

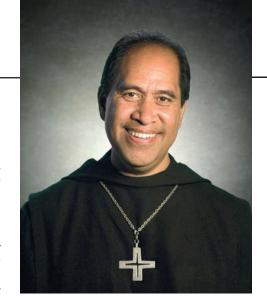
#### **LETTER** from the **ABBOT**

### Dear Friends,

T WAS A BUSY SUMMER FOR US here at Valyermo. Beginning in June, we celebrated the priestly ordination of our confrere Angelus Echeverry. It was a beautiful celebration at a beautiful venue: Immaculate Conception Church in Monrovia. Father Randy Campos, the pastor of the parish and good friend of the Abbey, allowed us to use his beautiful church for this momentous occasion. Also, Mother Judith, O.C.D. and our dear Carmelite Sisters very graciously hosted the reception at their home in Duarte, which was conveniently located down the street from the church. It was a spectacular day, involving many friends of the Abbey, to whom we are most grateful.

In July, Brother Columba Corrie professed temporary vows on the feast of St. Benedict. This too was a joyous celebration for the community. We were doubly blessed that Brother Columba's younger brother, Alan, was able to fly in from Scotland to be here to celebrate with us. Please keep Brother Columba in your prayers as he continues to faithfully live out his vocation here at St. Andrew's Abbey.

Also in July as part of our ongoing formation as monks, our own confrere, the internationally renowned Father Luke Dysinger, gave us two days of excellent conferences on reformation and transformation in the monastic life. Father Luke, as many of us know, is a natural teacher. Still, it is one



thing to "know" it, and quite another to "experience" it. What a blessing to have him as "one of our own."

At the end of July, we all traveled to Los Angeles to attend a performance of sacred music composed by Father Angelus, another talented confrere of ours. The annual event is called unSUNg, which champions the works of living composers. This year Father Angelus showcased two *a capella* pieces for choir, and a chamber piece for baritone, cello, clarinet, and chimes. This is the third year Father Angelus' works were performed at this event. Thank you to the friends and oblates that came out for this wonderful occasion, another opportunity for the Abbey to evangelize through the sharing of our gifts.

In the month of August, Brother Dominique celebrated his 50th anniversary of profession of vows, and Father Philip celebrated his 50th anniversary of ordination. These two elders of our community continue to be witnesses of fidelity and commitment to the younger monks. May the

Lord continue to bless us with faithful and committed monks.

To conclude our busy summer season, our Observer John Santa Ana entered the novitiate on the feast of the Triumph of the Cross (September 14); he was given the name Brother John Baptist. Please keep him in your prayers as he moves forward in his monastic vocation.

I share these special moments of our life with you since it is through your faithful prayerful support that the graces and mercies of God are bestowed upon us. We in turn, try to be as faithful as we can to God in living out our vocation as monks and as stewards of this beautiful oasis in the desert, so that we can share the fruit of our prayers and God's blessings with you and those who come here.

On behalf of the monastic community, "thank you" for your prayers, friendship, financial support and sacrifices. May the Lord richly bless you for your goodness to us, and may He be glorified in all we do.



# Chronicle

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Turone di Maxio, "Judgment Day," ca. 1360, Basilica Santa Anastasia, Verona (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

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#### **EDITOR'S NOTE**

#### **AELRED NIESPOLO, OSB**

ERTAINLY AMONG THE BEST-KNOWN lines of Augustine's *Confessions*, and of all Christian literature, is: "You have made us, O Lord, for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

In truth, these words encapsulate the season of Advent we will soon enter as Autumn begins the ending of the year, intimates the ending of all time, and hints at the judgment of all history and all creation; a time when all our own personal histories, and the histories of nations are made clear. We enter a season of desire, and of longing, a season of expectation, of wonder, of hope and perhaps even of restless fear. Advent, heralded by our expectations of Christ the King's return, is very much the season of the heart desiring what the heart desiries most.

St. Bernard wrote that Advent is really about the three-fold coming of Christ, and this trinity of arrivals is rooted in the very nature of God With Us, Emmanuel, Yahweh Saves, Yeshua, Jesus. There is the historical birth which we commemorate; there is the glory, and fearfulness, of his return at the end of Time which we anticipate; and there is the third coming which happens to us now, as we live God's word. For the Incarnate Son is now, he exists in our lives. In each of these three comings of Christ there is the gift of life, of the living God continually creating, bringing to fruition, the purpose and continuity which embraces all things.

Yet, we often get in the way of what our hearts truly desire. This is why the keywords of this time are "watch and stay awake": this watchfulness is a necessary part of our commitment to on-going conversion in our life with Christ. Because of the Incarnation of

Jesus, everything, by its very nature, is in the present tense.

Advent is also about the relationship of desire and time: we are waiting for what is already here. The time of Advent, which began from the first "In the beginning when God created heaven and earth" of Genesis, continues with John's "In the beginning was the Word" and ends with the eschaton, the making of all things new: the last manifestation of a Christ already come, but for whom we nevertheless still must wait. Our confusion lies in this: we lose Advent's immediacy because of our un-awakened and inattentive lives. As Merton wrote: "the spiritual life is first of all a matter of keeping awake."

Advent is about immediacy. And that is why we are able to cry out to God with Isaiah throughout our Advent liturgical readings, that he return to us because we do not even have the capacity to convert ourselves without God's help. Divine grace must tear open, rend, the heavens so that we may respond. Without

God active in our lives, we "are like men unclean", and all of "our integrity is filthy clothing." These are striking images because they

tell us what we, when alone, make of ourselves, when we are awake only to who we think we are: our posturing, our faux integrity, or self-importance, the world we cling to — and yet, without God our hearts tell us that we wither like the leaves, that our sins hollow us out, till we are blown away by the wind. Driven by this or that passion, hol-

low, empty and completely lacking any knowledge of self.

Because we are the clay and God the potter, we are the work of his hands. We are made by God to share in God's life. We are made for you Lord, and our hearts do not rest until they rest in you.

Our present times are marked by the steady march into shorter days and longer nights. After all, scripture tells us that the master will return during the night. The scriptures have often identified the night with powers of darkness, the time the enemy sows weeds in the field, times of frightening visions, attacks, suffering. Whether Job, affrighted by his visions in the night, or Jesus, in agony in the night garden — at best it is an ambiguous time, a time of potential tension. It is the world we live in as Christians, men and women

who are to be children of the light. And we are required to be awake and watchful during this night in order to receive the master on his return. Of course we can see this as primarily eschatological, and it is eschatological; but it also tells us that wakefulness in the night lies in leading our lives so that we may always let Christ into them. We are all the doorkeepers that have to stay awake in the present moment, because there is that knocking in the world now.

Simone Weil wrote: "we cannot prevent ourselves from desiring; we are made of desire." She stresses that even if this desire nails us

> down to the imaginary, the selfish, the temporal, we

> > are able

to open

it up to

God With Us as it moves from the imaginary to the real, from the temporal to the eternal. This is expressed in another way by one of the desert fathers who said that "whoever has a heart can be saved." When we pray for God's coming during Advent we are opening the door for him, opening the heart that yearns for Him. And

cumscribe his coming in by limiting his grace.

During this coming season of Advent, especially in a world as confused and fearful as it now is, we are asked to reflect on that cry from deep within ourselves and as Christians let us pray that cry is *Maranatha*—Come

we must take care that we don't cir-

Lord Jesus. 💢

# What to Do with the Silence

OW IS IT that we who want to take the spiritual life seriously have so much trouble with silence? How is it that our time of meditation and adoration gets cut short or gets filled with a lot of readings, or songs, or devotions? Even on retreats we can't keep quiet. Why do our days of

recollection get shorter and shorter? Why are our attempts to observe monastic "great silence" at night less and less successful? It is not only us—many others have the same difficulties. We are afraid of the silence. Why?

I think it's because when it is quiet, we feel very poor. We realize that we have no beautiful thoughts, that our minds are full of all kinds of stupid little worries and plans. Anger and resentments come to crowd out the Gospel



BEN HARRISON, MC

reading we have just heard. Sometimes our imagination may even go pornographic. When there is silence, we realize that our minds are very far from God, and very much obsessed with ourselves. Because these are such painful feelings, we can't sit with the silence. We have to fill it up with words, music,

pretty pictures, flowery prayers — or activity.

Maybe part of the problem is that there

are different types or tones of silence: there are silences that express anger, disapproval, mistrust and indifference, but also silences that show empathy, acceptance, admiration and love.

When we try to observe silence in our relationship with God, which of these silences are we direct-

ing toward him? And when

I try to enter into *his* silence, do I find it a warm and welcoming embrace or something less than that? And if it is less, is that because of my inner state or his?

Perhaps, like me, you have tried various techniques for quieting, for emptying your mind. In my many years of religious life I have never found a technique that will help me even sit still physically, much less calm my busy little grasshopper mind, my slippery little frog-like mind, always jumping, jumping. But that is not surprising, really. After all, we are small creatures, and our minds are full of small concerns. If God occasionally gives us respite from our distractions, we are grateful. But if not, we can learn to turn our distractions into prayer.

I'm thinking about what I did today? Fine, I make it a prayer. Like a child recounting to his mother all that happened in school, I tell the Lord all that happened in my day. My mind is full of worries about tomorrow? Over and over again I turn tomorrow's plans over to the Lord, making acts of confidence that he will help me navigate the difficulties step by step. My prayer is full of pain at things I've done or others have done to me? I make repeated requests for healing, for forgiveness, for reconciliation with my brothers and sisters.

Even temptations come to haunt my silence? I desire this thing, that pleasure? I long for this person, that experience? What goodness is it that I see and hunger for there that I can't find more perfectly in God? I plead with God in my deep yearning and neediness to give me the support, the nourishment, the comfort, the friendship, the love I need so that I can grow in my faithfulness to the One Good that lies hidden in all that is good and beautiful, in all that attracts me.

We want so much to feel close to God, but if we are not plagued by these distractions, then we are often burdened with a ponderous boredom or a frustrating dryness. My mind feels like anything but a temple of the living God. More like a garbage dump, a wasteground— or a desert. I don't feel at all like a child of God. More like an orphan, or a beggar. But the fact is, especially as people called and committed to serve the poor, there is nothing better for us than to feel like orphans and beggars. It was to them that Our Lord came. It was them he touched, not others. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." What else can it mean? We are blessed when we feel like "a dry, weary land without water," when we experience ourselves as broken, sinful and lost.

This prayer from our poverty puts us in deep union with our people. This prayer becomes a prayer for mercy not only for my sins and weaknesses, but for all those I serve as well. I will learn to be merciful to beggars because I know myself to be a beggar in God's sight. Because I know what it feels like to be Lazarus sitting on the rich man's door-step, I will learn to be compassionate to the Lazarus sitting at my door.

And as I learn to understand and identify with the orphan, God will perhaps lift me up and let me know consolation again, so that I can show his love to other orphans. Then I will no longer feel like an orphan, but like a joyful and confident child of God. And I can convey that deliverance to the lonely and the lost. But even if he leaves me in my desolation, I can still be his agent, his wistful presence among my companions on the way.

Among the desert fathers the story was told of a young monk who came to the wise old abba with many questions about prayer and spiritual life. The old man said, "Go and sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you all things." Silence will teach us all things because God dwells in silence. Remember Mother Teresa's saying, "The fruit of silence is prayer; the fruit of prayer is faith; the fruit of faith is love; the fruit of love is service; the

fruit of service is peace." It all begins with silence. If we learn to sit with the silence, even when it makes us feel poor, miserable and useless, we will find God waiting for us in the depths, below all that noise and chatter and grief and complaining.

Maybe the noise will not go away, but slowly, slowly we will learn to listen down, to hear

below all the confusion, to the deep silence at the centre of our hearts where God is always speaking, rather, whispering, his Word—"I love you... love you... you." And then no longer will it be even a whisper, but a silent spring of water "welling up to eternal life."

I remember two places where I experienced a profound silence resonant with God. One was

in the cave chapel of a hermit-priest in the wild uplands of Sicily. The ledge around that rough, low-roofed grotto could seat perhaps twelve people around the rock altar at its centre. The silence there was like the womb of the earth itself, a timeless refuge for generations of shepherds and monks. The other place was the Blessed Sacrament chapel located in the sub-sub-basement of a highrise office building in Los Angeles, where you could feel the deep rumble of the city high above and imagine below you the thrust of the girders supporting the weight of the massive building towering overhead. That muffled silence was like a peaceful, accidental eddy in the onward, electrical rush of the

human construct. In both these places I also carried a sense of my littleness and poverty. In the one it was the disencumbered empty-handedness of a wanderer returning to his natural origins, finding shelter from the elements. In the other it was the helplessness of the homeless vagrant seeking momentary respite from the city's manic chase.

And so I learn to be happy to pray as a poor man. I don't need to be strong, a contemplative athlete capable of controlling my thoughts, a master of difficult techniques. All I have to be is a poor man who, knowing he cannot pray well, relies on the Holy Spirit to be the fire on his hearth. Sometimes I feel like a cork bobbing on the ocean's surface,

dreaming of the deeps. Sometimes it is enough to rest there on the surface silently, trusting the ocean to be deep. But everything depends on giving God the time and the space, which means the silence. It is in that silence, when we have come to know and accept how poor we really are, that God can come and fill our painful emptiness with his joy and peace.\*



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.

<sup>\*</sup> Originally published in Spirituality, Vol. 23, No. 132, May/June 2017, Dublin Dominicans.

# Robes of Righteousness

DR. DONALD P. RICHMOND, OBL.OSB

"The habit and the tonsure contribute little; but a change of manners, and an entire mortification of the passions, make a truly religious man."

—The Imitation of Christ (Tan Books, 2013)

"Do not aspire to be called holy before you really are."

— The Rule of Saint Benedict, in Saint Benedict's

Prayer Book (Ampleforth Abbey, 2011)

OLINESS OF LIFE IS THE INCLInation, if not aspiration, of every human being. Whether we are rabid atheists or militant religionists, the desire to walk righteously beats within every breast. Even those who choose the way of the Tempter unwittingly seek to grasp the forbidden fruit of (even in a secular manner) being "like God." Such an assertion is not of necessity grounded within biblical wisdom, but, rather, existential reality. Passion for perfection is primal. Hunger for holiness is human.

If the above even remotely communicates truth, if we truly hunger for holiness as a necessary path to enlightenment, such an assertion poses at least one important question: How is holiness to be achieved? How indeed! Throughout human history a diversity of paths and disciplines have been trod in our search for sanctity. From rigorous asceticism to riotous licentiousness, from lonely deserts to far-lonelier palaces, the paths of perfection have been variously exciting, extreme and exacting. Saint Benedict of Norcia offers a simple answer to our question, however. He writes (using my own words) "the way up is the way down." That is, if we seek the







heavenly we must pursue and prioritize what is human and earthly. Enlightenment is not achieved except within the human community. There is no socio-psycho-pneumatic awakening except by envisioning and embracing our neighbor.

One of the most important texts within the Christian Tradition is found in St. Matthew's good news. In Matthew 5: 3-11, what has traditionally been called the "Beatitudes." Together these nine verses outline how, naturally and organically, the disciple attains and maintains a state of blessedness. Of particular interest, especially, is how the experience of blessedness is secured by living within the various conundrums which the text presents. With these words, Jesus Christ asserts that the poor are rich (vs. 3) and the persecuted are royalty (vs. 10). The future hope and expectations of verses 4-9 are bracketed within the here-and-now reality of kingdom living (verses 3 and 10). Living within the conundrum is the secret. We come to know, to knowledge, to awakening, by living these principles practically. True knowledge, or awakening, is not achieved through intellectual ascension, emotional integration or spiritual realization, per se. Rather, and essentially, it is achieved by allowing ourselves to fully descend into all of the difficulties experienced within the human community. As has been said by Thomas à Kempis, in the first book of his Imitation, if we want to fully understand the words of Jesus, we must entirely commit ourselves to the way of Jesus. Within the context of the Christian Tradition, this means that we must allow ourselves to be and become incarnate. The way is the awakening!

This principle is crucial to our question about holiness. The Beatitudes present and provide a series of steps (often overlapping and intersecting, digressing and progressing) by which we attain beatitude or, if we will, beatification and true vision. Beginning with

Continued on page 17

#### I. FISHING WITH RICH

WHEN AT THE AGES OF 48 AND 46 my maternal grandfather and grandmother became grandparents, they decided they did not want to be grand anything...so we called them Rich and Olive. Rich, was called Earl by Olive and Mr RE [Robert Earl] by everyone else in the little Wyoming town. The other Richardsons were Mr and Mrs HB, while my grandparents were Mr and Mrs RE.

Rich was a Civil Engineer, who had studied under Parshall of the Parshall flume fame. He also grew Golden Bantam corn so that he could go to college. He had planted the elm trees in the oval at Colorado State University. When my mother was in college at the rival University of Colorado, she discovered that her father was quite wealthy, making more

Sheaves," when we brought in vegetables. Now I know the line comes from a Psalm. Rich was a Unitarian. Olive was a Methodist. Some in the family were Scots Presbyters and Congregationalists. We were Episcopalians; all were pegs above the Baptists, Mormons and Catholics. Olive sang in the choir and so I learned to love the rousing Methodist hymns. It did not matter much to me, what church, I simply liked to go, always.

One did not have childish conversations with Rich. One could prattle on to Olive or the aunts, but not to Rich. One had to have something meaningful and important to say to Rich, because he really listened. He just waited for one to finish. He would also respond later, indicating that he had thought



than \$6,000 a year during the depression. As she worked as the bookkeeper for the family business, the Lovell Clay Products Company, she knew. Rich went to Denver annually and bought a new 3 piece suit that cost at least \$200.00, a grand sum in those days. Olive made her clothes and those of her daughters, often cutting fabric the "wrong way' to scrimp out a piece. My mother did not like that. Rich also worked in his vegetable and flower gardens. He wore khaki trousers, a long-sleeved Khaki shirt and a khaki tie, when he gardened!!! He had a hand plow and I would walk along side, barefoot. It was fun to pull the turnips, radishes and carrots; wash them under the hose or outside faucet and eat them. Rich, would sing,"Bringing in the

about what had been said. Kelly says one way I disarm students is that I also really listen. I wasn't sure of that. However, with all the emphasis on "listening" in the past few years, I have begun to reflect about listening. It seems I learned how to listen and not be afraid of silence from Rich, but I had not really realized that, until I grew old myself.

Most kids are given a stick from a tree with string, and a hook with a bobber or weight for first fishing attempts. Not us. We were given real poles of bamboo, with real spinning reels, the kind that you just put your thumb on the lever and it spins. We also had to learn to work with leaders, dry flies, especially Royal Coachmen and to carry our own wicker creels lined with grass. We learned how to cast, move

our flies about and be absolutely still otherwise. We were the only kids around who knew what "roily" water was. We also had to clean our own fish, properly.

Olive fried bacon and then put the trout [we caught only trout] dipped in flour and cornmeal into the hot bacon grease. We also had sliced cucumbers with a little vinegar, bread and butter sandwiches and lemonade. We learned to cut along the backbone of the cooked fish and to lift out adroitly the full skeleton with head and tail, leaving two perfect fillets to eat. Delicious and wonderful! To this day, I always serve cucumbers with trout or salmon. Rich did not like lake trout, which were red, only the stream trout, which were rainbows or sometimes browns. Our favorite campground for these feasts was on the way to the "Park" [Yellowstone] and called Three Sisters. Where we fished in the Big Horns also had names, but sadly I forget them.

Taking care of the real poles was a given. Our grandfather showed us respect by giving us the best with which to learn and to expect that we would take the best care of the equipment. I think that is a bit like the cellarer, who knows how to take care of things. It isn't so much caring for things as it is taking care of things. The poles and other equipment were not ours, but generously lent to us by our grandfather. The lending seems to be a form of hospitality too and definitely converted us from hostile children to loving fishers.

When I was 10 or so, I happened upon my grandfather's diary in his sister's house [the old Greeley homestead]. He had written it when he was 12 and every other line or so was about how he got mad at something. Much was devoted to the clashes about his younger brother Clyde. Clyde was a ne'er do well as an adult. Rich had started him in business several times and they had all failed. Clyde had died before I was born. Anyway, I loved my grandfather even more as I realized he also

had had the same fuse I came with. Today, I would have asked him what he did he do to control it? I have only recently learned to value anger as an indicator that either I am off about something, or something is wrong, but to wait... wait... wait.

Also when I was 10, the second of two "seeing more than was there to be seen" when I was a child occurred. We had gone to Red Lodge. Rich wanted to fish and Olive was worried because he had had a stroke. My mother and grandmother stayed in the cabin, but eventually asked me to go check on my grandfather. I approached from a cliff above the stream. I looked down and saw my grandfather fighting with the pole and line to cast. It was a fierce battle that he was losing and too intimate for me to have seen. I did not want him to see me looking at him having this battle of his humanity, aging decline and fury with God. I began to pray with every fiber of me, "Please dear God, let Rich catch a fish." I wept and prayed all the way back to the cabin. I did not have to explain much to my mothers...they just let me lie on my bed and cry-pray. I think that was the first time I ever really suffered for someone else's agony and I knew that it would not get better, so to speak...to catch the fish that day had to be as the chances in the future were less. I do not remember whether he caught a fish or not. I remember the seeing, the praying, and the suffering. I knew at the time it was a gift, a great gift and I was stunned for days. I knew its meaning too, but not in my head then.

Christ loved the fishermen. He even cooked fish for them. People shared the fishes and the loaves. When we eat the Host, we become Christ. That is the REAL PRESENCE. My mother made salmon at Christmas. When we feast on fish, I remember my family. Fishing with Rich and feasting on fish. And Christ is there too. It is a Christmas story.

## II. TREE FROGS: A Consolation Story

FR. JOHN BOSCO AT ST. ANDREW'S Abbey began the service by telling a story to make us laugh. I cannot relate the details of his tale accurately, but only as a "lead in" to my own account. Being an early-riser who navigates well in the dark, Fr. John is the "coffee maker of the cloister." One day as he was about to pour boiling water into a coffee maker, he noticed some extra "beige thing" in the machine. He removed the beige thing, a tree frog. However, he did not remove anything else and so monks drinking the coffee might be "hopping around." As you can see, I did not listen attentively as my mind went on its own voyages with the mention of tree frog.

John Spindler, my husband, comes to mind with any mention of frogs. His childhood friends gave him the name Cipek [sip-ick], meaning frog in Slovene. I did not hear that nickname until he was over 70 years of age, and though he expressed dislike of its being used, I saw the joy his friends had in recalling his childish appearance of long legs and ability to "hop around." It gave me a bit of insight into him as a boy, when I would never know him. In addition, John had "worked on" frogs for his dissertation and had told me that the big bullfrogs were cannibals and that one has to be sure they are well fed and separated to prevent their violent attacks on each other. I tend to think of frogs as long-tongued, nabbing flies and other nasty insects, not displaying "infrogunamity" [sorry, new word] to each other, as if they were human beings. After this brief mental flic of John of the frog, I went directly to a painful memory of tree frogs.

Shortly after we came to San Diego, we were in the wooded area near Alvarado Hospital one night. Much to the joy of the children [5 of them between 4 and 14 years of age], we found the grass and trees covered with tiny tree frogs. We scooped many up to take home. I think we

paid attention for a couple of days, but not too long after, I went out to the patio and discovered dead frogs everywhere. I remember being very grieved and physically sick. John being a bit pragmatic and stern said that of course they died as their little brains fried, not having enough water to keep them cool. The animals are not poikilotherms as we are. I was very sad, but I did not think to ask God to forgive me for poor stewardship of His creatures.

During the Fr. John Bosco's narrative, I did ask for forgiveness and also wondered if there were any tree frogs in San Diego.

A few days later, while on a retreat at Prince of Peace Abbey, I heard frogs in the night and was very conscious of the intense level of ambient noise in San Diego. My house is near two freeways [56 and 15] and the Abbey abuts two [76 and 5] as well. I did not sleep well. When I returned to my room after Lauds, I saw a tree frog. A beautiful golden beige creature with some black spots. He/she had long graceful legs. I touched him/her as I helped the exit of my room. So very soft. He/she and I sat for a while on the tiny patio outside my guest room. Perhaps the frog was thanking God for freedom and not being crushed had I mis-stepped and I was thanking God for forgiveness. Some might dismiss this is as coincident. I do not. I know God sends all kinds of comforts, we do not deserve. Mostly we do not choose to see them. Thank you God for the tree frog. \*



Audrey A Spindler is a retired professor who enjoys giving occasional retreats with Fr Francis Benedict, as they provide her with an opportunity to be a purposeful scholar again. A widow with

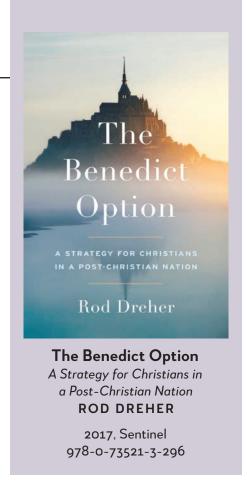
an active family life, she is also a grateful volunteer with Contemplative Outreach.

#### **BOOK REVIEW**

#### FR. PHILIP EDWARDS, OSB

Before attending to this issue's review, I must again confess to another hastily convenient but historically inaccurate obiter dictum bracketed into the last Chronicle's review of Carryl Houselander's The Reed of God. The fault is entirely my own; presented long past the due date for printing with a doughy glob of yeasty maundering of my own pondering, our doughty editor was able tidily to knot up the pudding bag by keeping Caryll on as the subject of "having been raised in the Reformed tradition...." But although a "rocking horse" rather than a "cradle" sort of Catholic, and certainly conditioned by contact with all sorts of heterodox persons and ideas in her "unorthodox" upbringing, her youthful and seemingly positive experience of living with communities of Catholic Sisters would seem to have given her a more comfortable easiness with the conventional Marian piety of her time. She was undoubtedly exposed at various times to one or another expression/ personal incarnation of "the Reformed tradition" but not "raised" in it.

As the one raised in it, albeit in a comfortable low-church evangelical ambience of neighborly adults and fervent born-again young people, I was a seeker for Truth and resolution of the troubled issues of my best friend's Ingersollian atheism and an intellectual justification for Christian Faith — and Happiness! Once in university and unable to cope with the initially-required-by-Presbytery major in philosophy, I took refuge in the English Department and was led by my high school English teacher to a learned Dominican scholar at St. Albert's for instruction in both faith and philosophy. Imbued with a no-nonsense puritan conscience tempered with a fairytale-fed imagination,



I scrupulously eschewed experiencing any liturgical or communal events that might color or deflect the intellectual pursuit, but my class notes were cluttered with doodles of rose-windows and gothic spires with possibly a mitred prelate now and again. (What really took my fancy but was beyond my limited graphic — or literary — skills were the "instressed" notes and sketches of G.M. Hopkins, which had just become available in a paperback that I somehow managed to pennyscrape enough to buy from the student bookstore.)

While the solid walls and tympans of Autun and Vezelay would more correctly symbolize the "Benedictine," the culmination of mediaeval Christendom and its faith-infused culture is more popularly experienced and

expressed in the flying buttresses and soaring windows of the later Gothic one might call "Bernardine" or even "Franciscan" and "Dominican," but in the romantic fervor of nineteenth-century restoration of the Old Order of things, including Benedictine monasticism, stylistic distinctions blurred so that the spire and buttress provided an apt symbol of the age of Benedictine presence and of the Mother Church.

Surely the most successful (at least, the most popular!) of Viollet-le-duc's restorations of Gothic glories is the fortified abbey mount, Mont-St. Michel, nestled off the coast of Brittany in the shadow of the neighboring Norman peninsula that harbors Cherbourg at its tip. The dust-jacket of Rod Dreher's book is an iconic color photograph of the island rising out of water and mist just as the inbreaking glow of dawn begins to finger the darkened spire's buttresses. One would have expected the opposite time of day when the light is fading into darkness as the author presents "the steady decline of Christianity and the steady increase in hostility to traditional values" (p. 2), but he does propose a positive program to preserve "the roots of our faith, both in thought and in practice" (p. 3), even if it may mean leaving the spires and buttresses to crumble into the rising waters, to find humbler shelters of whatever materials may still be at hand.

I was first made aware of "The Benedict Option" a year or two ago at the close of the meeting of one of "my" oblate groups, when copies of a sort of flyer were offered to us just as we were leaving. I remember being "put off" by its "tone," but was aware of its interest, particularly to those who consider St. Benedict, and his Rule, of value to their lives and actions. Now that is in book form it would seem worthy of formal consideration.

Despite the disclaimer in the Introduction—"This book does not offer a political

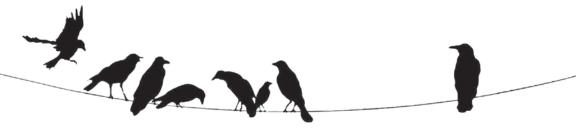
agenda. Nor is it a spiritual how-to manual, nor a standard decline-and-fall lament" (p. 4) — this book is nevertheless a sort of political tract in that it names names and would seem to exclude from the "strait and narrow way that leads to salvation" any Democrat and most Republicans, but as that would seem to be the mind of the people expressed in the last national election it need not be an important consideration for the moment. I suppose my own difficulty is the discomfort of a lazy, possibly naughty, miscreant brought before the finger-shaking figure of Authority — or, more appropriately, one of the Pharasaic "brood of vipers" under the tongue-lash of the camel-skinned Baptist. My living of the Rule of Benedict is often self-indulgent and off the mark of Gospel charity set by his (and my) Divine Master, Who is surely Coming to judge the living and the dead and the world by fire at any moment, a moment that no one knows but the Father. How to be ready? If we take the earliest written record of Apostolic teaching concerning this ( I Thessalonians 3:12-5:28) we should not be running away but continuing where we may be: chaste and fervent in love for one another, encouraging and building one another up, not repaying "evil for evil, but always seek[ing] to do good to one another and to all." And in all fairness to Dreher, this is practically what he does in finding and presenting real persons and groups across the gamut of persuasions that are actively providing real options of bearing light and overcoming the bearers of darkness. I sense that my discomfort is more in the "being put off by its tone" mentioned above. Despite my own quibble that got us into this ungainly paragraph, the Introduction is well-done, succinct, and reasonably thought out, and would be worth reproducing here if it were a bit shorter — as is true of the Table of Contents. Let me at least try to give you a taste:

This book ... offers a critique of modern culture from a traditional Christian point of view, but more importantly, it tells the stories of conservative Christians who are pioneering creative ways to live out the faith joyfully and counterculturally in these darkening days.... If the salt is not to lose its savor, we have to act. The hour is late. This is not a drill.... Read this book, learn from the people you meet in it, and be inspired by the testimony of the lives of the monks. Let them all speak to your heart and mind, then get active locally to strengthen yourself, your family, your church, your school, and your community. In the first part of this book, I will define the challenge of post-Christian America as I see it. I will explore the philosophical and theological roots of our society's fragmentation, and I will explain how the Christian virtues embodied in the sixth-century Rule of Saint Benedict, a monastic guidebook that played a powerful role in preserving Christian culture throughout the so-called Dark Ages, can help all believers today. In the second part, I will discuss how the way of Christian living prescribed by the Rule can be adapted to the lives of modern conservative Christians of all churches and confessions. To avoid political confusion, I use the word "orthodox" — small "o" — to refer to theologically traditional Protestants, Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox Christians. The Rule offers insights in how to approach politics, faith, family, community, education, and work. I will detail how they manifest themselves in the lives of a diverse

number of Christians who have lessons to teach the entire church. Finally, I will consider the critical importance of believers thinking and acting radically in the face of the two most powerful phenomena directing contemporary life and pulverizing the church's foundations: sex and technology.... (pp. 4–5)

What really unsettles me is that Dreher's fundamental option seems not to be Benedictine nor even Christian nor simply GOD-fearing, but only Conservative. Christianity from the beginning portrayed in the New Testament was unwelcome and persecuted, or enthusiastically received as Good News, fulfilling and renewing but calling for true repentance and change in newness of life, being a sacrificial leaven within the lumpy dough of human society, conserving all that is good, suffering all that is not even to the point of redemptive shedding of blood.

It is poignantly ironic that his Benedictine inspiration was rooted and entwined with the noble experiment of the monastery at Norcia (and its over-the-mountain neighboring community of "the Tipi Loschi, the vigorously orthodox, joyfully countercultural Catholic community in Italy, recommended to me by Father Cassian of Norcia" [pp. 239–241]). Chapter 3: A Rule for Living (pp. 48–77), with its nine subheadings — Order, Prayer, Work, Asceticism, Stability, Community, Hospitality, Balance, The Only Great Tragedy in Life — could well serve as a basis for a booklet for Oblates. However variant our own missionary Benedictine



tradition (blessed by Popes St Gregory the Great and Benedict XV) may be from the periodic "return to the source" attempts to revive the Primitive Observance that have through the 1500 or more years since that seeker of God, whom St. Gregory calls "blessed in name and deed," fled the city for the cave then for the mountain-top monastery to revise the Regula Magistri into a Regula Monachorum, we do profit from the perserverant prodding and pestering of

these conserving keepers of the letter. The poignant irony is that every effort to return the patriarch's ideal to his home town has been crushed one way or another by various political — and Divine? — forces from Napoleon to the recent seismic cataclysm that tumbled the whole town to the ground. The Letter still remains and the Spirit, calling us to "listen to the Master" that we may "run the way of his commands that gives freedom to our hearts" Just say "Yes" then!

#### ROBES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS from page 10

spiritual poverty, the pilgrim slowly ascends into sorrow (vs. 4), through humility (vs. 5) and up to a genuine hunger for righteousness (vs. 6). Later, in verse 8, purity of heart is attained. And here is both the problem and the promise. Between verse 6 (the hunger for holiness) and verse 8 (the satisfaction of this hunger with true purity of heart) falls verse 7: "Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy." What this means is clear. If we want to attain purity of heart and true vision, we must clothe ourselves with robes of mercy and compassion. Or, in other words, the robes of righteousness are the robes of mercy.

Righteousness has hands and feet because love has hands and feet. Just as love must be practical in order to truly be love, so righteousness and purity must be practical in order to be truly pure. Both the Buddhist and Christian traditions agree on this matter, although in some ways the Christian and Buddhist understanding of compassion/mercy in some ways diverge. In Basho's *Narrow Road to the Interior* the ancient Japanese monk Basho offers some rice to someone who is hungry. Interiority was exteriority. His road to perfection was the road to and with people. Similarly, in the New Testament, we are told about the "Good Samaritan" who helps an "unclean"

man in dire need. In this story the outwardly religious, but spiritually depraved, avoid the "unclean" man on the road. They do not want to become religiously unclean! However, interestingly, the man who is thought to be unclean (the "Good Samaritan") is in reality the man who was clean, right and holy. Holiness of life, in both traditions, is achieved and exhibited by how we see and treat others. Holiness is always intensely rooted within the human community.

"To whom are we offering a cup of water?" Jesus himself said, "And whoever offers a cup of water, even to the least of these, will surely not lose his reward." People from any faith tradition, or those who are simply interested in living righteously, need to ask, answer, and appropriate such a question. The way of righteousness, the path of perfection, is always and only intently and intensely human. The robes of righteousness are the robes of mercy.



Dr. Donald P. Richmond, an Oblate of the Order of Saint Benedict, is a widely published author and monastic illustrator who has appeared in publications such as the Saint Austin Review, Our Sun-

day Visitor, Benedictines and the American Benedictine Review.



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