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PAX

THE BENEDICTINE COMMUNITY OF NEW NORCIA

PRAYER

Come as you are…pray as you can

At first glance, it would appear that St Benedict doesn't have much to say about prayer in his 6th century rule for monks. For example, in the very short chapter (20) 'Reverence in Prayer' he suggests prayer, both personal and communal, should be brief.

Regarding personal prayer, I think Benedict captures its essence in his use of the term "tears of compunction"; literally, to be 'pierced' at the very core of our being by the utter mysterious awareness of the presence of God. We are not talking here about tears of sadness or depression, but rather the profound experience of being overwhelmed in silence and solitude by the reality of our truth before the God who created us.

When it comes to prayer in community, Benedict tells us that this is paramount. If the monastic life is all about seeking God then, in the Christian Tradition, we are to prefer nothing other than Christ. And, the best way to give witness to this preference is to come together in community – as the Body of Christ. This coming together in prayer – seven times a day – he referred to as 'the work of God', our primary task. So, when the bell rings for these times of prayer, we are called out of our introspection, our preoccupation with self, and our personal projects, to come together to worship the living God, who loves and sustains us…as we are…and to pray as we can…but with the expectation that through this prayer, we may become more like the One whom we seek.

A closer reading of the rule reveals that St Benedict actually has a lot to say about prayer, not so much in how to pray but, rather, in the multifaceted application and integration of prayer into the rhythm and regularity of daily life. This immediately implies that monastic life and, in turn, all Christian life – the seeking of God – is not a private life of perpetual navel-gazing, sitting (or kneeling) around all day praying, but rather a dynamic inter-relational life made up of all manner of occupations and encounters, with love and prayer at the centre of it all.

Benedict advises that if you're about to begin a good work, earnestly pray that God will help you bring it to perfection (prologue). In his list of 'Tools for Good Works' (Chapter 4) he instructs us to confess our sins to God in prayer. In the process of dealing with a troubled monk (Chapter 27), he concludes that the whole community should affirm their love for their brother by praying for him, and that the best remedy for the recalcitrant monk is prayer (Chapter 28). Whatever the task, whether it be reading and ruminating over the scriptures to hear the voice of God, reading in the liturgy, kitchen duty, serving at table, digging in the garden, attending to the laundry, welcoming guests, or sending a monk on a journey – it all begins with prayer and ends with prayer.

I hope the fine articles in this edition of PAX will encourage you in your prayer.

Abbot John

PAX

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ABBOT JOHN HERBERT, FR DAVID BARRY,
FR ROBERT NIXON & PETER HOCKING

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BENEDICTINE COMMUNITY OF NEW NORCIA
NEW NORCIA RD, NEW NORCIA,
WESTERN AUSTRALIA 6509
WWW.NEWNORCIA.COM.AU
(08) 9654 8018

FOR ALL CORRESPONDENCE ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION,
CONTACT THE EDITOR AT
PUBLICATIONS@NEWNORCIA.COM.AU

“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven”.

- Matthew 18:3-4

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MONSIEUR OLIER,
MASTER OF PRAYER

From Cahiers sur l'Oraison 220, July-August, 1988

Gilles Chaillot, PSS

Fr. Olier—one of the leading figures of the 17th-century Church. One of those great spiritual men, who like Bérulle, Condren, St. Vincent de Paul, St. John Eudes, strove for the renewal of the French clergy.

An immense task! And this at a time when a great number of priests were uneducated.

Olier devoted his life to it. He was not content simply to give future priests a solid spiritual and doctrinal foundation; his ambition was to launch them on the road to holiness. To that end, he taught them to pray, suggesting a very simple method to them: gazing at Christ, cleaving to him, living in him. In other words, to live interiorly with the life of Christ, and then to show that in their deeds.

In order to bring this great work to fruition, Olier founded a first seminary in Paris, in the parish of Saint-Sulpice, of which he became the parish priest. This seminary very soon established such an influence that bishops in all parts of France asked him to found one in their dioceses.

But in order to have good seminaries, you need a body of priests who are prepared for this mission. Thus it was that Olier set up the Company of Priests of Saint-Sulpice, the Sulpicians. And for more than three centuries now, these priests have been preparing very many young men for priestly life, in France, Canada, the United States and in Africa, Latin America and the Far East.

D.W.

A Biographical Sketch.

Jean-Jacques Olier was born in Paris in 1608, son of a councillor in the Parlement. Very early on, his family planned a rich ecclesiastical career for him: tonsured at the age of eleven, he received several priories as benefices. After a stay at Lyon, where he attended the Jesuit college, he pursued his theological studies at Paris.

During a journey to Rome, he contracted an eye-disease, of which the cure at Loretto marked the start of a life entirely given to God. He was 22 years old.

Under St. Vincent de Paul's spiritual direction, he was ordained priest in 1633 and committed himself to popular preaching, to the great scandal of his family. For several years, Olier took part in numerous rural missions, right up to the day when he went through a long and grave spiritual trial, simultaneously psychological and spiritual. This amounted to a real interior annihilation, which led him into total self-abandonment. In this way God was preparing him for his vocation as reformer of the clergy.

After having twice refused the episcopate, Olier gathered some disciples and in 1642 founded a seminary in Paris, near the Church of Saint-Sulpice, of which he became the parish priest.

Throughout ten years he gave himself to unremitting activity, both in that vast and hitherto neglected parish, in the seminary, and at the head of the little company of priests which he gathered around him. Despite opposition, he renewed the life of the parish to its very depths, visiting the sick, setting up local schools, assisting the need. At the same time as he was training future priests, he was reforming his parish clergy. The Paris seminary quickly became a model: at bishops' requests, Olier founded others in the provinces.

His influence even extended beyond the frontiers of France: he sent the first Sulpicians to New France [Canada], the founders of Ville-Marie, which later became Montréal.

But Olier the missionary was a man of prayer. Despite being absorbed in so many activities, he daily devoted long hours to prayer, unable, as he used to say, "to take pleasure in anything other than in conversation with God."

Gravely ill, he devoted his last years to the foundation of seminaries, to spiritual direction–many were the men and women, lay people, priests and religious, who entrusted themselves to him—and to working on the publication of his chief spiritual writings.

At his death on April 2, 1657, he, who aspired to "lose himself in God", left a renewed parish, a renowned seminary and a company of priests committed to the formation of the clergy in various dioceses.

The Editors.

Prayer, the most important activity of all in the Christian life.

"You cannot say enough about prayer: in the lives of Christians, it is the most important activity of all." Writing this in the Christian Catechism for the Interior Life published in 1656, a year before his death, Jean-Jacques Olier bore witness to the conviction which he had made his own over the course of long and remarkable personal experience.

A great desire for Prayer.

Prayer: that, indeed, was what by his own admission, had truly been the decisive experience which had stamped his spiritual journey and directed his apostolic vocation.

Brought up in the rather worldly piety which was at that time practised by many Christian families like his own, it was only in 1630, at the age of 22, that the young theological student experienced a real conversion and began to take seriously the gospel demands of the interior life. But this grace very quickly found expression, as he notes revealingly, in "a great desire for prayer."

After some years in search of his true divine vocation, Olier understood that God was really calling him to the clergy of his Church, not at all as a career, but to contribute to the indispensable reform of the Christian people, and this firstly by working for the sanctification of priests, called with him to be the primary agents in this.

But this apostolic direction was very soon focused precisely on a renewed understanding of prayer among the clergy. Olier became convinced that this was what the interior Master had destined him for, and in 1645 noted in his journal that this meant living "in perpetual contemplation" in order better to be able to "implant this into the priesthood" and so to influence the whole Church.

An entirely active contemplative: that indeed was the witness he bore, for during the ten years from 1642-1652 he added to the numerous activities of a parish priest those of a seminary director and of the Company of Saint-Sulpice. Not only was he faithful to daily devoting an entire hour, morning and evening, to the exercise of prayer, but it was not uncommon for him to spend the whole day in a real state of permanent prayer.

As an educator of priests and future priests, he insisted on "the great obligation we have to work assiduously at the practice of prayer in the seminary." As a pastor and missionary, he deplored the fact that such an experience of prayer should be "so rare in the Church nowadays," and he had no hesitation in identifying that as "the only reason" for the "little fruit or advance in souls."

Thus he untiringly devoted himself to all those countless folk entrusted to him as parish priest, or who entrusted themselves to him as their spiritual adviser, to guide them in the ways of prayer.

All Christians, one Religious of God

If prayer is "the most important activity of the whole of Christian life," it is because for Olier, the fundamental attitude of Christ in person is that of "religion" in relation to his Father, which "he came to live and spread" through "this world." By giving them "his very Spirit" Jesus sought to make all Christians, with him and in him, "one single religious of God."

This "religion," dear to him as to all the masters of the 17th-century French school of spirituality, needs to be properly understood. It is not limited to the moral virtue expressed in liturgical worship, but more broadly and deeply, it is the properly theological direction of every Christian life: in faith, hope and charity, it should be completely devoted to the glory of God, as was the existence of Jesus, lived for the Father in the Holy Spirit.

Two words constantly recur in Olier's writing, as truly characteristic of this "religion": respect and love.

Respect

Respect, first of all. Olier was, as it were, dazzled in faith by the absolutely incomparable greatness of God: only he deserves to be adored, "since everything is as nothing in his presence."

Not that he was insensitive to the charms of creation: in The Christian Day, a collection of pieces of practical advice published in 1655, Olier invites people to pray, for example, "by discovering the beauties of the countryside," or, "when you see the sun," or again, "by hearing the birds singing." But the prayers he suggests are altogether typical. Thus, at the sight of "the earth, plants, flowers and fruits" he suggests crying out:

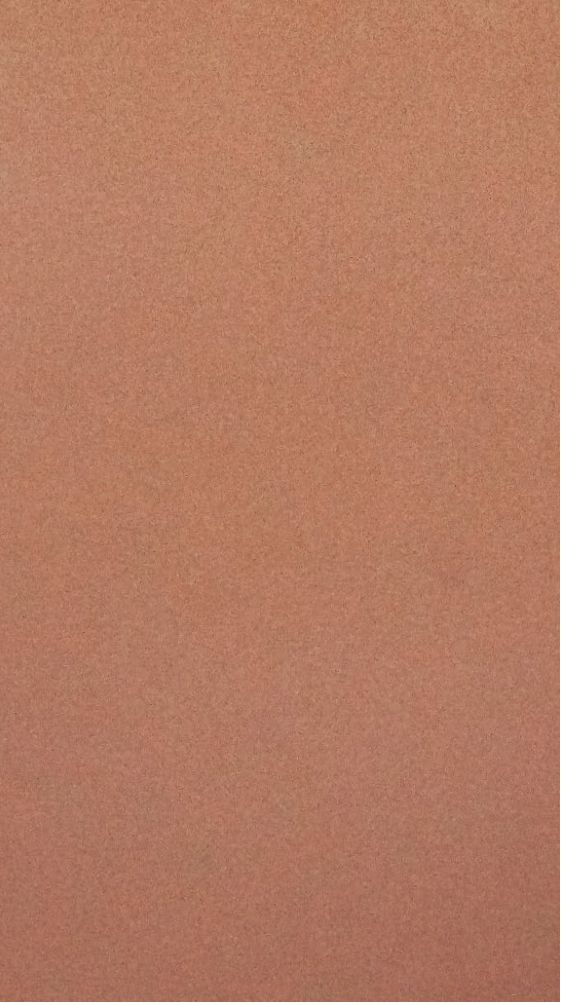
> ***My God, you are much more beautiful and wonderful in yourself than you are under the veil of these beauties.***

Far from stopping at the sights which nature offers him, the gaze of his faith penetrates through what he calls "the thin husk of being", to fix himself straightaway on the Creator, of whom all things are but the "figure."

In the same way that "all creatures look" to God, in order to render him "homage as to their Sovereign," in the same way God only gives them to us in order to raise ourselves to him and to him alone.

You wish that at the same time as we see creatures our gaze should rest on you.

And Olier's contemplation "by hearing the birds singing" leads him to this act of pure adoration: "All is nothing to me, except in you."



Love

Respect, but love, too. If God's incomparable majesty fascinated him so much, it was not in order to annihilate Olier or keep him at arm's length. The sight of creation, which was for him simultaneously a "mask" and the "face" of God, both hiding him and making him visible, caused him instead to "sigh" after Him whom he loved with every fibre of his deeply sensitive being: "All you creatures, then, speak of my Love!"

And in the ardour of believing desire, Olier could not prevent himself from yearning for the moment when at last all the shadows would vanish, in the new world,

When God will wish to cease to appear in figures, and when he will make himself seen as he is.

His "religion" is that of all lovers of God, impatient, like him, to see Him.

"While awaiting" the joy of the eternal face-to-face with Him whom he calls, "my sweet Love, my All for ever and ever, my Dearly Beloved and my Only One," Olier's contemplation, still more than towards creatures, is drawn with delight to Jesus. Jesus, who to him is "alone the whole beauty of God," "the fulfilment of the image and the perfect model of God."

> *O my great God, one world, and a thousand worlds together, are incapable of making you known: your Word alone can make you known just as you are in yourself.*

To live supremely for God in Christ Jesus

"To live supremely for God in Christ Jesus"–that is the foundational direction of the Spiritual Directory composed by Olier in the last years of his life, for the seminary community of Saint-Sulpice, which he had founded in 1642.

It is a good summary of the spirituality which the founder himself made efforts to practise and pass on to those around him, first of all to his brother priests, but also to the whole Church. Faithful to his fundamental "religious" viewpoint, this orientation firmly accents his roots in the central mystery of Christ. Nourished by his reading of St. Paul and St. John, it seeks to serve God's plan which "has predestined us to be formed in the image of his Son" (Rom. 8: 29). In other words, at the service of a Christian life in the full meaning of the word: every Christian is called to become "a Jesus Christ living on the earth."

But what are the limits of this "conformity which we must have with Jesus Christ?" What are the actual means which will make it possible to achieve this?

The measure of the Interior Life.

Olier likes to call the Christian life, which his whole spirituality seeks to promote, "the interior life." What does he mean by this?

The ideal which the Spiritual Directory puts forward is to live "in such a way that the interior" of Jesus, in other words the very depth of his mystery:

> *may penetrate the depths of our hearts, so that each of us can say what St. Paul confidently said of himself: 'It is no longer I who live, it is Christ who lives in me'.'*
> *(Gal. 2: 20)*

Such an insistence on interiority needs to be properly understood. Olier intends to put the accent on the commitment of the whole person to following Jesus. And while this commitment must spring from the Christian's heart, it must in fact shine out in the whole of the Christian's actual life, and find exterior expression:

> *In every person, such will be the sole hope and sole thought, such too the only activity: to live interiorly with the life of Christ, and to show it in our mortal body.*

So there is nothing in this spirituality of any kind of cosy privacy which would run contrary to the commitment to a true Christian practice. But neither is there individualism in this concrete "exercise" of "the interior life." If "each" is called, indeed, truly "to make their own" Paul's daring statement—"Christ lives in me"—it is within the context of the Church. It is only possible in proportion as the Christian is a member, an active member, of the Church, that "society of souls filled with the same interior life as Jesus Christ," as Olier says.

The founder of Saint-Sulpice constantly insists, and especially in his Spiritual Journal, on what he calls "the whole Christ, in other words Jesus Christ and his members, our Lord with his Church." Just as "the sun is the father of nature," so Jesus is "[the Father] of grace," insofar as he gives life to his mystical body:

> *My Jesus is a sun. In the heart of his Church he forms treasures of love and praise, through which he causes his Father to be honoured and glorified.*

So it is that Olier has no hesitation in speaking of the members of the ecclesial community, all enlivened with the same Spirit of Jesus, in the sacramental language which would be adopted by the Second Vatican Council:

> *Our Lord Jesus… thus lives in all for the honour of his Father and makes use of all the faithful like sacraments beneath which he dwells, so as to act in them and through them for the glory of his Father… So true is this that all the saints are nothing but living sacraments of Jesus Christ… Thus the whole Church is nothing but one Christ, the whole Church is nothing but Christ throughout.*

For Olier, as for all the great spiritual figures of 17th-century France, the interior life, meaning in other words a fully Christian life, is therefore at base a life simultaneously ecclesial and personal, and as a result, an apostolic and missionary life.

If Christ gives himself to all the baptised, especially in the Eucharist, he does so, says Olier, "in order to continue his mission to the very end of the world, and by this means go" throughout the whole universe, "to preach the glory of his Father." For in fact Christians, as "apostolic men," are therefore "bearers of Jesus Christ" to their fellow men, through their daily activities and their involvement in the world. And thus it is Christ in person who "through them" constantly continues everywhere to proclaim "the glory of his Father."

And all that will be so until his "religion" will be "perfectly attained in heaven... where there will be but one Jesus, where we will all be consumed in him, where there will only be he who will have consumed us all in his fire and his love.

The principal attitudes of the interior life

"In this consists the properly Christian life: that the Christian should live interiorly through the operation of the Spirit, in the way that Jesus Christ used to live"

As Olier constantly repeats, every one of the baptised is called to share "the same feelings, the same inclinations, the same behaviour and the same virtues" as the Lord Jesus.

But everything can be summed up in a fundamental disposition which is that of Christ's Passover: to be a "true Christian and a complete Christian" it is necessary to be "dead to oneself and alive to God alone."

Echoing St. Paul's baptismal teaching – "you must also consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:11) –Olier sees in this mystery of "death and life" the "two members of the Christian life" which should never be separated.

It is undoubtedly true that "it is through death that we enter life," following Christ, "the first" being like "the foundation of the second"; but it is just as true, even more so, that only his Spirit, by giving us a share in the very life of the risen Jesus "puts sin to death in us."

Dying to sin, "renouncing ourselves" in everything, is, in Olier's view, "the primary disposition which we must have in our works." If he is so insistent in this, it is because he takes seriously "the Lord's command in the introduction" which he himself gives "to [the] Christian life" in the gospel: Whoever wishes to come after me, let him renounce himself, take up his cross and follow me" (Mt. 16: 24).

And like all the spiritual masters of the 17th century French school, he has no hesitation in speaking of the necessary "interior annihilation" of the Christian. Startling language, which needs to be properly understood. It does not mean some sort of self-destruction, but rather an opening to the fulness of the very life of Jesus.

Olier invites us freely to find the "source" and simultaneously the "model" of this "annihilation of the heart" in the mystery of the Eucharist: the reality of the bread and wine is well and truly "annihilated in itself" precisely to the extent to which it is completely and entirely "converted to Christ." This is the meaning for our own vocation to:

> *Annihilate ourselves to ourselves (in order) to be transformed in Christ, thanks to the grace of the Holy Spirit who enlivens us interiorly.*

As in the paschal mystery of Jesus, death is thus for Christians the way to true life. By detaching them from sin and from themselves, from all that is not God, "interior annihilation" is both the condition and the fruit of their "attachment" to God in the risen Jesus. Union with "Christ the Lord who dwells within them" is the essential disposition to which they are called to bear witness:

> *Interiorly recollected in Christ, leading their lives under the vivifying action of his Spirit, as true Christians they will live more in Christ than in themselves; and in everything, they will show forth examples of his virtues and his conduct.*

For Olier, being in communion with Christ in this way means taking part in the different "mysteries" which, from the Incarnation to the Ascension by way of the Cross and Resurrection, have one by one revealed and brought about all the riches of his life in order to make them available to us.

The Means by which to enter and progress in the interior life

How, then, are we to reach such an conformity of our lives with Christ's? It is quite clear that Olier does not expect this to happen by way of a simple exterior imitation of the examples left us by Jesus' life on earth.

Every one of the baptised is called to become a "sacrament of Jesus Christ," even, as Olier does not hesitate to say, "a living Jesus Christ," and that within a Church which is in all its members, "nothing but one Christ" spread "everywhere."

The realisation of this Christian vocation can only be the fruit of a real communion with the mystery of the Word.

The living source of such a communion is none other than the Spirit of Jesus in person, who transfigures us into the image of Christ. "To hand himself over to the Spirit"–that is Olier's personal motto, and the only piece of advice he constantly gives his disciples.

> *We must have great trust in this divine Spirit and very much abandon ourselves to him so that he may direct us, he who is our true interior director just as he was for Our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Such an attitude – spiritual in the fullest sense of the word – is rooted in the grace of the sacraments of Christian initiation which in some sense "paint us" interiorly with "the very likeness of Our Lord ." Firstly the sacrament of baptism, "in which the Spirit of Jesus Christ is given to us" precisely "in order to make us live like him." Then in Confirmation the Risen One comes as it were to perfect in us that first sketch, or that "pencil outline" of his face, by giving us "a life perfected in his Spirit, a strong and vigorous life."

Above all the Eucharist in which the glorious Christ "comes into us" in the fulness and totality of his mystery, "in order to convert us and change us completely into him," to the degree that "through Holy Communion he seeks to act in us in his own person to the glory of God."

But Olier sees this sacramental communion in the mystery of Jesus as the source and centre of a much larger spiritual communion, of which the influence should extend to the whole life of the Christian, well beyond the moment of the Eucharistic celebration.

> *I want to tell you a beautiful secret: God has given us his Son to dwell in us, not only during the time when we communicate in his body and his blood, but still more in every moment of our lives.*

Basing himself on St. Paul's teaching– "Jesus Christ dwells in us by faith" (Eph. 3: 17)–a real revelation which stamped the whole of his personal experience– Olier makes the exercise of this faith, in the life of prayer, the supreme way of communicating constantly in the grace of Our Lord.

For him, together with Eucharistic communion of which for him it is in some sense a continuation, prayer is for him "spiritual communion with Jesus Christ, the Son of God." This is why it is truly "the most important activity in the whole Christian life":

> *Through prayer the soul discovers the abundance of the Spirit and the gifts which it has received through the sacrament, and, just as it can be constantly in prayer, it can be in continual communion with Jesus Christ.*

The Only Useful Means for Working at the Interior Life

"Prayer is the only useful means for working at the interior life. There is nothing more pleasing to God than what is done through this intimate union with the divine Spirit, which is perpetual prayer." This conviction, the fruit of his own experience, was not something that he limited himself to stating at the end of his life. Throughout his ministry he was constantly developing a real "science" of Christian prayer, or, more precisely, teaching a complete practical course of formation on prayer, for the use of every Christian.

This spiritual teaching had two essential characteristics: its ambition and its realism. What Olier was putting forward for all of the baptised was nothing less–and this is the ambitious part!–than the suggestion that they should live their whole existence "in a spirit of prayer", in other words to strive for a real state of permanent prayer. But he knew from experience–and here is his realism–that the best means for reaching such a life of prayer is precisely by means of the exercise of prayer, practised assiduously, daily.

To do Everything in a Spirit of Prayer

Commenting on St. Paul's injunction to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thes. 5: 17), Olier states that

> *For Christians, the holy and useful way of prayer does not consist of anything else but performing every action in a spirit of prayer: to perform every action for the glory of God in Our Lord and with Our Lord. That is what St. Paul calls, "living to God in Jesus Christ" (Rom. 6: 11).*

Gospel holiness is indeed that of love, or of "the charity which is given us by the power of the Holy Spirt." Love, which is the driving force of the existence of the whole Church, as it is of every Christian, in the way that "the heart" is the "principle of life which moves and governs everything within us."

Love like this–that "life of the Holy Spirit" –is the sole source of "religion" in its apostolic dimension, as it is in its contemplative dimension.

It is holy charity which has opened the eyes of contemplation of all the faithful servants of God to love him as much as they like and to praise and adore his admirable beauties. It is charity which sets in motion the hands of all the ministers of God who do spiritual and temporal good in the Church.

So it is that it is in this love that every Christian is called to "be born," to "grow" and to "reach perfection." "But where can birth, growth and perfection of love be found," asks Olier, if not precisely in prayer?

Charity is born in the bosom of prayer, charity grows in its arms, the same charity reaches its term and is perfected under the guidance of holy prayer.

For Olier, in fact, it belongs to Christian prayer to bring about, on the level of faith, the union of the soul with God in detachment from itself:

> *Prayer attracts God to us, makes us one with him, keeps us close to him and also fills us with him, keeps us forever in his presence.*

Better still, it "transforms us into him" by making us share in his own "divine qualities." This union is so close that Olier compares it to a "spiritual marriage" of the Christian soul with Christ. "The secret" of this mysterious communion remains as "hidden" from us as "that of the life of the Father in the Son and of the Son in the Father."

And the result of such a communion in the mystery of Christ is ultimately nothing less than a sharing in the very life of the Trinity: "We enter into the power of the Father, into the splendour of the Son and into the ardour of the Holy Spirit."

The assiduous practice of prayer

"The best means which gives the greatest entry into prayer," understood as a real state of communion with the mystery of Jesus, permanently lived, "is the very practice of prayer and working assiduously at it."

So Olier recommends the frequent, and if possible, regular practice of prayer, for example by asking the members of the seminary community of Saint-Sulpice "to practise it at least twice a day." Better still, he worked to supply his disciples, lay or clerical as well as priests, with the elements of a method capable of helping them to enter fruitfully into this daily exercise of prayer.

But, as a wise and experienced guide, he takes good care not to confuse end and means, and always to subordinate the means to the end. The only true Master of prayer is the Spirit in person, "who leads his children in prayer": entrusting oneself to his sovereign liberty is therefore the most important thing of all. And the only purpose of the method which Olier offers is precisely to foster such an amenability.

A Simple Method

In his 1656 Christian Catechism for the Interior Life, and then again in 1657 in his Introduction to Life and the Christian Virtues, Olier makes available to a wider public the practical and altogether simple method which he had already very frequently suggested to individuals. He addresses it to whoever desires to commit themselves to the paths of mental prayer, but especially to the beginner, in the hope that it "will greatly help this daily exercise."

"When you want to begin your prayer, the first thing you need to do is to renounce yourself," because only "if we are empty of ourselves" can we "draw Jesus Christ in." For him, this is the absolutely indispensable preliminary. It is necessary:

> *to present ourselves to Our Lord like poor beggar, stripped of everything but sighing for our perfection.*

By this means prayer will simply consist "of having Our Lord" by turns "before our eyes, in our heart and in our hands."

Jesus before our eyes. The first stage of prayer is "adoration." For Olier, faithful to the fundamentally religious view of the Christian life, "the first and principal" end of all prayer is "to honour and glorify God." And that, in the person of Jesus, the sole and perfect "Religious" of the Father, who "looks upon us as his temples to ceaselessly magnify him through us, in us and with us." It is "enough" then for us to say "quite simply":

> *My Lord Jesus Christ who are my praise, I take pleasure and I rejoice in all the praises which you give to God your Father, I unite and give myself to you to adore him and to pray to him through you and with you.*

Or, better, that we should remain:

> or some time in silence before him, with these same dispositions and "religious" feelings in the depths of our soul.

Jesus in our hearts–thus to enter into the very adoration of Jesus of his Father, is to come into "communion" with him, which is the second stage and, as it were, the heart of mental prayer. "Spiritual communion" in the strong sense of the word, to the extent that, as Olier explains, the sharing in his own gifts that God grants us, depends here "solely on the intimate working of his Spirit." Therefore it is a matter of "sighing for this divine Spirit," of:

> calling insistently upon him by all the endearments of love, to please come into our soul, to make us, to conform us to Jesus Christ, to give us to him to be possessed by him and be enlivened with his power.

Ultimately and very simply it boils down to "dwelling in silence with him," humbly and trustfully awaiting his "divine anointing." Such a union is in no way a matter of the "imagination" or of "perceptible lights:" on the contrary, Olier often insists, we must be "content with simple faith and charity alone, without wanting to feel anything else."

> The soul (in prayer) should keep itself in rest and silence in order to receive the whole range of God's gifts and communications, without wishing to act of itself nor to make efforts which would disturb the pure and holy workings of the Spirit within her.

Jesus in the hands. In the last stage of prayer it remains only to harvest the entirely gratuitous "fruit" of that "spiritual communion with Jesus Christ." Rather than talk of "resolutions" which would then have to be made, Olier prefers "more correctly" to call this stage "cooperation," which, he makes clear, "extends throughout the day," According to him, this is a word which makes clear

> more precisely the power of the Holy Spirit, on which we depend much more in good works than on our will.

He states firmly that it "could do nothing" were it not strengthened by the "efficacious power of the Spirit." Much better, ultimately, than "good resolutions" and looking out for "opportunities to carry them out during the day," what counts is:

> to conclude your prayer by letting go and a total self-abandonment to the Holy Spirit, who will be our light, our love and our energy.

A Flexible Method

Far from being a rigid framework likely to limit our freedom in prayer, and, more importantly, that of the Spirit who prays in us, such a method is clearly designed with the sole aim of allowing that freedom to develop without any obstacle.

So whenever necessary its place is to withdraw: "I do not send you any method of prayer," Olier writes to one of those whom he is directing, "because it would be useless to you now."

If meditation, with all its tiresome application of the intellect, may be of help to beginners, it is never more than a means to open them up to the free gift of a true contemplation.

Olier wrote to one of his spiritual daughters:

> The method which I have set out for you consists of simply being lifted up to God obscurely present and in awaiting what he will give you. Wait till the Spirit of God interiorly touches and strikes your own with his ray, and he will point out his will to you, making it known to you on what he wants you to concentrate in prayer.

And he sets on guard against the temptations which often lie in wait for the Christian on the path of mental prayer. What is primarily to be avoided, in seeking to bind oneself too tightly to a method, "is to overheat the head by a too lively and too ardent application to the subjects of prayer," at the risk of forgetting the essential.

> Provided that your soul gazes at God and occupies itself with him, that is enough for a good prayer. The simplest is always the best.

But one who commits to the paths of prayer must still more carefully guard against "the quest for spiritual tastes and consolations." "The longer I go on, the more I am convinced." Olier writes again, in one of his letters of direction:

> that the true and holy way of prayer of faithful souls is naked faith, shorn of every personal view and every feeling. It is the prayer of pure love and true disinterestedness, which drives out all self-love, and which makes the solid power of the Spirit of Jesus grow in us.

This is so true that, for him, "Jesus is himself more precious and more to be esteemed than all his gifts."

To do All in Our Lord

Attentive to guide souls on the path of mental prayer, Olier never forgets that, if it is to be truly Christian, the whole of life must be lived in a spirit of prayer, that is to say, in permanent and intimate union with Jesus in the grace of his Spirit:

> We must do all in the person of Our Lord, as his members, as united to him, as forming one whole with him, as being clothed with him. We should even give ourselves to him to do everything through his Spirit in his holy power. Thus when you drink, when you eat, when you sleep, as well as when you pray or when you do anything else, always do it in this way, acting with the maxims, the dispositions, in the powers and in the very Spirit of Our Lord.

So, just as much as in the method of prayer, Olier concerns himself over the link between prayer and life.

Never let yourself be drawn away from Jesus

Finally, he draws attention to the triple loss of increase and growth which arises "when we interrupt the interior prayer of our heart," to which we expose God himself, the Church and Jesus Christ and "our soul first of all."

Loss of increase for God, primarily, who "sees himself frustrated of his Kingdom and of his life" in us.

> Whoever interrupts prayer and recollection, whoever withdraws from and separates himself from God who possesses and fills him prevents the divine Majesty from reigning fully in his Son in us.

Loss of growth for the Church, finally, which is as it were, paralysed in its development.

> Further, by that we prevent the perfection of Jesus Christ and the realisation of his mystical Body, which cannot be perfected in the Church except by this communion of life with which he is completely full and which He must infuse into his members.

A loss of growth, finally, for the soul itself, which deprives itself of the nourishment indispensable for its growth.

> Just as we offend God by snatching the bread from our brother's mouth, we offend him a great deal more in snatching its heavenly and supersubstantial bread from our soul, which God calls "daily" bread in order to remind us that it is necessary to nourish ourselves with it every day.

And Olier emphasises just how "necessary it is to be watchful and faithful, so as never to allow ourselves to be distracted from and withdrawn from Jesus interiorly."

To make a holy preparation for prayer

Therefore he invites us first of all careful to "prepare" for prayer.

> What needs above all to be done is to make a holy preparation for prayer, in order to find there the abundance of the Holy Spirit.

And still more than the immediate preparation, he reckons that "the most important" is "the preparation of the whole life, which is called, 'remote preparation'."

> It is that which disposes the soul after long and hard work to receive the gifts of God and to put it into a state to make its duties pleasing to him.

What does this mean? It is a matter of "neither thinking nor doing anything" which might turn us away from the fundamental direction of our whole life towards God and for him, whether this be:

> immoderate care for our bodies out of self-love pointless amusement of spirit when in company without desire to procure the glory of God; or again, the interior attachment to honour and vanity.

Positively speaking, "it is necessary to have great purity of heart, serenity and freedom of spirit," to such an extent that all our "practices," "worship of God," or "service of neighbour" serve to "keep our soul in the presence of God." The habitual feeling of this presence to God "is one of the most helpful and necessary things for preparing our soul for prayer."

And Olier concludes:

> Take it as certain truth that in proportion as you grow in death and separation of yourself from every creature, to that extent you will grow in God and will have the fulness of his Spirit.

Mother and Daughter of the Life of God

"Prayer is the mother and daughter of the life of God in us." By expressing himself in this way, Olier is primarily setting forth his conviction that the best way of preparing "beforehand" comes down "to cultivating" the divine life which, by the grace of baptism "the Holy Spirit has established in us," as though "in germ." And that he himself takes the responsibility for making it grow.

"The first actions of the Spirit in the soul of the baptised in which he spreads "his divine light," are indeed to arouse and develop in her the "desire" for "the excellence of God and his life." They cause it "constantly to sigh and ask the fulfilment and perfection" of this divine life. Prepared for in this way by the dynamism of baptismal grace, the practice of mental prayer is "daughter of the Spirit."

But, "since God never fails to fulfil his promise of giving his Kingdom to those who ask for it," it is by means of this practice that "we can observe growth in the life of God and all his gifts in proportion to the ardour and assiduity of prayer." And hence prayer "itself becomes the mother," thanks to which "the fecundity of the life of the Spirit and of its divine fruits" will unfold in the whole life.

Olier does not fail to remind his readers of the demands which go together with this influence of prayer on the whole of daily existence: above and beyond the time devoted to mental prayer in the morning, it is necessary to strive to "cooperate throughout the day" with the "grace obtained in prayer," as he writes to one of his disciples. And to a religious sister whose adviser he was, he laid down several concrete means to use in order to progress in the humility and poverty which she was making the object of her prayer.

> You would do well to make your reading fit in with your prayers, in which you sigh for these virtues. You should also, throughout the day, repeat your demands for these virtues by ejaculatory prayers: outside prayer you should carefully maintain the feelings, thoughts and movements which you have received. You will take care not to dissipate (yourself) immediately afterwards in exterior concerns and to give yourself entirely to them throughout the day. Furthermore, you should practise externally what you feel within.

Let the Spirit of God Act

Active though "cooperation" should be, without which prayer would be unable to bear its fruits in the Christian life as a whole, it consists no less in "letting the Spirit of God act," all day long, just as at the precise time of morning prayer: "not to hinder it in the slightest, that is the only thing we have to do," Olier states in his Journal, speaking from his own experience.

On certain occasions he had been given an experience, in amazement of faith, of reading the tangible signs of the fecundity of that abandonment to the Spirit, fruit of his daily fidelity to prayer. Thus, after years of study during which he had remained "in ignorance of the Scripture," it was "while praying" that the light came to him to enable him progressively to enter into spiritual understanding of the Word of God:

> One day, as I was praying to God, a ray of light pierced my spirit, as though passing through my darkness and opening up my mind and spirit. From then on, I began to hear it, and through it I gained a great ease, which since then has constantly grown.

Again, it was in prayer that he states he found, at the very heart of the most intimate union with Jesus, the inspirations for his pastoral initiatives by which to organise the parish apostolate as parish priest of Saint-Sulpice.

In God's plans, not in ours

Very often, however, Olier emphasised the "secret" character of this spiritual effectiveness of prayer in his life, "imperceptible" even to those who benefitted from it. This is how he wrote to one of his parishioners:

> Prayer will be your strength and the holy power of your soul, even though it will not always be its solace and consolation. Prayer works in us according to God's plans, not ours. The secret and imperceptible power of the Spirit is poured out in us according to our needs, without making itself known.

And in his spiritual teaching to the seminary's clerics, he insists on the importance of following "the leading of faith": the light of faith that the Holy Spirit sheds in souls, letting them know their duty and obligation so that they may be content with this common inspiration, without always demanding miracles, marvels, extraordinary lights. What God wants is that we should be content to be led by faith and that we should not seek anything else, neither in the usual course of the Christian life nor in the time of prayer.

To the extent that he advanced in Christian experience, Olier emphasised that in prayer as in daily life, "the soul does not go to God, except for himself": it "does not go either to see, nor to taste, nor to feel," but simply and solely to:

> ***"give itself to God, so that he may work in it what he wills, so as there to be clothed with God, but for God alone. And, in him, to live divinely in the practice and exercise of heroic virtue.***

Christ Dwells by Faith in our Hearts

If Olier, a master of prayer and master of Christian living, in this way commits his disciples to follow "the leading of faith," it is because he never forgot the decisive lesson he received from the lips of Father de Condren. Having become his spiritual director the year before, he had encouraged him to "abandon himself to the Spirit of God" during his retreat of 1636. Then it was that Olier heard himself interiorly addressed by Jesus, "I am really present to souls." Astonished by this "truth" which he admitted he had never truly realised before then, he went and opened his heart about this to his director.

"That is true, our Lord is really present to souls," Condren replied to him, basing himself on St. Paul's affirmation, "Christ dwells by faith in your hearts" (Eph. 3: 17). "By faith: that is to say that faith is the principle of his indwelling; and his divine Spirit forms him with his virtues."

He invited Olier to draw from this the spiritual conclusion which would be decisive for his whole Christian life, as also for his prayer:

> Since this is so, you should henceforward unite all your works to the Son of God, in one of the following three ways: either by feeling, or by disposition, or by faith alone. If you have the feeling of Christ present, unite yourself to him by feeling. If you have no feeling, unite yourself to him by dispositions, that is to say, try to have in yourself the same thoughts and dispositions that he had in performing the same works.
>
> And when you have no idea of his dispositions and you cannot even form them in your soul, unite yourself by faith alone, in other words in spirit join your works to those of the Son of God and so offer them to God with your own.

That was indeed the secret by which Olier lived in his own life of prayer, and which he passes on to us, so that we may walk in his footsteps on the paths of prayer.

Gilles Chaillot, pss

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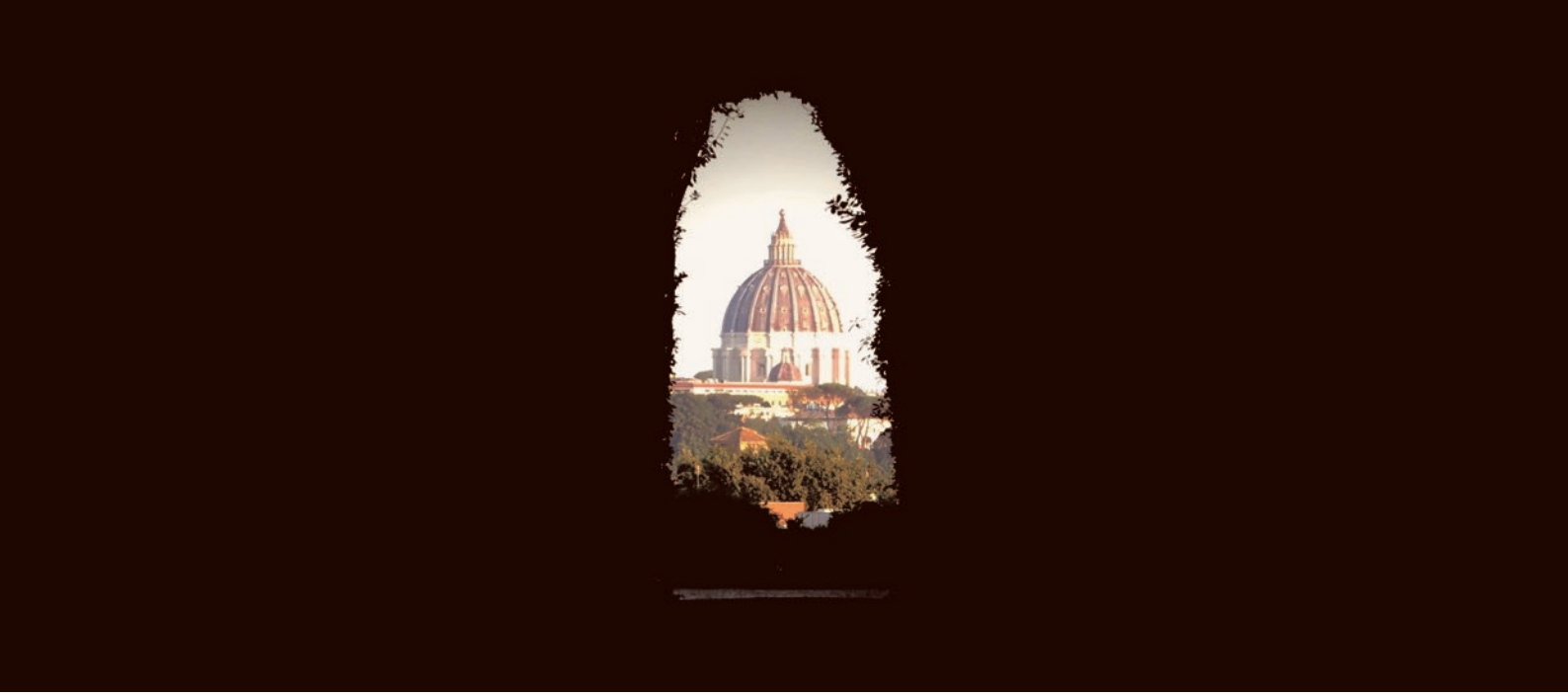
Translated by Giles Conacher, OSB, Monk of Pluscarden Abbey



THE FIFTH WORLD OBLATES' CONGRESS

A Report by Rev. Leonie Gaffel

September 2023 found me in Rome attending the Fifth World Congress of Benedictine Oblates. I had been to the Fourth Congress in 2017 (they are usually held every four years, but this one was postponed for reasons I probably don't need to mention), and was eagerly looking forward to what the week would bring. Held this time at Sant' Anselmo Monastery in the centre of Rome, the home of Abbot Primate Gregory Polan, and the curial headquarters of the Benedictine Confederation, the Congress drew over 150 Oblates from twenty-five countries for a week of Ora et Labora.

Our days in the monastery alternated with days out of it. On our 'in' days we attended workshops, heard from our guest speakers and discovered Islands of Silence. On our 'out' days we visited Monte Cassino Abbey for a tour, Mass in the Abbey and lunch in the Refectory, Subiaco to see the cave where St Benedict spent three years of his life as a young man and, on our final day, we were invited to the Vatican Palace for a private audience with Pope Francis. All covered by Morning and Evening Prayer and daily Mass.

The ninety-six words I have just written in the paragraph above give a very stark outline of what was a truly amazing week filled with many wise words, new friendships, and an inspiring sense of Benedictine hospitality and collegiality. Having had time for reflection since returning home, I find that three words represent much of what heartened and challenged me over the week. Those words are words, language and silence.

Firstly, words. It may not surprise you to hear that there were a lot of words! Formal words from our guest speakers and the informal words of sheer delight in being together, sharing stories of Benedictine life in places as diverse as Tanzania and Poland. It is amazing that we only had to be reminded once that breakfast was to be taken in silence!

The formal words of our guest speakers each revolved around a different focus. Sr Marie- Madeleine Caseau, Prioress of Saint Bathilde of Vanves, France, spoke on exploring formation needs for the future in a talk she entitled Evangelisation by pollination. She implored us to 'be our own bee' in the ways we take the nectar and pollen of our Bible, The Rule, the Church Fathers and Mothers and our traditions into our 'hive', our communities, to supply rich honey for the world. I am still pondering her breakdown of the word formation, where she spoke of our need to know and acknowledge our former self, which has made us into the form we have today, before we can move into formation for the future.

Abbot Donato Ogliari, Abbot of St Paul Outside the Walls Abbey in Rome, looked at ways of Living out our oblate calling in the 21st Century. He reminded us that the value, the rightness and the truth of the work we do, whatever work we do, lies in the doing of the work itself in a sense of calm belonging to God, even when (or perhaps especially when) the results aren't what we hope. While he was sharing about the value of our work with those in need, I wrote large in my notes his words 'The church tent (as opposed to the church palace)', and I find myself wondering about the ways we (or I) try to make our church (or our faith, or even our lives) a palace, wishing like David to build a solid structure to contain a God who would rather the freedom of a tent. Encouraging us to be 'the holiness next door', Abbot Donato prompted us to consider all our time as within the dimension of time in Christ.

The Abbot Primate, Gregory Polan, addressed the question of how we assist in Expanding the mission of the monasteries we serve, with a focus on the importance of hospitality as a means of reconciliation in our troubled world. Acknowledging that being an instrument of reconciliation may not always 'feel good', yet it is the surrendering of our feelings to God that is our Oblation, our offering of kindness and welcome. Abbot Gregory cited the Gospel of stories of people being invited to 'come and see' Jesus, and hoped that when we too invite people into our Christian lives and monastic communities to 'come and see' that what they 'see' is our joy in following Jesus, and how we love one another. Pope Francis too spoke of Benedictine hospitality, calling us to be 'models of welcome with regard to whoever knocks at your door, and models in preferential love for the poor'. Nowadays we need this as much as we need air..[for]..our society is slowly suffocating in the locked vaults of selfishness, individualism and indifference.'

Language. I live in Logan, south of Brisbane, a city that has roughly 207 first languages. The sounds of the world surround my days although I am well aware that I belong to the governing language group, and therefore understanding that world around me is easier than it is for many. This is not always the case when you attend an International Congress in a foreign country!

Cloister, Monte Cassino Abbey

Steps up to Sacro Speco, Subiaco

Sr Marie-Madeleine's address was delivered in French, and we listened along through headphones as the English translator sometimes struggled to keep up. (I pause to wonder – does 'be your own bee' sound as good in French? Perhaps a question for Google translate some day). Pope Francis spoke to us in Italian, and although we were handed an English translation before he arrived, he often went off script to the joy of the Italian speakers amongst us but leaving the rest of us itching to know what he said. Mass was celebrated each day in a different language, and so only once in English. The Psalms were prayed always in Latin, as is the monastery's custom for, as the Prior told me on a previous visit, the monks and students of Sant' Anselmo come from all over the world, and Latin is the one language they all equally struggle with.

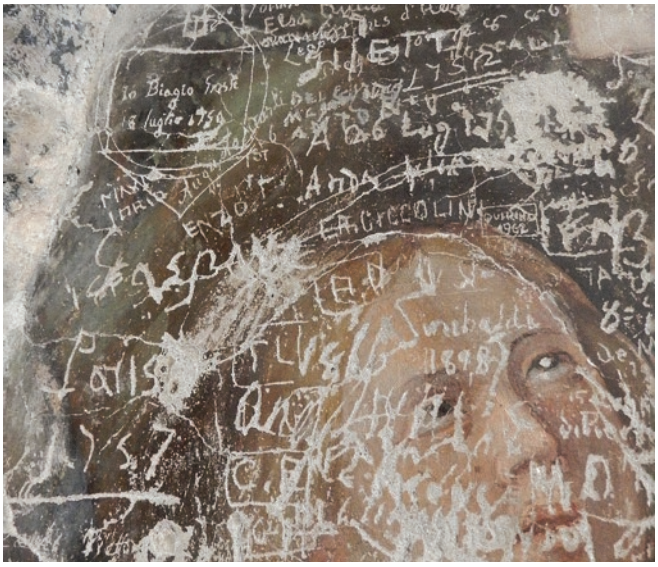
Being present on these occasions required real concentration, and at times was very hard. I longed for a psalm or a prayer that I could understand as I prayed it, and at times I resorted to silence as I simply let the sounds wash over me. And yet... there was a sense of peace in that, in letting what I knew to be the prayers and the psalms flow around me. The sharing of Communion was still the sharing of Communion – even if the words were French, or German, or Spanish. There were also times of real joy as we struggled to communicate across the language divides, and through strong accents, determined with grace, and perseverance, to forge bonds of community and to hear the other's story.

It was a humbling experience and I continue to reflect on what 'welcome' and 'hospitality' looks like across language and cultural barriers. I wonder how hard it must be for those who sit within our churches each week, never again hearing worship in their heart language. Connecting across the barriers may take more time and effort but, during this week, it was always worth it and I'm seeking, with God's help, to keep at it in my own community.

It may seem that with all the words and the languages there was little time for silence. But this is not true. Silence played an important part in my week. Each day started with a very early morning walk from the convent where I slept to the monastery where we met, through a sleepy, mostly quiet, Rome. In contrast with the heat of the day, these cool early morning times were precious and welcome. As a group there was the unplanned, awe-filled silence of over 150 people waiting in a Vatican Palace reception room for His Holiness to arrive, the semi-structured silence of our (mostly) silent breakfasts, and structured times as we participated in Islands of Silence. During these Islands, we watched the documentary 'In Pursuit of Silence', which I would highly recommend, we looked at Silence in the Rule of St. Benedict, explored contemplative prayer, and how to practise prayerful silence. Abbot Donato had told us 'where silence breathes, prayer speaks', and our Islands also contained times of silence, prayer, and meditation.

I like silence – by which I mean specifically silence from the noise of humanity and technology – the sound of the wind whistling around New Norcia as I write this is not for me noise. We pondered on this – when is it that sound becomes noise? Is all sound good and all noise bad – can the same thing be both sound and noise? Two reminders that I keep returning to - silence is to be explored, not explained – and – if no-one is talking, no-one is dominating. The second one seems particularly pertinent in our world today, and encourages me to think twice about the value of the words I use to break the silence.

My memories of this week go far beyond what I've written here, but I hope that these words in some way reflect the spirit of that time. When Sant' Anselmo invited us to 'come and see' with them, we did indeed see much joy. For that I feel truly blessed.



Graffiti on fresco, Sacro Speco, Subiaco

Dinner in the Refectory, Sant' Anselmo

CODEX BENEDICTUS

David Barry, OSB

The New Norcia monastery library holdings include a few facsimile editions of some quite important ancient manuscripts. Chief among these is the one known as the Codex Vaticanus, one of the four most important surviving more or less complete copies of the Greek text of the Bible (New Testament and Septuagint Old Testament) dating from the mid-fourth century AD. The facsimile, in six solid volumes, was produced in Rome between 1868 and 1881, under the auspices of Pope Pius IX (+1878) and his successor, Leo XIII (+1903). In the monastery's collection of facsimiles, a close second in importance to the Vaticanus, this time in connection with the Latin Rite of the Church's liturgy, is the 1975 facsimile of the Gelasian Sacramentary (Sacramentarium Gelasianum). This facsimile, presented to the Benedictine community of New Norcia by Cardinal James Knox in July 1980, reproduced a mid-eighth-century manuscript copy from Merovingian France of the fifth-century sacramentary containing the texts used in Rome by ordinary priests for celebrating the Eucharist, central to which was the Roman Canon (now also known as Eucharistic Prayer I). One clue to the French origin of the manuscript is the inclusion of French saints in the lists of saints before and after the consecration.

One facsimile that has begun to receive more attention in the monastic community recently, after having, to all intents and purposes, 'gone missing' for more than a decade, is what is now known as the Codex Benedictus. The facsimile dates from 1981, with its companion German-language introductory volume from Belser Verlag, Zurich, and from 1982, with its companion English-language introductory volume from Johnson Reprint Corporation, New York, while the original is most likely from 1072. Of the three facsimiles mentioned so far, it is the most beautiful and ornate. The German and English introductory volumes are independent of each other, except that the title page verso of the English work informs us: 'The "Codicological Introduction to the Manuscript Vaticanus Latinus 1202" is a translation in large part of the "Kodokologische Einführung" by Louis Duval-Arnould and Agostino Paravicini Bagliani from the German volume.' Practically all of what follows here is drawn from the English volume, cited as CBIV (= Codex Benedictus Introductory Volume).

The Preface by Herbert Bloch of Harvard University (CBIV 7-9) begins with the consecration of the basilica of Monte Cassino by Pope St Paul VI on 24 October 1964, rebuilt following its destruction by Allied bombing on 15 February 1944. On the occasion, Paul VI proclaimed St Benedict Patron of Europe. Then follows a brief summary of St Benedict's life, for which we are heavily dependent on the second book of the Dialogues of Pope St Gregory the Great. This recounts the establishment of the monastery of Monte Cassino and the writing of the Rule, as well as many miracles attributed to the saint. Monte Cassino and its history then becomes the focus of the preface, culminating in the fifteen hundredth anniversary in 1980 of the birth of St Benedict, appropriately celebrated by the publishing of the facsimile of one of the most illustrious and artistic lectionaries produced at Monte Cassino several centuries earlier and held in the Vatican library since the 15th century, named Vat. Lat. 1202, and now to be known as CODEX BENEDICTUS.

There follow five scholarly essays (CBIV 11-91) and two poems (CBIV 92-100), one of them in praise of Abbot Desiderius, the Abbot of Monte Cassino when the earlier abbey church was rebuilt and replaced with the more grandiose basilica, begun in 1066, which when completed was dedicated in 1071 by Pope Alexander II. It was completely destroyed by an earthquake in 1349. The second poem is one by Desiderius himself in honour of one of Benedict's most famous disciples, St Maurus.

The first essay, 'The Historical Setting and Significance of the Codex Benedictus', by Paul Meyvaert, tells us of the origins and use of the Codex, and the lives of St Benedict, St Maurus and St Scholastica.

The second essay, 'Codicological Introduction to the Manuscript Vaticanus Latinus 1202', by Louis Duval-Arnould and Agostino Paravicini Bagliani (CBIV 23-28), is, as mentioned earlier, a translation in large part of the Kodokologische Einführung prepared for the German-language introduction. It is succinct but informative as to the contents, composition and history of the manuscript. The section on contents can be particularly useful for those who have not the time or the background needed for gaining an appreciation of the riches of the manuscript on their own, so the details are given here in their bare essentials (CBIV 23-24):

The Feast of St Benedict (21 March): The Feast at the time had a Vigil and an Octave. The Night Office for the Vigil has readings from a Sermon of St Peter Damian (1007-72) and a Sermon of Lawrence, monk of Monte Cassino, Archbishop of Amalfi (died c.1050), with 13 folios: 3r-16r. The Feast itself has a series of readings from Pope Gregory's Dialogues, Book II, containing the life and miracles of St Benedict, with 70 folios: 16v-86v. The Octave has verses on St Benedict's miracles, with a prose prologue and epilogue by Paul the Deacon, an 8th-cent. monk of Monte Cassino, with 7 folios 86r-92v; verses on St Benedict by Marcus, a pilgrim poet and visitor at Monte Cassino (8th cent.), with 3 folios: 92v-94v; verses on St Benedict by Bertharius, abbot of Monte Cassino (856-83), with 5 folios: 94v-98v; Homily on Luke 11:33 with a prologue, by Paul the Deacon, with 9 folios, 100r-108r.

The Feast of St Maurus (15 January): (Pseudo-Faustus) Life of Maurus by Odo of Glanfeuil, with 67 folios, 109r-175r; verses on St Maurus by Desiderius of Monte Cassino, with 5 folios: 175v-179v; The Miracles of St Maurus by Odo of Glanfeuil, with 28 folios: 180r-207r.

The Feast of St Scholastica (10 February): Homily on Matthew 13:45 by Bertharius, abbot of Monte Cassino, with 23 folios: 209r-231r; Life of St Scholastica by Alberic, monk of Monte Cassino (died c.1105), with 14 folios: 231r-244r; Homily on Matthew 25:1 by Alberic of Monte Cassino, with 16 folios: 244v-259r; verses on the life of St Scholastica by Alberic of Monte Cassino, with 4 folios: 259v-262r. There are also captions accompanying the portrait of Abbot Desiderius and the illustrations for the Life of St Benedict and the Life of St Maurus, composed in leonine hexameters and plausibly attributed to Alphanus, Archbishop of Salerno.

The third essay, 'The Script and the Scribe of the Codex Benedictus', by Paul Meyvaert (CBIV 29-32), distinguishes the Codex's script as distinctly Beneventan (from Benevento), one of the most enduring of the various cursive writing styles current in Western Europe from the early till the late Middle Ages, and one of the few that survived the sweeping changes introduced in the time of Charlemagne, when the Carolingian or Caroline script replaced many others. Experts assert that the script of our Codex represents 'the summit of achievement attained in this script'.

The manuscript came from the scriptorium of Monte Cassino, which is located in the Campania region of Italy between Rome and Naples. Abbot Desiderius (1058-87) completed the lavish rebuilding of the monastery church, on which he employed highly skilled stonemasons and artists from Constantinople, assisted by young monks from the Abbey whose knowledge and skills were greatly enhanced by observing their mentors and working with them and under their supervision. Building and masonry skills in large parts of Italy had been severely impacted as a result of the intermittent wars that raged on the Italian peninsula for some centuries following the decline of the Roman empire in the 5th century, itself a fluctuating process. Liturgical items, including books for Mass and the Divine Offices celebrated in the church should match it in magnificence, Desiderius believed. Hence his commissioning of various codices, among which the Codex Benedictus stands out.

The fourth essay, 'Art-Historical Introduction to the Codex Benedictus', by Penelope Mayo (CBIV 33-57), is superbly written and is masterly in its scope and detail. Mayo speaks first of the aesthetic experience of the art historian who has the good fortune to leaf through the original manuscript in the Vatican Library or its splendid facsimile.

She likens it to that of the mediaeval artistic person captivated by the beauty of the finished product and marvelling at the skill both of the scribes as revealed in the evenness and legibility of the text, and of the artists who contributed the illustrations based on incidents in the life of St Benedict and St Scholastica, and those whose specialty was the ornamentation of capital letters, some of which occupy a full page. The 'perceptual intoxication' of the mediaeval and the modern connoisseur 'is quickly followed by a cognitive response; the object, even if unique, must be placed within a comprehensible framework.' That is what Mayo proceeds to do, with the deftness of someone who has really mastered the subject. The framework comprises comparing and contrasting the writing style and the text, and similar attention to the illustrations as regards details of composition, colour and shading with those found in earlier, contemporary or later manuscripts. All this is applied to extant manuscripts that originated in the scriptorium at Monte Cassino or that found their way there by way of donation or purchase, these latter in turn originating either in German workshops or those in or influenced by Byzantine styles emanating from Constantinople, which was at the height of its artistic and architectural prowess in the 11th and 12th centuries AD.

The learning displayed in the third and fourth essays is applied in a skilful and practical way in the fifth and final essay of the introductory volume, 'The Illustrations, Captions and Full-page Initials of the Codex Benedictus', a collaborative work by the writers of the two preceding essays, Penelope Mayo and Paul Meyvaert (CBIV 59-91), each bringing their specialist knowledge to the work in hand. For someone who is mainly interested in gaining an appreciation of the visual beauty of the manuscript, this would probably be the most consulted essay in the volume. There are two introductory illustrations – one showing Desiderius presenting the Codex to St Benedict, the other to introduce St Peter Damian's homily on St Benedict (CBIV 59-60), and then approximately twenty-one illustrations for the life of St Benedict, with eighteen large pages of the introductory volume devoted to describing in detail the artistic features of each illustration identified by the folio number (CBIV 60-79). There follow the illustrations for the life of St Maurus numbering approximately nineteen, with ten pages of exposition, a full-page initial introducing a poem by Desiderius in honour of St Maurus, a full-page initial introducing St Bertharius' homily for St Scholastica, and finally, an initial T marks the introduction of Alberic's Life of St Scholastica, and an initial S the beginning of his poem celebrating the same saint (CBIV 79-89).

As mentioned earlier, the introductory volume concludes with the Latin text of 'A Poem in Praise of Abbot Desiderius' from the first pages of the Codex, with an English translation of the same (CBIV 92-95), and the Latin text of 'Verses on St Maurus by Abbot Desiderius' from the final pages of the Codex (CBIV 97-100).

Being a scholarly work, the introductory volume has a bibliography to round things off, covering Textual Editions, Codicology, Architecture and General Decorative Program, and Byzantine Art in the Eleventh Century (CBIV 101-104). The usefulness of the volume would, I think, have been enhanced by the inclusion of a subject index.

A LIFE OF PRAYER

Michael Casey, OCSO

Looking back over a long monastic career, I note that many of my perceptions of it have changed. And while it is true that my formula to describe the role of contemplative monasticism in the Church has contained the same basic elements over the years, I think that it is also true that I tend to highlight different values according to where I am at a particular time.

At the moment, what seems important to me about the lifestyle which is termed "contemplative" is that for some people it is an essential element in their continuing growth. Not merely spiritual growth, but their development as persons and individuals. I don't know why this is so, but it seems to me a fact that certain people best realise their full potential within the monastic environment. I am not suggesting that such individuals constitute an elite. It is just that their nature and their special call from God are such that monastic life unlocks their specific possibilities both of nature and of grace.

It is not merely an individual choice, made on the basis of a mixed bag of motivations. It is something which necessarily follows from what God has made them and calls them to be. St Bernard of Clairvaux, a 12th-century Cistercian monk, seems to endorse this view that this choice of a disciplined life was not the result of his being a sturdy soul. Rather, it followed from the fact that, being weaker than most, he needed sterner medicine.

Monasticism is, simply, a form of life which brings out the best of a particular range of individuals. If it is true that policies and programmes remain abstract and unproductive of good unless they have the capacity to touch and to change the lives of individuals, then the value of monasticism to the Church is dependent upon whether it is an effective way of assuring the growth of individuals. Monasticism, as an institution, serves the Church because it puts into circulation the creativity of particular individuals which would otherwise have remained latent.

There are, however, many good and intelligent people in the Church who do not have a very accurate idea of monastic life. For instance, there are those who exaggerate its importance and give the impression that merely belonging to a contemplative community signifies a rank of holiness somewhere between the seraphim and cherubim. There are others who dismiss monasticism as essentially irrelevant to the thrust of the contemporary Church: to them, monks are like ecclesiastical magpies, living among the trees, warbling psalms and, at the most, serving a mildly decorative purpose.

There are still people who equate monastic life with an introspective, withdrawn existence, suitable only for strong introverts and for those who can't cope very well or who harbour a fundamental distaste for interaction with the 'real world.'

"Monasticism is, simply, a form of life which brings out the best of a particular range of individuals."

All of this confusion within the Church probably reflects a confusion within monasticism itself. Monks and nuns themselves have not always had a very clear view of the essential character of their vocation, especially during the recent decades of change.

What is monastic life? What makes it specific among the varieties of religious life within the Church?

A Life of Worship

Quite simply, what distinguishes the monastic vocation is the importance it attributes to the worship of God, to meditating on the word of God, and to continuing the practice of prayer and contemplation. This importance is measured not so much by words and theory, but by the fact that each day many hours are given to these activities.

Each day of the year, all the segments of the Liturgy of the Hours are prayed in choir, in circumstances which favour their prayerful celebration. The effect of this is that the whole day is seasoned with prayer and it becomes more feasible to live in a state of mindfulness of God. The simple, austere life which monks lead does not disturb this attention to spiritual reality. Instead community life, wholesome work and the practice of hospitality equip the monk on a practical level for prayerful living and prevent his becoming absorbed in himself.

This commitment to a life of prayer is not merely an individual's choice, but it is the chosen way of the community as a whole. This means that the presence of like-minded brothers supports and sustains the individual monk's vocation. What gives specificity to a monastic community is precisely this dedication to a way of life in which prayer and its supporting activities are paramount. Nothing is given precedence to it.

What can such a life offer to the Church? Certainly, it is an aspect of the following of Christ which must always be present in every Church, even in very new Churches, as Vatican II reminds us.

Certainly, it is a witness and example to the people of God on the importance of prayer and a resource from which they may draw guidance and support. But is there more than this?

There is an important passage at the beginning of the Epistle to the Romans which touches on the central reality of monasticism. It begins thus:

> *Although they knew God, they did not honour Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened.*
>
> Rom 1:21ff

St. Paul then outlines the sequence of steps in the decline both of individuals and societies. God is known but is not given due recognition as the Giver of all good gifts. Progressively, this failure leads to superficiality of mind and an inability to be moved by what is not immediately gratifying.

Space for God

So, people become slaves to their own lusts and appetites and are led into greater and greater aberrations, until they become the playground of every heartless and inhuman vice imaginable. (Cf. Rom 1:24-32) This is the way down. The way up must be its opposite. The way in which we allow the grace of God to win the victory over weakness and vice is allowing ourselves to recognise the gifts of God, and expending our energy on giving thanks. Thanksgiving and praise of God, rising from a heart that has undergone purification, are means by which the image of Christ is restored to us and innocence lost is made good.

We can never love God, St. Bernard teaches, until we come to the realisation that God loves us. Not merely repeating the words, but experiencing the truth for ourselves.

Monasticism aims to create a climate in which people have the opportunity to become so possessed by the reality of God's love that they willingly spend hours in responding to that love, are progressively transformed by it and so, in their own small way, come to express it concretely by their manner of acting.

This ambition to live a life wholly shaped by God's love is not difficult to understand. It is, however, exceedingly difficult to put it into practice, especially since it is not something which is brought to completion in a few months or years. It is a journey that lasts a lifetime. Furthermore, this journey is such that we never quite know what is to be found around the corner. We are constantly being called to go beyond familiar routines and to confront God in the unexpected reverses and demands which life brings. The further we travel, it seems to me, the more unpredictable each new phase becomes. It is a tricky journey, and this is why it is comparatively rare that we can make it alone. We need the guidance and support of other people and of a tradition. It is for this reason that Western monasticism has always understood itself as a search for God, in a community, under a rule and abbot. This way there is some chance not only of seeking God, but also of finding Him.

A monk is one who makes room for God in his life by opening himself to prayer. Allowing himself to be at God's disposal, the decision about how best to serve the coming of the Kingdom is not one that he makes for himself, but one which is left to God's providence and accepted in faith.

Monastic life has never been anything else than ordinary, obscure and laborious. For this reason, it is the sort of life which really only makes sense in the light of eternity.

[1]This article first appeared in The Advocate, April 2, 1987.

SEABIRD

A Monk

A cool gentle breeze
Ocean calling

Long sandy roads
Flanked with banksias spent

Santa on an old farm cart
Sits satisfied
Christmas has passed
The letterboxes are empty now

Locked gates secure passed prayer
Sand dunes lead to silence
An empty shack – to solitude

The old railway car
Yet freshly painted
Carries no passengers now
Their journeys have ended
Her wheels all stilled with axles rusted
She stands gracefully
So still
Save her vents
On rooftop spin
In time with her neighbour – the windmill

House all ready
With windows open
It's heart now beating

The first swim
With violent waves crashing
Releases passed hurt
Washes away passed anger
Those foaming salt waters heal old wounds
The wind – old memories

Sunset in sky of grey, pink and green of painter's palette
Competes with rising moon

Kangaroos with young
Cast their contemplative gaze over sunlit waters
At one with God
Supper my chore
A pot of tea, my friend
Flickering candles, my companions

The light of Christ

The stillness of ocean night
Waves attempt to express the inexpressible
Those roaring waves soothe the soul

Crabs at the back door, like mice
Scuttle off into the dark of night

Psalms come alive in yet another way
Seemingly void of human emotion
They proclaim the simple rhythm of life...

"From the rising of the sun to its setting"

"Like an eagle watching its nest"

"And rabbits hide in the rocks"

"The immensity of waters...the roaring of its waves"

Like some ancient Celtic monk
Seabird is my *Skellig*
This humble shack, my *rocky cell*

Pan endowed with morsels of the Mediterranean
Sizzles to the sound of Mozart
Wine glistening red
Catches the evening sun

A lone seabird flutters
Glides gracefully
Then three
Through purple Lenten sky
Past sun of passion red
Fading into a mingling horizon
Of hungry aching ocean...that deep sea of blue
And endless sky

Like the mighty arms of God
This vast ocean envelops them all
Those sorrows
Its waves shall wash away those tears
Silent prayer in a world of another thousand years
Another day spent
The God of the sun hides his face
Only to soften the darkness of my house
With the glow of early moon

"Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit"

Rising sun kisses the contours of summer scrub
Like soft cushions
Bejewelled here and there with wild flowers
On loan from spring

The recorded voice of my friend, the monk
Proclaims his message
Through the howling wind
In the midst of the night

"Humanity
Humility
Humour...virtues to sustain the 'daily-ness' of life"

Breaking her shoreline path
The seabird tilts her wing

Towards my seat of prayer
Hovering above
Against the wind
Yet supporting her
Like a messenger from God
She honours my presence
Our presence
In the beauty of things

Into eternity grey she glides

Like shining white gold
The sun sets once more
Over sea of silver ripples

My friend the lizard
In new day
From roof top niche
Ventures out
To inspect all manner of things

The pen, an instrument in the craft of love
On blank paper, my heart
Writes letters to friends
To show I care

The words of another book
Become dark once more
Their revelation to be remembered
Or forgotten
Or like distant friends
Will appear from the storerooms of my mind, my heart
To reveal

"Things both new and old"

The night is very long
For '*Sebastian*' the fox
My gift he accepts
With humbled tail
The morning reveals
His footprints in the sand
Like a friend still hesitant
He dared to come much closer

O cloudy sky
You promise no sunset
Yet with steadfast spirit
I stay
I watch
I pray

O God of surprises
You offer your brilliance
Transforming that grey of waiting
Into cascading sky of blue...red...gold
Over fathomless rich ocean of purple
So brilliant
So radiant
So Divine

And in a moment of eternity's length
Even the waves are stilled
In silent reverence
Paying homage
To the Beauty, the Grandeur
The touch of God

Colour fades
Save one last splash of red
One last streak of silver
Etched upon my heart
I return to my shack
To light the candles once more

As if beauty received
Is not sufficient
My house now arched
With rainbow of crystal colours
In perfect harmony, perfect unity

"O where can I flee"?

Surrounded, I cannot escape
God's giving
God's giving once more

In the sacrament of the present moment
Questions of mortality, immortality, fade
Why bother with heaven?

The frailty of my human condition
I cannot respond
Only thanksgiving
Only praise
Only worship

Only silence

"O Dark Night"

With book in hand
Drinking words
From the fountain of God
Out of the darkness
Rain, like soft death
Falls on the tin roof of my hut
To refresh my heart

So heavy with God

“And let them first pray together, that so they may associate in peace.”

- St Benedict

The whole life of a good Christian is a holy desire. What you desire you cannot see yet. But the desire gives you the capacity, so that when it does happen that you see, you may be fulfilled. . . [B]y delaying the fulfilment of desire God stretches it, by making us desire he expands the soul, and by this expansion he increases its capacity.

- St Augustine On the First Letter of John.

ST VERDIANA OF FLORENCE
THE SERPENT MAIDEN

Translated by Fr. Robert Nixon, OSB

The story below is a translation of the touching and beautiful life of St. Verdiana of Florence, an Italian Benedictine anchorite of the 12-13th centuries. She was born in Castelfiorentino, a village in the diocese of Florence, and sought God through prayer and solitude, living most of her life in an enclosed cell attached to a church. Yet she had some rather curious companions who shared her eremitic lodgings—namely two large serpents. The text below is a translation (with minor abridgements) of a biography of her, reproduced in the Acta Sanctorum for February 1, written by a contemporary of the saint, Blessed Atto. This Blessed Atto was a monk of the Vallombrosians Congregation of the Benedictine Order, later serving as Superior of that Congregation and then Bishop of Pescia. Although the life has already been translated from Latin into Italian, it seems it has not yet been made available in English.

i. The childhood and youth of Verdiana

The glorious virgin Verdiana was born to poor but faithful parents in Castelfiorentino, a village in the diocese of Florence. When she was a small child, she avoided the company of other children of her age, preferring to cultivate quiet solitude and contemplation. All who saw her came to marvel at her character, which was far removed from all the whims and follies characteristic of children, and displayed a gravity and earnestness typical of greater age. The men and women of her village, noticing the wisdom and prudence of all her actions, observed her attentively, and took care to supply for her whatever her parents, on account of their dire poverty, could not. When she was approaching her twelfth year, she had already achieved great local distinction for her mystical gifts. Her face was of striking beauty, yet she was extremely humble, and always content with the simplest of food and clothing. She dedicated herself assiduously to vigils and fasting. It seemed as if she was instructed by Heaven itself, for she was never once observed to do or say anything which was inconsistent with perfect wisdom. Now, Verdiana had a certain kinsman (a distant uncle), who was rich and noble. At about this time, he received her into his own household, as a companion and helper to his own wife. In due course, his wife entrusted to Verdiana the care and management of the entire household. It happened that in those days, a famine had struck the local area, and the people were severely afflicted with hunger. In the household of her rich uncle and his wife, there was a large barrel, filled with beans of various kinds. Moved by compassion and inspired by the spirit of kindness, young Verdiana (without asking permission) took the beans and distributed them to the hungry poor. But meanwhile, her uncle had negotiated a sale of the barrel of beans for a good price. For, indeed, during those days of famine, such a thing was to be esteemed as a great treasure.

When he had taken the buyer to his house, imagine his shock to discover that the barrel was empty! He cried out in fury and surprise, arousing the scandal and indignation not only of the servants of his household, but even his neighbours. All of them gathered around, sympathising with the master of the house, and utterly perplexed as to who could have stolen the beans.

But the light of Verdiana's compassion and sanctity had not been lighted to be placed under a bushel. Amidst the general disturbance and in the face of the wrath of her uncle, the humble and honest girl recognised in her heart that she had acted improperly. She openly confessed her misdeed (well-intentioned though it was) to all present. Naturally, her uncle was angry with her, and everyone reproved her for her foolishness and presumption. But Verdiana applied herself fervently to prayer, both asking forgiveness for her error of judgement, and imploring that somehow her uncle's loss might be restored. And thus she prayed for the entire night, with heart-felt tears and sighs.

And, behold, when dawn broke the next day, the barrel was discovered to be completely filled once more with beans! And the rumour of this amazing happening spread throughout the district, and Verdiana's fame for her mystical powers grew accordingly.

But Verdiana sought to follow the example of the humble Christ, whom she had chosen as her special and beloved spouse, and so wished to flee from all fame and public adulation. So she contemplated secretly departing from her uncle's household, and leaving her native district. Now, it happened that a group of women in the region were planning to undertake the great pilgrimage to the tomb of the apostle St. James, in Compostela in Portugal. Verdiana, seeing this an ideal opportunity to make her departure, offered to accompany the group as a companion and helper. But when the villagers learnt of this, they requested her earnestly that she should return to them as soon as possible. Overcome by their entreaties, Verdiana pledged herself to do so.

ii. Verdiana's journey to Rome, and her commencement of eremitic life

When her long pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela had been completed, Verdiana returned home just as she had promised. She was received back with the greatest happiness, and all the members of her household and neighbours rejoiced as if a treasure that has lost for a time had now been found once more. Many implored her, quite insistently, that she should never again leave her homeland. But Verdiana felt, deep in her heart, a calling to live as a anchorite, in silent contemplation of divine Love and the glories of Heaven.

So she humbly put the proposal to the villagers that she would stay in the region, if they would agree to build for her a small cell in some isolated location. There should would lead a life of solitary prayer. For she hoped that, freed from the passing concerns of this world, her heart could more readily ascend to the eternal and celestial mysteries of Paradise; and that, by renouncing the companionship of mortals, she could be easily enjoy conversation with the holy angels. And so a small cell was constructed for Verdiana. This modest dwelling place was located across the River Elsa, attached to a church dedicated to St. Anthony.

But before Verdiana formally commenced her solitary life as an anchorite, she resolved to go to the great city of Rome, and to spend the season of Lent there, in prayer and veneration of its holy monuments. Many of the local women, recalling their pilgrimage to visit the tomb of St. James, were very keen to accompany Verdiana once again. So she, together with this group of pious women, set out together for Rome. There she visited all the holy place—the catacombs, the ancient shrines and the magnificent basilicas.

The citizens of Rome did not fail to recognise the sanctity and devotion of Verdiana, which, despite the humility of her life, shone forth like a radiant star. Indeed, they insisted that she should remain in Rome, where she might grace that venerable city with her prayer and virtue. Thus it came about that she remained there for some three years. This prolongation her sojourn in Rome did not escape the notice of the citizens of her own village, who were deeply anxious at her long absence. But at last, Verdiana left Rome, departing secretly under the cover of night, to avoid those who would have detained her there longer. Then, as promised, she returned to her native district, to be received back by the local people with profound relief and widespread, exultant jubilation.

After her return had been duly celebrated, a day was selected for Verdiana to commence formally her life as an anchorite. Then the ceremony of her consecration was held at the local church, in the presence of all the townsfolk. The local bishop, Plebanos, a most holy man, presided at the ceremony, and blessed her and gave to her the veil of consecrated life. A certain canon of the Church of St. Anthony then led Verdiana to her cell. She advanced towards what would become her dwelling place, embracing a cross in her hands, and accompanied by all townsfolk in solemn procession. Just before she entered her cell, she turned to the assembled crowd. "Please prayer for me!" she said to them. "And I, in return, assure you that I shall never cease to offer my prayers for all of you."

Once she had entered the small cell, its entrance was closed up and sealed, leaving only a small window open for communication with the outside world. I myself, who write this narration, was present in person at this event; I was, of course, only a small boy at the time. Once Verdiana had entered her cell—behold!—it suddenly was transformed. Whereas its interior had been furnished in very simply and primitive fashion, it had instantly become like an ornate chapel, decorated with gold, silver, gems and the most splendid finery.

Her fervour and austerity of life as a anchorite was comparable to that of the ancient Desert Fathers of Egypt. To say this, shall hopefully suffice as a description. I prefer not to offer too many details, lest my readers should doubt the truth of my words, or accuse me of excessive credulity. In offering the following few basic descriptions of her eremitic life, I should rather be guilty of omitting certain things which are true, than risk seemingly to embellish the facts with invention.

Verdiana was then at that stage of life in which beauty flourishes most perfectly. In order that her mind might be purer and more alert to divine contemplation, she abstained entirely from wine. She took but a single meal each day, after evening had fallen. She took her food as a means of sustaining life and health, rather than a source of pleasure of entertainment.

Her spirit was constantly intent upon contemplation. Often she would be taken up into ecstasies and rapture. And, despite her solitary and enclosed life, she did not permit a single moment to be wasted or to pass by in vain, lest she permit any temptation or distraction to creep up upon her. Rather, she devoted herself constantly to meditation, reading or handiwork. Moreover, every week she would confess her sins, failing and weaknesses to a priest with sincere tears of compunction. She treated even the most minor of failings and vices with the seriousness with which most people treat grave sins, and assiduously tried to correct all her faults of mind, body and spirit.

Those who knew her best at this time relate that she received the particular grace of free-flowing tears. This came about especially when she meditated upon the passion of Christ, and when she contemplated the ineffable glories and splendours of the celestial Paradise. But she was led also to tears of profound compassion when she contemplated the hardship and miseries sustained by the poor and the sick. So deep was her compassion for the poor that she wished to possess nothing at all for herself, beyond what was necessary to sustain her life. People would give her alms and gifts through the window of her cell, of course. But of these, she kept nothing more than what was strictly necessary, giving the remainder to the poor and beggars who passed by. I shall say nothing of the clothing in which she garbed herself, for it was of the poorest and most humble nature imaginable. In her manner of life, she followed quite literally the holy precept which directs the faithful soul to take no care for tomorrow, but rather to emulate the birds of the sky or flowers of the field. For, truly, all the desires of Verdiana's heart were passionately fixed upon the eternal realities of Heaven, rather than the passing things of the earth.

This was the manner of Verdiana's life as an anchorite for some thirty-four years. During this time, no human being ever saw her face, nor did she look upon the face of any other human being. She occasionally conversed with people through the window of her cell; but she did this with the utmost reserve and fewness of words, lest she be diverted from the sweetness of divine contemplation.

iii. Verdiana's serpent companions

It happened once that a certain priest was preaching in the Church of St. Anthony, to which Verdiana's cell was attached. He happened to be describing the various temptations which Anthony had suffered, when devils vexed him in the guise of various beasts and animals. Verdiana was struck by this anecdote, and was filled with a desire that she too might experience a such thing.

After Verdiana had been enclosed in her anchorite's cell for about two years, her wishes to experience temptations similar to those of the great St. Anthony were answered. For, one day, two gruesome and horrible serpents, both of equal length, crawled into her cell through the window! Verdiana was terrified, not knowing what to do. For she had heard that serpents often served as familiar creatures of the devil himself. So she invoked heavenly protection upon herself by the sign of the cross, and prepared her heart to accept whatever might befall her.

The two serpents remained in Verdiana's cell for many days and nights. Occasionally, one or both of them would crawl out through her window, but would always return soon. Eventually, they began to share food and drink with the saintly maiden.

For when she would sit down to take her simple meal, which consisted of bread and water with perhaps a little milk or beans, the serpents would crawl up beside her and partake of whatever she was eating.

If ever it happened that the snakes were not able to share their customary meal with Verdiana (either because she wished to fast or there was no food available that day), they displayed their annoyance visibly. In one instance, when she did not offer them any food, they struck her with their tails with such force that she was hurled to floor. And so vehement and violent was this attack, that the hapless anchorite was unable to raise herself up from the ground for the space of eight days. But when she recalled the sufferings and fortitude of the ancient martyrs, the saint found new strength and soon recovered her resolution. For she realised that spiritual strength often grows more firm in the face of physical weakness.

In due course, Verdiana's reputation of sanctity reached the ears of the Bishop of Florence, Ardingus, a most learned theologian and pious man. He went to visit her, and spent several days in holy conversation with her on spiritual matters, and found discourse to be the source of great pleasure and inspiration to his soul. But it happened that he came to learn about the two serpents who lived with Verdiana in her cell. Whether he found out about this through seeing them exit and enter through the window of her cell, or whether she revealed it to him herself, is not certain. But once he was made aware of it, he was utterly astonished! His first impulse was to engage one of the rural folk with experience with such creatures to remove them.

But when Verdiana realised that this was his intention, she pleaded with him not to do so. For, she said, their presence with her was the result of her own prayers, and had produced much spiritual fruit and growth in virtue, charity and patience within her heart.

The good bishop was persuaded by her humble but earnest entreaties, and complied with her request to leave the snakes as they were. Afterwards, he continued to enjoy spiritual conversation with her, going to visit her regularly every year for as long as he lived.

Shortly afterwards, the local residents also came to know about these two formidable serpents who lived with Verdiana in her cell. They could not imagine where they had come from, nor did they understand that they had become the companions and guests of the saint. And so they were filled with wonder at this marvel.

It happened that once a certain legate of the pope was passing by the church where Verdiana had her cell. He was accompanied by a great multitude of officers, officials and guards. It happened that at the time, the two snakes crawled out of the mistress's cell for a while. Now, one of the guards who accompanied the papal legate saw them, and at once tried to kill them with his sword. This he did not succeed in doing, but he did cut off a large part of the tail of each of the reptiles.

In pain and consternation, the two serpents immediately hurried back to the cell, and entered through the window. They fled to Verdiana, as if she was their nurse and mother! And as she gently touched them and blessed them with the sign of the cross, not only were their wounds healed, but their bodies were restored to perfect fullness, as if they had never suffered any injury!

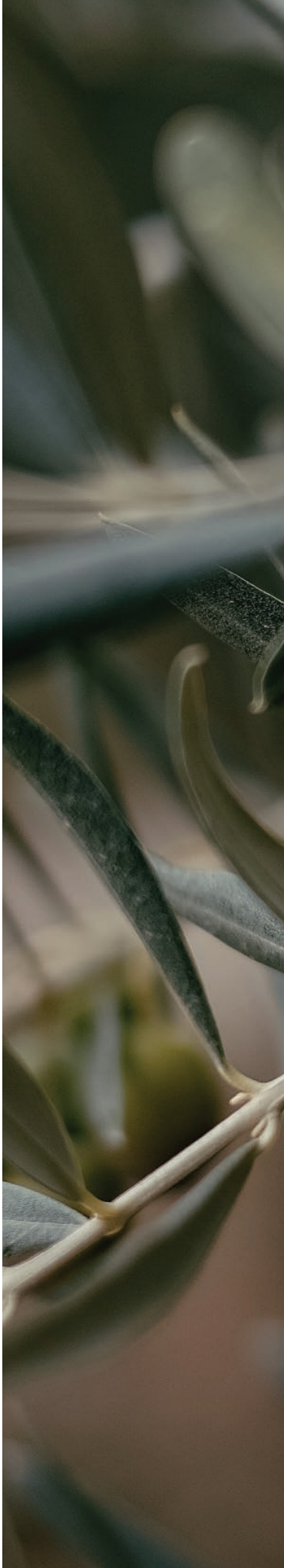
As the legend spread of the strange serpents who lived with the Verdiana (who was, by then, widely celebrated for her wisdom and sanctity) certain persons were filled with concern, lest they should inflict harm upon their beloved saint. So, without her knowledge of consent, some of them hunted down the creatures. One they killed, and the other they put to flight. This was about thirty years after Verdiana had first commented her solitary life.

Verdiana was deeply saddened at this, and mourned bitterly for the loss of her two companions, as if they had been beloved friends. For they had, indeed, been given to her by the grace of God. Although they had caused her a certain amount of fear and perplexity at the beginning, they had also presented her with many opportunities for charity and patience, and for gaining heavenly merits—moreover, the very wonder of the thing had caused many to give glory to God.

It was not long after the loss of the serpents that, by a particular inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Verdiana began to sense that her own death was drawing near. She revealed this to her own spiritual director. At this stage, her humility was so firmly established in her heart that no earthly fame could threaten or undermine it. Therefore, God then began to display his compassion and power through her more abundantly. And the holy maiden started to perform many startling miracles and marvels, such as can scarcely be imagined.

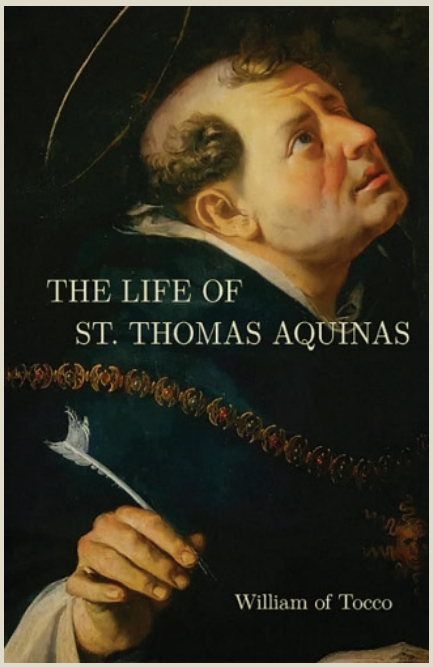
And so Verdiana's fame became very great, not only in her own town, but in the whole territory of Florence. Indeed, so many visitors and pilgrims flocked to her, seeking her prayers or words of consolation, that it became a source of grave vexation and anxiety to her. For in choosing the life of an anchorite, she had sought nothing but solitude and silence in which to contemplate the glories of Heaven. Yet she accepted that it was the decision of God that she should serve his faithful people in this way for a time, and she resigned herself to his holy will.

She passed from this word of space and time to the realm of glorious eternity, in the year of our Lord 1222, on the first day of February. When she died, all the bells in the region began to ring spontaneously, and continued to peal forth joyfully for some three days. And it is reported that, at that time, a certain infant, not yet able to speak, was heard to pronounce clearly, "The servant of Heaven, Verdiana, has ascended to glory!"



THE REF REVIEW

What are the monks reading?



The Life of St. Thomas Aquinas By William of Tocco

by Fr. Robert Nixon, OSB

St. Thomas Aquinas, honoured by the Church with the appellation of the 'Angelic Doctor', is amongst the most widely venerated of all Catholic saints. His writings are carefully read by all students of theology and he is perhaps given more authority than any other single theological writer in our tradition. Yet, despite the fact that he has been so deeply investigated as a writer and thinker, surprisingly little is known about the details of the life of this saint by most Catholics.

This is not for any paucity of original material and primary sources. There are many surviving early testaments to the holiness of Thomas, as a perusal of the relevant volume of the Acta Sanctorum reveals. Foremost amongst these early sources is the very comprehensive biography of Thomas written fairly shortly after his death by a fellow Dominican, Friar William of Tocco. This work, unfortunately, remains completely unknown to the vast majority of Catholics although it is the principal and original font from which almost all other versions of his life derive.

In the refectory at present (November 2023), the monks are reading an English translation of this life very recently published by Angelus Press. This translation, which reproduces the tone and style of the original Latin in a highly effective and idiomatic manner, has been prepared by David Foley based on the critical edition of the Ystoria Sancti Thomae by Claire le Brun-Gouanvic, published in 1996 by the Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies. In many ways, it is surprising that such an important text had not hitherto been made accessible in English, and David Foley and Angelus Press are to be commended for this undertaking.

William of Tocco's account of the life, virtues and miracles of St. Thomas is very far from being a dry and objective study. Rather, it reads like an exciting adventure, filled with fascinating, astonishing, and often strange and picturesque details.

For the interest of readers of Pax, seven of the remarkable miracle stories of St. Thomas are reproduced below. These are all to be found in the Ystoria Sancti Thomae, but are given here in my own translations which appeared in an article of mine published some time before Foley's translation. For those who wish to gain a greater insight into the life and character of this most remarkable saint, The Life of St. Thomas Aquinas by William of Tocco, translated by David Foley (Angelus Press, 2023), is to be unreservedly recommended

1) It once happened that the mother of Thomas, together with some other women, went to Naples to visit the baths there.

A nurse was taking care of Thomas who was still a small infant at the time. He somehow came into possession of a small scrap of paper on which was written the words of the Hail Mary. His nurse tried to take the fragment from the hand of the baby, yet he clasped it with such strength and determination that she was unable to remove it from his grasp. Young Thomas continued to hold it firmly in his hands until his mother managed to prise it from him. After this, whenever the holy baby cried, they would give to him the scrap of paper with the Hail Mary inscribed upon it and immediately he would be pacified.

2) Once Thomas had become a professor at the University of Paris, he was due one day to dispute some important theological question. Yet, the night before, when he arose from his sleep to pray, he found that an extra tooth had sprung up in his mouth! This new and extraneous tooth was positioned in such a way that he could not speak properly. Thomas consulted with one of his associates who suggested that the debate could be deferred so that the problem of the tooth could be attended to. But Thomas was not at all happy about deferring the discussion. So he applied himself to prayer, shedding copious tears of holy desire. And the superfluous tooth, which had sprung up in his mouth, promptly fell out without any pain or trauma. Thereafter, Thomas always carried the tooth with him as a memorial of this divine grace.

3) Once St. Thomas was in Rome during Holy Week. He preached on the Passion of the Lord in the Basilica of St. Peter with such fervour that the entire congregation was moved to tears. On Easter Sunday, he preached again, especially on the magnificent joys of the Blessed Virgin at the time of the Resurrection of her Son. Amongst the congregation, there was a woman who had long suffered from a haemorrhage. She was with the crowd who enthusiastically pressed in upon the Angelic Doctor and she managed to touch the hem of his garment. And, immediately, she was cured from her affliction.

4) Once St. Thomas was in Naples attending a meeting of the Dominicans. It happened that he fell ill and so he rested in his bedroom. A certain brother, Bonofilio, was attending to him. But Br. Bonofilio was called away to some other matter and so his brother, who was still a young boy, attended upon Thomas. And this boy avers that he saw a radiant star, of great brightness but of small size, enter through the window of the chamber and hover above the head of the Angelic Doctor as he prayed and meditated upon celestial realities.

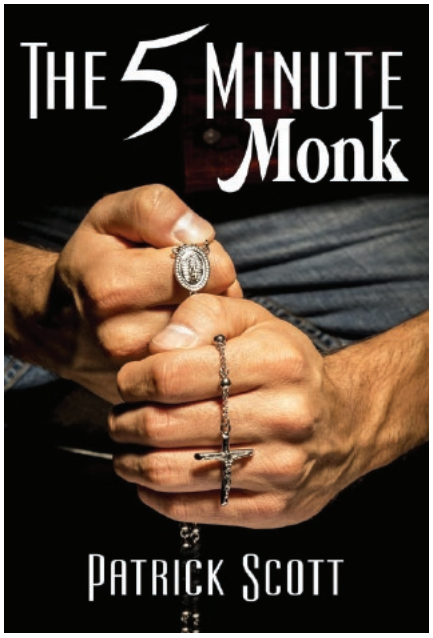
5) The spiritual elevation of the mind of the Angelic Doctor was very often accompanied by the physical elevation of his earthly body. Once, when he was in Salerni in Calabria for a meeting of the friars, he remained in prayer before the altar after the Office of Vigils. And, as he meditated upon Heavenly things, several of the brothers clearly witnessed him to rise from the ground. He levitated upwards to a height of about two feet and remained suspended there for an extended period of time.

6) After the death of St. Thomas, a certain holy relic of the saint—his hand—was kept in the Chapel of St. Severinus. Now, a certain clergyman visited that chapel for the purpose of venerating the many ancient relics of the saints kept there. But when he came to the hand of Thomas, he began to scoff at this new relic and to view it with a certain degree of disdain and scepticism. But as he thought thus, a violent trembling seized his body and threw him to the ground. In desperation, he implored the absolution of the priest of the chapel for his doubt and irreverence. But even then the fit of trembling did not cease to dominate him. So he asked that the hand of the saint be brought to him. With tears of repentance, he devoutly kissed it and implored the mercy of God and the forgiveness of his holy servant, St. Thomas. And at that very instant, he was released from the fit which had possessed him.

7) There was once a certain guest staying at the Abbey of St. Laurence in Fossanova who was sorely vexed by a demon. As he lay on his bed, this demon would appear to him in the form of a monkey. This diabolical simian would mock and taunt him without mercy. But when he attempted to defend himself by making the sign of the cross, he found that he was unable to move his limbs at all. Indeed, he found himself to have been rendered completely paralysed. But some of the monks took him to the tomb of the great St. Thomas. There, he poured out fervent tears imploring the Angelic Doctor to intercede for him in his piteous plight. And immediately his movement was restored and the demon, in the form of the malicious monkey, scurried away. Shortly thereafter, the man entered the same monastery and became a monk himself.

BOOKS FROM THE LIBRARY

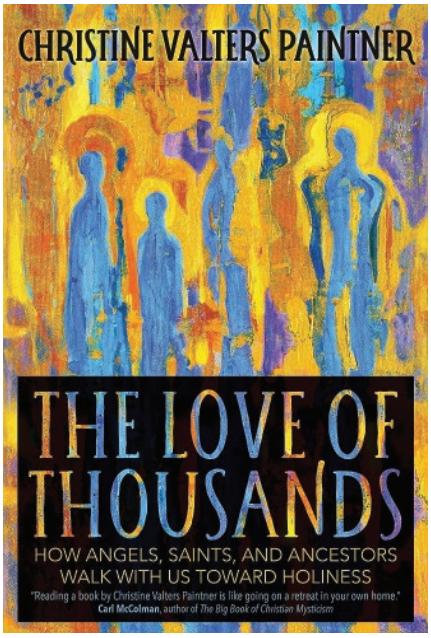
New books on prayers



The Five-Minute Monk

Patrick Scott (2023)

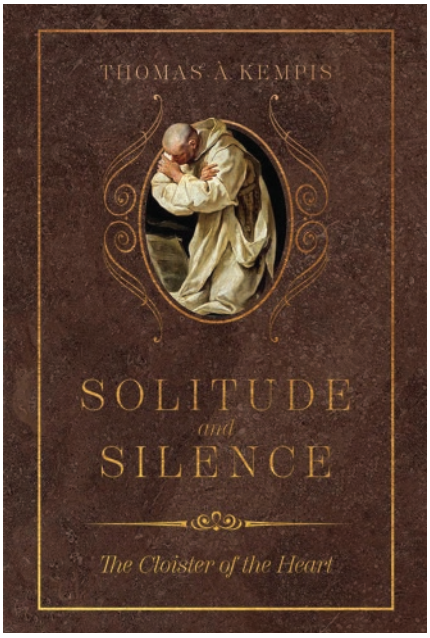
This small work offers a practical guide to an approach to prayer which the author styles as "pragmatic monasticism"—that is, the incorporation of monastic principles and practices into everyday life for people who are not monks or nuns. This is not a new theme, of course, as in recent years there has been a flourishing of interest in such approaches. Nevertheless, this book is distinguished by its strongly practical approach, thoroughly rooted in Catholic beliefs and culture. One of the most impressive aspects of the author's proposed programme is its impressive time-efficiency (as the title suggests), combined with its great clarity and very realistic insights into contemporary life. The reader is offered a simple way of consecrating each day to God, and enjoying the blessings, strength and wisdom which only God can give.



The Love of Thousands—How Angels, Saints and Ancestors Walk With Us Towards Holiness

Christine Valters Painter (2023)

This fascinating and intriguing book offers a highly accessible and appealing insight into how angels, saints and ancestors can play a significant role in our everyday lives on both a spiritual and practical level. Drawing upon our rich Catholic heritage as its primary source as well as a diversity of other mystical traditions, it highlights the richness of the spiritual universe we inhabit, and shows how awareness of this can assist us in overcoming adversity and arriving at personal sanctity, equanimity and happiness. A wide selection of prayers, spiritual exercises and anecdotes make this work a useful, diverting and enjoyable read.



Solitude and Silence—The Cloister of the Heart

Thomas à Kempis, (2023)
Translated by Fr. Robert Nixon

This short treatise is by Thomas à Kempis, the author of the timeless and ever-popular spiritual classic, The Imitation of Christ. It takes as its theme the value of solitude and silence in the cultivation of the spiritual life—something which is not only pertinent to the monastic charism, but also very timely in this age of endless distractions and constant communication. Thomas à Kempis wrote this work as a kind of handbook of suggestions and meditations, reflecting upon his own personal experiences and his searching observations of human nature made through his role as a spiritual director. Although it was written in the 15th century, contemporary readers will find Solitude and Silence—The Cloister of the Heart (published here for the first time in English) to be extremely practical, deeply insightful and occasionally challenging.

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