

SAINT ANDREW'S ABBEY

NUMBER 259 ✱ WINTER 2019



THE VALYERMO  
Chronicle

## LETTER *from the* ABBOT

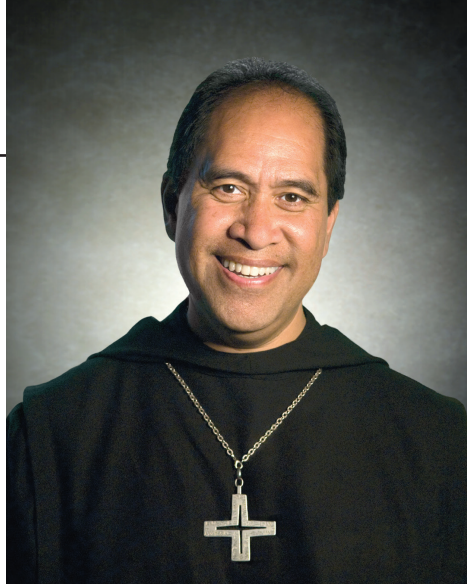
*Dear Friends,*

NOT LONG AGO, ON FEBRUARY 2 of this year, while it was pouring rain at Valyermo and all over southern California, the Lord blessed me with an important lesson that I will not soon forget.

February 2 is the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, also known as Candlemas. At the noon Mass, we provided candles for those who attended, as is prescribed in the rubrics. Mass began with all the artificial lights turned off. At the given time, the light from one candle was passed from person to person until all the candles in the chapel were aflame. Because the electrical lights were off, the candles provided the only illumination in the chapel, signifying of course, Jesus the Light of the World, and because it was a particularly dark and gloomy day outside due to the passing storm, the light they gave off seemed all the brighter and more visible, effecting a stronger sign.

After Mass and lunch, I walked out of the refectory into the pouring rain and hastened toward the monastery, seeking shelter from the unpleasant weather. "At least," I thought, "I have a jacket and an umbrella." Passing by some parked cars, I was startled when the door of one of the cars opened and a gentleman jumped out. "Father!" he called to me. Recognizing him from Mass, I stopped and tried to smile as I (im)patiently stood in the rain.

I had no idea what he wanted, but I thought whatever it was, it must be very important for him to stop me in the middle of the parking lot in the pouring rain(!). Different possibilities passed through my head in the few seconds it took for him to get from his car to me: maybe he wants me to anoint someone in his family who is dying in the hospital, which would mean I'd have to drive to the hospital in the storm. Maybe he needs to go to Confession, which would mean my afternoon schedule would be altered. Maybe he needs financial assistance, which would mean I'd



have to talk with him first, assess the situation, and then, if needed, track down our financial controller. But whatever it was, I was sure it would require time from my already tight schedule. All these (self-centered) thoughts and more raced through my head in the brief time it took for him to approach me. He tried to protect himself from the pouring rain by pulling his light denim jacket over his head while keeping both his arms in the sleeves of the jacket. It didn't work. This in itself made me feel guilty, as I stood there under the shelter of an umbrella.

"Father, I'm sorry," he said, "but I forgot to return my candle after Mass. Here it is." And he extended his hand toward me.

I thought to myself, "Are you serious? We are both standing in the middle of the parking lot, in the pouring rain and gusty winds because you want to return a used taper that is probably worth 35 cents!?"

I looked at the small, inexpensive, used candle in his outstretched hand. It was threaded through the flimsy circular cardboard watchamacallit which is used to catch melted wax so that it doesn't drip onto the floor. It was one of the tapers we used at Mass that day, *and* which we also use at Mass for Holy Thursday, *and* which we also use for the Easter Vigil.

In other words, the candle he wished to return was (to me) simply one of many used

tapers we have on hand for liturgies. And judging by its size, I could tell it had already been used for many liturgies because there was not much of it left.

I was stunned, grateful, impressed, perturbed, and humbled all at the same time. And before long I began to feel guilty and embarrassed about my attitude towards this person. He could have easily taken the candle home with him, and no one would have noticed it. He could have thrown it away, and no one would have called him on it. He could have said nothing about it, and no one would have been the wiser. But he didn't.

And *that* is what spoke to me. *That* is what impressed me about him. He wanted to return the candle because it didn't belong to him. I immediately sensed the light of his spirit shining brighter in the rain, while mine was slowly fading.

Walking to the monastery after this exchange, I recalled that the used candle now in my hand had also been blessed at Mass. No wonder the gentleman had made sure to return it.

It was at this moment that I wanted to close my umbrella and allow the rain to fall on my head. I felt a need to be washed of the sins of impatience, self-importance, and lack of charity toward my neighbor.

It was not the gentleman who needed something from me, as I had arrogantly and impatiently thought, but it was God who wanted to bless me through the example, humility, and uprightness of this person. God wanted to remind me of what He always expects of me: compassion, patience, and humility. And apparently He wanted to remind me of this as I stood in the pouring rain in the middle of the parking lot!

May the Light of Christ shine brighter through us with each passing day so that He alone is glorified in our lives.

Abbot Damien ❧

# THE VALYERMO Chronicle

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Caravaggio  
*The Entombment*  
(1603)

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*Homily given to prisoners in  
Manchester, England*

# A SERMON on Snakes

I WANT TO TALK ABOUT SNAKES. Today's Gospel begins with Jesus saying "The Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." I grew up in the mountains of Virginia, and there are lots of species of snakes in those forests, two of which are highly poisonous—the Timber rattlesnake and the Northern copperhead.

When I was a kid I often went barefoot in the summer, and my feet were tough. One day I was walking slowly up a mountain trail, quietly watching and listening for birds and wildlife. I would sometimes surprise a deer or a bobcat, a wild turkey or occasionally a ruffed grouse. A few times I even came upon a bear. As I put my bare foot down I realized that it was just an inch or two in front of a coiled copperhead. He must have been dozing in the sunlight or he would have already fled or bit me. I jumped back instantly and looked around to be sure there weren't any more surprises, and then I did something I still feel ashamed of.

I reached down and picked up a big rock and threw it at him. It bounced off, and he slithered off to the right. I hope the rock didn't do him any serious internal injury, but it did leave a bit of a rough scratch on his beautiful pattern. Timber rattlers strike me as kind of coarse and ugly, but copperheads have a beautiful pattern of grey and cinnamon colored hour-glass markings, and a gold-copper head. As he crawled off I felt bad that I had harmed one of God's creatures just because I was scared.

I think one of the reasons snakes scare us



is because of the camouflage. They usually blend in very well with their surroundings. I have nearly stepped on snakes a number of times, and whether they are deadly or not, it always gives me a rush of fear.

In the Gospel Jesus is referring to an incident that happened some twelve hundred years before, when Moses was leading the people out of slavery in Egypt, and they were crossing the desert. If you want to check it out, it's in your Bibles, Numbers 21:1-9. Leading the people of Israel to the promised land was a bit like taking the kids on a vacation. They're always complaining about something—they need a toilet, they're hungry, they're bored, it's taking too long, it's too hot, Sally's pinching me, James is eating all the cookies, you know how it goes. They say "I wish we'd never come," but you know once they get there they'll love it.

Every time there was some little difficulty crossing the desert, the people went to Moses and complained. They said, "We were better off as slaves in Egypt, we should never have listened to you." But God wanted them to be free, so he used the carrot and stick approach. Do you know that expression? When you have a stubborn mule or donkey and it won't move forward, you can use a carrot to lure him forward or a stick to drive him forward. So sometimes God gave the people a treat and sometimes he gave them a shock. This time there was a plague of poisonous snakes all around the camp, and people were being bitten and dying. They asked Moses to fix the situation, and Moses asked God what to do. He was told to make a bronze serpent on a pole and set it up where people could see it, and if they were bitten and looked at the bronze serpent, they would be safe.

Now Jesus uses that magical story from long ago to make a point. Basically, he's saying that humanity has been bitten by the serpent of evil and is dying of the poison of

sinfulness and corruption, and he himself will be lifted up, and those who look to him with faith will be safe.

In the Gospel of John, when Jesus talks about being lifted up, he is referring to his knowledge that he is going to have to go through an ordeal of suffering and rejection before being crucified, lifted up on the cross. But he also knows that by allowing himself to be raised up on the cross he will be defeating the forces of evil. And he believes his Father's promise that he will be raised from the dead and taken up into the glory of God. In John's view, Christ on the cross is already the victorious king.

Now, we can make an interesting parallel between the bronze serpent in the desert and Jesus lifted up on the cross. When the people looked at the bronze serpent, they saw what they feared. But looking at what they feared, looking it in the face, saved them. When we look at Jesus on the cross what do we see? We see what we fear. It's all there before us, as plain as day. It is true, we have gotten used to seeing the cross and not looking at it too carefully, but if we really focus on it and look at the crucifix attentively, open-heartedly, we see there everything we most fear—pain, suffering, death, loneliness, rejection, all the disasters, the evils that could befall us.

But, strange as it may seem, we also fear goodness and truth. Jesus was good and he spoke the truth, and that scared people. His truth-telling scared the authorities because it exposed their dirty tricks, but it also scares us because it challenges our self-justifications, our delusions, our lies. Why do people turn away from Christ, from God? Because they're afraid that exposure to God's goodness will change them. Good people make us nervous because they have something we want, but we're afraid that if we get it, we'll lose our freedom. We're terrified of not being in full control of our poor, unhappy little lives!

When I was lost in my confusion as a young man, I couldn't look people in the eyes. I was afraid of two things: I was afraid that they'd see what a rotten piece of work I had become, but I was also afraid that if I saw kindness and love in their eyes, I'd break into tears. I was frightened that a bit of understanding and sympathy would undermine my tough-guy defences, and the lonely little boy inside me would turn out to be a cry-baby.

I've said this before, but it's one of the most important things I've learned over the years. Fear and anger are very close, almost the same. We prefer anger because anger makes us feel strong. Fear makes us feel weak. If I feel both, and in my experience they always come together, I will focus on the anger because it makes me feel powerful. But whenever I'm angry and I don't know why, all I have to do is ask myself what I'm afraid of. Then, if I can manage to look that fear in the eye, or ask God to help me face it, I can put it in perspective and find some way to deal with it. When I was afraid of that copperhead, I threw the rock. But when I saw him crawl off, I felt sympathy for him.

So Jesus makes us angry because he challenges us, shows us how crooked we are, and, scariest of all, loves us anyway! We were afraid of having our lies and our defences undermined by Jesus' goodness, so we did that to him (look at the crucifix). But after we did that we realized, we began to realize, what we had done. We raised him up on the cross, God raised him up from the dead, and when we look at him, even though he scares us and threatens our falsity and selfishness, we are still drawn to him. "When I am lifted up, I will draw all men to myself." As we look at him there on the cross, lifted up like the serpent in the desert, our fear turns to compassion, and then to respect and then to love and then to trust.

Later in that Gospel we heard today, where Jesus says that those who see him

lifted up and believe in him will be saved, we have to understand what he means by believing. Believing is not just thinking something, having an opinion, not even being convinced of something. Just looking at that bronze serpent in the desert may have been enough for the Israelites to recover from their snake-bites. But just looking at Jesus, just saying "Lord, Lord!" will not get us out of our trap. Believing is making a radical act of trust, acting on your convictions.

If you're drowning in a stormy sea and somebody throws you a rope — being convinced that the rope will save you is not enough — you have to grab it with both hands and hold on for dear life. That's what believing is — grabbing this Jesus-rope with both hands, and if your hands cramp, holding on to that rope with clenched teeth.

Yes, it is a wonderful thing to look upon our Saviour there on the cross, lifted up before us, showing us the way to God. He *is* the way, the road, the path — and if we want to follow him, we have to set out on that path and follow it to the end.

When I almost stepped on that copperhead those many years ago, the shock of it scared me enough that I turned back home. That reminder of my mortality made me aware that I need to take care of my life, not venture further into the wilderness of my own feelings of curiosity and invincibility, my imagined special status as someone in harmony with nature. When I turned back, my inner voices accused me of cowardice, but, chastened, humbled, I sought a place of safety, of communion with my fellow human beings. I went back to camp. But there have been other times when I have had to go deeper into the wilderness, take a stick and nudge the snake out of my path, face the fear of further encounters, and carry on through risks and dangers toward my destination.

*Continued on page 17*



# EDITH STEIN

## *ST. TERESA BENEDICTA OF THE CROSS*

### **A Woman's Search for Truth**

BY MICHAELA RUSSELL, OBL. OSB

**M**Y JOURNEY WITH THIS SAINT BEGAN ON A SPRING afternoon several years ago at the Abbey in conversation with my oblate sponsor, Cheryl Evanson. We had just completed a workshop on Desert Mothers and our discussions led me to pose the question, “Who are our Modern Mothers?”

Saint Teresa Benedicta was born Edith Stein on October 12, 1891 into an observant Jewish family in the German Empire of Prussia. She was born on the Jewish Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur.

Edith was a very gifted child who loved learning. She admired her mother's strong faith; however, Edith's youthful pursuit of truth led her into agnosticism and the study of philosophy.

Her quest for truth began at Breslau University with the study of psychology, but then turned quickly to philosophy. She developed a close social circle which enjoyed discussion, as well as excursions into the local countryside. Additionally, Edith and her classmates were "passionately moved by the women's rights movement." In her autobiography, *Life in a Jewish Family*, Edith tells us that it was her "deep conviction of social responsibility" that made her decidedly favor women's suffrage.

It was through her studies in philosophy that she found the new school of phenomenology founded by Dr. Edmund Husserl, and she then moved on to Göttingen University to study under him. Phenomenology sought to find the connection between the visible world and the world of ideas and values. At Göttingen, she became an outspoken, albeit key member of the Philosophical Society. Many of the relationships she made there lasted throughout her lifetime and several were instrumental in her journey to faith. Edith tells us, "In Göttingen I had learned to respect questions of faith and persons who had faith."

Edith Stein was among the first women to receive a PhD in Germany. Her dissertation was titled *On the Problem of Empathy*. Edith then served on the faculty of University of Freiburg. However, she was denied many opportunities because she was a woman and she was Jewish.



On holiday in 1921, Edith read the autobiography of the mystic St. Teresa of Avila, which greatly affected her and led to her conversion. It is said that upon finishing, she laid down the book and proclaimed, "This is Truth!" She was baptized on January 1, 1922 and left the university to teach in a Dominican girls' school in Speyer, where she lived in community.

Edith Stein was a strong and outspoken advocate of educational opportunities for women, promoting education of the woman as a whole feminine being ... "a development of her humanity, her womanhood, and her individuality." She believed that women must be prepared for both single and married life.

"Each woman who lives in the light of eternity can fulfill her vocation, no matter if it is in marriage, in a religious order, or in a worldly profession."

Edith was active in the Catholic Woman's Movement and became its voice. She toured Europe giving speeches and wrote

essays which have been collected in one volume simply titled *Essays on Woman*. In her work, Edith explores the essence of the feminine and what it means to be woman.

Edith espoused the creation of woman as unique from man, but by no means inferior to or less than. Man and woman were created equally to complement one another as helpmates. Woman has a calling to motherhood; however, Edith's view of motherhood reaches beyond the traditional mother-child relationship and is not limited to physical birth.

“Woman naturally seeks to embrace that which is living, personal and whole, to cherish, guard, protect, nourish, and advance growth in her natural maternal yearning.”

Furthermore, Edith believed every aspect of society requires motherhood. Not just traditional careers like education and nursing, but perhaps even more so those seemingly worldlier such as statesmanship.

“The singular mission of the working woman is to fuse her feminine calling with her vocational calling and, by means of that fusion, to give a feminine quality to her vocational calling.”

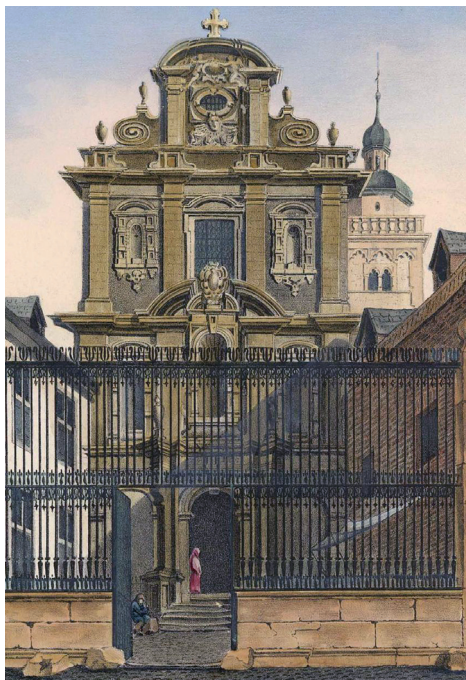
While man and woman are called to work in unity as complimentary helpmates, they share in their humanity and thus may reflect the other's attributes.

“Christ embodies the ideal of human perfection; in Him all bias and defects are removed, and the masculine and feminine virtues are united and their weaknesses redeemed; therefore, His true followers will be progressively exalted over their natural limitation that is why we see in holy men a tenderness and a truly maternal solicitude for the souls entrusted to them while in holy women there is a manly boldness, proficiency, and determination.”

Edith spent many holidays on retreat and received spiritual direction at a Benedictine monastery, Beuron Archabbey located in the upper Danube valley in Germany. Interestingly, St. Andrew's Abbey foundation is in direct lineage from Beuron.

However, while she worked with the Dominicans and prayed with the Benedictines, her spirit was called by the Carmelites. Edith Stein entered the Discalced Carmelite monastery of St. Maria vom Frieden (Our Lady of Peace) in Cologne in 1933. She took the name Sr. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross.

Sr. Teresa Benedicta continued her research and writing while living in community, publishing a metaphysical book which combines the philosophies of St. Thomas Aquinas and the Phenomenology of philosopher Husserl. In addition to scholarly works, she also wrote songs and poems in the style of the Psalms.



ST. MARIA VOM FRIEDEN IN COLOGNE

Eventually, Sr. Teresa Benedicta's older sister Rosa, converted to Catholicism and joined her at the monastery as a lay member of the order.

In an attempt to avoid the growing Nazi threat, not just to the Stein sisters themselves, but also the community at large, Sr. Teresa Benedicta and her sister were transferred to the Carmelite monastery at Echt in the Netherlands. There she wrote *The Science of the Cross: Studies on John of the Cross*.

On July 26, 1942, in retaliation for a pastoral letter from the Dutch bishops condemning Nazi persecution of the Jews, the Third Reich ordered the arrest of all Jewish converts in the Netherlands. Sr. Teresa Benedicta and her sister were arrested and sent to Auschwitz, where they perished on August 9, 1942.

Teresa Benedicta of the Cross was beatified as a martyr on May 1, 1987 in Cologne, Germany by Pope John Paul II and canonized on October 11, 1998.

Ever since Edith Stein was a young girl, she had sought truth. Declaring in her autobiography, *"My desire for truth itself was a prayer."*

And perhaps her most sage advice:

"Do not accept anything as truth if it lacks love. And do not accept anything as love which lacks truth! One without the other becomes a destructive life."

Edith Stein is a Modern Mother to those seeking *Truth*, leaving us a legacy of both *intellectual* and *spiritual* pursuit. As a career woman, wife, and mother trying to live a deeply spiritual life in our contemporary society, my journey with Edith Stein has brought me a new sense of clarity. She has inspired me to truly reflect on my unique feminine gifts—a sym-

pathetic ear, compassionate heart, generous spirit, and warm nature—fully embrace them, and bring those gifts to bear in each of my vocations in order to nurture, heal, and build relationships and new opportunities in life-affirming ways. It has helped me to release a little of that pressure to compete with men in a man's world. It has emboldened me to advocate fiercely for my daughter. And it has sensitized me to the balance and

flow within my partnership with my husband which must be cherished above all else as we continue working toward becoming each other's very best helpmate.

*"The woman's soul is fashioned as a shelter in which other souls may unfold."* ❄

**MICHAELA RUSSELL** is an Oblate of St. Andrew's Abbey where she assists in facilitating an annual workshop on Edith Stein. She and her husband, Maurice, first met while on retreat at the Abbey.



AS I APPROACHED THE 20-YEAR anniversary of my appointment to the bench, I happily anticipated my retirement date of September 3, 2017. In fact, for several years before the appointed date, I began making out my “bucket list” for “the rest of my life,” however long that would be. I loved my work, but having spent 80 percent of my adult working life in the courtroom (20 years as a trial lawyer, 20 as a trial judge), I figured it was time to hang up the robe and retire the gavel, or at least pass it on to a younger and more energetic judge. My judicial assignments over the years included a lot of high volume and high emotion matters: child custody, domestic violence, elder abuse, conservatorship and guardianship cases; criminal matters—felonies and misdemeanors; drug diversion court; termination of parental rights; mental health court; probate and trust litigation; and all manner of civil disputes (breach of contract, personal injury, professional malpractice, insurance coverage and so forth). In one building where I sat for five years, the most heart-wrenching of these cases were heard on a daily basis. One of my colleagues called our court building “the tower of pain.” In addition to my full caseload, for about a third of my judicial career, I supervised first a criminal panel and then the

# “Love Made Visible”

JUDGE MARY FINGAL SCHULTE (RET.)



probate and mental health panel. Outside of work, I volunteered as a lector in my parish, was chairperson for a number of years of our diocese’s Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs Commission, became an oblate of the Abbey, was a hospice volunteer, and taught judicial and legal continuing education courses locally and statewide. I was ready to empty the old bucket a little and fill it with new things.

As my retirement date quickly approached, however, I became more and more unsettled if not downright annoyed with the constant questions from family, colleagues, strangers, and friends as to what I was going to “do” next. I felt like I had to have some sort of “to do” list that would justify each day of the rest of my life. Some people said that if I didn’t “keep working,” I’d be “bored.” Others suggested that if I didn’t stick around in the legal field, I’d be “wasting” my education. Still others seemed to view retirement as an opportunity for a permanent (and to me, at least, self-absorbed) vacation. “But wait!” I said to myself, you’re not being very Benedictine, or Ignatian in going about planning your retirement. (I’m an oblate of St. Andrew’s Abbey, but am also grounded

in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. Both spiritualities emphasize contemplative prayer, which includes the daily Examen, and lectio divina.) A friend once said to me, “We are human beings, not human doings.” Instead of focusing on a bucket list, I began to ask myself, as retirement loomed: What does God want me to be? Who does God want me to be? What does God want me to become? Yes, the Scriptures, our faith tradition, and the *Rule* of St. Benedict are replete with things we should be *doing*, but they are all undergirded by who we are, as Christians, and as God’s beloved daughters and sons.

In my profession, and probably in our society in general, people tend to identify themselves very much with what they do. It doesn’t help that the word “retirement” sounds too much like “tired” or like something we do when we are sleepy. I prefer the French word *retraite*, which sounds a bit like “retreat.” Instead of worrying about mapping out what is left of my life, I began to look on my retirement as a kind of retreat, not in the sense of backing away or giving up (as in battle), but as a re-gathering of oneself, and a time/season of renewal, recharging, regrouping. In Spanish, retirement from a job or from work is *jubilación*, similar to our English jubilation.

As I prayed and reflected on what God would have me “be” or “do” next, I also re-called how, over my life, God has usually directed me via the deep-felt desires of my heart, and in the counsel of trusted friends and family. So, as I found myself more than ready to leave the courtroom, I was not ready to “leave the law” or the very fine community of lawyers and judges I have been privileged to know over the past 40 years. I just needed to slow down. I wanted time to walk my little dog twice a day, to bake, to read more, to keep working on my French, to learn Spanish, to pick up my camera and tripod again, to clean out closets and cupboards in my ongoing

effort to simplify my life, to have lunch with friends, to spend time with grandchildren (five now five and under) and to travel. Every one of these activities becomes a prayer, as I simply enjoy being in the moment of whatever I am doing, aware that the years ahead are fewer than those behind. Baking for example, forces me to slow down, not multitask, and focus on what I am doing. When walking my dog, Jenny, I enjoy chatting with neighbors I barely saw all those years that I was working; and as I take joy in the little canine companionship on our walks, I think of how much God seeks and must enjoy our friendship and companionship. Praying in French (the Magnificat is particularly lovely in French), or listening to my weekly French newscasts, I think of how we are bound together with all of humanity, beyond our artificial borders. Travel broadens my appreciation for other cultures and ways of living, and again, reminds me that God is not a God of walls or borders.

In many ways, in “retirement,” I feel that I’ve been able to integrate my life better: my hobbies, my interests, my profession, my family, my friends, my faith. My *retraite* has allowed me a new freedom to live out my oblate vocation that the fairly structured schedule of my 40-year legal career (which included raising two sons) often hampered.

According to the Abbey website, the oblate commits him or herself to “a never-ending process of integration—a deepening of their awareness of and responsiveness to God through the practice of contemplative prayer. This ongoing process of integration is referred to in the Rule as *conversatio morum*, ‘reformation of life.’ It is the oblates’ continuous consecration to God of the deepest parts of their selves and their lives.” “Since the oblates’ consecration of self is also a consecration of time, their simplification of life also entails a simplification of schedule—a sincere commitment to ‘clear time for God.’”



It's now been sixteen months since I heard my last case and put the robe in the closet. I joined a mediation service whose corporate mission is more about helping people and than it is about making money. I average about five to seven mediations a month, which leaves me plenty of time for the bucket list items. A synonym for mediator is peacemaker. The *Rule* of St. Benedict is something I can apply each time I mediate a case.

The Prologue to the *Rule* repeats the words "listen" and "hear," urging the monk to "incline the ear of your heart." What a beautiful way of describing how it is to be a truly engaged listener. "Listen carefully...and attend to them with the ear of your heart" (1). Hear with attentive ears: "...every time you begin a good work, you must pray to him most earnestly to bring it to perfection" (4). "...the Lord waits for us daily to translate into action, as we should, his holy teachings" (35). The Prologue tells us to seek after peace and pursue it (18). Much of mediation is listening, active listening, listening with the heart, for the story not being told, in order to bring the parties to a satisfactory resolution. Chapter 4 cautions the monk to guard one's lips, prefer moderation in speech, not to love too much talking (51–53). I can't listen well if I am doing all the talking, or waiting to speak instead of focusing on what's being said.

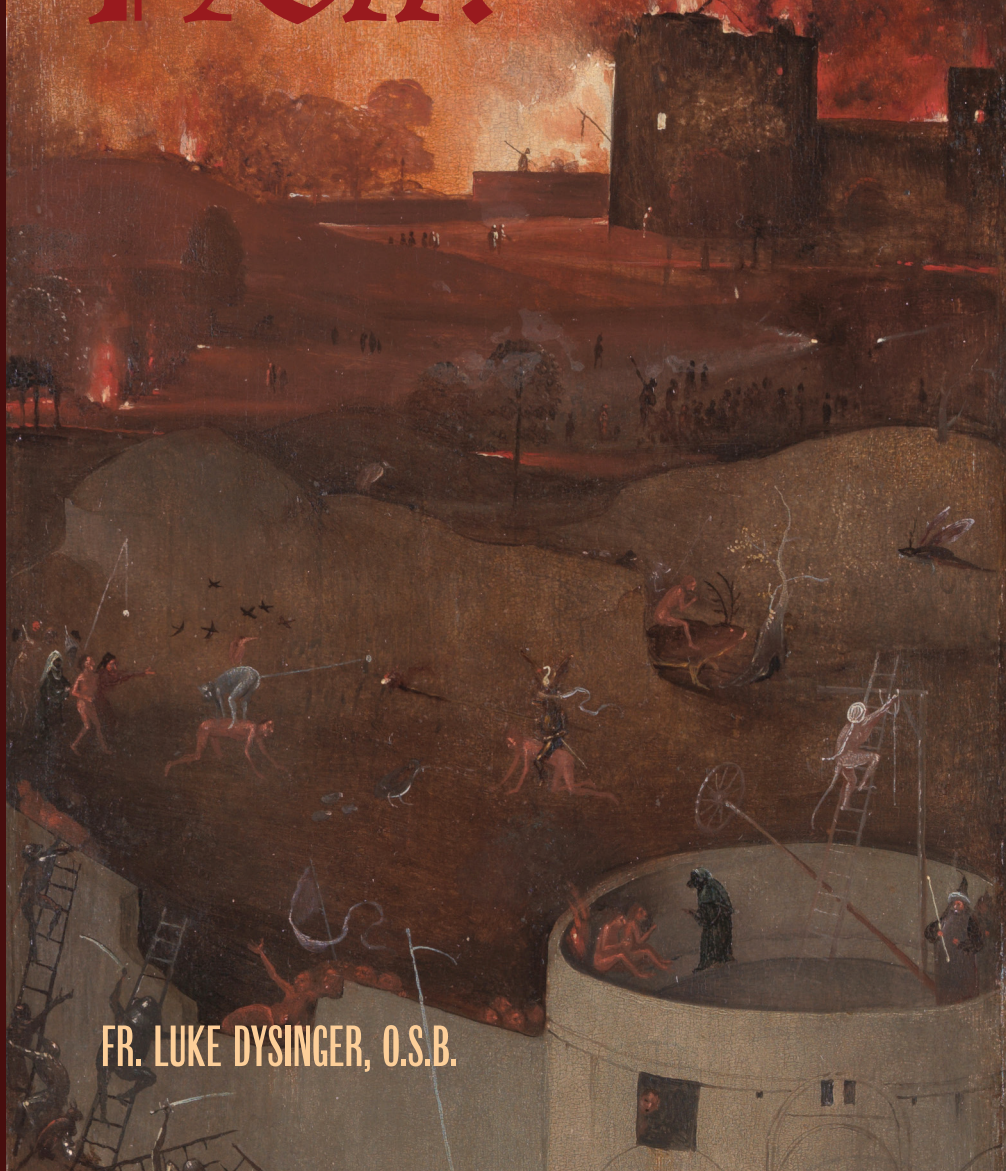
When the lawyers and their clients come to my office, I treat them as guests, as Chapter 53 of the *Rule* encourages: "Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ.... And to all let due honor be shown" (1, 3). Many of the parties come with emotions such as anger, disappointment, hurt, sorrow, feelings of betrayal, and even a desire for vengeance. Often their journey through the court system to my office has been filled with delay and lack of closure. I make sure to greet the lawyers and clients as soon as they check in at the front desk, rather than let the receptionist get them settled in a conference room where I then make my "entrance." I offer them coffee, I usually bring something that I baked, cookies or cake usually, to serve as well.

As an oblate, I am called to serve God and people around me through prayer, and thereby to be available not only to my family, monastic community and parish, but also to my civic community. My part-time mediation practice allows me to be available in a special way to my civic community.

Before I retired, in my courtroom, at the bench where only I could see it, I taped some of the justice scriptures to my desk. In retirement and in particular before a mediation where emotions can run high, I still meditate on them. Micah 6:8 — "What does the Lord require of

*Continued on page 21*

# Whatever Became of Hell?



FR. LUKE DYSINGER, O.S.B.

**H**ELL IS NO LONGER A popular subject with most preachers, teachers and theologians, at least in the United States and Europe. In the not-too-distant past hell and the horrifying prospect of eternal damnation were prominent themes in parish missions and retreats. In the traditional Ignatian Exercises vivid meditation on these dark possibilities occupies a prominent place in the fifth exercise of the First Week. Nevertheless, these are not themes to which twenty-first century Christian homilists or evangelists devote much time.

In Christianity, Islam, and conservative branches of Judaism “hell” describes a place or state of eternal suffering for sin, irrevocable separation from God and immutable gloom: as Dante inscribed over the yawning gateway in the *Divine Comedy*, “Abandon all hope, you who enter here.” Implicit in this doctrine is the distressing corollary that at death—or perhaps even before—human freedom and the ability to receive sanctifying grace will cease forever. Worse yet is the lingering suspicion that the God whom we want to believe became incarnate and died to save us might actually turn out to be the implacable titan of Michelangelo’s Last Judgment, the angry monster of our worst nightmares who can no longer be restrained, even by His Mother’s prayers. Little wonder, then, that the doctrine of hell is unpopular in the modern age, characterized as our culture already is by seemingly-irresistible temptations to cynicism, isolation, and suicidal despair.

Attempts throughout the centuries to explain or mitigate this doctrine have not met with much success. The great theologian Origen and the desert father Evagrius raised the ancient philosophical question, “can habit become nature?” and concluded that the answer is “no”. In other words they were convinced that, although we can sin

and thus separate ourselves from God, we cannot by sinning change our nature into sin, into unalterable separation from God. They believed that divine grace would never abandon even the worst sinner, and that even after death God would somehow find a way to persuade the most hardened, frozen soul to accept the warming power of Christ’s embrace. Thus the Hound of Heaven (to use Francis Thompson’s image) would eventually cajole or chase everyone who had strayed from God’s flock back into the sheepfold of divine union. This doctrine, known as the *apokatastasis* (“restoration”), was declared heretical at successive ecumenical councils from the sixth century onwards and its most famous proponents, Origen and Evagrius, were thus ironically condemned by name to that very separation (“anathema”) which they had denied.

In more recent times the Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar raised this question in the title of his 1988 book, *Dare We Hope that All Men be Saved?* More cautious than Origen or Evagrius, Von Balthasar concluded that although we may hope and even pray for *apokatastasis*, we may not believe or profess it as doctrine. More recently Bishop Baron has been attacked by considerably lesser minds in the Catholic blogosphere for daring to suggest in 2009 and 2011 that hell may turn out to be empty, since the Church has never definitively decreed that any particular human being is known with certainty to be incarcerated there. Pope Francis has not hesitated to threaten Mafia leaders<sup>1</sup> as well as the proud and rich<sup>2</sup> with hell, and he has warned abusers to prepare for both earthly and divine judgment;<sup>3</sup> but he has

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Speech to the Members of Libera*, March 21, 2014

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Message for Lent*, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to the Roman Curia*, Dec. 21, 2018.

also asserted more reassuringly (and somewhat paradoxically) that in the life to come, “Everything will be saved. Everything.”<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the best sources that draw together and make sense of these various strands are the writings of Pope Benedict XVI and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The *Catechism* describes hell not as a penalty or judgment imposed by God, but rather as a deliberately-chosen condition of separation from God and other human beings: “This state of definitive self-exclusion (*sui ipsius «auto-exclusionis»*) from communion with God and the blessed is called hell” (*Catechism*. §1033) Pope Francis reiterated this in 2016: “Eternal damnation is continually distancing oneself from God.”<sup>5</sup> In his brilliant fable, *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis hinted at what this might feel like. He describes a dismal twilight world where it is always possible to move further and further away from tedious, quarrelsome neighbors, eventually achieving distances measurable only in light years. If people choose to leave that place is was purgatory, but if they choose to stay it is hell. If we are honest with ourselves we must admit that we know from personal experience what Lewis meant. We have all spent time in the purgatory/hell he describes: cell phones and ear buds make it easy to invest in mental real estate there, enabling us to electronically withdraw whenever we wish into the solitude and distance from others we crave. This “distancing” can certainly become a habit, even an addiction. But can it become our nature? Perhaps. If I truly believes with Jean-Paul Sartre that “hell is the other person,” then I am in a sense already in hell. If what I most deeply desire is to be free forever from the painful encumbrance of relationships with

others, with God, and with my own deepest self, then I am already enduring something of the essence of damnation without the trouble of having to die.

In a chapter entitled “Hell, Purgatory, Heaven” Pope Benedict XVI rejects Origen’s comforting doctrine of universal salvation but he cautions, “For the saints, ‘Hell’ is not so much a threat to be hurled at other people but a challenge to oneself.”<sup>6</sup> The potential for separation from God and other people is not theoretical; we all know it from personal experience, we have all to some degree “been there.” But it is a potentiality of which we can only speak with regard to ourselves. This is why Catholics are—and ought to be—flustered when asked the fundamentalist’s inevitable question, “Are you saved?” Rather than a confident (and arrogant) answer, this question should evoke a series of related issues. Am I loved by God? Yes. Did He die to save me from my sins? Yes. And does His terrifying gift of freedom mean that throughout life I retain the power to turn away from Him? Indeed and unfortunately, yes. But as Pope Benedict suggests, I can only know damnation as an existential possibility for myself: whether it is a choice anyone else could bring themselves to make is something I cannot know, for “only God knows the hearts of the children of men” (1 Kings 8.32).

But on this side of the grave there is always a way out of hell. As Pope Benedict writes: “The answer lies hidden in Jesus’ descent into Sheol, in the night of the soul which he suffered, a night which no one can observe except by entering this darkness in suffering faith.... Hope can take it on, only if one shares in the suffering of Hell’s night by the side of the One who came to

4 Pope Francis, *General Audience*, October 11, 2017

5 Pope Francis Homily of the mass at Santa Marta, November 25, 2016.

6 Johann Auer, Joseph Ratzinger, *Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 9, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* (Cath. Univ. of America Pr., 1988) 217.

transform our night by his suffering.”<sup>7</sup> A vivid depiction of what Pope Benedict means is found in the second reading in the Office of Readings for Holy Saturday. An unknown early Christian author explains how every aspect of Christ’s passion can be symbolically experienced as a kind of “little *apokatastasis*” with the power to effect a magnificent spiritual-alchemical transformation. The soldiers’ contemptuous spittle is somehow transformed into Christ’s life-giving kiss; the pain in Christ’s hands heals the sin of those primordial hands that reached out towards the Tree of Knowledge; and, of course, the wooden Cross becomes the Tree of Life. When we find ourselves in hell, as many in our culture often do, we must remember that Christ has been there before us (1 Peter 3.18-20) and that he has transformed everything we find there—including the experience of desolation and emptiness (Mk 15.34)—into a path that can, if we let it, lead back into union with Him.

It is a challenge to suffer in the dark night of faith, to experience communion with Christ in solidarity with his descent into the Night. One draws near to the Lord’s radiance by sharing his darkness... [Hope] must place its petition into the hands of its Lord and leave it there. The doctrine of everlasting punishment preserves its real content. The idea of mercy, which has accompanied it, in one form or another, throughout its long history, must not become a theory. Rather is it the prayer of suffering, hopeful faith.<sup>8</sup> ✠

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 217-218

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

## A SERMON ON SNAKES

*from page 6*

The cross and the one lifted on it are at once a warning, an assurance and an invitation. They warn us that the way forward, the journey across the desert to freedom, has its perils and its deadly dangers. They assure us that our saviour and our salvation lie ahead in that direction and that he is with us every step of the way. And they invite us to face our fears and follow that Way to the end, to allow ourselves to be drawn unresistingly to him who, once lifted up, draws all souls to himself. ✠



**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.



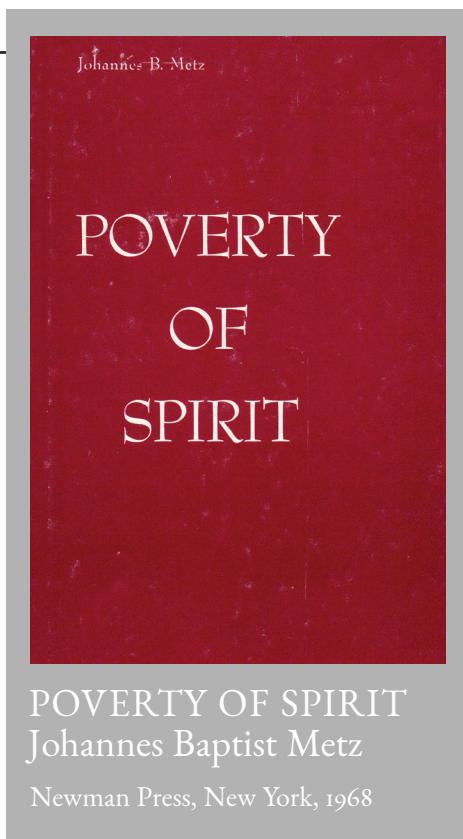
## BOOK REVIEW

FR. PHILIP EDWARDS, OSB

OUR FAMOUS BENEDICTINE motto, PAX (Peace), stands on its other well-known two-legged partner, ORA ET LABORA (Pray and Work).

Both efforts — prayer and work — are seen as essential to Benedictine life. The monastery is presented as both school (Prologue) and workshop (RB4). A monastic's "work" encompasses not only physical work (*lab-ora*), but also the intellectual (*opus*), and at its apogee, the spiritual (*opus Dei*). "[L]et nothing be preferred before the work of God" (RB 43). Chapter 48, "On the Daily Manual Labor," "...the brethren should be occupied at certain times in manual labor, and again at fixed hours in sacred reading..." precedes directly Chapter 49, "On the Observance of Lent," when "the brethren keep their lives most pure" by "restrain[ing] ourselves from all vices and giv[ing] ourselves up to prayer with tears, to reading, to compunction of heart and to abstinence...." Chapter 48 specifies that, "on the days of Lent from morning until the end of the third hour let them apply themselves to their reading and from then until the end of the tenth hour let them do the work assigned.... In these days of Lent they shall each receive a book from the library, which they shall read straight through from the beginning. These books are to be given out at the beginning of Lent."

This Lent, the Editor has lead me to this gem of a book of barely fifty pages, which, if you began on Ash Wednesday, you could easily finish before the First Sunday in Lent. But "diamonds are forever," and this finely cut and polished "gem of a book" is definitely diamantine. Our library copy dates from the original copyright date of 1968, an English translation untouched by subsequent



gender-conscious correctness, sturdily manly, but piercing to the quick of the heart of the One who was rich and became poor that we might be rich. 1968 was the year of student riots and unrest and upsetting of comfortable academic conciliarists. This slight bit of diamond dust, an academic's own Lenten Lectio, encapsulates the Isaiahan spirit of prophecy, comforting the afflicted while challenging if not directly afflicting the comfortable.

In the Foreword, Metz lays the philosophical ground-work of what it is to be Man/human: "...being is entrusted to him as a summons, which he is to accept and consciously acknowledge...never simply a being that is 'there' and 'readymade', just for the asking. From the very start he is something that can Be, a being who must win his

selfhood and decide what he is to be.... To become man through the exercise of his freedom—that is the law of his Being” (pp. 5–6).

In accepting the chalice of his existence, man shows his obedience to the will of his Father in heaven (cf. Mt 26, 39, 42); in rejecting it, he rejects God. Knowing the temptation which humanity itself is, knowing how readily man tries to escape the harsh distress of the human situation, knowing how difficult it is for him to bear with himself and how quickly he feels betrayed by himself, knowing how difficult it is for man not to hate himself (as Bernanos points out), we can then understand why God had to prescribe “self-love” as a virtue and one of the great commandments. We can then understand why we constantly need the help of his grace. We can then realize how much easier it is to say “no” instead of “yes” to oneself, and why all asceticism is first designed to serve this great “yes.” Man must learn to accept himself in the painful experiment of his living... (pp. 7–8).

God “became man”; he took on our flesh... the assumption of man’s type of Being is primarily a spiritual venture pulsing through the free activity of our heart. It is an unfolding story, an inner journey; it commences with conception and birth, but these events do not tell the whole story. God becomes man: what are the spiritual lineaments of this process? What does it involve? What motivations lie behind it? Paul describes it in a famous passage (Phil. 2:5–11). The Synoptics also have something to say about it, describing its inner thrust in the story of Jesus’ temptation in the desert. Unless we are greatly mistaken, this story is the biblical way of presenting the spiritual process involved in God’s assumption of humanity” (pp. 8–9).

Metz might have included here the Synoptic (and even Johannine) Passion Narratives, which, while not literally reproduced in his text (as are Phil 2:5–11 and Mt 4:1–11) culminate his first chapter, “God Becomes Man.”

Have we really understood the impoverishment that Christ endured? Everything was taken from him during the passion, even the love that drove him to the cross.... His heart gave out and a feeling of utter helplessness came over him. Truly, he emptied himself (Phil 2:7).... The Son of Man reached his destiny, stretched taut between a despising earth that had rejected him and a faceless heaven thundering God’s “no” to sinful mankind. Jesus paid the price of futility. He became utterly poor. In this total renunciation, however, Jesus perfected and proclaimed in action what took place in the depths of his being: he professed and accepted our humanity, he took on and endured our lot, he stepped down from his divinity. He came to us where we really are—with all our broken dreams and lost hopes, with the meaning of existence slipping through our fingers. He came and stood with us, struggling with his whole heart to have us say “yes” to our innate poverty. God’s fidelity to man is what gives man the courage to be true to himself. And the legacy of his total commitment to mankind, the proof of his fidelity to our poverty, is the cross. The cross is the sacrament of poverty of spirit, the sacrament of authentic humanness in a sinful world. It is the sign that one man remained true to his humanity, that he accepted it in full obedience. Hanging in utter weakness on the cross, Christ revealed the divine meaning of man’s Being (pp. 18–19).

The full text of Philippians 2:5–8 heads the subsequent and second chapter, “Man Becomes Man.” The last four chapter titles — “The Innate Poverty of Man,” “The Poverty of Man Freely Accepted: Poverty of Spirit,” “The Concrete Shapes of Poverty,” and “The Dregs of Poverty: Worship” — are indented in the table of contents as sub-headings of this chapter without a specific Scriptural “*Lectio text.*” And indeed they are a philosophical continuum of the Synoptic “take” on this most primitive text of the New Testament (to which St. Paul may have added one line of his own, but passes on as a whole when reminding his beloved Philippians to “have this in mind”): “The Synoptics summed up this attitude in the phrase ‘poverty of spirit’ (Mt. 5:3). In their accounts of Jesus’ temptation, it is depicted as obedient acceptance of our natural impoverishment, which culminates in forlorn death on the cross: ‘Though he was rich, yet he became poor’ (II Cor. 8:9). Christ showed us how really to become human beings...” (p. 23).

A man with grace is a man who has been emptied, who stands impoverished before God, who has nothing of which he can boast... Grace does not erase our poverty; it transforms it totally, allowing it to share in the poverty of Jesus’ own immolated heart (cf. Rom. 8:17)... not just another virtue — one among many. It is a necessary ingredient in any authentic Christian attitude toward life. Without it there can be no Christianity and no imitation of Christ. It is no accident that “poverty of spirit” is the first of the beatitudes.... It is the doorway through which men must pass to become authentic human beings. Only through poverty of spirit do men draw near to God; only through it does God draw near to man. Poverty of spirit is the meeting point

of heaven and earth, the mysterious place where God and man encounter each other, the point where infinite mystery meets concrete existence (pp. 25–26).

In a way, these four sub-chapters replay the biblical drama of Salvation History from Eden to the New Jerusalem: God creates and shows the way; His people heed the serpent’s hiss and lose the way; God, ever faithful to His covenant, redeems and renews. Although there is a cyclical character to this pattern, it is more of a helix, spiraling from creation to the Eschaton. As the pious hymn we sing at Lauds on every Monday of the Second Week in Ordinary Time (and which Sister Karen Wilhelmy, CSJ, of most fond memory, found fearfully challenging to her daily living in its closing exhortation: “to live more nearly as we pray”) reminds us in the second verse, “new mercies, each returning day around us hover while we pray; New perils past, new sins forgiven, New thoughts of God, new hopes of heaven.” Metz is telling us that the inexplicable mystery of the Incarnation, “the free, gratuitous action of God on our behalf... with self-sacrificing love... giving us his Son,... showed us what our existence is... the true nature of our humanness... the proper spirit to have in becoming a human being: the spirit of poverty” (p. 24).

When Metz said in his Foreword, quoted at length at the beginning of this review, that “God had to prescribe ‘self-love’ as a virtue and one of the great commandments,” all kinds of red lights and alarms went off about egotism and selfishness — and that silly song of the Roaring Twenties, “I Love Me, and only Me, It’s Me I’m Wild About.” But, realizing my own sketchy catechetical training could well have missed this specific point, I let the flow of rhetoric carry me past. On page 33, he clarifies that

...humble acceptance of our authentic Being is self-love in the Christian sense. In biblical terms it is 'poverty of spirit'. It is man bearing witness to himself, professing loyalty to his radical poverty, and shouldering the weight of self-surrender. In poverty of spirit man learns to accept himself as someone who does not belong to himself. It is not a virtue which man "acquires"; as such it could easily turn into a personal possession that would challenge our authentic poverty. Man truly "possesses" this radical poverty only when he forgets himself and looks the other way.... To look back for reassurance is to try to acquire possession and full control over this virtue, which amounts to losing it (p. 33).

Left alone to himself, man still remains the prisoner of his own Being. He cannot successfully hide for long his mysterious Being. If he attempts this, the truth of his Being haunts him with its nameless emissary: anxiety. This becomes the prophet of the repressed mystery of his Being; with its alienation, anxiety takes the place of the scorned poverty. In the final analysis man has one of two choices: obediently to accept his innate poverty or to become the slave of anxiety" (pp. 30-31). ❌



## LOVE MADE VISIBLE

*from page 13*

you: to love justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with your God." (I struggle the most with that third one.) Zechariah 7:9 — "Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another." Isaiah 1:16-17 — "Learn to do good; Seek justice...." Hosea 12:6, 15 — "Therefore, return to your God, observe kindness and justice, and wait for your God continually...." The night before I mediate any dispute, whether it is a probate and trust matter, a legal or medical malpractice suit, a personal injury case, or business dispute, I pray for the lawyers and the parties. I pray for a resolution, but more importantly for healing. Many of the disputes I hear involve elderly and vulnerable people, or family members who haven't spoken in years. Sometimes they have to be kept on opposite sides of our office suite. As a mediator, I don't represent either side, nor do I take sides. It gives me freedom to listen more effectively as I am not the decision maker; the parties are.

Several years ago, while attending Mass in Paris at the church of St. Germaine de Près, I was moved by six words of a very simple homily: "*Dans sa silence, Dieu est là.*" In his silence, God is there. That's become a daily prayer for me in retirement: be blessed by the silence. Slow down, be more mindful, listen. Wherever I am, whatever I am doing, God is there. My leisure is a prayer; my work is a prayer, and my prayers are my work. And, in case you are wondering, I chose the title of this article from the words of Khalil Gibran: "Work is love made visible." ❌

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