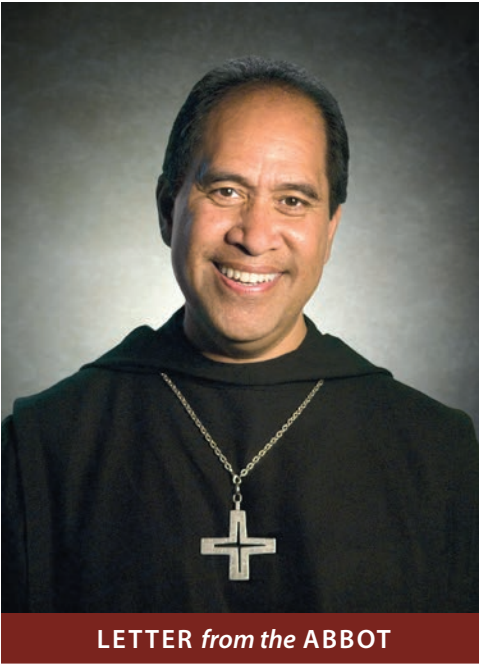


ST. ANDREW'S ABBEY  
THE VALYERMO  
*Chronicle*

№ 250 ✕ FALL 2016





LETTER from the ABBOT



DEAR FRIENDS,

*The homily given by Father Abbot at the funeral of Fr. Gregory Elmer, OSB, speaks to all of us on many different levels. We offer it to you as the Abbot's column for our Fall Issue of the Chronicle.*

I LOOK AROUND THE CHAPEL AND I SEE people who have known Fr. Gregory for 40 and 50 years when he was a young monk. I see others who knew Gregory as a middle aged monk when he was in the prime of his monastic vocation traveling the world, preaching brilliant retreats, writing beautiful poetry and delivering dynamic lectures and homilies. And then I see those who knew Fr. Gregory in the final years of his life, when he went from one nursing home to another, when he suffered slowly and painfully with the progression of Parkinson's Disease and a variety of other illnesses and periods of

hospitalizations, which naturally took a toll on his body and mind.

Reflecting on my visits with Gregory over the years, I am taken back specifically to the many times Fr. Isaac and I used to take him to his Kaiser neurology appointments for evaluation for the brain surgery (DBS) to help with his Parkinson's. I am reminded of that fact that though there is so much we can do now because of the advancement in modern technology and medicine, there is still one thing we cannot do. We still cannot prevent someone from dying. No matter how much money we spend on the best doctors and research, and no matter how hard we try to stay healthy by eating the right things and exercising, we still cannot prevent someone from dying. But Jesus can. And He did, through his own death and resurrection. Thank God, Fr. Gregory died in Christ. Because Christ promised eternal life for all who believe in Him, we can be assured that he lives now with Christ.

All of us here today and the scores of others who wanted to be here today, are witnesses to the journey of Fr. Gregory. The journey that included much suffering, which is why I chose this Gospel passage: come to me all you who are weary; I will give you rest.

Fr. Gregory loved classical music. When Fr. Isaac and I went to collect his belongings at Mary Health last week, he had a whole drawer filled with CD's of classical music, and then we found another small box of CD's in the closet. He was a pianist whose fingers gracefully moved up and down the piano keys. However, the Parkinson's prevented him from ever playing again. The disease began to slowly take away the things he enjoyed doing or things he did well.

He was an eloquent speaker. However, for the past couple of years, but especially the last several months of his life, I could barely understand his words. Though his eyes were clear and focused, this eloquent and dynamic speaker, with a booming bass voice was often

times inaudible when he spoke, even when I put my ear an inch away from his mouth.

He was an ardent reader, but over time reading became difficult for him. He loved to write and as Fr. Francis said last night, he had beautiful penmanship. But the last several years of his life, he was unable to even hold a pen, let alone write with one. Slowly, little by little, more and more 'things' began to be taken away from him. He began to be stripped of the many things he liked and liked to do, until all he had was himself and God.

Fr. Gregory's life journey is a reminder to all of us that even though we can fill our lives with things we like and want whether they are hobbies, relationships, or projects. Eventually these things will slowly go by the wayside of life, or be taken away from us, whether through illness or some other misfortune.

The ideal of course is to not have to wait until these things are slowly removed from our lives or stripped from us—whether by illness or some other misfortune—but to lay them down of our own accord, to willingly let them go, to surrender until there is nothing more and no one else to distract us from the One who created us for Himself, the One who loves us like no one else can love us or ever will love us. The Eucharist—His sacrifice—is the perfect sign of that love. Now Fr. Gregory no longer sees signs and symbols of the God who loves him (and us) like no other, but he sees Him face to face.

*Abbot Damien* ✧



# THE VALYERMO *Chronicle*

NUMBER 250 ✧ FALL 2016

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## The Valyermo Chronicle

is published quarterly.

## Credits:

EDITOR

Aelred Niespolo, OSB

LAYOUT

Michael Schrauzer

COVER IMAGE:

Claude Monet, "Peupliers au bord de

l'Epte, vue du marais," 1892

(Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Printed on chlorine-free,

FSC-certified paper.



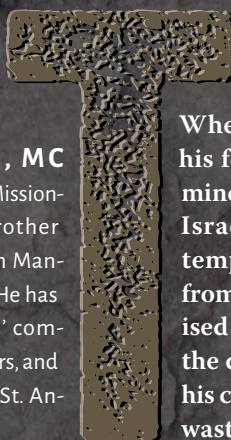
# IN THE DESERT

*These are thoughts originally shared at a communion service at an English prison in Feb. 2016.*

## BROTHER BEN HARRISON, MC



Ben Harrison is a Missionary of Charity brother currently based in Manchester, England. He has been in brothers' communities for 35 years, and has been visiting St. Andrew's since 1972.



HERE ARE MANY PASSAGES in the Bible that refer to the experience of life in the desert.

When we read the story of Jesus and his forty days in the desert, we are reminded of the forty years the people of Israel spent in their own trials and temptations crossing the wilderness from their slavery in Egypt to the promised land. What does all this interest in the desert mean? Why does God want his chosen people to spend time in such wastelands?



I lived for five years in a small town in the middle of the Mojave Desert, twenty-five miles from Las Vegas. By the way, if you have any romantic fantasies about that place, let me remind you that its local nickname is "Lost Wages." My work involved a lot of deliveries and driving, and I was always ready to give a lift to hitch-hikers, since I had often travelled that way myself. People always seemed to get to Vegas on their own steam, whether by car, bus, train or plane, but an awful lot ended up hitch-hiking home, broke.

Anyway, when I first arrived in Nevada I found the desert intimidating. It was so hot and barren, even the tops of the red rocks were baked black in the fierce sun, and I imagined rattlesnakes under every bush. But after a while I began to explore my surroundings and to make little forays out into the wilds, and I came to love the desert and to spend much of my free time out in its vast emptiness.

One of the things that first strikes you is the solitude. There's nobody about. Once you're out of the town and away from the road, you can be hours or days without seeing another human soul. And the silence is amazing. There is a huge sense of space, and because there is no humidity in the air, it can be startlingly clear. I could see the jagged cliffs in the bare mountains thirty miles away. The night sky is filled with millions of stars. You can take long hikes on moonlit nights and find your way as easily as in daylight. And the clarity of sound is as sharp as the clarity of vision. A lizard skittering through gravel is as clear at 30 yards as if it were right beside you. With all this vastness, silence and stillness there is an enormous peace, a feeling that the One who created all this is very close, ready to whisper secrets.

But in seconds that sense of wonder can turn to a thrill of danger and a shiver of death. You suddenly notice a coiled

rattlesnake where you're about to put your foot, you turn over a stone to sit on and find a scorpion, you stumble over a rock and twist your ankle and realize you're miles from the nearest road. You're hiking in a narrow ravine with perpendicular walls and wonder if a sudden thunder storm five miles away is going to send a wall of water tearing down the gulley and smash you against a boulder.

Once sitting on a hillside, peacefully gazing out over the tranquillity of a desert morning, I heard an advancing roar and sat aghast as a cloud of bees churned across the valley, swarmed over my head and slowly settled into the contorted trunk of a juniper tree a few meters away. I crept away as fast as I could, my head down.

Another day, exploring a dry wash to see where it led, I heard a strange clanking noise, and climbing on the hill looked down into the next gully to see a coyote dragging a nasty trap on its hind leg, with a chain and an iron stake attached. Wondering if I had St. Francis's gift with animals, I approached it, but that only panicked it and made it run off desperately, snagging the chain against rocks and bushes.

I could recount other occasions on which the wilderness reminded me of my terrifying littleness, mortality and weakness. Sometimes I would come home from my desert forays full of peace and utter well-being, saturated with a sense of God's provident care of his creation. Other times I would come home chastened, shaking, relieved and grateful for the company of other human beings and a safe refuge from the immensity of nature's careless indifference.

So then, why would God want anybody to go through all of that? Does God tempt us? No, that's the Devil's job. And the Devil wants us dead and damned. Does God *allow* us to be tested? Surely. But why? Not because *he* needs to know what we're made of, he already knows. Rather, so

that *we* can learn who we are and what we are capable of — both our weaknesses and our gifts. Because we're human beings with limited vision, we are easily fooled, and we easily deceive ourselves. We desperately need to know ourselves better. What are our temptations? I think there are basically three.

First, we may believe that we're *more* than we are — stronger, smarter, straighter, better — and that can get us in a lot of trouble. You know that feeling of finding yourself flat out in the dust after you've picked a fight with somebody bigger and stronger than you? It may be physically painful and morally humiliating, but there may also be some relief. "I don't have to play the big-guy. I'm just me, and I've survived one more trouncing. I'm not God, after all." That's what they say in AA, "The only thing you really need to know about God is — it's not you!"

Second, we may be tempted to think we're *less* than we are. "I'm rubbish, I'm worthless, I'm useless, nobody loves me, everything I do turns to muck. I'd be better off dead." If the first temptation was grandiosity, this second one is self-pity, or worse, self-contempt. To paraphrase D. J. Anderson, one of the explorers of alcoholism, the fatal danger is not so much to think "I'm very special," or even to think "I am a worm," but to wallow in the feeling "I'm a very special worm." But then you wake up on a sunny morning and somebody gives you a friendly smile and you realize it's a new day and you do have at least a trace of hope. A young prisoner on the high security wing once said to me, "Every day above ground is a good day."

The third temptation is to think, or wish, that you're something or someone *other than* who you are. "I should be like my brother, or like my hero, or like this gangster or that athlete — or even that saint." There have been times when I would have been satisfied to be just about anybody except who I am. But then I find myself giving something, or saying something to somebody I care about, and

realizing that I am the *only* one who could do that for that person at that moment. And then I am able to forgive God for making me me.

If those are the basic temptations, what is the basic response? Read the Gospel accounts again (Matthew 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13) and look at how Jesus responds to his temptations. His responses show that he had that wonderful gift of self-knowledge — self-acceptance. He knew exactly who he was, neither more nor less, he accepted the potential and the limits of his human condition. He was happy for God to be God, and for himself to be God's servant.

For us, humility is precisely that: living in the truth that I am a creature, a human being, a sinner like everyone else, but a sinner loved by God and entrusted by God with gifts to be shared. The first Christian monks were men of the wilderness, the Desert Fathers, and there are many anecdotes that celebrate their humility and their humanity. There was one monk known for his humility, and the Devil decided to tempt him, so he appeared to him gloriously saying, "I am the angel Gabriel and I am sent to you with a special message from God." The monk said, "You'd better check your instructions. There's no reason God would have a special message for me." And the Devil fled.

One of the few good things about prison is that it gives you time — time to think about how you got to this point in your life and where you want to go from here. If God has a plan or a purpose for each of us, which I believe he does, we'll only find peace and happiness in being what we were made to be, what we have it in us to be. So it is essential to find out who I am, to accept that and to ask God to take it and bless it and make something beautiful of it. If that sounds like a good idea to you, then pray that God will give you first the desire and the willingness, and then the grace and the courage to know and accept yourself as you are right now, and let him lead you out of this present desert to where your meaning and your purpose are waiting for you. ✱

## Eisegesis and Exegesis

ONE OF THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES of the Protestant Reformation, in urging that each person read the bible for herself without relying on any authority, is a subtle shift from exegesis to eisegesis. Wikipedia, though deserving some of its reputation as unreliable, especially with entries in religion or politics, seems reliable here. It defines eisegesis as “the process of interpreting a text in such a way that the process introduces one’s own presuppositions, agendas, or biases into and onto the text” and that without apology. I’m okay; you’re okay; my interpretation is okay; your interpretation is okay. Eisegesis is commonly called reading into the text; it is opposed to exegesis, which means taking the meaning out of the text, rather than putting one’s own into it. Exegesis makes us submit to the text as our master; eisegesis makes the text submit to us.

Eisegesis sounds bad — as bad as what Humpty Dumpty said to Alice in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*. “‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.’ ‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’ ‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master — that’s all.’”

Whether it is reading the bible or the Rule of St. Benedict, there is the possibility of eisegesis. We can read into it our preconceived ideas about what it’s supposed to say, and then find “confirmation” of what we were inclined to believe anyway (confirmation bias).



**Janice Daurio, Obl. O.S.B.,** has been a Benedictine oblate since 1978. She has been teaching philosophy at Moorpark College for almost twenty years. She is a lifelong Catholic from Brooklyn, N.Y.



# Reading the Rule

**JANICE DAURIO FORD, PH.D, OBL. OSB**

Eisegesis seems bad, but is it all bad? Is it even avoidable? As soon as I try to make the Rule meaningful for my life, I am mixing my own ideas with the text. There’s no way around it; the alternative is an opaque text with historical value only. On the other hand, I can’t be Humpty Dumpty; I can’t have the text mean anything I want it to mean; because then the text means nothing. How can we read the Rule in such a way so as to preserve its meaning but also have it as a guide for our lives?

## Analogical Meaning

Help comes from St. Thomas Aquinas, in discussing words we use to describe God. Does the word “good” in the sentence “God is good” have exactly the same meaning as it does in the sentence “Abbot Damien is good”? If so, then the meaning is univocal. Or is the meaning of the word “good” in the first sentence completely unrelated to the meaning of that word in the second sentence? If so, then that meaning is equivocal.

As usual, Thomas strikes a middle position. If goodness is appropriate to God in God’s proper mode of existence, just as “good” accurately and appropriately describes Abbot Damien in Abbot Damien’s very different mode of existence, then the meaning of the word “good” is analogical.

We can avoid irresponsible eisegesis if we avoid the equivocal meaning of the words of the Rule. But the univocal meaning of the words of the Rule won't help, either. We can't read the Rule "literally" (univocally) for two reasons. First, it applies to monks who lived hundreds of years ago in a very different world from ours. And second, when the Rule applies to us — oblates — living out in the world, it cannot have the same meaning as it does for the monks of Valyermo. But our meaning can't be completely unrelated to the Rule's actual (historical, monastic) meaning, either.

### *Reading the Rule*

The Rule of St. Benedict has abstract words like "humility" as well the concrete words of ordinary words, like "bed" and "knife." Let's stick to the ordinary object words.

Let's look at *Chapter 22: How the Monks Are to Sleep*:

Let each one sleep in a separate bed. Let them receive bedding suitable to their manner of life, according to the Abbot's directions. If possible let all sleep in one place; but if the number does not allow this, let them take their rest by tens or twenties with the seniors who have charge of them.

A candle shall be kept burning in the room until morning.

Let them sleep clothed and girded with belts or cords — but not with their knives at their sides, lest they cut themselves in their sleep — and thus be always ready to rise without delay when the signal is given and hasten to be before one another at the Work of God, yet with all gravity and decorum.

The younger shall not have beds next to one another, but among those of the older ones. When they rise for the Work of God let them gently encourage one another, that the drowsy may have no excuse.

Since there is diversity even within the oblate community, you, gentle reader, will have to do the application work yourself. For example, for parents with young children, the directive about

separate beds and suitable bedding seems clear enough. But what of oblates who live alone?

What about the candle? There is an oblate couple with a sanctuary lamp (unlit!) in their bedroom — a reminder of God's presence throughout the night. But of course there are other analogical ways to understand the candle.

As for the knives and the appropriate clothing for sleep, this might serve as a reminder of the importance of personal hygiene and health; ordinary life is holy. The body is holy, and caring for your body is certainly in the spirit of the Rule.

Then there is the part about gently encouraging each other to prayer in the morning. I know of a married couple who pray morning prayer (lauds) together, with the husband (in this case) "gently encouraging" the wife to wake up.

### *The Rule, Oblates, and the Twenty-First Century*

Oblates need to take their roles as oblates seriously; oblates are not second-class citizens by comparison to the monks. Reading the rule in a way appropriate to our way of life, without sacrificing the meaning, is as important for oblates as it is for monks, even if harder to figure out.

Oblates are called to the same level of holiness, conversion of life, stability, and, yes, obedience, as the monks, but in our own way. Perhaps oblates will do in our time what St. Benedict did in his time. Perhaps we are entering the Age of the Laity, or even the Age of the Oblate.

The words of the now-retired Notre Dame philosopher Alisdair McIntyre, written over 30 years ago, but for our times, may help:

"What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community [oblate groups?] within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues [the virtues prescribed by the Rule?] was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope...We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another — doubtless very different — St. Benedict"... or Benedictine oblate group. (Alisdair McIntyre, *After Virtue*) ✠



**T**HE TOWN IN MASSACHUSETTS WHERE I LIVE IS CALLED MARSHFIELD and there are many marshes. Not just cranberry bogs but marshes along rivers or near seabeds. My house is on a corner lot with windows on both sides looking out on marshes and streaks of the South River running through. All this bordered by very tall trees — maybe a hundred feet high or more. The sunsets are unbelievable. My neighbors across the street have a big rural piece of land with houses and animals (dogs, cat, chickens, bees) tucked away out of sight. It is a world much as God made it to be.

## LIFE IN THE HERMITAGE



**SR. MARY WOLF-SALIN**

Outside is not totally silent. Dogs, children, cars pass. One hears machines. But all this at a peaceful rhythm — somewhat mitigated by the reactions of my dog as people pass.

Hermits have dogs — at least many wise ones do. They are guardians, companions, friends and informers. They let you know when a storm is coming, when a less than friendly animal or person approaches, when a delivery is coming. Otherwise, my brand of dog is very quiet; the official description mentions contemplative eyes.

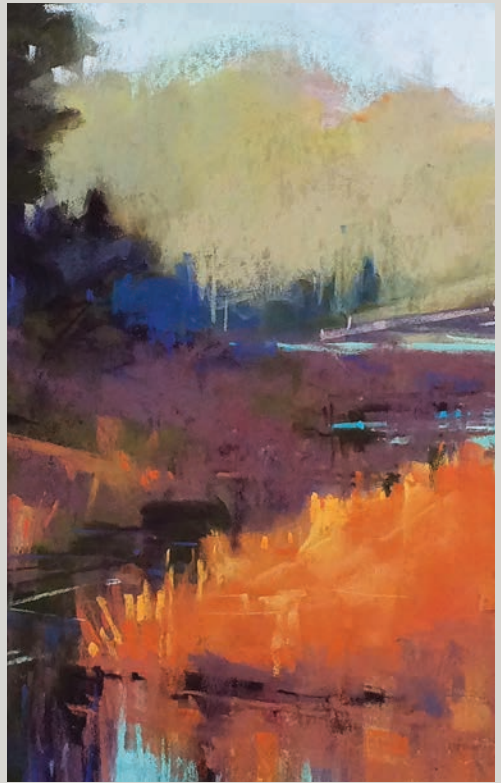
The day rhythms itself around the Liturgy of the Hours, with Lauds very late (8:45) to allow a long stretch of prayer and quiet before. Mass is at a nearby abbey with two days kept for greater solitude.

Then there is work — a human necessity. My job is psychoanalysis or spiritual direction during limited hours, as well as the usual chores — gardening, cleaning, feeding the dog and myself, shopping. The days pass extraordinarily quickly and then it is time for the quieting movement of evening — more lectio

divina, Vespers, supper, a slow movement toward Vigils. The sounds of evening begin: the occasional woodpecker, a car or two returning from work. (Where I live all traffic stops cold, even on busy streets, when a wild turkey, or two, or five decides to cross the street. Or a Canada goose.) The occasional deer or coyote tends to stay a little more hidden. One could spend hours watching the antics of squirrels jumping from tree to tree — apparently miles from the ground.

A lot of this is about nature. Maybe that is where we are made to live? One learns the value of a spot of shade, of a cooling breeze, of warmth in the freezing cold — oddly all things we sing as we ask for the Holy Spirit. Even in the inner city people are beginning community gardens — and the occasional space for chickens. As houses get bigger and bigger and corporations get bigger and bigger I remember that “small is beautiful” and thank God for this setting for my life.

The value and beauty of nature are about much more than a kind of romantic love for the wind in the trees. A recent study found that babies were getting sick on their mothers’ milk. How can this possibly be? It turns out that if their mothers were sitting on a sofa “protected” by Scotch Guard or its equivalent, this affected the mother’s milk. But in that case, what are we to think of all the fabrics in our homes — curtains, sheets, carpets? How many of these come from natural fibers? And if they don’t, or if they are “protected” by whatever chemical is used, what does this do to the interior of our homes? Not to speak of the fact that our furniture, unless it is made of pure wood, is also “protected” by formaldehyde? This is why we are urged to open windows, since the interiors of our homes are apparently more toxic than outside. This is a very serious issue and one we need to think about. My hermitage is no purer than anyplace else. Since the last renters did a lot of damage before I moved in, my landlord carpeted the whole house. My furniture was given free when a



nearby university refurbished its dormitories. Formaldehyde on all dressers.

We need not to get paranoid about such issues. But we need gradually and slowly to move into a situation where mother nature’s gifts are respected and chosen. We may need our next piece of furniture to be smaller, if we want real wood. We may need our next meal to be simpler. A little real butter or sugar rather than a substitute that tastes like, looks like, sells like whatever it is imitating. A friend, saddened by the autism spectrum diagnosis of a grandchild, combed the country to find a doctor who could help. Eventually she found one — in Holland. His prescription? Only foods with absolutely no additives.

In other words: what mother nature — or God — gives us is good and needs to be received reverently and gratefully. When we mess with it we literally do so to our peril and that of those we love. If we continue looking for bigger, richer, flashier, we can harm the



whole human race. In our days maybe monastic humility is beginning to show a new face. Maybe really small is beautiful.

And then we come to work. Because of my work and because of the hermitage a lot of human pain comes here. I get requests for prayer that are heart-breaking in their anguish — and their faith. “Please pray that I can find a job before we lose our house.” “Please pray that my premature baby will live.” “Please pray for my elderly parent with cancer.” And more. All this needs to be carried in prayer — not to speak of other parts of the world with their own anguish, their violence and their starvation. Which brings us back to the life of the hermitage.

Traditionally, hermitage life is seen in terms of the desert. Superficially speaking this life hardly looks like a desert, with its frequent outings for Eucharist, shopping, other needs. But if one looks deeper, what is the desert about? It is a choice to move away from the noise of “the city”, seen as an archetype. A choice to withdraw from social media or even socializing for its own sake, a choice of the silence and solitude the desert represents. Some decades ago there was a movement toward urban hermitages seen in this same way. When anyone plans to go for a silent retreat that person makes some of these same choices, leaving home, family, work, phone, television, computer, and on. The person chooses to go into the silence, if only for a week or so. Such a decision can actually be life-changing, producing the experience of a return to one’s deepest self, perhaps hitherto hardly known, and to God. For if God lives in the depths of our being, closer to us than we are to ourselves, as Augustine said, when the noises cease one is in a better space for this meeting.

On the wall in my hermitage is a contemporary illuminated manuscript with a quotation from a little known Church Father called Philoxenus of Mabbug. It reads: “For one who has experienced Christ himself silence is dearer than anything.” What does this mean? What can it mean? Surely many things

are dearer than silence — people? Eucharist? One could go on. So what is he saying?

Perhaps one gets a better idea if one switches keys a bit. What is needed for a poet to write? Surely enough silence for thoughts and words to clarify. For a musician the same must be true. For a lover, does not noise become a distraction from the one thing that is most important? All of which is to say that for many of the most human activities what we most need is the ability to center, to be about what we most want to be about. Why would what Philoxenus calls the experience of Christ be any different? This explains why ever since the early desert experience and on through centuries of contemplative life silence has been so deeply valued. A book I read years ago by a Cistercian author said that the way we eat our breakfast determines whether we will see the morning dew on the grass. This is about a silence that is not only the cessation of words. Our inner monologues destroy silence even more. And our inner quiet opens us to more than the dew. Maybe this is the deeper meaning of the desert.

Benedict would say, in the great tradition of the desert, that this is a space for meeting temptation as well. All the nicely covered up parts of our psyche may well reveal themselves — memories, passions, old hurts. The silence is also about coming to terms with these. For some people this is too much, at least without help. The desert fathers and mothers pre-dated psychoanalysts by centuries. But this hard work bears much fruit in the solidity of what emerges in the end — a stronger faith that is able to move past its illusions into the darkness of the unknown God and that then, mysteriously, finds that the dark is illumined by the awareness of God’s love. ✱

**Sr Mary Wolff-Salin** lives at the Hermitage of the Advent in Marshfield, MA. She is an RSCJ, an oblate of Valyermo, a theologian, psychoanalyst, and author — and sometime breeder of Great Pyrenees dogs.

# Remembering FR. GREGORY

FR. FRANCIS BENEDICT, O.S.B.

✠ FR. GREGORY DIED IN THE LORD ON August 2, 2016. His passing from Parkinson's disease was merciful, considering the suffering he endured from it and other maladies for more than ten years. One of his greatest disappointments initially was the need for 24-hour care which necessitated him living apart from the community, first at Villa Scalabrini in Sun Valley and later at Mary Health of the Sick in Newbury Park.

Gregory and I were "classmates" living together in community since we entered the novitiate in 1968. We professed monastic vows, were ordained together, and spent many years collaborating in various ways to serve the monastic community, the community of Oblates, and the wider Church community as well.

He was extraordinarily gifted. Gregory had many loves that accompanied him throughout his life: music, art, literature and letters, intellectual and political discourse, poetry, theology, spirituality and mysticism. He was a master debater, well-trained during his high school years at Notre Dame in Sherman Oaks. He was the president of the Young Democrats in San Fernando Valley before entering the monastery. His creativity and gift for public speaking prepared him to become a great preacher, retreat master-teacher of the spiritual life, and groundbreaker for interdisciplinary experiences of spirituality and the arts. Gregory loved attending concerts, visiting art museums, going to bookstores, travelling, preaching retreats in places as far away as Norfolk, Virginia. His inner monk never tired of outer explorations.



The monastic superior at the time of our ordination saw in Gregory a man of desire and aptitude for further academic and theological study. A year after his ordination, he was sent for doctoral studies to *The Institute of Man* at the University of Duquesne to study formative spirituality under Adrian van Kaam and Susan Muto. This culminated in a second master's degree. He then went on to Boston College to study theology, particularly in the area of mysticism. He transferred from Boston to Oxford University, reading theology there. These academic endeavors did not yield a higher degree, and it was decided he return home to share the fruit of these studies through retreat ministry and preaching.



Gregory initiated music meditation on the evening of Good Friday, in which he introduced a classical piece of music to retreatants who would enter the mystery of the passion of Jesus through an alternate portal complementary to the solemn liturgy of that day. For Gregory, classical music was an encounter with the divine presence, where the high point of the soul touched God. Throughout his life, Gregory spent quality personal time meditating with music.

Valyermo has always been a welcoming place. Its hospitality was and is ecumenical and inter-religious and Gregory established ecumenical relationships with many people who came. This forged a more than 35-year friendship with members of Bel Air Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles. He taught adult classes there on occasion and was the first Catholic priest to take the pulpit at Bel Air for a Sunday service. His preaching on Scripture enthralled them and so many others throughout his life. Bel Air began having weekend silent retreats here through Gregory's influence. He made several pilgrimages to Israel and Italy with members of Bel Air and his friendships created enduring relationships



with members of that Church and the Valyermo monks.

Gregory had a lifelong interest in film and initiated the "Spirituality & Cinema" retreats at Valyermo. He would always introduce theological and spiritual themes evident in these films. After viewing them, he facilitated lively discussions among those who participated. Film as an art form was for Gregory a new literary-artistic medium for transmitting the meaning and truth of the human condition in its longing for God.

Mysticism, the living experience of God among the saints and in our own lives, was a passionate interest and study for Gregory. He read deeply into the writings of the mystics and began to teach his understanding of the spiritual life through their writings. Many will remember his retreats on various saint-mystics: St. Catherine of Siena, St. Therese of Lisieux, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, Jan Ruysbroeck, and others. As novices together and throughout our monastic life, I remember many discussions with him on the writings of Thomas Merton, whom he loved. I often thought that Gregory desired to be another Merton who might influence contemporary spirituality. Unfortunately, he was not a disciplined scholar or writer so this did not become a reality. But there is vivid and living memory among the monks and his many friends of what he taught us through his preaching and his passionate love for things spiritual and aesthetic.

For the Oblates of the monastery, Gregory imparted the spirit of the Rule of St. Benedict and the monastic tradition in a contemporary and living way through retreats and conferences. He founded the Santa Barbara Bay Area Oblate group in the late 1970s, which met monthly. For the years he was able to be the director of this group, our Oblates were devoted to his teachings and "hung on" his words, so eloquent and soul-piercing. His love for that locality and its climate was a special incentive to found this group. Throughout

his childhood and teenage years, his family spent many weeks of summer vacation each year in Carpinteria. He loved beachcombing, collecting shells, communing with nature. I remember him saying that if Valyermo grew in numbers, he wanted us to make a foundation in Hawaii!

Gregory was a man of his cell. He never held a major job or administrative position in the monastery, nor did he have the patience or aptitude for such endeavors. He read, meditated, wrote poetry, imagined new ways of presenting the perennial wisdom of the Gospel, created ideal pilgrimages to far-away place. He took a long trip to Europe for the 25th anniversary of his vows. One of his favorite places was Skellig Michael in Ireland, an island of rugged beauty and a site of early celtic monastic life that charmed his spiritual sensibilities. He imagined himself to be suited for the hermit life because of his mystical inclinations and his love for Thomas Merton, who ended his own monastic days as a hermit. Throughout his life, Gregory had a delicate constitution and was afflicted with illness more than the average monk of his age. He retreated to his room in illness, loving his solitude while welcoming visitors who served him meals or came to enjoy rather intense conversations about life, theology, and spirituality.

Having lived with Gregory for so many years, and having been his abbot for sixteen of them, I believe that his last ten years were a great crucifixion and purification. His mystical inclinations were forged into a hidden, interior reality as his health declined, and as his care required absence from his monastery. The things he loved were slowly taken away from him, one by one, not just his mobility. As time progressed, he found it more and more difficult to read. He continued to listen to music and watch films at Mary Health. But that too faded away. His beautiful handwriting, through which he wrote letters and poetry, deteriorated and disappeared from his



everyday life. For months, he couldn't feed himself or do anything really. His speech became faint, inaudible; and his words indiscernible. One wondered about his thoughts, his musings, his prayer. In my last two visits with him, Gregory couldn't speak or respond to any attempt I made to connect. His eyes gazed elsewhere to the point that I sat in silence with him, nothing else. I likened it to a long visit to the Blessed Sacrament. Christ was present to both of us in the silence of his incapacity.

I would like to conclude my remembrances with a few words of Martin Laird from his book, *Into the Silent Land*. These words, I believe, were Gregory's reality, especially in his last days: "A mature contemplative practice places us squarely before the wound of the human condition. . . . We learn that the consummation of self-esteem is self-forgetful abandonment to the Silence of God that gives birth to loving service of all who struggle. . . . In the Crucified and Risen One, grace and disgrace have been joined. Because of this, our failure opens onto the luminous vastness of our depths, where Christ silently presides in the unfolding liturgy of our wounds." ✱



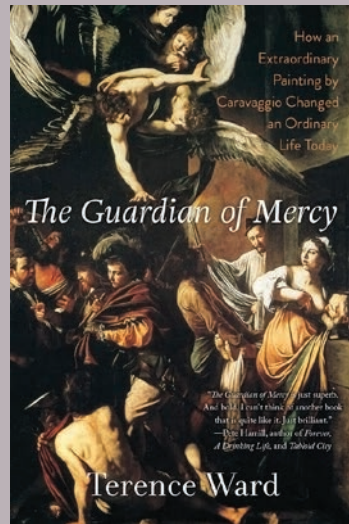
## QUARTERLY BOOK REVIEW

by fr. philip edwards, osb

BEFORE HAZARDING A NEW REVIEW, I must needs lay bare my back for penitential flagellation for “a very palpable error” of careless rhetoric that slipped past a prick of uneasy consciousness of something not-quite-right-there and the proofreader’s eagle eye — a really shabby slip for someone who owes his welcome into Newman’s “Catholic fullness” to a patient and learned son of St. Dominic — as I should have known well, Saint Vincent Ferrer, eloquent preacher and resilient reformer when Europe was disintegrating with plague and papal triplication, was definitely Dominican and not Franciscan; the “careless rhetoric” was to see the flow of the importation of popular devotion channeled through Franciscan (rather than simply Spanish or just European folk custom) missionary practice. (St. Vincent’s gift was to appreciate and appropriate the popular and personal in the contemplative light of doctrine and so to encourage ecclesial communion, the hope not always realized of every conscientious prelatial encounter with popular devotion and enthusiasm.)

One hundred years after St. Vincent, a Florentine artist comes to make his mark in all the arts in renascent Rome for more than half the century, Michelangelo Buonarroti. Nine years after his death, in “a small town forty miles east of Milan” (p. 13), another Michelangelo (Merisi) is born who will himself in his youth come south in the first years of the new century for a short burst of painterly glory in Rome and Naples under the name of his home town, Caravaggio. It is his (conjectured) story and that (presumably ‘factual story’) of the guardian of his painting *The Seven Acts of Mercy* (plus the serendipitous concurrence of Pope Francis and his Year of Mercy) that make this beguiling blend of fact and fantasy.

The *Author’s Note* (pp. ix–xii) tells at the very beginning:



**THE GUARDIAN OF MERCY**  
*How an Extraordinary  
 Painting by Caravaggio Changed  
 an Ordinary Life Today*

TERENCE WARD

2016, Arcade Publishing  
 ISBN: 978-1-62872-592-6

This story found me. I was wandering with Idanna in the back streets of Naples — the Italian city of her grandmother — when we came upon a mysterious painting by Caravaggio, Inside the small, empty, silent church . . . lit only by a glow from the glass skylights of the cupola.

Suddenly, a Neopolitan man chosen to guard this forgotten treasure stepped forward. This humble municipal employee confessed how he has been moved by art for the first time. Unexpectedly, he opened a window for us onto the power of art to enlighten and elevate.

This narrative unfolds through sliding doors, from the guardian’s gritty contemporary world [in stalwart standard font] to a reconstructed past [in supple Italic] that imagines Caravaggio’s exile from Rome to Naples. There he creates a painting that offers a fresh take on the perennial works of mercy. . . . In his radical vision, the fugitive artist breaks with tradition; using Neopolitans fresh off the streets as his models,

placing them in scenes that defy the religious art of his day.

I am not an art historian. I have tried to draw his character and working methods based on the spare known facts. Caravaggio left behind neither personal effects nor letters.

In a city that survives on a knife edge between cruelty and grace, the acts of mercy still resonate with universal meaning, as relevant now as when the artist brushed his oils onto the canvas four centuries ago.

The central focus of this story and its protagonists, Antonio Esposito and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, then, is the latter's wondrous Baroque depiction of real bare flesh of back, breast, hand, and foot shining out of the swirling darkness. With the author and his wife we are led by the guardian to see and to understand what these striking, realized images are "saying" to and about both ourselves and the painter, the city and world we live in — and the mystery of God and His Mercy.

That we have this as it stands now (2016) is itself a miracle of grace. We are told in the *Epilogue* (pp. 179–183):

...Uncertainty governs our unconscious. But wonder and the magic of inspiration are invincible. I say this because I wrote this story once before. But then, in the mountains of Indonesia, the entire manuscript vanished into the night. My laptop was stolen along with the backup drive. After a long period of mourning, Idanna shook me and insisted I should begin again, which eventually I did.

Ironically, this extended time frame allowed for the book to be released at a moment when the tectonic plates are shifting in Rome and beyond. Not only does the current Pope Francis inspire the faithful, he astonishes the world with his statements that he delivers with dramatic honesty and passion.

He strikes a deep chord.

Like Samson, he has shaken the temple....

About the writer himself I should like to know (and tell you) more than I am able. The inner back flap of the dust jacket of this edition

that I have on hand tells us that he was born in Colorado and taken while a boy by his parents to live in Iran, an experience that seems to have found fruit in his previous (and first?) book, whose encomia on the back side of the dust jacket truly whet my appetite. The inner flap gives us the full title, *Searching for Hassan: A Journey to the Heart of Iran*, but then cryptically cuts to the quick by saying "he is also a documentary producer and a cross-cultural consultant. He divides his time between Florence, Italy, and New York."

In the first chapter, *Into Mezzogiorno*, we meet him in Florence

...far from the concrete canyons, of Manhattan, or the lofty Tehran where I grew up in the days of the Shah, or the anarchy of Athens where I was based as a cross-cultural consultant for a decade working across the Persian Gulf. All that changed when I met Idanna, whose magnetic voice seized me one evening in the East Village.... When we went around the table, Idanna spoke softly, poetically, and told us about a world where Asia spilled into the green Pacific waters. This island was her home. Struck by her words, I knew that I had to know more. Two years later, we were married on Madison Avenue and 25th Street in Manhattan in the Italianate Appellate Courthouse during a blinding December blizzard that blanketed the city in a white cloak for days.

Here in Italy, I've seen that Idanna carries a wide, cosmopolitan vision that sets her leagues apart from the smug Florentine society that has been feeding off the city's legacy for centuries, instead of preserving the best of the past for the sake of the future. Idanna's style differs dramatically. She chooses to play it low-key and understated.... Peering through the Florentine fog from my desk, I gaze beyond the old cypress in a nearby garden.... suddenly I turn to find Idanna standing silently behind me. On winter days like these, a deep melancholy overwhelms her. Her mood changes when the humid chill seeps through our walls and settles in... she sighs. 'My Neapolitan grandmother rarely smiled, but when she was bedridden, I remember that all I had to do was to utter the word *Napoli* and a sudden

spark would light up her dark blue eyes'... Staring out my window into the mist, Idanna's words about her *nonna* linger in the air. 'You know, in my family, the word *Napoli* always conjures up light.' For myself, Naples holds another pocket of illumination, the *Istituto Universitario Orientale*, set in the historic center, which happens to be one of Europe's finest centers of Near Eastern studies. A leading expert on Persepolis, Adriano Rossi, teaches there. I have urgent need to speak with him about my book on Iran.

'Adriano just wrote,' I reply; 'he's back at the Orientale.'

'Yes, andiamo, let's go!' she says without missing a beat....

Neapolis, the New City, older than Rome itself, harbored in the shadow of the volcanic rim of Greater Greece, is very much a protagonist in this story of dark passion and redemptive light, providing a brief respite of freedom and inspiration for the renegade painter — and a safe haven in the midst of its squalid streets for the great fruit of this gift of creative freedom.

In the chapter treating the sixth (in the rather helter-skelter order of this book) Act

of Mercy, "Burying the Dead" (Chapter 19, 'The Comedy is Over', pp. 127–131), Terence and Idanna are treated to a night at the Teatro San Carlo with a mordant bit of *opera verismo*, Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, a not so subtle warning from Idanna's Neapolitan friend about Antonio's domestic crisis. Fortunately, Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* would more nearly suit the merciful climax of this book's story; despite the dark destructive suction of the black hole maelstrom of greedy passion and vengeful wrath, the Uncreated Light Who is *emmet* and *chesed* is Lord, "Whose beauty is past change; praise Him!"

Repent, and believe the Good News! ✧



**Fr. Philip** was born the year this monastic community was founded in China. Newman, especially his *Grammar of Assent*, was important in his intellectual formation. He made his monastic profession

at Valyermo in 1962.



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### September 9–10

The Universal Vocation of Monasticism (Rev. Greg Peters)

### September 12–16

Sophia Wisdom in the Writings of John of the Cross (Fr. Stephen Coffey)

### September 30–October 2

Contemplative Prayer (Fr. Luke)

### October 3–7

St. Teresa's Way of Perfection and the Face of God (Fr. Stephen Coffey)

### October 31–November 3

Autumn Artist Retreat (Deloris Haddow)

### November 4–6

Edith Stein (Fr. Joseph, Cheryl Evanson, & Michaela Ludwick)

### November 7–11

Mysticism of Teilhard de Chardin (Fr. Stephen Coffey)

### November 14–18

Guess What's Coming for Dinner (Fr. Isaac)

### November 23–25

Thanksgiving at Valyermo (Various Monks)

### November 25–27

Advent Retreat (Various Monks)

### November 28–December 2

Priest Retreat: Healers of Christ (Fr. Francis)

### December 16–18

Veni Veni Emmanuel: A Silent Advent Retreat (Fr. Matthew)

## ONE DAY RETREATS

### September 10

A Donde Aponta Tu Brujula Espiritual (Carlos Obando)

### September 17

Wit and Humor in the Bible (Fr. Patrick)

### September 24

Benedictine Vows; Stability, Obedience, Conversion- Foundational Tools for Parents and Grandparents (Lisa Marion)

### December 4

Taller Adviento En Espanol (Carlos Obando)

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