

Session 1: Tom – Iconography Discussion

The other thing about icons is asking ourselves: *where is God, and where is the mystery in all of this?* In this icon here, they call that a mandorla, which is actually a Latin-Italian word for almond. The eyes basically have an almond shape. Sometimes iconographers draw a circle like that, and sometimes they use an almond shape, which you guys have probably seen. As you go deeper into the center of it, it becomes darker and darker. In this particular one, the iconographer just did a couple of shades. Sometimes there are three or four shades going deeper into the heart of God.

In this icon of Christ on the cross, you notice that the cross represents the mystery of God. He is resting in the mystery of God on this cross. Out of the darkness, out of the suffering, and out of the pain comes the crucified Christ, which brings our salvation.

In this tradition, saints are typically depicted in consistent colors. St. Peter is always wrapped in orange. The beloved disciple is always in green, which means generative or life-giving. Mary Magdalene is also always in green. In almost any icon you see, she will typically have red shoes, according to our history. There is so much to say about these icons.

Some icons will depict Christ with his eyes open, meaning that he is still with us. In other icons, his eyes are closed, meaning that his work is finished—representing the full revelation. Scripture scholars and theologians note that when Christ heals someone and tells them not to tell anybody, it is because the full revelation of who Christ is does not truly come to us until he is on the cross, when it is finished.

In this other image, he is depicted in white. When he was born, he was wrapped in swaddling clothes. Thus, this depicts his journey from birth to death. You can see the beloved disciple looking completely distraught, holding his face in his hands. The hands and the face are always the most important parts of an icon. The placement of the hands and symbols like the Alpha, the Omega, and the Trinity are crucial.

In this icon particularly, I encourage you to take note of crucifixions depicting Christ on the cross with Mary. Her hand represents her mercy towards her son. It is a beautiful aspect of icons—showing the deep mercy she has towards her son. The hair and other elements represent specific theological meanings as well; everything has a symbolic representation.

I also want to mention that many icons utilize an inverse perspective. Just like we were talking about balance, if I were trying to draw a regular picture of a building, the front of the building would be larger than the back. In an icon, it is the opposite: the front is smaller, and the back is larger. The next time you look at an icon, observe what that does to you. It actually draws you into the icon. It is one of the distinct techniques they use.

Icons originally started in the catacombs. Early Christians buried their fellow believers in the catacombs and would etch crucifixes or symbols into the stones. Later on, they used candles and began to paint. Tradition marks that as the beginning of iconography, which was then carried on by the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Classical Eastern Orthodox icons follow very strict rules, metrics, and guidelines. However, you will also see contemporary icons that are much more liberal in style. If I had a group of half a dozen iconographers in a room, there would be a lively debate going on.

Participant: This might be a naive question, but what makes something an icon as opposed to a regular painting? Can new icons be created, or have they all already been identified?

Tom: New icons can absolutely be created; you can commission them.

Participant: Is it a copy of something pre-existing, or can it be completely new?

Tom: Not necessarily just a copy. For example, like Father Michael mentioned, you can commission a brand-new icon. I don't have it with me, but I commissioned an icon of the resurrection. It features symbols of the Liturgy of the Hours, the steps of humility written into the design, the Cistercian founders, and Thomas Merton. As long as you follow the general theological rules, it becomes an icon. The word "icon" simply means "image."

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the way an icon officially becomes an icon is quite beautiful. We have a tabernacle, but their tabernacle is a room half the size of this one. At the beginning of Lent, they place all the new icons in the sacristy and pray over them. On the Easter Vigil, there is a special blessing and prayer, and they officially become icons.

Our theology teaches that the presence of Christ is truly present to us in these icons. Praying with them ties directly into the Cistercian monastic tradition. For me, it is just like communicating with anyone else: if I really want to hear what someone is saying to me, I have to actively listen, quiet my mind, and be receptive. That is how the spiritual world comes through these icons. In my experience at St. Catherine's Monastery, the icon will completely grab you, and suddenly it feels as though the icon is gazing back at you. Just reflect on that.

Participant: Can I ask a strange question? Does the concept of copyright apply here? I once saw a large icon that looked like a hippie had hit it with a six-pound hammer, and I loved it. We had two icon-writing classes in my church where we were given existing images of icons and instructed on how to copy them. If I saw an icon that completely grabbed me, would it be appropriate or a heresy for me to try to paint that copy myself?

Tom: You can absolutely reproduce an icon for personal use. Now, there are modern iconographers who will say, "This is my specific representation, so you cannot take pictures of it to sell on greeting cards around the world." There are copyright laws for commercial use. But if you saw one and wanted to recreate it to place in your private chapel, that is absolutely fine.

Participant: On your diagram with the icon in the center, what do the lines represent?

Tom: Imagine the left side is our world being drawn through this icon into the spiritual world, and the right side is the spiritual world coming through that icon directly to you. It represents a thin space or a portal between the two. Does that make sense?

Participant: Yes, thank you. That is really important.

Participant: I have another question. You know a lot about icons, and I think you have one of the Holy Trinity. Can you speak about that?

Tom: You are likely thinking of Andrei Rublev's Trinity icon. There is a wonderful book on it that I should recommend to you all. I actually donated a four-foot diameter version of that icon to St. Benedict's Parish on Irving Park in Chicago. It is life-sized and displayed in the church now. There are so many profound things about Rublev's Trinity. First, the color used for God the Father is a pinkish hue, which represents both the male and female aspects of God. Second, you have God the Father on one side, the Holy Spirit on the other, and Christ in the middle. Their figures are arranged to create the negative space of a chalice or cup in the center. The most amazing thing about the icon of the Trinity is that the focal point, or the vortex, is not on the flat surface of the icon itself. It sits three, four, or five feet in front of it. In other words, when you walk up to the icon of the Holy Trinity, you are invited to be the fourth person sitting at that table. There was a saint who said, "God exists because Rublev created the icon of the Trinity." When you stand before it, you are drawn directly into the divine community. Furthermore, you have the Tree of Life above the Son, and the House of the Father above the Father, reminding us that "my Father's house has many mansions." You also see the Holy Spirit. All three figures have identical faces because they are three-in-one. However, the Holy Spirit's staff is fully exposed, whereas the Father's and Son's staffs are partially blocked. That symbolizes the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, being fully present with us here on Earth.

Participant: This might be a poor comparison, but what is the difference between *Visio Divina* using a regular painting versus praying with an icon?

Tom: Nature is our first scripture, and regular art can certainly speak to us. However, a true icon contains absolutely nothing man-made or synthetic. For example, the icon I donated to St. Benedict's was painted by a sister out of Monroe, Michigan. She actually went to Russia to source minerals from the exact same locations where Rublev got his pigments. Iconographers use egg tempera, mixing natural egg yolk with ground minerals and flowers from the earth to

create the colors. Even the varnish is natural, often sourced from tree resins, which must sit in a window for a year to cure properly. A true icon honors the idea that nature is our first scripture. An icon is not fully an icon until it is blessed. In our Western tradition, we use the Book of Blessings for a short prayer, whereas the Eastern tradition has a more extensive liturgical placement.

Participant: How common are iconographers today?

Tom: There used to be an active iconographers' guild in the United States, but unfortunately, it has largely become extinct. There is still a group up in New York. Sister Nancy in Monroe is now too elderly to teach classes. The man who painted these three icons here is Joe Malham out of Chicago.

There are two quick things you will notice about traditional icons. First, unlike going to an art institute to see a Van Gogh or a Monet, you will never see an iconographer's name signed on the front of an icon. It is never about the artist; it is entirely about the window to the sacred. Second, you will never see a shadow in an icon. The reason there are no shadows is that the light is not casting *onto* the subjects; rather, the uncreated light of Christ is shining *through* them toward you.

Participant: I am very excited because I rarely get a chance to discuss iconography. I don't paint or draw as much as I used to, but when my husband and I were dating, I asked him what his favorite mystery of the faith was. He said the Presentation in the Temple. I looked up existing icons of Simeon, researched the tradition, and created my own version. It is not strictly traditional in the way you described, but it is a creative icon. I would love to show it to you.

Tom: Oh wow, that is beautiful! It is a sort of creative icon, yes.

The true gift of praying with icons, going back to my experience at St. Catherine's Monastery, is practicing our monastic tradition of letting go of the self, being totally present, and being receptive. We don't just call this sacred art. These are living spiritual entities that communicate to us whatever we need to hear at that specific moment. Sometimes you will come to an icon and deeply relate to the distraught emotion of the beloved disciple, or find yourself identifying with Moses. It is constantly communicating.

This Transfiguration icon was the first one I ever commissioned. Personally, my spiritual calling is to see the transfigured Christ in the world, which is why I am a Lay Cistercian. Joe painted this for me.

To wrap up, when you look at a traditional crucifixion icon, you will often see a skull depicted at the base of the cross. This represents the skull of Adam, showing that Christ's blood redeems our original fall. Often, you will also see a city wall running halfway across the background. Christ is raised above that wall to show that his salvation is universal and for all people, breaking past human barriers.

Have a blessed time praying with the icons. Thank you, everyone. Now we will move to the spokespersons from each individual discussion group.

Session 2: Group Reports & Debrief - "Why am I a contemplative?"

Group 1 Report – Dan

Our group started by having everyone describe what contemplation means to them personally. I will present their thoughts in bullet points.

- **Coming Home:** One member described it as coming home as a beloved child of God, discovering what is real about oneself as opposed to the mental constructs we create in our own minds.

- **Surrender:** Another person spoke about being a temple of the Holy Spirit, allowing God to surprise us every day, and coming to the realization that we are not in charge. It is about letting Him work through us and getting rid of our own baggage. To quote St. Paul: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." We talked about how incredibly difficult that process of letting go can be.
- **Freedom of Expression:** One of our members noted that contemplation gives them the peace of mind and strength to witness to the things they believe to be true. They find they can speak their mind more freely as a contemplative.
- **Practicing the Presence:** We talked about practicing the presence of God. It is a constant discipline. We don't naturally walk around in awareness of God all day; we need to intentionally bring ourselves back to that awareness.
- **Hope:** While people often use the phrase "surprised by joy," one of our members beautifully stated that contemplation leaves them "surprised by hope."

We then transitioned into asking how being a contemplative enriches our lives, and whether it enriches our *whole* life or just our *spiritual* life. The group quickly concluded that on the contemplative journey, the veil between your secular life and your contemplative life gets thinner and thinner until it disappears entirely.

- One of our members, who is a visual artist, described contemplation as an emerging quality and a gift. He explained that his daily work, his contemplation, and his spirituality eventually merge into one. What he creates contains far more depth than what is immediately visible on the canvas. This is a truly integrated approach—not confining contemplation to an hour a day or Sunday Mass, but weaving it into the very fiber of who you are.
- **Freedom and Stability:** When you reach the point where you can surrender and let go, a deep freedom follows. You worry less. One member admitted she used to be a champion worrier, but has learned to let go over time. Another person noted experiencing fewer emotional ups and downs. We tied this directly to the monastic vow of stability: feeling more stable because you are looking to God rather than to others or becoming a victim of your circumstances.

Finally, regarding the whole life versus spiritual life distinction, one member who works in education shared that they feel called to bring this presence into their work with children. This led us to discuss the movie *The Matrix*, where everyone thought they were living in reality but were actually comatose, plugged in, and controlled. In a sense, that can apply to us. We easily convince ourselves that our daily grind, our titles, our decisions, and our accolades constitute our true identity. Richard Rohr talks about the first half of life and the second half of life; the first half is necessary to get your feet on the ground, but eventually, you must realize that the external constructs are not who you truly are. Contemplation allows us to see ourselves, others, and God entirely differently, passing from a closed existence into a radically open way of being. Thank you.

Group 2 Report – Craig

Our group wrestled with how we support one another on this journey. One person suggested that we are actively carrying each other through a spiritual synergism, even if the mechanics of it feel a bit murky. We agreed that it has actually become comfortable to exist in a space of *not knowing* everything.

Another member suggested that we focus on the true definition of love. In the English language, we use the same word to say "I love pizza," "I love God," and "I love my spouse." We felt that our language falls short and that contemplation helps us tap into the singular, ultimate reality of divine love.

When looking at what this means to us personally, someone brought up the analogy of the Trinity being like water—manifesting as steam, solid ice, or liquid. We aren't fully sure of the science or applicability of the metaphor, but we agreed it is a good thing that God remains a mystery. If we could cleanly define exactly what God is, we would be dealing with something far too small.

The statement that jumped out to me most from our sharing was when someone said that coming to this path has meant needing "less and less of everything else." Nobody in our group held a rigid, black-and-white view of how things must be. It felt incredibly good to simply be in a space of shared, open seeking. Thank you.

Group 3 Report – Jason

I will confess that our group experienced a thread of "good perturbation" throughout our discussion. We began by examining the semantics of the word "contemplative." The core question of our retreat is *why* am I a contemplative, but we had to first define *what* it means. We defined it as an inherent capacity to see, to love, to receive, to seek, and to be open to what is true in contrast to what is false. While visiting the Hermitage yesterday, Adam asked a wonderful question, and Paul mentioned that contemplative work is a primal orientation within all of us toward the unspeakable. That beautifully mirrored our group's conversation about this shared human capacity.

In terms of what it means for us personally, we touched upon expected disciplines: having a rule of life, maintaining daily prayer, and cultivating a disposition of showing up and staying accountable. It means getting up every morning and going to prayer simply because you are committed to doing it.

Yet, there was also an honest confession from someone who said, "Sometimes I don't even want to think about it anymore. I don't even want to be a contemplative—and yet, I am." There is an undeniable capacity within us that wrestles with this calling. It involves a steady routine of spiritual reading, learning not to judge others, and recognizing that this practice leads us to a sense of oneness and unity with each other. One of my favorite moments was when someone shared their simple, honest daily prayer: "*God, just get me to Mass.*"

When discussing how it enriches our lives, themes of peace, gift, and oneness came through clearly. It enriches us precisely through the wrestling and the "good disturbance" of staying connected to God. We talked about how we engage with our secular lives outside the abbey. One person shared that every day they spend away from the abbey, they feel their spiritual tank drain just a little bit more.

However, we also discussed how our lives can manifest as a monastery right around us. Through our friendships, our marriages, and our daily work, the monastic experience unfolds right where we are. We don't have to go searching for it; God is present wherever we are. Someone beautifully quoted St. Francis: "*Preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words.*"

Finally, regarding whether this affects our whole lives or just our spiritual lives, we agreed it creates an intentionality that reaches outward. The fruits of prayer naturally spill over into our daily activities. As lay members, we live in a creative tension between our deep contemplative nature and the frantic demands of life on Earth. Thank you.

Group 4 Report – Ellen

Our group defined contemplation as listening rather than talking, and *being* rather than *doing*. It means sitting with God even if the immediate outcome feels like it's going nowhere. It is about encountering yourself and God in the depths of your heart. We agreed that while everyone should practice some form of contemplation, contemplatives are specifically called to root their

entire lives in this practice. It provides a completely different lens through which you view the world, encounter God, and interact with everything around you.

For all of us, the answer to *why am I a contemplative?* was simple: we felt we had no choice. Being a contemplative is not about constructing a polished self-image or managing how others perceive you; it is about stripping everything away to uncover who you actually are.

We shared our stories of how we came to join the Lay Cistercians. While keeping individual details private, a few beautiful, common themes emerged:

- **Stumbling Into It:** For most of us, we stumbled into this path. It felt as though God led us here by the hand, often when we weren't even looking for it.
- **The Irresistible Call:** We felt powerfully called into stillness and solitude out of the messiness of our lives. This was true even for members of our group for whom stillness and noise-reduction do not come naturally. We have people who naturally thrive on chaos, noise, and busyness, yet the internal call to silence was so irresistible they had to answer it.

We danced around a theological concept that we actually have formal language for: the two pillars of contemplation. There is the *mystical* piece (how God calls us into purification) and the *ascetical* piece (how we intentionally offer our efforts back to Him). You can think of it like a bicycle: you cannot move forward using only one pedal. God calls, and we must answer.

Our group expressed immense gratitude for this gift. We recognize that it didn't originate from us; God handed it to us. At the same time, everyone felt a profound weight of responsibility to respond and turn their hearts fully toward that call.

We concluded that the contemplative life is life enriched and made fully alive through direct encounter with God. It allows you to know yourself better, which makes you far more capable of loving others in the world around you. We are intentionally building daily structures to bring God into our routines until practicing His presence simply becomes a habit. This removes the false barrier between the sacred and the profane, bringing a clear awareness that everything is spiritual and your entire life is holy.

As Lay Cistercians living in a highly counter-cultural environment, we don't have the automatic external structures of a monastery to keep us on track. In the beginning, you have to intentionally choose to enforce these habits upon yourself until they take root and become second nature.

Final Reports – Rodrigo, Tom, Brother Gregory, & Father Michael

Our group discussed these questions in a free-flowing, organic way. We agreed early on that contemplation is a higher form of prayer where we intentionally turn our attention to being present to God, just as He is always present to us.

We noted that this path depends completely on grace. We must make all the human effort we can, but in the end, it is entirely a gift from God. We can grow to be aware of God everywhere: in nature, in art, and in icons. To cultivate this awareness, we must practice detachment from worldly desires and material distractions—essentially learning how to disconnect from the noise of the world.

Someone emphasized that contemplation must always reflect in action. If you are a true contemplative, it should manifest in your daily work, your family life, and your parish church. It isn't a separate compartment, which answers the question about whether this affects your whole life or just your spiritual life—they must become one and the same. One member shared that this practice has made them far more confident in life, while others noted that it has granted them the grace to forgive past hurts and has carried them through seasons of suffering and loss.

Ultimately, we are in this to praise God. We noted a truth reflected in the lives of many saints: the closer you get to God, the more clearly you see the flaws within yourself—things that are not

always pretty. But as you get closer to the Divine, you realize you have the ultimate Help right there with you to face those flaws, so it doesn't cause you to panic. Thank you.

Tom: To add to our group's report, when asked if this affects our spiritual life or our whole life, our table was completely unanimous: it encompasses our *whole* life.

When discussing how contemplation enriches our lives, a chorus of "it helps me" statements emerged. It helps us become Christ in the world, helps us embrace silence, helps us slow down, and helps us live in the present moment to see the mystery in other people.

Father Michael shared a wonderful story about his first year arriving at the Abbey. On his one-year anniversary, the Abbot met with him and asked how things were going. Father Michael admitted, *"Well, there is a brother in the choir who is just driving me absolutely crazy."* The Abbot looked at him and asked, *"Is it the one on your right or the one on your left?"* Father Michael replied, *"Deep down, it's all of the above!"* The Abbot smiled and said, *"Then you have come to the exact right place."*

Catherine chimed in to say this reminded her of how much easier it is to love her dog than her neighbor! But contemplation teaches us to be full of grace, gives meaning to our existence, and helps us shed the shallow, superficial hopes of life so we can trade them for deep, everlasting hope. It makes us thankful, compassionate, accepting, and loving.

Personally, it means listening—the very first word of the Rule of St. Benedict—serving, taking action, and remaining curious. It requires a constant conversion of life (*conversatio morum*), which we know is a cornerstone of the Cistercian charism. It is a profound vocation.

When defining a contemplative, words like "ontological," "union in Christ," "transformative," and "transcendent" came up. But hats off to Aaron from Canada; when we asked him what a contemplative is, he laughed and said, *"Hey, I'm just the Uber driver bringing my wife down here. It's all a mystery to me!"* We thought that was a perfectly true and humble answer. Thank you.

Brother Gregory: This discussion reminds me of something a member of our group shared. Brother Frederick, who has been in this monastery for fifty years, recently remarked to the Lay Cistercians: *"I haven't heard this much talk about contemplation in fifty years as I am hearing right now from you all."* I think he meant that monks try to simply *do* it rather than talk about it. In a way, I feel the same; I don't always know how much I have to say about it because it is meant to be lived.

To me, contemplation means learning to "pray without ceasing." How do we actually do that? When someone asks us to pray for a specific intention, we pray in that exact moment, but then we continue to carry that prayer forward as we live out our daily lives.

Brother Paul wrote a book titled *The Embrace of a Useless Life*. When people ask what contemplation is *for*, the answer is that it is for itself. It is an intrinsic calling; we do it because it is who we are. As someone else wisely noted: *"Don't explain, don't complain."*

Going back to Tom's point about crucifixion icons showing Christ raised above the city walls: it reminds me of a place where I worked for a while called Arcosanti, where they were trying to build a model city. The architectural concept was that the city would feature no church or cathedral because the entire city itself was meant to be the church. The whole space was sacred. That is what we are trying to do with our lives.

Monastic Debrief & Summary – Father Michael

I want to thank the secretaries from each group. If you could type up your notes and compile them, I think it would be wonderful to share them with everyone. A lot of incredible, deep insights were shared today. I would like to touch upon a few key themes.

First, reflecting on Tom's talk on icons, the first book we read during our formation spoke about *becoming* an icon. Living a contemplative life is ultimately about becoming spiritually

transparent, stripping away the ego so that the light of Christ can shine cleanly through us. That is exactly what happens on this path.

Second, building on Craig's report, he spoke about being comfortable in a space where we *don't know*. Human beings naturally want to get their heads around things and categorize them. However, there is a vital spiritual dimension to allowing ourselves to rest in the unknown, entering a space where we are simply present to the mystery of God and letting that mystery transform us.

Third, Jason's group spoke beautifully about "creating a monastery around us." Wherever we are planted, we can establish a sacred space. We can choose to live in the sacred and extend that peace to others, allowing their own spiritual lives to flower.

Ellen's group spoke of entering into the stillness. Cultivating that internal sacred space is exactly how we protect ourselves from the modern world, which is filled with an awful lot of distraction and noise. If we can allow ourselves to truly experience silence, we can finally hear the movements of our own deepest hearts.

Rodrigo's group reminded us that it is all about grace. Catholics pray the *Hail Mary* and address her as "full of grace," but in truth, we are all called to be full of grace. We are meant to live in the constant, unmerited help that God wants to share with us.

Finally, they noted that contemplation helps us endure suffering. None of us escapes suffering in this life. In some ways, monks enter the monastery specifically to lean into suffering—to stop running away and to face the existential difficulties of life head-on. Once you develop a contemplative baseline, you can much more easily accept and embrace the suffering that inevitably crosses your path. We often try to avoid it at all costs because our culture constantly screams that we are not supposed to suffer. But we cannot escape it; it is an intrinsic part of the human journey, and it is often the very thing that is most transformative for the soul.

This path is a lifelong call to conversion. I know that I personally need to be converted anew every single day if I am going to become the person God is calling me to be. We must not be afraid of that continuous call.

Thank you, everyone. Well done.