder," for a better job with a higher position or level of authority. From singing in the choir during the days, many services, to scrubbing the grease traps in the kitchen, is all done as unto the Lord, and He receives the glory.

I attended both Vespers and Compline, this evening, and I am sorry that my ignorance does not know the meaning of these words (remember this is my first exposure to the Abbey and Catholicism), but the heart understood the meaning of the worship and I could feel myself seated in the heavenlies at certain points in both services. It seems as though I was the only person in the sanctuary. It didn't matter that I didn't know when to stand, sit or kneel or that I didn't know the sign of the cross. It didn't matter that I didn't bow in front of the altar, or that I understood the words of what was sung. It only mattered that I was there, and God was there, and we met together, my spirit to His Spirit, united in a way that I hadn't known before.

I have to fight the urge to sit in the front row (doesn't bother me now), so that I can see the monks, and that priests as they conduct the service. Because I am not Catholic, because I don't know the routine, it is easy for me to be embarrassed when I find myself sitting when everyone else is standing, or vice-versa. The hard part for me is the feeling that I am not worthy to enter into the Holy of Holies, that I have to allow the High Priest to enter in and make atonement for me. It is fashioned much like the tabernacle in the Old Testament.

I want to remember every detail about this place. I want to continue abiding in His presence and not miss anything. Tonight the priest blesses me with holy water. I could feel the blessing touch me and tears came to my eyes as I felt that touch. I wanted to reach up and grab more as I walked away from the front

of the sanctuary. What a holy thing it is with Psalms being chanted in the dark as the monastery retires for the evening.

DAY 2

To love the Lord so much that you are eager to greet Him so early in the morning is something that most people do not partake in. *I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord.* To speak only when speaking to God in prayer, in song, or in the reading of His scripture is a most holy assignment. **My God you have said that your Word would not return to you void, but that it would do what you sent it out to do. This morning it is my desire, my prayer, that your very Word becomes a part of my, of my heart, or my breathing, of my living, of my being and that it goes with me when I shall leave this place. Amen.**

Later, as we were eating lunch a cardinal flew against the glass window as if he were trying to enter where we were. It reminded me of how we are trying to get where God is, by going through a window or through a crack, or some other unconventional opening. Then we can't figure out why we keep banging our heads on the glass.

Listening to a tape presentation during dinner helped me to understand some things, particularly concerning the life of a monk. The monks do not gather seven- or eight-times a to celebrate mass, or worship for any purpose but to worship God. A point was made during the tape that I found intriguing. The monks, or anyone involved in the religious life have married themselves, not to the church, but to Christ and He becomes their [mystical] lover. They gather to commune, to have spiritual intercourse per say with their lover. Everything they do, the work for example, is needed for the ongoing benefit of the monastery to the glory of God.

A situation like this, meaning great periods of time of aloneness and solitude, can be rather frightening if there are hidden issues that we have chosen not to deal with. I myself would not have been able to do this myself a few months ago – before I found my peace with God again. But now, I am finding the solitude very healing, and even to the point where an occasional outside is intrusive, such as hearing cars pass outside the window of my room. I am jealous of the cloistered because they do not have to suffer the continual insane and negative distractions and influences that irritate me.

The sign above the Garden Gate says in huge unmistakable letters, **“GOD ALONE.”** What a statement! And those two words display more definite power than any other statement made or heard. Those words take all of the words ever taught, ever written, and all of the words ever spoken and thought and condense them as it God has banished them away and replaced them with His one Holy thought. GOD ALONE!

Could it be possible that God wants us to live our lives more after the fashion of the cloistered monks than we realize? Maybe that is truly what that scripture means when it says to us to *“Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you?”* In other words, instead of seeking the riches, and the recognition that the world offers, only to lose our peace and relationship with God. The truth would be to look for first His Kingdom and then trust Him to bring you the work that will not disturb the peace, the discipline, the prayer and ultimately your relationship and total communion with God. What a unique concept that mainline Protestantism has sorely missed. It is all to keep you holy and focused on God.

I took a walk this afternoon after NONE and was out for an hour or so. I reasoned that it would be cold, but once outside was glad to find that the sun was warming. I walked directly up the hill [St. Joseph's Hill] behind the Abbey by first statue (the cross) then down the hill to the plowed field. For the first part of January I am amazed at the greenness of the hills which gently roll up and around the Abbey. The best view of the Abbey can be seen from the top of that hill. The whole structure is not elaborate, but starkly beautiful with its sole purpose being to give glory to God.

From there I crossed the road and walked up the hill a bit to the other side of the Abbey. I circled this area down, re-crossed the road until I had gone full circle back to the entry of the Abbey itself. Pausing among the tombstones I wondered how to get into the garden that led down into the area behind the sanctuary where the monks are buried in a courtyard. Following along the wall I came across a gate with a sign that read, "Garden area for Retreatants Only," which gave me the liberty to enter. I walked down beneath the walkway just seeing, wanting to go by the monks graveyard but resisting for a short time because I noticed someone praying there. So I went down to the flat part of the garden and followed along the gravel driveway until I came to another sign, which read, "Monastic area. Do not enter." There ahead of me loomed a stone wall decorated with a row of white crosses with a gate forbidding my entry. Above the slope of the wall were stairs, overgrown due to disuse also forbidding my entry. So I turned away from that area, followed the slope of the building up to the monks graveyard, where now I could stand alone in reverence and solitude.

Slowly I looked for any names I recognized from reading Voices of Silence, but other than the cross marking the grave of Father Louis (alias Thomas Merton), I could only guess the other names that I saw there. I noticed that to the left of me from this location was a wrought iron fence with a gate marked "Monastic area. Do not enter." Behind this gate were more rows of white crosses, plain, like the others, but many more. I could not get close enough to them to read any of the names on them. After a time I headed back to my room because by now the cold was getting to me and I was forced to seek some warmth.

I prayed some as I walked away. I prayed that God would direct me in ways that would lead me in service to Him. I prayed that He would change me and teach me to have a holy attitude no matter what I found myself involved in during the day. I prayed that I would have a deeper understanding of who He is and that He would teach me to walk in the His Spirit. I prayed that He would make me more tolerant and forgiving of others regardless of what my own personal desires might be. I prayed that I would change and become more tolerant of C_____ and more understanding of his needs so that I can have a servant's attitude towards him. That way I will make the way joyous instead of allowing the little things to irritate me.

EVENING

To me the compline is the most solemn and meaningful service of the day. Perhaps it is the nature of it that makes it so, with the lights low, and the atmosphere somber. To walk up through the cubicles where the monks stand and worship their Lover, is very sobering indeed. I bowed slightly as the holy water fell upon me and life last night I was greatly moved. I kept a vision of throwing myself on the ground in complete and total surrender to God, the power of His Holy Spirit rolling over me, pouring over me like a mighty wave, I am desirous of making moments like that linger so I can savor them.

It would have been extremely hard to have shared this experience with someone close, at least this first experience at the Abbey because I am finding the alone times, those times of contemplation and solitude

to be valuable in the overall benefit of the entire experience. The drawing closer to Jesus and this drawing about from the world is very healing to me.

It is remarkably interesting to watch the monks. I am glad that I read Voices of Silence before I came as that is giving some depth to my time here. The monks live a life of total peace and devotion to God but after listening to the brother give us orientation last night, I also sense that there is real joy in the sacrifice and somberness. There are 75 monks here, including one female (the only time I have seen a Trappistine, at Gethsemani). I have yet to see them all, perhaps they are all present at Mass. The monks are profoundly serious about what they do. My question would be this: Does the liturgy and prayers lose their meaning after you have recited them for 30 years or more? Or do they become more meaningful as their relationship with God deepens?

Please God, my prayer tonight is that you will see into C___'s heart and remove those things that are causing him distress and pain. Please my God, show him that you can be His comfort and His peace. Let him cast all of his cares upon you to be his source and the supplier of all his needs, not only materially and physically, but spiritually and emotionally as well because I cannot bear the burden of this. Amen.

Day 3

I missed Vigils this morning as it takes me some time to get to sleep at night, but I got to Lauds (albeit late) and to Mass. During Mass there was a warmth on the part of the priest, and I found the service more meaningful. It would be easy, in my opinion, for some of the other services to become rote, and I have yet to figure out the sequences. The room is cold and so is the church, so I wore my jacket to service.

(Note: Many deeply personal things are written in my journal during this time period that cannot be shared here).

I just returned to my room from Vespers and supper. I will greatly miss the religious structure of this place where God dwells as I watch those who are in the religious life. I began to think that it would not be as difficult as I previously imagined. For most people I think that leaving the entrapments of the world would be the most difficult step. For me? Lately the world has become a burden, a distraction, a barrier between God and me. I understand how many have chosen to live this life and even before that God has called them to it.

To have your whole day centered around those times when you worship God, and not have a place in your schedule for things that would cause distraction, would be the ultimate joy. I believe that more and more I should seek a living, a job, a work, which allows me to glorify God, to put Him first, so that there is never a question as to where I stand with Him, and where He is with me.

Very soon the bells will ring calling us to worship. The longest period of time between services is the time between the last office Compline to the first office Vigils. What a contrast to the world where people go for days, weeks, months and sometimes years before they think of God again. No wonder it becomes easier to fall into sin! Many have said that you become like the thing – or person – that you spend the most time with. If you don't spend time with God, how can you expect to be come like Him?

When one is called to worship seven times per day, one becomes responsible and accountable for all that you do. The whole existence becomes for God, as He becomes (and is) the reason you for existence. God calls us to wait in the Spirit and not in the flesh. Honestly, I don't know how close to walking in the Spirit I am at three in the morning, but I am resisting the flesh by getting up and being there.

Later

Back from mass and breakfast. I was drifting in and out of sleep, so I missed Lauds. Shortly from now we will have TERCE. Today my goal is to spend as much time in prayer as possible, although this morning will most likely be interspersed with long periods of sleep.

Spiritually? Right now I feel ready to do whatever God chooses, whether it be here, at home, or in California. (This was during a time of discernment). I can do nothing but trust God for my existence and survival. I am certainly unworthy of Him and His service but am learning and knowing the blessing of grace upon me. I looked down on the Catholic church believing that I didn't need someone else to tell me how to pray or do my praying for me. But through this experience at Gethsemani I understand and appreciate the deepness of devotion.

11 am

Just waking up again – upon looking out the window I can see the gloominess of the day. I suppose that the sun that that was prominent a few days ago is gone, but at least it isn't snowing.

When I drift in and out of sleep, I can hear the monks chanting the Psalms. It is a mournful sound that brings great peace and I feel like I will revery back to it whenever I am looking for a source of comfort. I am going to borrow a copy of their Psalms – an older copy – because I want the ability to teach the chanting and the praying of the Psalms as the opportunity presents itself. I am feeling the urgency of getting serious time in prayer today and the reluctance to go home, or wherever I end up tomorrow afternoon. I also think that I will need to prepare a bit of a message or a teaching.

12:55 pm

It is raining here at Gethsemani now. Here in the library I sit after SEXT and dinner and the wind is coming through the screens of the enclosed porch making a lonely cold sound. Even the winds call the name of God, almost too violently as if in chastisement because we humans are too stupid to figure it out for ourselves. I know God, he says. Because He tells me in what direction to blow, and He has put the tone and the octaves in my voice. It is He who has given me the icy fingers which I use to sting your bare skin, as if I am slapping to make you pay attention to what I say. Even the Abbey sings her praises to the King who created her as the wind caresses her and uses her like an instrument of praise. The rain comes in like a blanket from the distant hills, each drop, windblown, to lend individual voices to the chorus of praise, their almost silent music shadowed by the winds force, but we are still aware of their presence.

No, I have not received any heart-rending, direct communication from God since I have been here at Gethsemani, but He has spoken to me in subtle ways throughout the experience which I will try to summarize here:

- God wants us to order our day around seeking Him. If our job, or our life prevents us from seeking Him then it is up to use to change our lifestyle, so He is first and foremost.

- God expects us to worship Him in ALL that we do in the way we work; we pray and conduct ourselves. This then is where the true joy comes from because we will learn to seek Him for ALL of our needs, not just the ones we cannot provide for ourselves, in this becomes the worship in Spirit and in Truth.
- Everything exists for His glory. We were created by Him for His glory, as is the music, literary gifts, the things of nature, our communion and relationship with others, the list is endless.
- He desires that we love Him as He loves us although He understands that this is not possible with our own human nature and frailties. The monk, those living in cloistered life have done so because they desire an intimate and total relationship with Him that is not marred or interrupted by the distractions and temptations of the world.
- While it is not possible for us to lead isolated and cloistered lives we can “be in the world but not of the world,” by disciplining ourselves and ordering our lives around Jesus Christ, the living Word. This is the true witness of God, that all we do is set out to glorify Him.

The last full day

The day fades. I sit in my room looking out the window. Directly in front of the window stands a tall straight cypress tree which a top that reaches above where I can see. Some of the lower branches are twisted, apparently from being broken by the force of the wind. From the cypress tree the ground follows a slight slope to the stone wall that clearly separates the Abbey from the rest of the world. Smaller cypress trees and other evergreen trees surround the main cypress tree.

Directly below the window is a terrace that is walled. On warmer days it would be a perfect place for sitting and reading, praying, or sunning to the heart’s desire. The slope below includes the garden of agony, which is secluded and sheltered. Stone markers follow a curved pathway that ends under the cypress tree. Each marker depicts a bronzed picture of the stations of the cross. Beyond the Abbey wall and the highway, which by my observation appears to be well-traveled, the land reverses the slope upwards until it reaches the wooded hills.

“I look to the hills, from whence cometh my help.” The gentle curving offers me an invitation to follow its voice.

The snow flies now, just faintly, but enough that it is visible, and enough that the wind is able to make it dance. A valid desire would be to come back in the summertime when the land is glorious and bountiful, made richer by the shining of the hot sun.

I am privileged to only have been at the Abbey for a short time; time not long enough to be noted in the annals of history but long enough to implement healing within my heart and joy within my soul.

As I have gone from office to office, I have tried to observe the expressions on the faces of the monks. I have tried to determine what is their thinking, and what is at the core of their being. I

have tried to understand how successfully they seem to have managed leaving the glitter and transactions of the world behind and how they are consistent in their worship and devotion to God who is not only their creator but who has also become their Lover, their Life, and their sustenance. Puzzling at this I am wondering how they came to these conclusions. I am enlightened as I realize how this is possible. It is as I said in the beginning, as all who enter here are reminded by the carved letters in the stone above the gate, "GOD ALONE!"

GOD WHO IS, WHO WAS, AND WHO IS TO COME AT THE END OF THE AGES! AMEN!

From Father Michael Casagram

+WHAT DO YOU SUPPOSE THAT I AM? St John the Baptist, 2023

These words from the Acts of the Apostles are from John the Baptist as he is completing his course, coming to the close of his life. His disciples are wondering if he is the long-awaited Messiah and he assures them that he is not, but that there is one coming after him whose sandals he is unworthy to unfasten. Celebrating the birth of John, the Baptist helps us all to prepare the way for the long awaited one, helps us to have an inner disposition that allows the Lord Jesus to draw ever nearer to each of our lives.

We live in a world of immense change due to technology, social unrest, war, climate warming, poverty, the migration of millions of people. We just heard of how Isaiah, and later John the Baptist, were called from their mothers' wombs. If any of us gathered here, were to reflect carefully, he or she would realize this calling has ever been present in our lives. Even if not born into a Christian or Catholic family, God has touched our lives at a critical moment, left us with a lasting sense of being chosen, being a part of a people that is God's very own.

As monks, every day we sing the Benedictus, Zachariah's song of thanksgiving. "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel who has visited his people and raised up for us a mighty Savior." Our Savior leaves indelible marks on our lives. No kind word, no act of real love, act of real kindness can ever be forgotten by the one who gave rise to it in the depths of our hearts as long as we are willing to acknowledge the source, acknowledge the God who has visited each of us.

We too at times, like Isaiah, feel that we have toiled in vain, that our strength has been spent especially as we grow older and yet in faith, we know that our "recompense is with our God." This is certainly what Elizabeth, and her husband Zachariah must have felt when both, beyond

the age for doing so, were told they would bear a son and that he was to be called John. This event has an ongoing message for our own time.

We are constantly being brought into that awareness of how fragile we are, of how our human efforts fall short of God's divine plan. We have our schedules, our agendas but then our lives take a turn we never expected. Certainly, this took place with the Titan sub this past week, that was visiting the ruins of the Titanic.

We are faced with an unfolding different than planned, we are faced with a horizon wider than our own. We can retreat, hide behind our familiar ways of seeing and doing things or move into a fresh vision of the world around us. Growth in any of our lives depends on our ability to expand our consciousness, a willingness to enter into a divine view of what is really going on.

When we do, we are like Zachariah unable to speak writing on a tablet: "John is this name," and all were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened, his tongue freed, and he spoke blessing God." Our limited grasp of what is taking place is freed and we know that the hand of the Lord is guiding us into the fullness of life and love.

Only with the eyes of faith, hope and love do we begin to fully grasp what is unfolding all day long and at this altar. It is all summarized in the Holy Eucharist we celebrate. Here we are given, under the appearance of bread and wine, the very Body and Blood of our glorified Savior. Here we are made sharers in God's very own divine life. Here are fulfilled those beautiful words of Zachariah, the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high breaking upon us.

(Isaiah 49:1-6; Acts 13:22-26; Luke 1:57-66, 80)

+ENGAGING IN LECTIO DIVINA

7 June 2023

When thinking of the value of doing spiritual reading or Lectio Divina I found myself thinking of those lives have had been deeply changed by engaging in this religious practice. One of the first to come to mind is St Augustine who when faced with the corruption in his life, found himself "weeping in the bitter agony of my heart." He heard a voice saying "pick up and read, pick up and read" so he opened a copy of letters of St Paul and read the first chapter. His eyes landed on: "Let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

These words changed his life and I think the Word of God will continually change any one of our lives if we allow it to address whatever we are dealing with that keeps us away from being our true selves. All that is really asked of us as we seek God is to take the time to expose ourselves to this Word of God. This is not easy in our modern world when the media and the occupations of daily life so easily distract us from this kind of exposure. What becomes crucial in any of our

lives is to set apart some time each day when we allow ourselves to be open and completely present to of the life-giving Word of God.

I know for myself how easy it is to get caught up in the demands and concerns of daily life and how I can ignore what is most important and transformative for holy living. To be in a living and loving relationship with God is what makes us truly human and authentic as persons seeking to realize our full potential. To get sidetracked is all too easy so that we become alienated from our true selves. Merton at one point wrote a whole book on this as the epidemic of our time.

I know that in my own life one of the greatest moments affirming my monastic vocation was in the midst of my Lectio Divina. I was attracted to the writings of William of Saint Thierry, so I read Odo Brooke's commentary of William, the chapter on the Trinitarian Aspect of the Ascent of the Soul to God in the Theology of William of St Thierry. This is volume 37 of the Cistercian Studies series of books. Let me add at this point, that you can find a nicely written summary of the history of Lectio Divina if you simply google these two words and find the Wikipedia synthesis.

Reading this chapter, I became aware like never before of what it means that we are made in the image and likeness of God. Following the insights of St Augustine about our human makeup, William realized how our memories reflect the Father in the Holy Trinity, our intellects reflect the Son, and our wills image the working of the Holy Spirit. What William of St Thierry saw so clearly was that in using our memory, intellect and will according to the calling of grace in our everyday lives we realize the way we are made in the very image and likeness of God. We thereby become the loving people we are destined and intuitively know we are meant to be. We come to the realization of how Christ wants to become manifest in everything we do throughout the day so that his good news may spread to all those with whom we live.

It is all too easy to be diverted from this divine calling but in living it we discover that perfect freedom that belongs to the children of God, the joy for which we have been destined. It is to experience already here on earth the life we are to enjoy for all eternity. To come to this perfect freedom, this divine exaltation means a real death to our "old" selves, to that self-centered life that undermines our real purpose in life. But this death to self becomes greatly facilitated when we realize just how close and involved God wants to be in each of our lives. This is what Lectio Divina will do for us as often as we let ourselves fully engage in it.



Poems by Linda Boerstler

God Alone!

Beyond the shadows of the abbey
past the walls of stone
away from the sounds of silence --
it remains as "God Alone."
To come to this place, I've found it!
To leave from the place I've known.
even midst the worldly destruction,
it remains as "God Alone."

God alone is my existence
God alone becomes my song.
God alone becomes my joyous strength.
God alone keeps me from wrong.
When in the fog of sin and shame
and I can't find my heart for the grief,

I only need to see those walls of stone.
God alone gives me relief.

When the bells call me to my knees
and I come in here to pray,
my mouth has no words for speaking.
God alone tells me what to say.
As the candles burn in silence
bearing petitions to the throne,
I bow in peace, in darkness
my heart in touch with God alone.

In the shadow of the cypress tree
bent and broken from the wind,
lay those who found the truth before.
God alone their only friend.
Upon my lips, etched in my heart
and chiseled into the stone,
carved in flesh, and carved with blood,
here I stand, by God alone.

Singing with the Monks

There it is! Can you hear it?
Lost in the deep sounds of praise.
Listen as the psalms float upwards.
My soft high voice joining the phrase.
Too quiet for singing, too soft for words
but reaching the Father's ears.
There! Listen! It rises too.
United with the voices of the years.

Somehow, I'd like to know that
because my praise has taken wing
and melded with the holy song
and voices. I may be just imagining
that my heart helps to carry
the songs the monks sing each day
into a new level of heaven
because I was here to pray.

There it is! Can you hear it now?

I know it is there because I sang it.
As holy as the monks who've made the vow.
"My life to God!" The bells rang it.
And even if you choose not to listen -
even if you haven't the time to care
my voice still sings through eternal ages.
I sang with the monks! I was there!



Merton's Chapel
Randy Cox

The Wind at Gethsemani

Even the wind cannot be silent
demanding we hear his voice.
Listen to me! Listen to me!
in the dark, he's made his choice.
Through the trees, around the belfry
down in the garden, along the walks
no branch or flower unmoved
nor a leaf remaining on its stalk.
Up, up through the trees to the hillside
with a song as big as the sky.
Follow Him! Follow Him!
Eternal mystery from on high!

For God so loved this sinful world
that He gave His only Son,
born as a child. His life unfurled
to a mission never before done.
Bled and died on a rugged tree
so, you and I could be born again.
Even the wind knows the secret
mystery of God to become our friend.

Listen to me! Listen to me!
I have no soul to save.
it was for you, your human soul
that Christ was laid in the grave.
But if you choose not to seek Him
or give him the praise that is due.
then I the wind with sing the glory
for I was there when He died for you.

Compline

The last blessing comes in song
after we have said goodnight
going with us to far destinations
till those stone walls are gone from sight.
To life, to love, to hope, to work.
till we gather again in His name

like the dew on the mountain of Zion
We never leave here the same.

Holy Father bless us now
with your protection of peace
like rivers of living water
our burdens to you release.
Fill us with your Holy Spirit
Protected by the shed blood.
Jesus, who died to raise us
White-washed clean in the flood.



Prayer Beads Randy Cox

Coffee with Merton*
by Randy Cox

On a cold March morning
I first met Thomas Merton
At his place, his hermitage

There was no heat in the room
Only a small electric heater
Not nearly enough to cut the chill

I made coffee and sat at his desk
A single overhead lamp
Aided the sun's rising

The window's view was panoramic
Very much as Merton saw
Very much what he enjoyed

I had come here to write
What, I didn't know, just
That I wanted his voice in my ears

I lit votive candles for ambience
Pulled a blanket off his bed
And wrapped up in it

The frosty front lawn soon
Began to thaw and so did I

There was a friendly presence
About this room, one of
Familiarity and encouragement

The smell of long-lost fires
Scented by fireplace soot,
Was comforting, memorable

The photos, the macrame hanging
The bookshelf, the squeaky chair
Sang their own song....

As if Merton himself was still about
As if he had just stepped out

For awhile but would soon return

The coffee was, after all, hot and inviting

Come back, Father Louis, come home
Where you belong, where your heart lives
In this place of peace and paradox

*Thomas Merton's hermitage

Trappist, Kentucky

Submitted by Ray Geers

Called to Multilevel Consciousness

Dear friends, with your permission, I want to share a mental exercise that I do every now and then to help me to clarify matters which are mostly spiritual. Like Plato and Saint Augustine, I like to search for answers in dialogical form. Today my dialogue partner is Santiago. Santiago is like my guardian angel, and I believe his name is translated as Saint James. James is my confirmation name. You are free to stop reading if it doesn't appeal to you, but I hope it resonates with some. Here it is:

Me:

Santiago, my friend, I am on the crest of a new spiritual confusion and could benefit from some counsel again. A listening ear please.

Santiago:

I will be here for you, and I have no other obligation than to be fully here, so, please, let's enter into this conversation however confusing it may seem at first. I will remind you that you are all right in bringing things up, no matter how unsure you are about them. Do not be worried about this conversation. Why? Because basically you are doing fine. Living humbly, but somewhat simply, and honestly, and with the usual sprinkling of pleasures and discomfort.

You compare yourself with others' lives at times, which I suspect has been happening lately, and you've been pulled into more confusion, as if you were wrestling an old enemy once again.

Me:

OK. I will take a blind stab at a start to this...

You have already put a finger on one major contributor to my confusion – the foolish habit of comparing myself with others. I do this automatically almost every day, and sometimes I see the folly of it and sometimes I don't. What I forget is that even comparisons in my favor are a problem. "I have a healthier diet ", or "I have a better understanding of politics ", etc. These comparisons try to secure my ego with a sense of superiority. No sooner does this action occur and then I'm put on the inferior side of some human trait or equation. So - "Yes, but they have more connection and fun eating their less healthy food" or "Their political views give them more of this or that than mine do." Suddenly, I'm on the defensive within society, and within myself. My peace, which was built on being somewhat superior, falters.

Santiago:

I know what you mean. It seems so naturally human to take sides in a comparison battle. We have an almost infinite number of opportunities for playing this game, both individually and on the social scale. Intellectually, we know it is not necessary for us to be always “best”, “right”, “popular”, or “understood.” Ultimately, it is a matter of giving up positions of strength and identity within us against the fearfully different other person or position. Unless we give up our positions of strength, we will be in constant battles of attacking and retreating outside us, and we will alternate between anxiety and depression within.

Me:

We agree on the problem it seems, or at least on one level of it. The wise person’s option is to metaphorically rise above, (or it could be described as going deeper than), these apparent dichotomies of comparison.

Mentally, and for short periods of time, I can understand the freedom of a less comparison-oriented, (you might say a less consumer-oriented), outlook or preoccupation in life. Jesus recommends that we go off on our own – into a “closet” or another “deserted place” – to pray. I think he recommends this approach in order to free us from our noisy neighbors – God love them! – whose unenlightened habits can’t help but pollute our minds and inhibit our need to realize our mystical possibilities. I have done this kind of spiritual retreat almost daily throughout most of my adult life. I can honestly say that it works. Mysticism happens in my desert retreats. The hard part for me is not the retreat, but rather the reentry to a world of comparison – consumer consciousness.

Santiago:

Yes, and that world is also inhabited by such loving people, in many circumstances. What can you do? You enter their world and instantly become one of them. The only difference for you, Raymond Charles James Geers, is that you have lost most of your drive to want to be better and best. There’s only the slightest ghost of an interest within you, it seems, in half of the things that they are talking about in their friendly table fellowship.

Me:

You know me so well! And allow me to add another thorn in my side. Just when I have become more skilled in human small talk – (and I have been working at it for years) – I begin to lose my hearing. What the heck! What is God doing to me? Does he want me to feel continually disconnected from human conversation? Am I to remain the outsider forever and closed off from this chatty side of human life? Although it is not mystical or perfectly peaceful, at least this kind of fellowship grounds one in community and helps you to feel somewhat normal, which is a good thing you know.

Santiago:

As usual, Ray, I think you will get a decent answer to this question when you examine it patiently over time. I remind you that just last night you were in a crowded room with people you didn't know very well, and you managed just fine. You had several conversations that were both friendly, and sometimes even deep. Not bad at all! So please, don't sell yourself short or blame God if your dream of perfect human fellowship hasn't been achieved yet. You can be grateful for what you do have. A room of good people trying their best to be a community; that's a beautiful thing!

Me:

Yes, it is. I seem to be called to multilevel consciousness. The mystical is ultimate because it is baseline reality: non-comparative, non-competitive, close to God's heart, and really, all I need. The second level is community level. Hopefully my communities, although always comparative and consumer-oriented by nature, are also open to mystical consciousness. Then one can have some of both worlds – though never perfectly.

Santiago:

But the imperfect nature of the community level opens you to compassion. Compassion, like an elevator, can usher you right back to the mystical level, even in a crowded room full of conversations that you may or may not be able to really enter into or understand.

Me:

Brilliant Santi! So, now my confusion has brought me full circle back home again. It is the home of compassion and peace, which is beyond complete understanding. We are not going to solve this mystery of human nature. Looks like we just have to be grateful for the love and understanding, Lord willing, that we receive as we stand and talk and move in the middle of it.

Santiago:

Amen brother. You've got this!

Also from Ray Geers

*The hollow ringing
of my tinnitus
reminds me of the crickets
of summers long past away.*

*The quiet moments now
though never complete*

offer me their strength.

*in a realm of inner riches
love is always flowing
and growing
within and without.*

*And all shall be well
even in this shell full of
crickets, there is quiet.*

*Slow me down Lord
my feet solid on the ground
in this place content
to feel the fabric rent
with quiet tender mercies.*

*No more running 'round Lord,
I pray you slow me down
in swelling breaths we'll fast
from anxious cares at last
in wave upon wave steady.*

Homily on the Words "Be Attentive to Yourself"

By Saint Basil, the Great

1. God who has created us has given us the use of language, that we may reveal the plans of our heart to each other and through our shared nature we may each give a share to our neighbor, as if from some treasury, showing forth our intentions from what lies hidden in our heart. For if we spent our lives with naked soul, we would immediately communicate with each other through our thoughts; but since our soul is concealed under veils

of flesh as it produces thoughts, words and names are necessary to make public the things lying in the depth. Accordingly, since when our thought takes meaningful voice, as if carried in a ferry by our discourse, crossing the air it passes from the speaker to the hearer; and if it finds the sea calm and quiet, the discourse comes to anchor in the ears of the students as if in tranquil harbors untroubled by storms; but if as a kind of rough upsurge the clamor of the hearers blows adversely, it will be dissolved as it is shipwrecked in the air. Therefore, make it calm for the discourse through silence. For something may appear useful, having things you can take with you. The word of truth is hard to catch and is easily able to escape those who do not examine it attentively, so the Spirit directs that it be brief and modest, to signify much in a few words, and through conciseness be easy to retain in the memory. For indeed the excellence proper to discourse is neither to hide the things signified in obscurity~ nor to be redundant and empty, turning in all directions while overflowing randomly. So, what we have just read from the books of Moses is truly of this kind, which all of you who are diligent have remembered, unless through brevity it has escaped your notice. The reading is as follows: "Be attentive to yourself, lest unlawful words come to be hidden in your heart" [Deut 15-9]. We human beings are easily led to ward sins of the mind. Therefore, he who has formed our hearts individually, knowing that the greatest part of sin is accomplished in impulse through what is in our intention, has prescribed purity in our directive faculty as primary for us. For that by which we most readily sin was worthy of the most guarding and care. For as the physicians with greater foresight safeguards the weaker parts of bodies by precautionary advice ahead of time, so the universal protector and true physician of souls, who knows most of all where we are more liable to slide toward sin, has anticipated this with stronger guarding. For actions done through the body need time and opportunity and labors and coworkers and other requirements. But the movements of the mind operate timelessly, are completed without weariness, are constructed effortlessly, and are convenient on every occasion. Perhaps someone haughty who looks down on propriety, though clothed in the outward appearance of sobriety and sitting among many who call him blessed for his virtue, has run away in his mind to the place of sin in a hidden movement of his heart. He sees in imagination the things he seeks, he again imprints there some indecent liaison, and entirely within the secret workshop of the heart he paints a clear picture of the pleasure for himself. He has accomplished the sin inwardly and is without witness, unknown to all, until there comes the revelation of the hidden things of darkness and the disclosure of the intentions of hearts. Therefore, be on guard lest at any time there comes a lawless hidden word in your heart [Deut 15-9]. For one who looks at a woman with desire has already committed adultery in his heart [Mt 5.28]. Hence the actions of the body are impeded by many things, but those who sin by an intention brought about by the swiftness of thoughts still have the sin. Therefore, where the sharp point of transgression is, a safeguard has swiftly been given to us. For Scripture has testified, "lest at any time there comes a lawless hidden word in your heart." However, let us return to the starting point of our discourse.

2. "Be attentive to yourself," it says. Each of the animals by nature has from the God who has constructed all things the resources to guard its own structure. And you would find, if you observed carefully, that most of the non-rational animals have without training an aversion to what is harmful, and again by a certain natural attraction-. They hasten toward the

enjoyment of beneficial things. Therefore, also God who is educating us has given us this great precept, that as this comes to them by nature, it comes to us by the help of reason, and as they are set right without reflection, we may accomplish this through the attentive and continuous care of thoughts. And guarding strictly the resources given us by God, let us flee sin as the non-rational animals flee harmful foods but pursue justice as they pursue nourishing grass. So be attentive to yourself, that you may be able to distinguish what is harmful from what is healthful. But attentiveness is of two kinds: on the one hand we can gaze intently with the bodily eyes at visible things, and on the other hand by its noetic faculty the soul can apply itself to the contemplation of incorporeal things. If we say that the precept refers to the activity of the eyes, immediately we would find it to be impossible. For how could one grasp the whole of oneself with one's eye? For neither can the eye be used to see itself, nor to reach the head, nor to see the back, nor the face, nor the arrangement of the internal organs deep within. Now it is impious to say that the precepts of the Spirit are impossible. It remains therefore to hear what is prescribed as applying to the activity of the mind. Be attentive to yourself, that is, observe yourself carefully from every side. Let the eye of your soul be sleepless to guard yourself. You walk in the midst of snares [Sir 9.131. Hidden traps have been set by the enemy in many places. Therefore, observe everything, "that you may be saved like a gazelle from traps and like a bird from snares" [Prov 6.5]. For because of keenness of sight the gazelle is not taken by the traps, whence also it gives its name to its own sharp-sightedness [an untranslatable play on words]; and the bird by lightness of wing ascends higher than the plots of the hunters, when it is alert. Therefore, see that you do not show yourself as worse than the non-rational animals in guarding yourself, lest when caught in the snares you become prey to the devil, taken captive by him into his will [2 Tim 2.26].

3 Be attentive, then, to yourself, that is, neither to what is yours nor to what is around you, but be attentive only to yourself. For we ourselves are one thing, and what is ours is another, and the things around us are another. Thus, we are the soul and the mind, through which we have come into being according to the image of the Creator, but the body is ours and the sense perceptions through it, while around us are possessions, skills, and the other equipment of life. What then does the Word say? Do not be attentive to the flesh, nor pursue its good in every manner, health and beauty and enjoyment of pleasures and long life, nor admire wealth, reputation, and power. As for those things that are of service to you in this temporary life, do not regard them as great. Through concern about these things do not neglect the life that comes first for you, but be attentive to yourself, that is, to your soul. Adorn it and take care of it, so that all the filth befalling it from wickedness may be removed through attention, and all the shame due to evil may be cleansed away but adorn and brighten it with all the beauty that comes from virtue. Examine what sort of being you are. Know your own nature, that your body is mortal, but your soul is immortal, and that our life is twofold in kind. One kind is proper to the flesh, quickly passing by, while the other is akin to the soul, not admitting circumscription. Therefore, be attentive to yourself, neither remaining in mortal things as if they were eternal, nor despising eternal things as if they were passing. Look down on the flesh, for it is passing away; take care of the soul, for it is something immortal. Understand yourself with all exactness, that you may know what gift to apportion to each for the flesh nourishment and coverings, and for the soul doctrines of piety~ education in courtesy,

training in virtue, correction of passions. Do not fatten the body excessively and do not seek a lot of flesh. For since "the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh" [Gal 5.17], and these are opposite to each other, see that you do not add to the flesh and grant great power to what is inferior. For as in the turning of scales, if you weigh down one side you truly make the opposite side lighter, so also with body and soul, the increase of one necessarily produces a decrease in the other. For when the body enjoys well-being and becomes heavy through much fleshiness, the mind is necessarily inactive and slack in its proper activity; but when the soul is in good condition and through care of its own goods is raised up toward its proper greatness, following this the state of the body withers.

4. The same precept is both useful to the sick and very appropriate to the healthy. In regard to the sick, physicians recommend to the ill to be attentive to themselves and to disregard none of the things heard to bring healing. Likewise, also the Word, a physician for our souls, thoroughly cures the soul afflicted by sin through this small aid. Be attentive, then, to yourself, that you may also receive the aid of healing proportionate to your offense. If the sin is great and severe, you need many confessions, bitter tears, earnestness in vigils, continual fasting. If the transgression is light and tolerable, let the repentance be equal to it. Only be attentive to yourself, that you may recognize the strength and illness of your soul. For many, through lack of attention, get great and incurable illnesses, and they do not themselves know that they are ill. Great is the usefulness of this precept also for strength in deeds; thus, the same thing both heals the sick and makes perfect the healthy. For each of us who are disciples of the Word is a servant in one particular activity appointed to us among those in accord with the Gospel. For in the great house of the church there are not only vessels of every kind, gold and silver and wood and earthen ware [2 Tim. 2.20], but also skills of all kinds. For the house of God, which is the church of the living God [1 Tim 3.15] has hunters, travelers, architects, builders, farmers, shepherds, athletes, soldiers. This brief word is appropriate to all of them, producing in each both exactitude of action and eagerness of will. You are a hunter sent by the Lord, who said, "Behold, I am sending many hunters, and they will hunt them atop every mountain" [Jer 16.16]. Be carefully attentive to yourself, lest perhaps the prey flees from you, that being caught by the word of truth those made savage by evil may be led to the Savior. You are a traveler like the one who prayed, "Make straight my steps" [Ps 118-133]. Be attentive to yourself, lest you turn aside from the road, lest you turn away to the right or left [cf Deut 17.20]; go on the royal road. Let the architect firmly lay the foundation of faith, which is Christ Jesus. Let the builder watch what he builds on it, not wood, not hay, not straw, but gold, silver, precious stones [1 Cor 3.10]. Shepherd, be attentive lest any of your duties as a shepherd escape your notice. And what are these? Lead back the stray, bind up the broken, heal the sick. Farmer, dig around the unfruitful fig tree and place there what will help its fruitfulness. Soldier, share in sufferings for the Gospel, fight the good fight against the spirits of evil, against the passions of the flesh, take up all the full armor of the Spirit. Do not be entangled in the business of life, that you may please the one who has made you a soldier [2 Tim 2.4]. Athlete, be attentive to yourself, lest perhaps you transgress any of the athletic rules. For nobody is crowned if he does not strive lawfully [2 Tim 2.5]. Imitate Paul, and run, and wrestle, and box; and like a good boxer, keep the gaze of your soul undistracted. Shield your vital organs by putting your hands in front of them; let your eye look intently toward your opponent. In the race, stretch forward to what lies ahead.

Run so that you may obtain. In wrestling, struggle against the invisible opponents. Such a one the Word wishes you to be throughout your life, not frightened, nor lying idle, but soberly and vigilantly watching over yourself.

5. I lack the time to describe in full the pursuits of those who work together in the Gospel of Christ, and the power of this commandment, how it is well suited to all. Be attentive to yourself; be sober, able to deliberate, protective of present things, cautious toward things to come. Do not through laziness give up what is already present, and do not take for granted the enjoyment of things that do not exist, or things that perhaps will not exist, as if they were in your hands. Does not this infirmity naturally exist in the young, who having frivolously expansive minds regard things hoped for as already present? For when they have time during the day, or in the quiet of night, they invent for themselves insubstantial fantasies and are carried along by them through the agility of the mind, imagining an illustrious life, a brilliant marriage, happiness in their children, a long old age, honor from all. Though the things they hope for can nowhere be actualized, they become unduly inflated toward the greatest of human attainments. Acquiring large and beautiful houses filled with all kinds of treasures, they encompass land, as much as the vanity of their thoughts can appropriate from the whole creation. Thereupon they enclose wealth in storehouses of vanity~ To these things they add cattle, a crowd of household slaves surpassing number, civic authority, sovereignty over nations, military commands, wars, triumphs, kingship itself. As all these things happen through the empty invention of the mind, through much folly they seem to enjoy the things they hope for as already present and lying at their feet. This weakness belongs to a lazy and indifferent soul, to see dream visions while the body is awake. Therefore, the Word compresses this frivolous expansion of the mind and inflammation of the thoughts, and like a kind of bridle halting the unstable mind, it mandates this great and wise precept. To yourself be attentive, it says, not taking nonexistent things for granted, but manage present things advantageously with a view to what takes place. Yet I believe that the Legislator also uses this exhortation to remove a habitual passion. Since it is easy for each of us to meddle in things belonging to others rather than examining things belonging to ourselves, that we may not suffer from this it says, stop busying yourself with these dangerous evils. Do not spend time through thoughts scrutinizing the weakness that belongs to another, but be attentive to yourself, that is, turn the eye of your soul to inquire about things that belong to you. For many, according to the word of the Lord, who observe well the twig in the eye of their brother, do not look at the beam in their own eye [Mt 7.3]. Therefore, do not cease examining yourself closely, to see whether life proceeds for you according to the commandments; but do not look around at things outside yourself in case perhaps you can find some fault, like that stern and boastful Pharisee, who having set himself up as just also greatly despised the publican [cf. Lk 18.11]. Do not cease examining yourself as to whether you have sinned somehow in thought, whether somehow your tongue has slipped, running ahead of your mind, whether in the works of your hands you have done something in advisable. And if you find in your own life many sins (and you will surely find some, being human), say the words of the publican, "O God, be gracious to me, the sinner" [Lk 18.13]. Be attentive to yourself. This word is for you also when you are brilliantly successful, and all of your life is flowing like a stream. It is useful in protecting you as a kind

of good adviser bringing a reminder of things human. And of course, also when hard pressed by circumstances, on occasion you can sing it in your heart, so that you are not lifted up by conceit to excessive pretension, nor do you give in to ignoble thoughts, falling into despair. Are you proud of wealth? And do you have grand thoughts about your ancestors? And do you exult in your homeland and bodily beauty and the honors given you by all? Be attentive to yourself, mindful that you are mortal, that "you are earth, and to earth you will return" [Gen 3.19]. Look around, examining those of like eminence before you. Where are those who possessed civil authority? Where are the unconquerable orators? Where are the leaders of public assemblies, the brilliant horse breeders, the generals, the governors, the despots? Are they not all dust? Are they not all legend? Are not the memorials of their lives a few bones? Stoop and look into the tombs to see if you can distinguish which is the slave and which is the master, which is the poor one and which is the rich. Distinguish, if such power is yours, the captive from the king, the strong from the weak, the attractive from the misshapen. So having remembered your nature you will not then be conceited. And you will remember yourself if you are attentive to yourself.

6. Again, are you someone low born and obscure, a poor person born of the poor, without home or country, sick, in need every day, trembling at those in power, cowering before all because of your lowly life? "For one who is poor," Scripture says, "is not subjected to threats" [Prov 13.8]. Therefore, do not despair of yourself because nothing enviable belongs to you in your present circumstances, do not renounce the hope of all good; but lift up your soul toward the good things made present to you already by God, and toward the things laid up in store through his promise for later. First, then, you are a human being, the only one of the animals formed by God [cf. Gen 2.7]. Is this not enough to be reasonable grounds for the most exalted joy, that you have been entirely formed by the very hands of God who has made all things? That since you have come into being according to the image of the Creator you can ascend quickly toward equality of honor with the angels through good conduct? You have been given an intellectual soul, through which you comprehend God, you perceive by thought the nature of beings, you pluck the sweetest fruit of wisdom. All the land animals domesticated and wild, and all those living in water, and all those that fly through the air, belong to you as slaves and are subject to you. Further, have you not invented arts, and built cities, and devised all the things pertaining to necessity and luxury? Are not the oceans passable for you through reason? Do not earth and sea serve your life? Do not air and sky and dancing stars disclose to you, their pattern? Why then are you downcast because your horse does not have a silver-mounted bridle? Yet you have the sun carrying its torch for you in a swift race through the whole day. You do not have the luster of silver and gold, but you have the moon with its limitless light shining around you. You have not mounted a chariot inlaid with gold, but you have feet as a vehicle proper and adapted by nature to yourself. Therefore, why do you call happy one who has a fat purse but needs the feet of others to move around? You do not lie on a bed of ivory [cf. Am 6.41], but you have the earth which is more valuable than great amounts of ivory, and your rest upon it is sweet, sleep comes quickly and is free from anxiety. You do not lie beneath a gilded roof, but you have the sky glittering all around with the inexpressible beauty of the stars. Now these are human things, but those of which we will now speak are still greater. These things are for your sake: God

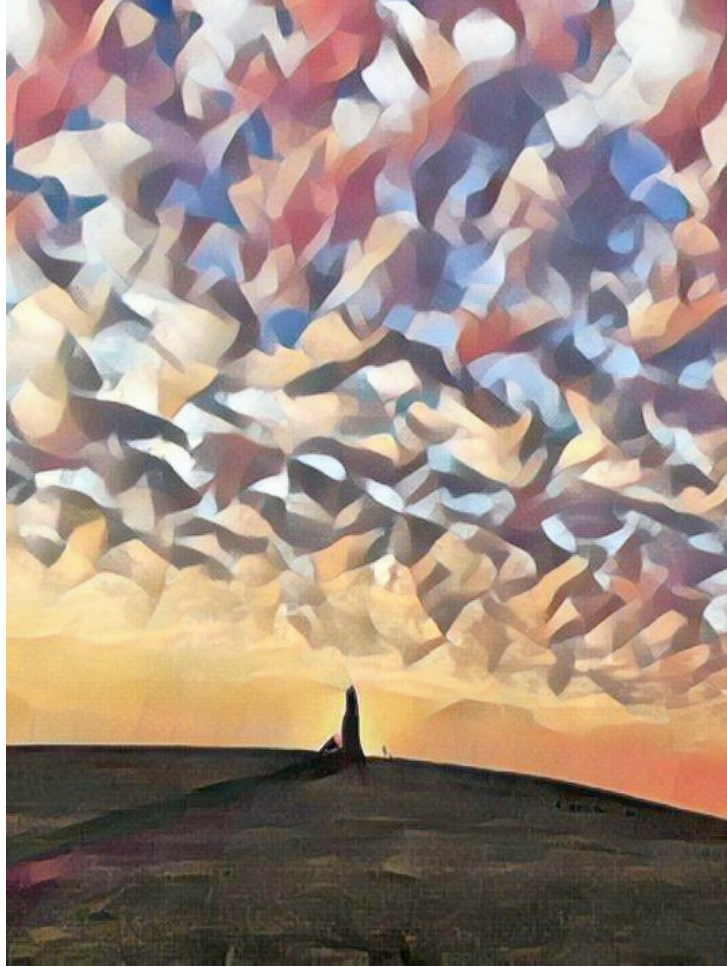
present among human beings, the distribution of the Holy Spirit, the destruction of death, the hope of resurrection, divine ordinances perfecting your life, the journey toward God through the commandments; the kingdom of heaven is ready and crowns of righteousness are prepared for one who has not fled from labors on behalf of virtue.

7. If you are attentive to yourself, you will discover these things about yourself and still more, and you will enjoy the things present and will not be downcast about what you lack. This precept will be a great help if you are mindful of it on all occasions. For instance, has anger gained mastery over your thoughts, and have you been carried away by temper toward inappropriate words and savage, beast-like actions? If you were attentive to yourself, you would curb your temper like some disobedient and refractory colt, striking it with a blow of reason as if by a lash. You would also control your tongue, and you would not lay hands on the one provoking you. Again, evil desires madden the soul, casting you into incontinent and licentious impulses. If you were attentive to yourself and remembered that for you this present enjoyment will result in a bitter end, and this tickling, which through pleasure has now come about in your body, will bring forth the venomous worm punishing us forever in hell, and the burning of the flesh will become mother of eternal fire, immediately the pleasures will be gone and banished. A certain wondrous inner calm and quiet in the soul will also come into being, as when the noise of undisciplined servant girls becomes silent through the entrance of a discreet lady. Therefore, be attentive to yourself, and know that the rational part of the soul is also intelligent, but the passionate part is also irrational. And the one exists by nature to rule, while the other exists to obey reason and be persuaded by it. So do not ever allow your mind, reduced to utter slavery, to become a slave of passions; moreover, do not yield to passions struggling against reason and let them transfer to themselves the rule of the soul. The exact comprehension of yourself also provides entirely sufficient guidance toward the concept of God. For if you are attentive to yourself, you will not need to trace your understanding of the Fashioner from the structure of the universe, but in yourself, as if in a kind of small, ordered world, you will see the great wisdom of the Creator. Understand that God is incorporeal from the incorporeal soul existing in you, not circumscribed by place; since neither as a matter of principle does your mind spend its life in a place, but through its conjunction with the body it comes to be in a place. You believe God to be invisible in understanding your own soul, since it also is ungraspable with bodily eyes, for it is colorless, it is without shape, and it has not been encompassed by any bodily characteristic, but it is recognized only from its energies. So, nor should you investigate God by understanding through the eyes, but supporting faith by reason, have spiritual understanding about him. Marvel at the Creator's work, how the power of your soul has been bound together with the body, so that penetrating to its extremities it leads the many separate limbs and organs to one convergence and sharing of life. Examine what power from the soul is given to the flesh, what sympathy is given back to the soul by the flesh; how the body receives life from the soul, and the soul receives pain from the body. Examine where you have stored away the things you have learned; why the addition of things that have come later does not overshadow the knowledge of things retained, but without confusion you keep your memories distinct, inscribed on the directive faculty of the soul as if on a bronze slab, guarded closely. Examine how as the soul slips gradually toward the passions of the flesh its own beauty is destroyed; and how again

cleansed from the shame of evil, through virtue it ascends quickly toward the likeness of the Creator.

8. If you like, after your contemplation of the soul be attentive also to the structure of the body and marvel at how appropriate a dwelling for the rational soul the sovereign Fashioner has created. He has made the human being alone of the animals upright, that from your very form you may see that your life is akin to that on high; for all the quadrupeds are bent down toward their stomachs, while the human being is prepared to look up toward heaven, so as not to be devoted to the stomach or to the passions below the stomach but to direct his whole desire toward the journey on high. Then God placed the head at the top, locating in it the most valuable of the senses. Their sight, and hearing, and taste, and smell have been established, all near each other. And although confined in a small space, none of them impedes the activity of its neighbor. The eyes have laid hold of the highest lookout point so that nothing blocks their view of the body's parts, but placed under the small projection of the eyebrows, they reach out from the prominence above in a direct line. Again, the hearing is not directed straight, but by a spiral-shaped pathway it takes hold of the noises in the air. This indeed exhibits the highest wisdom, enabling sound to pass though unhindered, or rather be led in, bending around the twists, while nothing from outside that accidentally falls in can be a hindrance to the auditory perception. Examine closely the nature of the tongue, how it is tender and nimble and is sufficient by its varied movement for every need of speech. Teeth, also organs of speech, provide strong resistance to the tongue and at the same time also take care of food, some cutting it and others grinding it. And so, when you have traversed all things with suitable reflection on each, and have observed carefully how air is drawn in through breath, how warmth is kept around the heart, and the organs of digestion, and the channels of blood, from all these you will perceive the unsearchable wisdom of the Creator [Rom 11.33]. So, you will also say to him with the prophet, "Your knowledge from myself has become wonderful" [Ps 138.6]. Therefore, be attentive to yourself, that you may be attentive to God, to whom be glory and dominion unto the ages. Amen.

From *On the Human Condition*: Saint Basil the Great, trans. Nonna Verna Harrison, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, pp 93-105



The Heavens Declare
Randy Cox.



Bondi's To Love as God Loves as viewed through a Celtic Cross

This review was taken from <https://susandoodles.com/2010/11/22/bondis-to-love-as-god-loves-as-viewed-through-a-celtic-cross/> and not written by myself or any other contributor to this journal. It does a better job than I could summarizing key points from the book and a particular viewpoint that may not agree with the auspices of the Abbey of Gethsemani, the Lay Cistercians, or anyone else associated thereof. It was my purpose to include this review, as I think highly of the book and am privileged to be able to study it in my work. The author of this review has NOT been contacted regarding the use of this information; therefore, I ask that it not be passed on to anyone outside of our membership and friend constituents. Written by a United Methodist Pastor, I found the book vital as a discussion of the deep and extravagant love of God. This is why I wanted to leave this review here.

The Celtic Cross, even the various knot patterns, have long appealed to me. Maybe it is because I do have some genetic connections with Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, but the three simple links create a visual image representing a Trinitarian God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—is at the base of my personal faith. As one ponders upon the design, there appears to be three fish, also an early sign of Christianity, and at no point does there seem to be a beginning or an end to the design.

Reading Roberta C. Bondi's book, *To Love as God Loves*, I found my thoughts wrapping around the three major points of love, humility, and the passions in a very similar manner as if I were meditating on the Celtic Cross: one thought wondering around, intersecting with another, and even flowing into the third concept. I found it very difficult to see any separation of these three concepts as they build upon each other, support each other and connect with each other.

First, consider love, especially since God is love. Love needs to serve as the very foundation of any discussion on Christianity. Bondi discusses love from the point of view that if God is love and God is perfection, then the goal of living a faithful life is to find perfection. This idea is one of the reasons that early Christians joined the monastic movement, going out into the desert to live a life devoid of possessions and relationships. Choosing to live in the desert apart from society was a way of seeking perfection in love. Today such a severe interpretation of perfection seems legalistic or overly literal. The discussion of living in a monastic lifestyle centers on the discipline of one's practices of reading, studying, praying and reflecting on scripture attempts to separate an individual from real-world, human experiences. In a sense, living a monastic lifestyle presumed that one is more perfect—more holy—than others who professed faith in God.

Today, and for generations, the monastic lifestyle has lost its appeal for most Christians. Bondi steps away from the discussion of the desert life and focuses on two human definitions of love—one emotional and a second as a disposition. The emotional form of love, according to Bondi, comes with the statement:

I cannot love you with your flaws; I am only human.” [The author states,] “I am only human” carries with it the implication that we have no more control over our ability to love than we have over our ability to go a month without sleep. . . . [and] keeps a lot of people feeling inadequate, guilty, helpless, and angry all at once. (Bondi, p. 24)

Monastic followers really felt that by following strict disciplines and removing themselves from society, they could reach perfection in loving one another.

As the early understanding of Christianity grew, the shift from love and perfection moves to the two forms of love as emotion and as a disposition. Understanding love as an emotion may seem like a simple concept to understand by today’s standards, but Bondi attempts to define these two forms in order for us to consciously expand on Christian love. Continuing with the emotional form of love:

. . . the word “love” commonly describes a whole range of emotions that we feel in many different situations, including “falling in love.” Love as an emotion is spontaneous. . . . It is a kind of mood that we experience as coming upon us, bringing with it warm and positive feelings. . . . This kind of love does not entail action on our part to be real; though our feelings may push us to act in a certain way, there is no necessary reason why we have to act on those feelings. (Bondi p. 30)

The second form is love as a disposition. Upon initial reading of this, the choice of ‘disposition’ was difficult or uncomfortable for understanding. Disposition typically implies a characteristic, a personality trait, or a tendency over which you may or may not control. Yet, Bondi’s explanation makes this into a conscious decision, even an action—a verb rather than a noun:

. . . the word “love” in English to mean a deep attitude of heart, or as a disposition directed at something or someone with which or with whom we are in a long-term relationship of commitment. . . . it is by a commitment we make that shapes our ways of seeing, understanding, and acting. . . . [Love as a disposition] is a habitual attitude of heart that wishes for and seeks to provide for his well-being in concrete acts of kindness, consideration, and service, every single day, in small ways as well as large ways. (Ibid.)

Bondi sees love as an action more than a state. The most current literature available within our denomination focuses on the actions that demonstrate love. For instance, consider Bishop Robert Schnase’s five practices: radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission, and extravagant generosity. These practices or disciplines move our understanding of Christian love from an emotion into a disposition.

Returning to the concept of the Celtic cross, consider the principle of humility and its interaction with love. There can be no separation. In order to fully love one another, self cannot be the primary focus but rather as a well-maintained tool to carry out love, as a disposition. As Bondi works to explain love, who is to be loved must be defined. First, we must have a healthy sense of self. A healthy self-love makes it possible for us to love God and one another.

The early Christians who chose to join the monastic movement, the emphasis on following such a severe lifestyle may not have indicated a healthy self-love. At least by today's standards, the strain of the lifestyle would not necessarily be identified as healthy. In today's viewpoint, a healthy self-love means taking care of the body so it can perform well. It means not beating up on one's self emotionally or judging one's actions against the perfectionist's images which the monastics tried to maintain.

Humility, as outlined by Bondi, is currently "countercultural." Today society rewards those who prove successful on the job, who create new ideas, who can step out in front of others with solutions, with money, with power. The monastic culture saw humility in a different perspective:

Those who chose the monastic life, however, believed that for themselves only radical renunciation of the external as well as the internal patterns of their cultures could put them in a position where they would be able to begin to love. This was why they did what may seem so self-destructive to us in the present: they sold their property, refused marriage, gave up careers, and turned their backs on everything their culture valued. . . . [all were seen as] to be a constant source of self-deception and temptation. (Bondi, p. 41)

This standard of humility places individuals into a subservient position to others. That, today, is seen as an unhealthy state; it indicates that one's self-image, self-love can damage the ability to demonstrate Christian principles.

Bondi's clarification of humility for contemporary Christians shows how challenging a standard of behavior really is. Humility has gone against the Western standards for several centuries:

[Humility] calls for the renunciation of all deep attachments to what the world holds dear: goods, social advancement, the satisfaction of appetites at the expense of others, the right to dominate others in any personal relationship. (Bondi, p. 54)

Why, then, is it so important to understand how humility is intertwined in Christian love? In order to follow God's one commandment to love one another and to transform the world, all the worldly standards or measures of secular success need to be re-prioritized in our lives. God's love for one another is now the operating system for today's Christians. And in meditation of how these two concepts intertwine, an honest review needs to be made of the third of Bondi's Celtic cross—the passions.

The passions are roadblocks to living a truly Christian lifestyle in which we honestly love one another and, by doing so, are transforming the world. Bondi identifies the passions as gluttony, avarice, impurity, depression/sadness, anger, acedia, and vainglory. Many of these terms certainly are not common, everyday concepts in today's society, but Bondi's explanations clearly outline how these "passions" interfere with love and humility. The seven passions take a simple Celtic design based on three and complicate the simplicity of God's design for us.

On first hearing the term ‘passion,’ a modern Christian jumps to a definition that typically does not seem to fit the discussion Bondi leads. Passion typically implies a strong emotion connected to sex; secondly, today’s society also connects temper to passion. Yet, in Bondi’s conversation, passion is an extremely strong emotion that affects one’s judgment and interferes in the ability to love as God loves.

For United Methodists, an interesting connection appears in understanding how the passions were identified as a problem. According to Bondi, the early Christians borrowed an idea presented by Plato who used a metaphor about a chariot pulled by two horses. The charioteer and the horses represent the pull between emotion and reason.

Driving the chariot is reason. It is reason that enables human beings to see the world and respond to it not simply on a level of physical needs and desires, but consciously and morally. For the Christian monastics, this meant to see and know God, to see as God sees, and to love God and other people. . . . The horses provide energy and power; it is the charioteer who sets the direction of the travel and puts the energy of the chariot in motion. (Bondi pp. 60-61)

Today’s United Methodists depend on the quadrilateral to keep a balance in understanding how to live as God lives. Using the four approaches to make sure that our understanding and our decisions are God-based, the element of logical reasoning is an essential factor. Reason helps keep human passions under control.

Reading the scriptures provides a base of knowledge of how God taught the faithful to live. Rules are laid out in the Old Testament to assure the people of Israel were healthy, were able to run their lives successfully, and to remain faithful. Then as Jesus arrived to replace the Old Covenant with the New Covenant, more instruction was needed, and the books of the New Testament guide us further along the path of loving one another. Therefore, United Methodists use all four windows in the quadrilateral to assure that the passions are kept in control based on scripture, historical perspective, personal experience and rational thought, i.e. reasoning.

Looking back at the Celtic cross, the simplicity of the three, unending, infinite ovals can become extremely ornamental as it is expanded to fill a space, to provide more depth to the mystery of life, to show how God’s love can continue to grow. A summary of the passions causes modern Christians to pause and to meditate upon the message of the cross:

Gluttony—overeating is only one form, but overdoing in any form becomes a controlling force in one’s life. The hunger interferes with the ability to love as God loves; the hunger has to be satisfied above all other—including God.

Avarice—selfishness is another way to define this passion. If owning property or having control of resources takes over reason, God’s expectations are ignored.

Impurity—defined as “lusting after bodies” continues to be widespread in today’s culture. The emphasis on sex as a physical element in a relationship and as a consumerism trigger has

become so pervasive that love as a concept is twisted and has wrung God out of the fabric of our lives.

Depression/Sadness—now clearly defined as a mental illness that takes control of one’s life is a passion because it prevents or interferes with one’s ability to love not only one another, but even God.

Anger—temper; Bondi states that the monastic literature identified this as the most destructive passion. Today psychologists encourage patients to identify their anger and find ways to express it; unfortunately, anger often takes over all sense of reason and replaces love. With no love, God’s new covenant is broken.

Acedia—an unfamiliar term in today’s culture, but during the Middle Ages it meant laziness. Today, though, acedia refers to the loss of enthusiasm for life. When boredom sets in whether within the family structure, at the jobsite, or even with a hobby, acedia is the controlling passion interfering with living life as God asks us to live—loving one another. If our focus on God is lost, life becomes boring and/or restlessness sets in.

Vainglory—another unfamiliar term means vanity or egotistical. Monastics suffering from this passion wanted to be admired for their religious practices, but today it can feasibly be as simple as wanting to please a parent more than another sibling can or being recognized as the ‘top dog’ in any career.

Pride—at the worst, this passion causes one to put down or devalue, as Bondi says, others; but regardless of which century it may be, pride interferes with one loving one another as God would love—it destroys humility. (Bondi pp. 71-76)

No discussion is complete without a final statement. The three loops of the Celtic cross continue to provide quiet testimony to how cultures can assimilate new ideas. The Celts were content in their practices; but as the Christians moved into their culture, the old ideas became new ideas. The wooden cross that Jesus drug up the hill and died upon symbolizes a revolution fueled by love. The Celtic cross translated a pagan tradition into a Christian symbol of unending, infinite love. Bondi shows us that the one commandment to love one another truly transforms the world as long as humans maintain humility and are alert to the passions that can separate them from God.



Book mentioned in Linda's article.

Voices of Silence: Lives of the Trappists Today Paperback – July 1, 1992

by Frank Bianco (Author)