

T H E V A L Y E R M O

# Chronicle

S A I N T A N D R E W ' S A B B E Y

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## LETTER *from the* ABBOT

*Dear Friends,*

LAST MONTH AT THE RECOMMENDATION of my doctor, I went to have tests done to see if my brain was still working. The results are still not in!

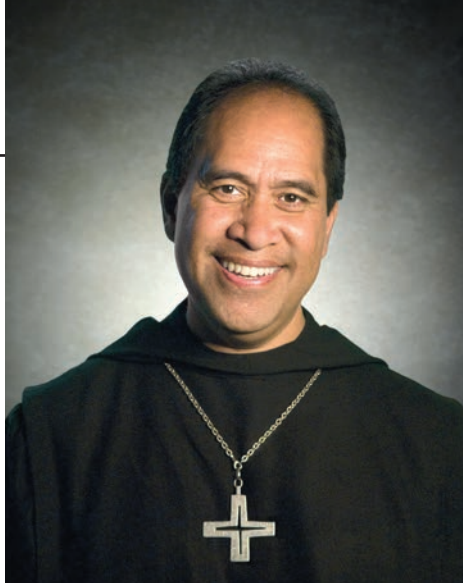
After the appointment I walked out of the building, and I saw a middle-aged woman sitting alone on a stone wall that surrounded a beautiful fountain; she was crying. She was about five meters from the front door through which I had just exited, and was in plain sight. I couldn't tell if she was in physical pain or not.

I have family and friends who, when in these types of situations, without even thinking, "jump into action" right away. If they were with me that day, they would have approached the woman and asked if she needed any kind of help.

I, on the other hand, always remember the words of my spiritual director: "Damien, there are a lot of good things to do in the world, but not every good thing is yours to do. Always pray, ask God what He wants you to do, discern." So I did.

Of course, everything from that point on, moved in slow motion. I looked at her (careful not to stare), and I prayed really fast and asked God "what should I do? Give me a sign." Although all was in slow motion, it happened in less than five seconds. Simultaneously, in those quick five seconds, I was having a dialogue with myself in my mind, in the form of questions and answers:

Is she alone? I don't think so. She keeps looking into the building, into the waiting room; maybe she came with someone who is in there. Maybe the person she came with is getting her help right now.



I don't think she needs help. Why do I think that? If she did, she would have made eye contact with me, (and that would have been my sign), but she just ignored me. She didn't even look my way.

Does she need medical attention? Probably not, since this facility is not a hospital or clinic, but a testing facility.

Should I just ask her if she needs help? What harm could there be in just asking? But what if she gets angry at me and creates a scene? What if she accuses me of something I didn't do?

What if she asks me to do something that I actually can't do for her? Then I'm back at square one. That would be worse. Plus, I would really feel stupid and look foolish.

In those five seconds, I "discerned" (or convinced myself) that God didn't want me to approach her. So I continued to walk to my car.

While walking to the car, more dialogue and questions: "Wow, are you *really* just going to walk away from her like that? You're a Christian? You're a priest? You're a monk? What about the parable of the Good Samaritan? The priests in that

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story didn't stop either. Is that you God: are these questions coming from You, or someone else?

Those five seconds were very uncomfortable. Such unclarity. I ended up not approaching her, but prayed for her as I walked to (the safety) of my car.

Even though I didn't think of that scene again all day, which made me think perhaps I did do the right thing, it was one of the first things that came into my head the next morning. So I went to confession.

Some people might say, I should have helped her. Others would say, I *did* help her as I prayed for her.

Maybe it's my heart, and not my brain, that the doctors should be testing for.

*Abbot Damien* ✱



# THE VALYERMO Chronicle

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Giovanni di Paolo, "Paradise," 1445.

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

**A**DVENT IS A TIME SET aside in the Church's life when our hearts are to be made ready to receive the newborn son of God, son of man, Jesus Christ. It is a time when we are to look deeply into our own hearts and try to understand what they truly long for, what they beat for, for what we desire and yearn. And in Advent we reaffirm that the heart does

is far more prevalent in all our lives—especially when we are asked to hear any news or announcement that has a possibility of unknown consequences for us. It frightens us: for example, “Mom, Dad, I am pregnant,” “I’m sorry, but your MRI indicates an unknown growth,” “Because of the economic down turn we have to let you go,” “Mom, Dad, I’m gay,” “Congratulations, you have been accepted to enter seminary/convent,” or “We have to ask you to leave the

change? What do I have to give up in how I understand the world, myself, my opinions, my valued stereotypes?” It is unnerving, and frightening to be in dialogue with God.

But Mary silently ponders God's greeting in her heart, and no matter how challenging, or even puzzling, she engages with God. Her heart becomes the still place in which she will continually discover who Jesus truly is. As our own hearts must become that same place of discovery and response.

it, no matter what we hear, ponder it, and be open to the Spirit changing our lives.

And as Mary pondered that visible Word, she becomes a model for us as we too ponder that Word in scripture; that Word in each other; that Word in the created world around us. We too are asked to incarnate Jesus in our lives. And in accepting the incarnation of Jesus into our hearts, we discover and accept ourselves. What Advent tells us is that to grow in God, we must prepare our-

## Listening for the WORD

GRATIA PLOON DOMINYS. TEELVA

indeed desire God, yearning to be healed from whatever has wounded it. For most of us, and that includes myself, this has not often been the case. Instead of Jesus, we perhaps yearn more for (and in some cases even dread) the treats and gifts and escapes from the often harsh and frightening realities of life, of lives lived in confusing love, unclear, undirected and all too often unfulfilled. But also too filled with bodily, psychological and emotional pain. So it is good to ask why do we not truly listen to our hearts? Or understand what our hearts need?


This negative ability to *not* truly listen isn't reserved only to Advent. I suspect it

community.” And I am sure each of us can supply their own particular lists from their own life stories. These kinds of statements can confuse us. What are we in for? What are we to do? How do we cope with these simple words that deeply affect us?

In the Annunciation gospel that is, of course, the climax of Advent, Mary hears a similar statement: “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you.” And she was “greatly troubled at what was said, and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.” Our initial reaction might be similar; our first reaction could very well be: “Oh, no, what now? What am I being asked to do? How am I being asked to

But we are mistaken if we think that from the moment of the Annunciation Mary completely knew, or understood, the full significance of her Son, despite Gabriel's words. Mary pondered. And at each step of the way, she had to re-assert the “yes” of the Annunciation, ever and more deeply understanding what her response implies. She spent her life pondering the visible Word of God that was, and is, her Son. She grew in knowing him, in comprehending the mystery of God Incarnate. She offers us a way of continually living the lessons of Advent, of a life in God that prepares for God. She shows us that first we must learn to listen for God's word, not fear

selves to receive him, and in receiving him, we will also receive our true selves.

Reflection calls for response. And Mary's response to God was not simply a choice between right or wrong, good or bad, some sort of black or white ethical or moral decision. Mary gives us an example of what our choices as Christians really imply: that each genuine choice we make reveals who we are, because the heart grows when it *understands* what and why it desires, not simply in doing what it thinks it desires. It is about choosing to let the love and life of God grow within our hearts, and prepare to receive it no matter what the cost. 





**R**EADY ARE WE TO PRAISE our heroes from days of old. Just ask Br. Dominic or Fr. Philip, and they will gladly recount the glory of our founding fathers who brought this monastery from Belgium to China, and China to Los Angeles: the artistic eye of Werner, the intellectual prowess of Eleutherius, the unsurpassable affection of Gaetan etc. Truly their legends live on in the hearts of those who knew them, and stir wonder in those who, like myself, did not. And yet with confidence I presume these men, while they were among us, received only a fraction of the reverence their names now bear. Such is the case with most of our heroes. What writer or painter ever enjoyed the full scope of his/her earthly success? Few of privilege to be sure. Heroes and saints have a way of becoming shinier once they die. Perhaps this is because death

is the final confirmation of a life well lived. Or because death allows us to look past the deceased's shortcomings in life. How much easier it is to praise the virtues of someone whose vices can no longer get on our nerves. In any case, the ability to look back on our pioneering monks is not afforded to me, being the young monk that I am. What a shame it would be however, to take my brothers here and now for granted, only to crown them once they've gone. Thus I am compelled to find and cherish my heroes among the living, which, for me, happens to be an easy quest.

At age 17 I found myself reading Eusebius' *History of the Church*, and was positively enthralled by the tales of men and women therein. Christians who committed outlandish deeds, suffered terrible persecution, and died horrific deaths, all because they preferred nothing whatsoever to

"LOOKING FOR MY HERO"

Christ. Too often Cradle Catholics take the lives of the saints for granted. "Who wants to hear about another mystical ecstasy, or beheaded nun?" As an Evangelical however, nothing could be more captivating. I was familiar with the Protestant saints e.g. Billy Graham, C.S. Lewis etc. But there was something a bit more raw about Polycarp and Ignatius of Antioch that caught my attention. I wanted to meet someone like them. If there were Christians like that centuries ago, why couldn't there be Christians like that today? Why couldn't I be like that? Such were the meanderings of my adolescent mind.

Fast forward a few years and a few more books under my belt. Through a directed studies project at Biola University, I wound up at St. Andrew's Abbey during the Holy Triduum. As usual the guest house was completely booked, so I decided to sleep in my hippy van decked with orange carpet and purple fur (little did I know that was against the rules). Come Monday morning I stumbled into the refectory hungry and bewildered. The huge room was totally vacant except for one monk sitting at table. It was Brother Peter, a lover of breakfast. As soon as he saw me, he jumped from his seat and began ushering me with his withered hand into the back of the kitchen. There I helped myself to some left overs from Easter, as he returned to his morning ritual. I've never known what to make of first impressions. Couples talk of love at first sight, and employers look for solid first interviews, but most of my deep and meaningful relationships were born from the most ordinary circumstances. How could I have known that this 5'1" Chinese man was exactly the person I had been longing to meet? Unlike Marvel Comics, nothing about his appearance communicated valor. The interior life is cunning that way.



After a few more years (and books) I was preparing to make the big leap of entering the monastery. First, let me be clear in saying that this decision had nothing to do with Br. Peter. A wise monk once told me that the only person who should cause anyone to join a monastery is Jesus. Besides, I still knew very little about Br. Peter, mostly that he liked writing books. Before committing the rest of my life to prayer, I saw fit to do a bit of traveling with my cousin. While visiting my sister in Tokyo, she recommended I read Shusaku Endo's *Silence*, a historical fiction that highlights the failures of Christian missionaries and their persecution in Japan during the Tokugawa Shogunate era. It was this book that led me to pick up Br. Peter's autobiography once I arrived at St. Andrew's. Both share a resemblance up until their endings; and of course one is fiction, while the other autobiographical.

In *Dawn Breaks in the East*, I learned that Br. Peter (Zhou Bangjiu) joined the monastery elementary school at age 12, and went on further to become a Benedictine. But one

BROTHER PETER



year before making solemn profession, the Red Flag fell, resulting in the deportation of the Belgian monks, and captivity of those who were Chinese. Br. Peter's obstinacy against joining the "Patriotic Association," thereby committing apostasy, came with 26 years of imprisonment. Recalling his life in prison has always been our favorite topic of conversation. While giving Br. Peter his monthly haircuts, he shares with me about how the communists tried forcing him to renounce the faith. For weeks at a time they handcuffed him until his right hand lost all functionality. For six years he was bound hand and foot by shackles. Two years were spent in solitary confinement. Yet amidst unfathomable anguish, Br. Peter recounts his sense of freedom during those decades. "In my prison life, I was free," he laughs. "Mao was not free."

Some monks joke that for 26 years, it was the communists who suffered under Br. Peter. Perhaps there's some truth to that. In selecting victims to torture, a monk would be among the most difficult. Starving him

only offers more opportunity for fasting. Throwing him into total isolation gives him the chance to practice silence and solitude. Br. Peter was not offered a Bible or Missal to chant the Psalms, so he came out of prison with hundreds of his own psalms recited and memorized. As the communist regime waned, Br. Peter was released on July 25th, 1981. Soon after, the motherhouse of San Andre in Belgium received a hand written letter containing the words; "I am alive."

I need offer no further evidence as to why Br. Peter is my hero. He is precisely the type of Christian I had read of, searched for, and not only met, but now live with in community. Which brings me to the point I wish to make. Hero worship is easy to accomplish if you've never met your hero. Better yet if your hero is dead. For until we meet our heroes, our imaginations run wild inventing all kinds of characteristics we might fancy him/her to have. "My hero looks like this, while your hero looks like that." Sad, or I should say, sobering is the day when your hero becomes incarnate, escaping from the



BROTHER JOHN BAPTIST (BEFORE ENTERING ST. ANDREW'S)



shackles of your projected ideals. Perhaps this has already happened to you, as it has to me. Today I will sit across from my hero at lunch as I do everyday, then we will pray together at Vespers, and if I'm lucky he'll ask me to give him his usual eyedrops for macular degeneration. Don't get me wrong, Br. Peter merits my highest admiration, I am his #1 fan, and am humbled to live life alongside him as my brother. That said, observing my 93 year old hero day in and day out calls into question what my values are, and who I want to become. In other words, having the prize set before me makes me ask myself, "Do I really want to press on toward this goal?"

BROTHER PETER AND BROTHER JOHN BAPTIST

The lives of the saints are dazzling, but do we really want to be like them? To experience all they experienced? What shines on paper can appear quite mundane in the flesh. And yet Christ beckons us to look closer at Him every day. Not the Christ of my imagination. Nor the Christ of my projected ideals. But the Christ of the cosmos, Whose surprises are unending. Reality is something to be reckoned with, for in so doing we are drawn out of ourselves and into the light of truth. Thus let us behold our heroes for who they are, especially Christ whom all other heroes fall short of. Lest in preferring the Christ of my mind, I should fail to recognize Christ in the flesh. ✖



THE EARLY MORNING was glorious. The dry lakebed, speckled with mirages in the colors of the rays of the rising sun, stretched out to rocky Luehman Ridge and the rocket site. In the foreground on the vast concrete apron where I walked there was a three-man crew fueling a two-engine jet airplane that gleamed under the cloudless sky. A light smell of jet fuel was on the air.

As I entered the concrete-block building through the heavy double steel fire doors and turned the corner into the long hallway leading to my office complex, my ambling progress was impeded by an obelisk of sorts comprising three strong young men. The first was on all fours on the smooth vanilla tile floor, facing a wall; he didn't see me come around the corner. The second was standing upright on the back of the first, facing me. He responded to my broad smile with one of his own. The third was sitting on the shoulders of the second. He also didn't see me, for he, head bent backwards at an almost impossible angle, was absorbed in trying to capture a desert stink beetle that was making its way across the pebbly white tiles of the false ceiling. The sight of this slightly wobbling tower of humanity stopped me in my tracks (safety alert!) but I said nothing. Disgracefully, even after my many hours of safety training I was actually more amused than concerned; plus I wanted to oversee the fate of the beetle. This wasn't the first time I'd stumbled into such an eyebrow-raising situation when our student interns were onsite, and, I rationalized, most of these young people are, after all, our future researchers and engineers, and hadn't I, in the confidence and wisdom of my youth, done many of the same kinds of dangerous things and escaped unharmed? Besides, what would be the state of science today without folks who were inspired to action by such concepts as "Let's try this"?



## The Rule at WORK

ELIZABETH ANN KISSLING

Rationalization completely successful, I remained silent and observed what turned out to be a gentle and careful capture of the beetle using a paper coffee cup and a sheet of folded paper. I was impressed that the young man who captured it was not put off by the stink the stressed beetle exuded. As the four of us walked outside to release the beetle in a place in which I've released several throughout the past 15 years, I learned the names of these young men, their career goals, and a bit about their families and where they grew up. The beetlecapturer's name was Jeremy. He had come to NASA for the summer from Puerto Rico, and his goal was to work for NASA as a controls engineer. This was his first year as a student intern, he was having fun and learning a lot but was worried (eyes now cast down) about having to write the required one-page synopsis of his summer experience at NASA. He had heard that the

synopses are edited onsite by the technical editors (who are old people). He described himself as "a terrible writer compared to everyone else."

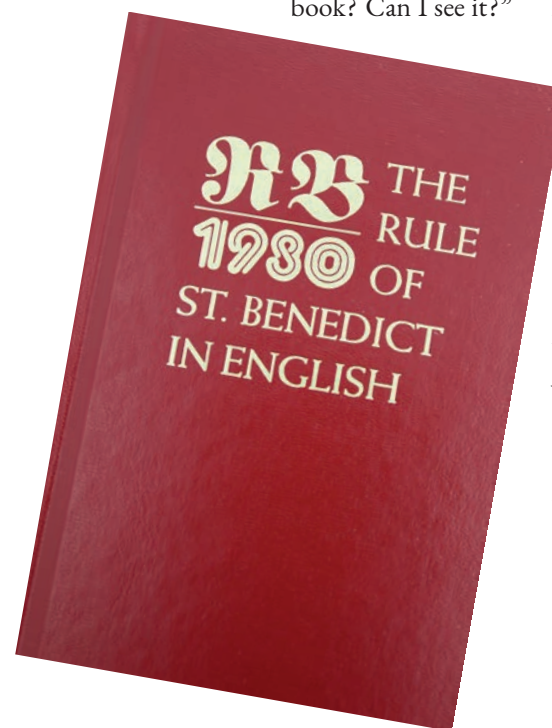
"I'm sure it's not as bad as all that," I told him, "Just write it the way you'd explain it to one of your friends, and let the editor take care of the rest. The writing is the hardest part. Editing is a piece of cake."

Two weeks before deadline, midmorning, Jeremy stood in my little office holding a piece of paper on which he'd written the synopsis of his summer research.

"I'm not a very good writer compared to everyone else," he said, speaking to the carpet.

"You told me that on Beetle Day. I remember. Anyway, you don't have to be a good writer," I replied, "You have a good editor: me. You've already done the hard work."

I spent fifteen or twenty minutes editing his one-pager, which indeed needed heavy editing. About halfway through my edit, Jeremy asked tentatively, "What is that red book? Can I see it?"



He was referring to my soft-cover copy of *The Rule of St. Benedict In Latin and English with Notes* (Ed. Timothy Fry, O.S.B., The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1981). The book was lying on my side credenza, and as those familiar with this book know, the cover abbreviates the title to *RB 1980*. Jeremy wondered whether the book was a technical textbook; he wanted to leaf through it.

"Yes, it is a textbook of sorts," I said, handing him the book.

Jeremy flipped through the book while I finished editing his synopsis. A minute or two after he'd picked up the book he read aloud from page 183, "Place your hope in God alone," and followed with his own question, "How do you do that?"

In my head, with a decided lack of sincerity, I thanked the Lord for placing me in this situation — yet another in which I was sure to seriously blunder or utterly fail. Jeremy left my office with his edited synopsis, a very substandard "explanation" of how I place my hope in God, and a good understanding of the importance of always beginning again (or, as Jeremy summarized it, "Like, just start over and over until you get it right.")

The following summer, when the new crop of student interns arrived, Jeremy was among them. His selection for a second consecutive internship was a testament to his dedication, hard work, and developing engineering abilities. Three days before deadline I received an email from him with an attachment. The body of the email contained one sentence: "I've already done the hard work." And it was so — the attachment was a smoothly and concisely written description of his participation in controls research for that summer. I made no edits, and I noticed as I composed my response that below his signature block he had added the tagline, "Start over and over." ❌



I WAS IN THE MIDDLE OF A WEEK'S RETREAT AND taking myself altogether too seriously. I came back to my room after supper and an hour in the chapel, and I had given myself a headache from being too intense. My retreat director had pointed out that I seem to be quite driven, not only in my work and activities at home, but even, on a spiritual level, on this retreat.



So, I decided to take a break from all that intensity. I lay on the floor with my feet up on the chair and just let my mind do what it wanted to. I found myself feeling very much in the presence of God as I remembered silly jokes and absurd situations from my past, and funny things people have said to me over the years. This went on for a good hour or more, with me giggling and chuckling as I shared these memories with God. I

also remembered a few moments from my own spiritual journey when I had the feeling my own rash words and acts had given God the opportunity to remind me, as though with a twinkle in his eye, of my own grandiosity and ridiculous self-importance. When I told the director the next morning that I had spent an hour giggling with God, he said it was a real inspiration.

But I had a nagging doubt as to whether

it was somehow disrespectful or irreverent. Then, as I thought about it later, I remembered St. Paul's statement (1 Cor. 1:25) that "the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men." And I remembered how my own spiritual journey had led me from a period of unconvinced atheism through the existentialist and absurdist writings of Sartre, Camus, Becket and company; through the quirky, ironic anecdotes of the Desert Fathers and the light-hearted but profound insights of C.S. Lewis's fantasy works; on towards the oddness of the Christian message as presented by Patristic writers like

logical would be to fix the conditions. What God's foolishness does is the opposite of that. It bows to the conditions.

God's thought, his mind is called "the Word," *o logos*, and it is what gives logic and meaning to all things. What God does is let this eternal and omnipresent Word minimize itself to the stature and nature of one human being, Jesus of Nazareth, and God speaks that Word into the welter of our chaos, the nonsensical condition of a world which has lost its meaning, abandoned its sanity. Jesus, as the Word, brings meaning and order to our world. And we reject it! The Cross!

# D RIVEN to I STRACTION

BEN HARRISON, MC



Tertullian. What I thought he said was, "I believe the Gospel because it is absurd." When I researched what Tertullian actually said, it is quoted as follows. He made "this observation, with specific reference to the death and resurrection of Christ: 'it is entirely credible, because it is unfitting... it is certain, because it is impossible' (For Latinists out there: *prorsus credibile est, quia ineptum est... certum est, quia impossibile*). (Big Think, Peter Harrison, 12 April 2018).

Excuse me if I go off on a short theological digression here, but this is key to my insight. Camus and company describe the absurdity of the human situation, the dilemma of fallen man in a fallen world. We want all that is good, bright and fair, but find ourselves beset by trouble, suffering and death. What human wisdom would consider

The Crucifix is the proof of the foolishness of mankind (rejecting all that is good), and also the image of our human condition (aspiring to heights but pinned to earth). But it is also the icon of the foolish prodigality of God, who instead of overthrowing evil, undergoes evil; instead of overpowering death, undermines death. He gives meaning to suffering and loss, and thereby transforms them. He brings life into death and hell, and thereby neutralizes them. He defangs the serpent. He loves the enemy. He defeats death by dying. And then he offers us the new life, pregnant now with meaning, with purpose, with joy.

This is the mind-boggling foolishness of God, what Dante calls the Divine Comedy—something we could never have imagined, but which, once intuited, is the perfect solution to



an intractable dilemma. What I have always understood Tertullian to mean is that, what to our mind is unfitting and impossible, is not only entirely appropriate but, because of its unforeseeable originality, pre-eminently convincing. Since our broken world and humanity are sunk in such absurdity, only an equally absurd solution can salvage them — which is why all the mysteries of the Christian faith, the incarnation, the death and resurrection, etc., have a quality of mind-boggling oddness. The foolishness of God, the absurdity of the Christian message, is the entirely fitting response to the absurdity of life.

As I continued to wrestle with this question of whether my attitude was irreverent, I remembered the whimsical humour of many of the Old Testament stories, for instance the series of conversations between Moses and God in which each refers to the chosen people as, effectively “Your lot.” “What are you going to do about your people now?” And I can easily identify with Jonah sitting, disgruntled, under his dried-up vine, angry because God didn’t sort the Ninevites once and for all.

And then there are all those times in the New Testament when Jesus could not have helped but shake his head at the unruly and obstreperous crew of disciples he had assembled, and their misdirected antics. He must still find it amazing how thick we, his very serious followers, are, and how astoundingly off target we manage to throw our darts.

I ask myself, “Is God serious?” I am not asking, “Is he joking,” but “Does he have that character of sternness, gravitas and focus that I associate with the word *serious*?” I would say God is clear-minded. “Serious” has something dark and frowning about it that I find inconsistent with God’s abounding love

for his creation. And I remembered that passage from Proverbs (8:29-31) where the writer talks about the playfulness of God’s creative wisdom:

when he assigned the sea its boundaries — and the waters will not encroach on the shore — when he traced the foundations of the earth, I was beside the master craftsman, delighting him day after day, ever at play in his presence, at play everywhere on his earth, delighting to be with the children of men.

The final confirmation of the suitability of this light-hearted approach to prayer, at least on occasion, came as I reflected on creation itself. I remembered the joy of sea otters chasing each other in the Pacific surf; the delight ravens must feel as they hover, swerve and dive in tandem on desert up-drafts; puppies chewing on each other’s ears; kittens with yarn; and lambs startled by a passing hiker, running in panic to take comfort in mother’s milk, positively lifting her off her feet in their desperate need for reassurance. And her look of studied indifference as she goes about her highly focused business of munching grass. I thought of that time on another retreat when I was depressed and went to sit beside a quiet pond. A row of ducks were waddling in a stately procession to the shore, and each, in order, slipped on the muddy ledge, scooted down the bank and splashed into the water, making every effort to maintain their duckish dignity.

So I conclude that giggling with God is an altogether salutary way to spend an hour, and entirely consistent with his loving, merciful and generous patience with us, his unruly but, to him at least, lovable creation. ✕

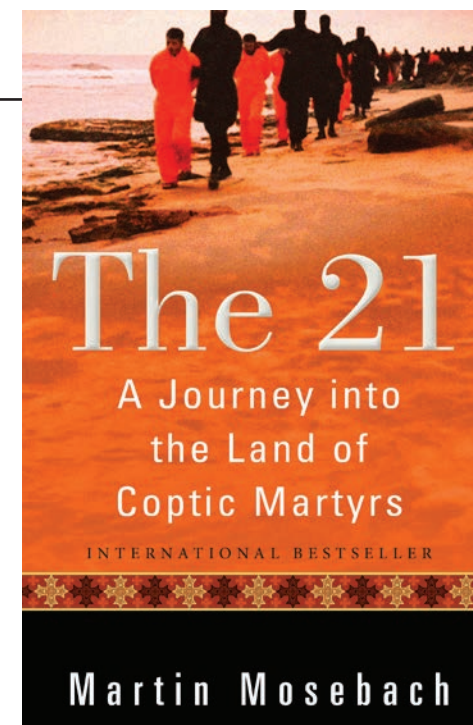
## BOOK REVIEW

MARY KAUFFMAN, OBL.OSB

ON FEBRUARY 15, 2015, TWENTY-one men in orange jumpsuits—twenty Coptic Christians from Egypt and one Christian from Ghana who voluntarily stayed with his Coptic brothers—were brutally beheaded on a beach in Libya by black-clad ISIS militants, who called upon “merciful Allah” as they murdered these men. This scene was carefully recorded in a video entitled “A Message Signed with Blood to the Nation of the Cross” in order to instill maximum fear and terror into viewers. However, the captive men appeared to die with peace, calling on the name of Jesus in their last moments; the video soon had a completely different impact than that intended by the murderers.

Who were these martyred men? Where did they come from? How did they have the faith and courage to face such a horrendous death with such equanimity? These are the questions German novelist and journalist Martin Mosebach, a Roman Catholic, sets out to answer by journeying to Upper Egypt to visit their homes, families, and friends. He takes us to a land far removed from the urban glitz and sophistication of Cairo in language that is accessible and easy to read in Price’s excellent translation. But the book’s themes are not simplistic. He explores with respect and an open mind the uniquely Coptic life of faith brought to the world’s attention through the video, asking probing questions along the way: he often chastises the Christians of the West for their complacency in their faith, their ignorance of and condescension towards the world of the East, and their lack of awareness of the persecution of Christians in other parts of the world.

Coptic life in the rural villages of Upper Egypt, particularly in El-Aour, where most



of the martyrs and their families lived, is thoroughly Scripture-based. All that happens is seen as either a reflection, fulfillment, or re-enactment of Old and New Testament events. While the official Coptic Church was founded in Alexandria by the apostle Mark in 43 AD, Copts trace their heritage back to the Holy Family’s flight into Egypt, where they claim the childhood of Christ as their own in their own “holy land.” During the persecution by the Roman emperor Diocletian (303–311 AD), great numbers of Coptic Christians died for their faith. Copts call their Church the “Church of the Martyrs” and see little change in their lives since the earliest days of Roman rule: persecution for their faith is part of their Christianity.

Few can read and write in the home communities of the martyrs; most of their families are what we would call “illiterate.” Mosebach was amazed at the grace and peace with which the families took the news of their sons’ and husbands’ martyrdoms. To his question of why they were not exhibiting







more grief, the father of the martyr Malak quoted from memory the narrative of King David's fasting and weeping while his first child with Bathsheba was gravely ill; David ate after the baby died, saying, "Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me." Thus, the Copts live scripture even today; thus, the "illiterate" man explained his reason for not showing grief: the example of King David. He felt sorrow while his son was suffering in ISIS captivity but joy when he was released by death into heaven. These families were joyful that their sons were now with God.

A reader gleans much general information about Coptic life, from how children are named to a history of tattoos, from Coptic ethnicity as the indigenous Egyptians to the Coptic Church's long relationship with monasticism that continues to the present day, from their unquestioning acceptance of the miraculous to how the village has been scarred and dirtied by the modern accumulation of "trash" as opposed to the "organic waste" of the past. (For about a week after reading this, I was haunted by "trash." I noted that almost every room in my house had a

wastebasket that was always half full; that almost everything I bought at the grocery store had some sort of throw-away wrapper or container; that my garage had two large trashcans in it. I am now cured of this obsession.)

Other aspects of Coptic culture are described more fully in the book, including their homes, their art, and their liturgy. Their Eucharistic liturgy, which can last three hours, is recounted in particular detail. There are 200 fast days in the year. Mosebach says that "in order to get to know the martyrs of El-Aour, one must pay close attention to their liturgy, all the more so since its sheer otherness and ancientness make it so distinct from the standard liturgies of the West. Those who celebrate the Roman Catholic liturgy will have to wonder whether, in its updated form, it still does justice to its apostolic beginnings. Copts have no such reason to wonder, since theirs has been preserved fully intact."

Other contrasts are made with the Western world, and especially with Western Roman Catholicism. "Contemporary Westerners suffer from historical and genealogical amnesia and... are very condescending" towards the Christians of the Eastern world, seeing them

as backwards and as perhaps taking their religion "too seriously." In the Western world, people are "discreet" about religion. In most of the contrasts between the East and West, the West comes out looking the lesser.

If I have a criticism of Mosebach, it's that he is overzealous in finding flaws in Western culture and the Western Church. For example, he recounts a conversation with a bishop soon after the beheadings, wherein Mosebach asked why the Catholic Church did not *formally* (italics mine) recognize the martyrs' testimony; the bishop replied, "But they're Copts!" Mosebach seemed to take this as an expression of the entire Church's close-mindedness about other Christians. However, on the day after their martyrdom, Pope Francis offered Mass for the twenty-one and invited the congregation to pray with him for "our brother Copts, whose throats were slit for the sole reason of being Christians, that the Lord welcome them as martyrs... Catholic, Orthodox, Coptic, Lutheran does not matter: they are Christians! And the blood is the same. The blood confesses Christ." They will not be *formally* canonized in the Catholic Church, but they were certainly recognized and honored by the Church all over the world.

Mosebach also repeatedly contrasts the extreme reverence and respect that all Copts have for their liturgy and their priesthood with a Western Christianity that has become all too casual. He is painting with a broad brush here, as this is not true of many Western Christians. (However, a June 30, 2019 protest by Catholic parishioners in Portland, Oregon—who shouted at their new pastor because he removed both the group's own supplemental "mission statement," which they had appended to the Creed said during Mass, and their political statements from the front of the parish—suggests Mosebach may have a point. One woman chanted to the priest, "We are following the voice of Jesus...

because when we resist the law, we are in the Spirit of God.")

There are some small factual or word errors in the book. For example, he sometimes uses the word "Mass" to describe the Coptic liturgy, but "Mass" refers only to the Catholic liturgy. These word errors could be the mistake of the translator; in any case, they are minor enough not to detract from the overall vision of his narrative.

Mosebach ends his book with some very thought-provoking questions as he compares the growing modernization of Cairo with Coptic village life and wonders about the effects of urban life on faith.

I was somewhat dismayed that when I mentioned the beheadings on the beach in Libya to several Catholic friends, most did not know what I was talking about. Perhaps we really are insular in our Christianity and should learn more about the lives and circumstances of our brother and sister Christians in the non-Western areas of the world. *The 21: A Journey into the Land of Coptic Martyrs* will not only inform you but will touch your soul. It offers a profound perspective for taking the measure of a reader's own surrounding culture and its effect on our faith, on the practices and expressions of it. Though we live in a world remote from that of Upper Egypt, there is much we can learn from the example of the Copts.

During Mosebach's Egyptian desert explorations, he came upon an adobe wall that enclosed what eventually proved to be monastic grounds in the midst of the sand dunes. He climbed on a boulder to peer over the wall and saw a garden of palms and foliage, with orange trees, vegetables, and a well. He says: "Nowhere does a garden radiate such promise as in the desert." This is perhaps an apt image of the Copts, a living, flourishing garden of faith surrounded by the vast desert of an increasingly secularized world. ❌





## UPCOMING PREACHED RETREATS

### NOVEMBER

- 1-3 Edith Stein:  
*Her Journey from Darkness into Light*
- 4-7 Autumn Artists' Retreat
- 11-15 Priests' Retreat:  
*Ministry & Priesthood Inspired by  
the Writings of Pope Francis*
- 20 Take Charge of Your Life
- 22-24 Praying in the Cave of the Heart:  
*The Spirituality of Bede Griffiths*
- 23 God in America:  
*Judeo-Christian Values in  
American History*
- 27-29 Thanksgiving at Valyermo
- 29-12/1 Advent Retreat
- 30 Taller Adviento en Español

### DECEMBER

- 4-6 Lectio for Advent
- 9-13 Hildegard of Bingen:  
*Prophet of the Cosmic Christ*
- 18 Take Charge of Your Life
- 18-20 Augustine and the Confessions
- 20-22 The Psalter, Mirror of the Soul
- 24-26 Christmas at Valyermo
- 31-1/2 New Year's Retreat: *"Behold, I make all  
things new!" (Rev. 21:5)*

### JANUARY

- 10-12 Leadership and the Rule of Benedict:  
*Purity of Heart*
- 17-20 Mid-Winter Dance Workshop:  
*Moving to Bridge the Gap*
- 25 Beginning Again

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