

THE VALYERMO Chronicle

SAINT ANDREW'S ABBEY



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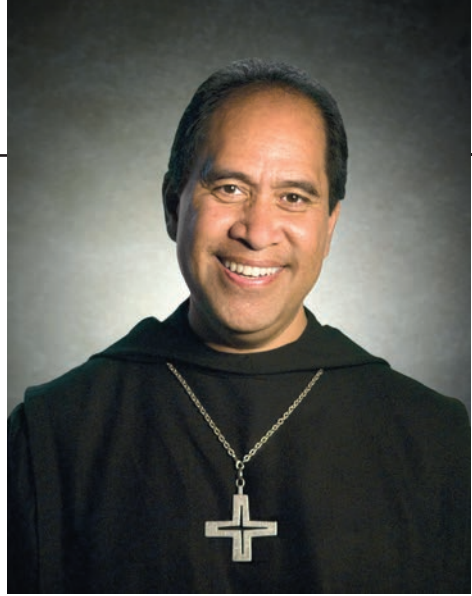
LETTER *from the* ABBOT

In November and December of last year, I started seeing online posts that had messages like: Good riddance to 2020!; I'm not going to set my clock back one hour. I've had enough of 2020; 2020 the year from hell!

Last year was a considerably challenging and demanding year on many levels for many people. So I challenged people with the question: Where was God all last year? Where was He at the onset of the pandemic, during the Bobcat Fire, when churches closed, during the violent protests across the nation, when hospitals wouldn't allow priests in to anoint the sick and dying, when friends and relatives died alone? Where was He?

Any level-headed Christian would have to answer: God was where He always is: right beside us. He never left our side.

In my humble opinion, this is the way we need to look at 2020 and everything for that matter. When we look at 2020 in this light we have to say—although it was a year plagued with fear, death, and significant setbacks—God never left us alone. He was with us in our sorrows and confusion, challenging us and waiting for us to see Him in the darkness and chaos. But some of us refused. Our minds (perhaps even our hearts) simply would not allow us to believe that our God could allow this, that our God could be found in places like sickness, sorrow, violence and death. And yet, that is precisely why our Lord came to earth, to heal us of these things through His death and resurrection.



The year 2020 will remain forever ingrained in history and our minds as the year of the pandemic, the global shutdown. It will almost always conjure up bad memories, but hopefully it will also remind us that our God is a God who accompanies us into the depths of darkness and despair with the hope that it will bring us to Himself, the Light.

The degree to which we acknowledge and accept that God is always with us, even in the midst of confusion and death, to that degree will we continue to live with the hope and trust that befits His children, who are children of faith, children of hope, and children of Life, and so encourage others to do the same.

May 2021 afford us many opportunities to witness to the fidelity and love of God. ✠

Abbot Damien



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Carlo Cignani, *The Penitent
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“THE MONK’S CELL IS NEXT to the prisoner’s cell, and through the wall the two can sense each other’s presence.” I wrote those words about twelve years ago¹ when I had been talking to an inmate at a Los

is influenced as much by the prisoners I work with as by the monastic tradition that drew me to the Catholic Church and the religious life in the first place.²

The Sister in charge of organizing days of recollection for the religious here



CELL Dwellers

BEN HARRISON, MC

Angeles County jail who fondly remembered coming to the monastery at Valyermo as a boy, when his alcoholic father would arrive in his old pickup with his two young sons to beg food and gas money from the monks. After more than thirty years working as a volunteer in prison chaplaincy, I find that my own spirituality

in our diocese in England, where I live now, asked if I would lead one of those days, which are attended mostly by older women religious. I said that I would be quite comfortable talking to a room full of criminals, but the mere thought of talking to a room full of nuns terrified me. She responded, “There’s really not

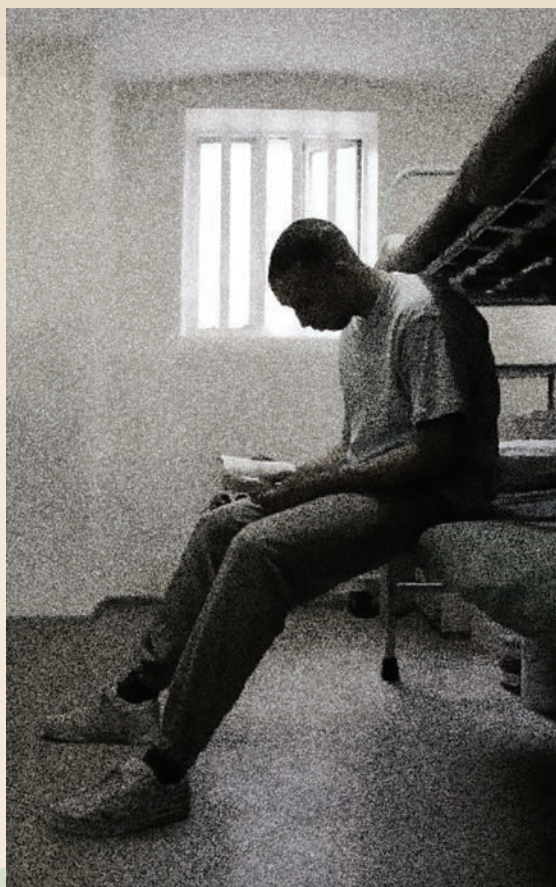
¹ *Valyermo Chronicle*, No. 222, Winter 2008, “A Memory Awakened.”

² *Valyermo Chronicle*, No. 224, Spring 2009, “Musings of a Wannabe Monk.”

that much difference.” And I think she is right. People who spend much of their lives with a certain amount of solitude have a lot in common—they have wrestled with the same demons and been visited by the same angels. Both are socially “marginal,” and it has historically probably been to their disadvantage that monastics have at times been revered, rather than ignored, for their marginality.

When I was a young man searching for a route into some kind of spirituality, I came across a book of the sayings of the Desert Fathers. I was fascinated. Here was a book that was serious about the Gospel and prayer, yet not full of the usual preachy, moralizing sentimentality and self-righteousness that I thought was all Christianity had on offer. Included with that collection of humorous, puzzling and inspiring anecdotes was St. Athanasius’s *Life of Anthony*, the story of St. Anthony the Great (or Anthony Abbot, as distinguished from the much later but more popular Anthony of Padua). Anthony lived in Egypt from 250 to 356 AD, and after a dramatic conversion, felt called to leave everything behind and dedicate himself to a single-minded following of Christ. After some preliminary experiments with solitude, he spent fifteen years alone in an empty tomb, and many more years in an abandoned desert fort, living a life of prayer and penance, tempted by boredom, depression, loneliness, demons and the urges of the flesh. He eventually emerged, full of wisdom and humility, to be considered the patriarch and founder of Christian monasticism. It was one of Anthony’s followers who advised a young novice who was tempted to go shopping for interesting spiritual experiences and exotic gurus to “Go and stay quietly in your cell. Your cell will teach you everything you need to know.”

Now obviously we all know, even from the various flamboyant and grotesque artistic portrayals of Anthony’s assault from demons, that solitude can as easily lead to madness as to wisdom, and that long periods without social contact can



more easily end in self-obsession than in selflessness, in pathology than in sanctity. We often hear of prisoners emotionally broken by weeks of solitary confinement, to say nothing of the dire mental health consequences for those who are kept in “secure housing units” for months and years. Being alone with yourself for any extended time is difficult for most people. In recovery programs there is a saying that,

if one's objective is sobriety, "an addict on his own is in the worst possible company."

Very early, the monks realized the importance of having a spiritual director or advisor to help the solitary keep the right balance. In fact, most of the anecdotes in the collections of the sayings of the desert monks and nuns have to do with precisely that—questions of balance, discernment, discretion, and dealing with the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil. Later developments found that, for most people drawn to a monastic way of life, it was healthier for the individual solitary to be in some way linked to others in a loose society or a more organized monastic structure. The word "cell" (Latin, small room) originally referred to an individual hermitage or one-roomed hut, though as the tradition developed, it came to mean one individual's compartment in a larger building, hence its use to describe both monastic and prison accommodations.

So, what does that mean, then, that "your cell will teach you everything?" To me it means that I will learn more about God and myself by quietly opening my heart and mind to God's presence in prayer and by a contemplative sensitivity to grace moving in me and around me, than by constantly trying to figure things out, by chasing new information and novel experiences, and by busily comparing myself and my experience to other people's. This inner work, though performed alone, will normally only be fruitful, however, when the solitary person is linked to a praying community and is accountable to some sort of a spiritual director or companion.

In my own experience in prison chaplaincy, I find that many people do find prison a time when they can reflect deeply on their lives thus far, their past choices and the consequences of those choices, and

their plans and hopes for the future. My main role is to be a friendly presence in a fairly hostile environment, but often that evolves into the role of one who listens to people and tries to help them make sense of their experience of life. I never "preach." Knowing how irritating it is to be preached at, I "do not do unto others what I do not want done to myself." But I listen respectfully, ask clarifying questions when I can, and if invited, share my own experience of the search for meaning, and the struggle to find the way of life that is right for me. This could be considered spiritual companionship or a non-directive type of spiritual direction.

Despite the difficulties and dangers of solitude, the great Christian mystics and spiritual writers are all in agreement about the importance of solitude and silence for anyone who wants to deepen their relationship with God. A recent book by Cardinal Robert Sarah (*The Power of Silence*) discusses in depth the absolute necessity of solitude and silence, especially in our modern world which is dominated and contaminated with constant noise, stimulation, and hyper-activity. What he refers to as the "dictatorship of noise" keeps us constantly entertained, aroused, tense and distracted to such an extent that we cannot tolerate even the minimal silence we need to know our own minds, much less to reach the degree of self-knowledge and self-acceptance which are absolute prerequisites for a vital relationship with God. Until we can live with the truth about ourselves, we will never be able to venture into the presence of the One who *IS* ultimate truth.

Even that great saint of service to the poor, Mother Teresa, insisted on the centrality of silence and solitude for her sisters and brothers. They cannot recognize Jesus present in the poor if they do not spend

time silently in the presence of Jesus, in Adoration in the chapel. This silent confrontation with their own poverty, misery and sinfulness is what enables them to identify with the poor and lonely ones they serve. Jesus' full experience of our human poverty is what allowed him to identify himself with us to the point of saying, "Insofar as you performed a kindness to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me." According to a saying of Mother Teresa, prayer, faith, love, service, and peace are all, ultimately, fruits of silence.

Now, if I am going to draw parallels between monasteries and prisons, I have to admit that, aside from the fact that the former are chosen and the latter involuntary, prisons are certainly not oases of silence. There are the sounds of the prison itself—banging gates, guard dogs, shouting officers and prisoners, alarms, and loud-speaker announcements. Then there is the cacophony of noises from whatever radios, televisions and other media sources are permitted. Prisoners are as anxious as other people to avoid being alone with themselves. If monks struggle to avoid mobile phones, televisions, newspapers, and simple gossip, how much more those who have little notion of the value of silence and plenty of reason to avoid looking at themselves. And yet, despite all that, there are moments of silence, and even in the midst of noise, individual prisoners can and do choose to make a place of silence, if not in their cells, at least in their minds or hearts.

But let me not generalize too much. Let me tell you about one particular friend. M spent several years in my prison, the last six months of which were in the solitary confinement area. M was at that point classified a "six-man unlock," which means that even if he was simply leaving his cell for a shower, six officers had to

be on hand in case he "kicked off," which he occasionally did. He had his anger and his grievances, but he told me on one occasion that he attacked the officers just because he needed a bit of exercise, and a scuffle was as satisfying as anything, never mind a few bruises and scrapes.

Despite M's anger and violence, we got along quite well, and we would have long conversations at the crack between the hinges of his door, trying to ignore the shouting of officers, the banging of other prisoners on their doors, and all the other ambient noises. Sometimes we just talked about his family, his health, or the latest injustices of the system. But he had a Bible in his cell, and sometimes we would have long discussions, initiated by him, of profound theological issues—the hymn about the self-emptying of Christ from Philippians, the enfleshment of the eternal Word from the first lines of John's gospel, the new life in the Spirit promised through baptism in Paul's Letter to the Romans, as the "old man" dies away and the new Christ-life gets more firmly rooted. M had a deep intuitive understanding of these things. The various conflicting aspects of M's personality were all part of who he was, the mystery of his humanity, and I liked him a lot. He was real. And we could laugh together easily, about ourselves and the absurdities of life.

He has been transferred on to other prisons since then. In the first of those, he ended up spending another six months in solitary, and something happened then which I will refer to later. Four years down the line I still get occasional phone calls from M, who has another eight years to serve. We have the same range of conversations as we did before. When I have insights that I am thinking of sharing with others (including some in this essay), I sometimes

“run them by” M to see if they make sense. He often understands my point before I’ve finished making it. I highly value his friendship and his spiritual companionship.

Of course, other men with whom I have deep relationships have totally different characters and temperaments, but each is on a journey, each has been confronted with stark and painful realities, and each is searching for some sort of firm foundation on which to build their future. That they trust me enough to share their search and their journey touches me deeply. And despite the fact that they may have done terrible things, they have virtues and personal qualities that I not only admire but emulate. Indeed, within each human, I would say, a monk and a criminal share adjacent cells. As Jacques Maritain says, the border between heaven and hell, between the saved and the lost, runs through the heart of each of us.

When the corona-virus lockdown prevented me from going into my prison for six months, I felt a great closeness to my friends “inside.” Society itself was experiencing a small degree of the burdens of incarceration. I often thought especially of particular men whom I knew, who were at that time in the solitary confinement unit, and how, despite their frustrations, they had always been gracious and pleasant whenever I appeared at their cell doors. I admired their ability to “take their punishment” with some degree of equanimity, and I thought about how it must be for them in the middle of the night, when all the outside noises eventually subside, even officers banging gates, other prisoners shouting and rattling doors, and the guard-dogs barking from their kennels. To be locked in, alone in the dark, cut off from everyone you know and care about, with nothing but your own thoughts — and God, if you have any kind of faith. Well, in

fact God is there, waiting, even if you don’t have faith. And I prayed for those men, as I said in a letter I wrote for the chaplains to distribute to all those I knew well:

For what it’s worth, my prayers are with you. And, just so you know, when I’m praying for you, I’m imagining myself locked in a cell at night, digging down deep within myself, below all the anger, the fear, the hurt and the hopes, to that quiet place that I believe each of us has deep down inside, where God is waiting to meet us, to hold us, and to give us strength. My prayer for you, as it is for myself, is that we learn to access that deep place, and that we find there that strength and courage to live the lives God created us to live. Amen.

But I wasn’t sure. Was such a thing possible? Does that ring true? Is there really such a burrow of warmth and presence at the heart of us? And I asked M if that made any sense, if he could believe such a thing. He said that, yes, it is certainly realistic to think such a thing is possible, when the moment is right and the person is ready. In fact, he said, it was something like that that caused a shift inside him during that second six months in solitary, when he went to that new prison, and that as a result of that shift his attitude had changed profoundly. My friend M, the “six-man unlock,” hasn’t had a “nicking” or incident of any kind in the three years since that time.

I don’t know exactly what happened in his case, but in speaking with other people I have known who have gone through profound changes that reoriented their lives, it seems that a moment comes when you make a radical act of acceptance of yourself and of surrender to the realities of life, which, though that sounds like limitation,

feels like liberation; and though it sounds like defeat is experienced as triumph. From that moment, the person emerges into a fuller engagement with life.

Now that is where I try to go when I pray—into that deep place, that cave, that womb, that sub-basement, that refuge that I believe is at the core of every human being, below all the hopes and fears, below the dreams and the terrors, below the anger and the ecstasy—that still place where the One who knows us intimately awaits us patiently—is awaiting us always and forever, whenever we return.

Will I share what I have written here with M? He knows I'm writing it, and that I'm mentioning him. But I worry that if he is anything like me, seeing himself so highly valued could be problematic. Because of my insecurities, whenever I receive a little affirmation I tend to revel in it so much that I get inflated and then have to do something self-defeating to jinx myself, to prove to myself that I am not some kind of hero or guru, but just an ordinary guy. Maybe that wouldn't be a problem for M. He doesn't seem to have that particular weakness, though he surely has some others.

I don't delude myself that he or I or any of us is out of danger. We are all always capable of indiscretions, accidents, sins and betrayals, of self and others. Only God's grace can keep us standing, and only God's mercy can lift us when we fall. For my own sake, I need to dig down to that deep place within, that place of intimacy, where He awaits me, knowing that in that place I am one with every saint and sinner, every monk and criminal. Indeed, the monk's cell and the prisoner's cell are side by side within me.

When I recently had a week's retreat, because of the lockdown restrictions I could not go to any of my preferred monasteries or retreat houses in idyllic settings,

so I had to make do with a little house in the city. That was an opportunity for me to practice this way of prayer not only in solidarity with monks and prisoners, but also with pensioners and others who live alone. I was a bit anxious about being on my own for eight whole days, knowing the terrifying monsters of fear, panic and delusion that lurk beyond the borders of the conscious mind. But I anchored myself with the daily liturgical offices of the Church, the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, and Adoration each day at the same hour as my brothers back home. And I reminded myself often that "thoughts are only thoughts, and feelings are only feelings, but the rock of truth is that God is with me, and within me, here and now."

I often remembered and prayed for my friends in prison, and how so many of them endure so much for so long. If they can weather all that for months and years, I should be able to manage a week! After my retreat I wrote them again, saying that "I hope the Lord will lead me back to you soon. Because I love walking with you, watching you learn and grow in your self-understanding and your faith in God and in life, and seeing you discover the treasures that lie hidden in your hearts. As I've said before, I believe that in the stillness of the night, if you learn to listen deep, God is speaking words of courage and comfort to you too, deep in your heart."

When Jesus taught us to pray, he told us to go into our little room and pray to our Father there in secret. That little room is at the core of each of us, our own cell of solitude and silence. And in that cell it matters not if I am monk or prisoner. I am both. I am neither. There, all distinctions dissolve—no victory or defeat, no humility or pride, no freedom or constraint.

What is left? You tell me. ❖

From BUDDHA to BENEDICT

BY TA-TEH HSIU-SHIH (*Fr. Thaddeus Yang An-Yuen, O.S.B.*)

FR. THADDEUS YANG WAS ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF SAINT ANDREW'S Abbey, Valyermo. Born in 1905, he joined our Belgian mother-abbey of St. Andriesabdij (St. André as it was then known) in Bruges in 1927. His significance in monastic and missionary history is explored in detail by David J. Endres in his article: "The Legacy of Thaddeus Yang." International Bulletin of Missionary Research (Vol. 34, No. 1, January 2010) pp. 23–28. We quote from the first two paragraphs of the article, which may be read in full online at: <http://www.internationalbulletin.org/issues/2010-01/2010-01-023-endres.html>

TA-TEH HSIU-SHIH (1905–82),¹ later named Thaddeus Yang An-Jan and hereafter referred to by his shortened pen name, Thaddeus Yang, was one of the first indigenous priestly vocations for the Chinese community of the Order of St. Benedict (Benedictines).² Born to a Chinese Buddhist family in Java, Indonesia, and educated in Hong Kong and then Europe, Yang encountered the Roman Catholic Church and the Benedictine Order in Belgium. Attracted to Christian faith, he was baptized and soon thereafter pursued a religious vocation as a Benedictine. After ordination he was sent back to the Far East to labor as a missionary in China. In that role he helped to educate Westerners, especially Americans, about Chinese culture, religion, and the missions. While mission historians have often studied the role of missionaries being sent to

distant lands to preach the Gospel to non-Christian peoples, the mission legacy of Thaddeus Yang, O. S. B., illustrates the reverse situation of an indigenous Catholic missionary who educated Americans about the missions and helped to stimulate interest in mission support.

Conversion and Calling. Thaddeus Yang was born on May 15, 1905. His father had lived a life similar to that of a Buddhist monk, practicing a life of solitude and self-denial.³ From his early years, Yang wished to imitate his father and live the austere life of a monk. His mother, though, cautioned him against it, encouraging him instead to enter the diplomatic service. His education, which his mother hoped would equip him for eventual diplomatic duties, took him to Hong Kong and across Europe to England, Germany, and finally Belgium.⁴

We now permit Fr. Thaddeus to speak for himself in two autobiographical articles, "From Buddha to Benedict" and "The Chinese Adventures of an Indonesian Monk" (to be published in the next issue of the Chronicle).

1 Special thanks are due to fellow historians who assisted me in this research: Robert Carbonneau, C. P., of the Passionist Historical Archives, Union, N. J., and Luke Dysinger, O. S. B., of St. Andrew's Abbey, Valyermo, Calif., and St. John's Seminary, Camarillo, Calif.

2 After Yang received his religious name, some still called him "Brother Ta-Teh." His name has appeared in print as An-Jan, An-Yuen, and An Djian. He used "An-Jan" when he wrote the foreword to *The Communist Persuasion: A Personal Experience of Brainwashing*, by Eleutherius Winance. New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1959.

3 Yang's imitation of his father is found in chapter 1, "The Young Ascetic," in Yang's autobiography, titled "Chinese Bonzes and Catholic Priests," dated January 4, 1943, pp. 3–7, folder 9, in box 51, Catholic Students' Mission Crusade Collection, Archives of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati (hereafter CSMC).

4 "Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Thaddeus Yang," interview with Thaddeus Yang in the Benedictine Chinese Mission Office, Lisle, Illinois, May 15, 1945, pp. 2–6, folder 4, CSMC.

I

That Spring day was a memorable day for the high school where I was learning French in preparation for the university. A celebrated missionary had come to address the faculty and students on the Catholic Church in China. “Celebrated,” that is, among European Catholics—to me, his Belgian name, Vincent Lebbe, at first meant nothing, and his Chinese name,



Lei Ming Yuan (“The-Thunder-That Rumbles-In-The-Distance.” struck me as presumptuous—all the more so because he was short of stature, and his soutane was old and faded and full of patches—not unlike the robe of a Chinese stage “beggar.”

As it turned out, a “beggar” Father Lebbe actually was. After twenty years as a missionary in China, he returned to Europe in 1919 and had ever since been traveling from one European country to another, and from city to city, begging for

funds and scholarships in behalf of the two hundred or more Chinese students he had lured away from the Radical-Socialist and Communist-dominated Franco-Chinese Federation and its affiliated Student-Workers’ Movement.

I had only a very short interview with Father Lebbe—but long enough to convince me that he was not what I had imagined him to be. His ragged appearance belied his dynamic and magnetic

personality. Before we parted company that night, he said to me: “I will say Mass very early tomorrow morning—I want you to serve my Mass. After breakfast you will accompany me to the railway stationer we will talk more on the way.”

“But, Father.” I protested “I am a Buddhist, and I don’t know Latin; neither do I know what the Mass is all about . . .” “Never mind,” he cut me short. “You shall serve my Mass. I’ll tell you what to do.”

On the way to the railroad station the next morning, Father Lebbe told me: “I am going to apply for a scholarship for you at the University of Louvain. One of my brothers-in-law, a professor at the University, has just built a new home. He and his wife, my youngest sister, are very good people. I want you to live with them. you will like them and they will like you, I’m sure.”

There was something of my father in Professor Thoreau. The devotion with which he prayed every morning before breakfast and every evening before dinner recalled my father’s meditation or

“concentrated sitting.” Devout Roman Catholics, the Thoreau’s were not in the least bigoted or prejudiced. They never talked religion to me except when I asked them questions about Christianity.

On Christmas Eve I accompanied Professor and Madame Thoreau to the Midnight Mass at nearby St. Anthony’s Church. I knew by then the meaning of Christmas. I had read St. Luke’s description of the first Christmas night in Bethlehem—and I found it quite appropriate that Professor and Madame Thoreau should choose to sit beside their butcher and baker instead of taking seats in the front pews, one of those reserved by tradition for so-called people of “good social standing.” After the service we returned home in silence, glorifying God in our hearts, like the shepherds in Luke’s story.

During the Christmas vacation Father Lebbe came to Louvain to see the 15 or 20 Chinese students studying there. Known as “Father Lebbe’s students.” they were all Catholics, the most promising of those whom Fr. Lebbe had converted from the Radical-Socialist Student-Worker’s Movement in France.

“Everything I have seen up to now, in the university and in this home, impresses me very much.” I said to Fr. Lebbe that evening. “Catholicism is the religion that I could embrace. But there are a number of doctrinal points that hold me back. Such is, for example, the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross.”

“Do you still remember.” asked Fr. Lebbe, “the teaching of the Buddhist Pure-Land Sect?”

“I think I do.” I answered, “although it was long ago that I lost interest in any religion.”

“Well.” said he, “There is a parallel between the Gospel revelation that God the Father sent Jesus Christ, His only-begotten Son, to die on the cross for the salvation of the human race, and the Pure Land teaching that the Buddha-Savior Amitabha sent the Bodhisatva Avalokitasvara or Kuan-Yin to the world to lead all men to everlasting happiness.”

“Precisely.” I objected, that’s whereby doubts come from. Kuan-Yin is not even a Buddha. Jesus Christ claims to be the Son of God, how can He die? Even Kuan-Yin cannot die. The very thought of a Buddha or a God who is liable to suffering or death is repugnant to us Buddhists. By definition, a Buddha is a being that cannot suffer or die, for he is outside and above the Wheel of Life and Death.”

We argued back and forth until midnight. What finally convinced me was Father Lebbe’s own personal religious conviction rather than the soundness of his theological reasoning. After all, I said to myself, there are more “mysteries” in Buddhism than in Christianity, and religion is above all a principle of life and not a set of abstract “truths” for the theologian or the philosopher to juggle with. A theologian, I said to myself again, may be able to unravel the mysteries of his religion, but what good would it do him-and his fellowmen- if he did not live up to the requirements of the mysteries he claims to penetrate and which he takes upon himself to teach to others? Father Lebbe was not a theologian. He loomed above theology. He so loved Christ and China that his sole ambition was to lead China to Christ.

To further dispel my doubts, Father Lebbe invoked the Buddhist notion of

Bhakti, which my father used to explain to me in the sense of total devotion to the Buddha-Savior Amitabha and total compassion towards all sentient beings. "Because the Son of God was all-immersed in Bhakti," Father Lebbe declared, "He gave Himself up on the cross in order to lead mankind to His Father-not only the mankind of two thousand years ago but all mankind until the end of time."

Father Lebbe himself was all immersed in Bhakti, so totally dedicated was he to Jesus Christ, and so totally devoted to the welfare of his Chinese students.

That night I did not sleep at all. At 6 o'clock in the morning, I served Father Lebbe's Mass for the second time, this time having a better understanding of it, and, more important still, believing in it, for it was after that Mass that I asked Father Lebbe to baptise me.

My decision to become a Christians however, was also the result of my personal observation of Professor and Madame Thoreau's exemplary Christian life. Without ever making any attempt to "convert me, they gradually and unconsciously exercised a decisive influence upon me, by simply carrying out the teaching of the Gospel which they professed to believe in.

II

Not long after my baptism, I made up my mind to become a monk. But my confessor and spiritual director, regarding my yearning for monastic and contemplative life as nothing but the fleeting enthusiasm of a new convert, advised me to wait a few more years until I had attained Christian maturity.

In my quest of "Christian maturity." I began to attend the office of Vespers

at the Benedictine Abbey of Mont-Cesar, at the outskirts of the city. The spectacle of the black-robed monks singing in unison and by turns bowing, genuflecting, and kneeling together around the altar brought back to memory my early Buddhist ascetic-contemplative life, thus making my resolve to be a monk all the stronger. I talked several times with the Guestmaster. He gave me St. Benedict's Rule to read. The Benedictine Rule appealed to me very much. But written in the 6th century, could it still be followed to the letter in the 20th century? According to the Guestmaster, his Abbey was composed mainly of scholars, writers and teachers. My conception of Monachism was still my Buddhist father's-that a monk is a pure contemplative. In the light of this conception, I could not figure out how a monk could be anything but a monk, that is to say, a man devoted exclusively to prayer and meditation.

While my mind was thus beset with doubts and confusion, I learned that Mr. Lou Tseng-Tsiang, China's former Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, had lost his wife and was, for this reason, seriously contemplating becoming a monk at the Benedictine Abbey of St. André near Bruges. I learned, too, that this Abbey was considering the possibility of founding a monastic community in China-"That." I said to myself, "may very well be the sign we have been waiting for."

During the summer vacation I went to Bruges and spent a few days at the Abbey of St. André. The Guestmaster welcomed me most cordially. The Abbot revealed to me his plans for China and expressed the hope that I would take an active part in the new venture. "The project is very attractive indeed." I answered, "and it would be an honor to be part of

it, however, before making any definite commitment, I should like to consult with my parents first."

My father's answer to my letter was brief and to the point. He said, "If your conscience tells you that you should become a Christian monk, then go ahead, follow the voice of your conscience. But go into it seriously and courageously. One needs courage to be a good monk." Then in a detached manner, as though the matter did not concern him, he added: "Your mother wants you to obtain from the venerable Abbot permission to continue your secular studies, even as a monk." I translated the letter for the Abbot. My mother's request, which my father conveyed half-heartedly, seemed to amuse him. He read it out loud and slowly, then he said to me laughing, "Your mother must be an extraordinary person. She reminds me of Zebedee's sons' mother. Do you know the Gospel episode?"

As I was not sure, he picked up the New Testament from the book-shelf and read to me: "Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons. 'What do you want?' Jesus asked her. She answered, 'Promise that these two sons of mine will sit at your right and your left when you are King.' 'You don't know what you are asking for,' Jesus answered them. 'I do not have the right to choose who will sit at my right and my left.'"

"Like our Lord." the Abbot commented, "I have no right to grant your mother's request. The matter pertains to my Senior Council and the Chapter."

He stopped for a while, thinking hard, then went on to say: "However, out of respect for your mother and father, I will take it upon myself to send you back to Louvain University after you have completed your monastic and ecclesiastical training."

I was dumbfounded. I wanted to thank the Abbot but something like a hot rice dumpling was choking my throat. The Abbot dismissed me.

"Now go back to the Guesthouse." he said, "We'll talk again tomorrow. What I have said to you is strictly confidential. You may reveal it to your parents but to nobody else."

After a week in the Guesthouse, I was invested with the novice's habit along with other candidates. Contrary to the saying that "The habit does not make a monk." I thought I was someone else in my "holy garb." tunic, scapular, and cincture. When I got up for the office of Matins at 4 o'clock the next morning, I said to myself, "Now we're in for good. We're new man. We must live up to it. 'Courage, Father has said, and Father was our first Spiritual Master."

III

I did not have any trouble observing the Rule and Customary. This was due to my early Buddhist ascetic training and the moral and spiritual support of the Master of Novices, Dom Gabriel Eggermont. An electrical engineer who joined the Abbey in his thirties, Dom Gabriel was a man of experience and of insight, but above all he was a holy monk, and his holiness commanded the respect and affection not only of the Novices but of the professed monks as well.

Dom Gabriel did not know much about China and the Chinese, but he seemed to understand my Chinese way of thinking and acting better than many another. He was always careful not to make me lose face before the other Novices. This the Guestmaster once did to a Chinese student who came on a retreat

with other students. On their arrival that evening we had apples for dessert. The Chinese student took one and munched it with gusto. After the supper, the Guestmaster detained him in the refectory to teach him how to peel an apple with a knife and fork. With a broad smile, the

and said so in his monthly letter to his uncle, who took pleasure in reading the most virulent passages to me. Did he propose to test my religious vocation, according to the Holy Rule, which says, "Let him examine whether the novice is zealous for the Divine Office, for obedi-



student thanked the Guestmaster for the free demonstration. The next morning, however, he left the Abbey without saying goodbye to anyone.

The Father Sacristan who was also a teacher at the Abbey School, had a nephew missionary in Inner Mongolia. The young missionary hated the Chinese

ence, and for humiliations." In any case, he always saw to it that I be assigned to serve the latest "private Mass." celebrated during the breakfast hour by a sick priest who had lost almost entirely the use of his free will. I should have been thankful to the Father Sacristan. Instead, I complained rather bitterly to Dom Gabriel.

Any other old-school Novice Master would have given me a half hour lecture on the monastic virtues of patience and endurance. But Dom Gabriel knew better.

"Relax," he said quietly. "I'll straighten out the situation."

The very next day I was relieved from my twofold duty to serve the late Mass and do the sacristan's bed room. As a substitute I was appointed to the "Office of Humility," which consisted in doing the Novice Master's room and cleaning up the novitiate toilets. Careful though I was in handling Dom Gabriel's chamber pot, I slipped and crashed with it on the floor of the corridor. Accident or no accident, it was one of those "offenses" the Customary listed as "major," one which required that I brought the broken pieces to the Chapter of faults held every Friday morning. Accordingly, before the assembled Community, I held the pieces aloft saying, "I accuse myself of having broken Father Master's chamber pot." Everybody, including the Abbot, looked at blushing Dom Gabriel with amusement. After the Chapter, I apologized to him and asked him, in accordance with the Customary, permission to punish myself by taking my bowl of soup on my knees, in the middle of the refectory, during the noon meal.

Following the chamber-pot incident, I was relieved from manual labor altogether. I was given two hours of Latin lessons a day instead of just one. Added to the regular classes of Holy Scripture, Commentary on the Holy Rule, History of Monasticism, Liturgy, and Gregorian Chant, that made an average of five hours of study each day. They were not called "classes" nor "studies." The Canon Law forbade novices to "study."

My Latin teachers were novices like myself, but they were good teachers. And

they loved Latin, "The language of the Church," as they called it. "Of all languages," they never tired of telling me, "Latin is the most logical." I could not quite agree with them. To my Oriental mind, Latin was an upside-down language, similar to what Europeans called a "Chinese jigsaw-puzzle."

We were ten novices. One of them, Brother Michel, was an ex-Communist militant from Paris, brilliant mind, lovable character. He died in the middle of our noviceship, at the age of twenty-five. For twenty-four hours, his body lay in an open coffin in the huge and cold Abbey Church. For twenty-four hours, the Church bell tolled every half hour—slowly, mournfully, causing my nerves to stretch tauter and tauter, until I could bear it no longer. In order to avoid being a nervous wreck, I signed up for the night wake, from eleven to midnight. Kneeling on a priedieu before the lifeless body of Brother Michel, I thought of my little sister, Jade-Orchid, who had been carried away by an epidemic of smallpox shortly before I left home. In her open coffin in the Hall of Ancestors, I furtively deposited a red rose, whispering to her as I did so, "We have no orchid. Take this rose with you in your journey to the Pure-Land." Even as I was thus musing, I fell asleep. In a dream, I saw happy Jade-Orchid singing, frolicking, and gamboling in a green meadow. I called her. My own voice woke me up with a start. Brother Michel was staring at me, mouth gaping. Cold sweat ran down my body from head to foot. I wanted to shout for help; I could not open my mouth. I wanted to run away; I could not move. Nor could I keep my eyes off the glassy and vacant stare, too afraid lest the corpse should rise up all of a sudden and jump at me...

At long last, bearded Brother Wolfgang came up to relieve me. Pretexting dizziness, I asked him to accompany me back to my room through the dark cloister. I left my room light on until dawn. Shame or pride prevented me from revealing this chilling experience to the Master of Novices; I did however, ask him to excuse me from the funeral services.

It was not long before Lent. In keeping with the Holy Rule, Don Gabriel gave each one of us novices a book to read during the holy season. The one I received was about the early monks of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. Their mode of life reminded me of my Buddhist fathers. To emulate them, I obtained permission to fast and put on a hair shirt from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday. If fasting did not cause any discomfort, the hair shirt did provide a rather unpleasant experience. Whenever I made a movement, I had the sensation of being swarmed with a thousand red ants or fleas. I became irritable, especially in the presence of a brother novice I had not been able to get along with. My irritability did not leave me until Maundy Thursday, after we had chanted together Jesus' ultimate recommendation: "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another." After Vespers I went to see the brother novice and asked his forgiveness for all the nasty things I had done to him. Thereafter we became good friends. Sadly enough, following his ordination to the priesthood, he was sent to the Congo as a missionary and there, while hunting in the jungle to feed his famine-stricken people, he was gored to death by a wounded buffalo.

That evening, while in meditation at the foot of the Altar of Repose, I heard a voice, faint but distinct, surfacing from the depth of my soul. "This hair-shirt

experience should teach you once and for all that monastic life does not consist in the performance of unnecessary acts of penance or mortification, and that one single act of brotherly love is worth more than forty days of self-inflicted suffering."

IV

Under the guidance of Dom Gabriel, the Master of Novices, and Dom Edouard, the Guestmaster and Editor of the quarterly missionary journal, *Le Bulletin des Missions*. Mr. Lou Tseng-Tsiang had become Father Peter-Celestine Lou, O. S. B. On the day of his profession of vows I was appointed "porter." Among other things, my duty was to open and shut the refectory door and give a pinch of holy water to the Abbot, the Prior, the Subprior, and the Master of Novices-and also to each guest. On that day, the guests were all VIP's-the personal representative of the King of Belgium, Chinese Ambassadors, ministers and consuls from all over Europe. As the Chinese Ambassador to Lisbon was entering the refectory for the banquet, I presented him with a pinch of holy water. Thinking I wanted to shake hands with him, he grabbed my hand, shook it vigorously, and said in a voice that boomed like a Buddhist temple gong in the silent cloister: "How do you do? How do you do?" A violent fit of laughter seized me. I had to leave my post and forgo the dinner, which, I learned later, was "*formidable*."

Mr. Lou was fast approaching his sixties when he applied for admission as a novice at the Abbey of St. André; and he had had almost forty years of diplomatic service to his credit. After his profession of vows, he confided to me that his sole ambition was to follow a centuries-old Chinese tradition.

“You see, Brother Ta-teh,” he said, “In the past, when a public servant felt that he had fulfilled his obligations toward the State, he would retire to his native village or to some remote place to spend the rest of his life in contemplation or in communion with nature. That, I assume, is what your father has been doing. Even though I cannot compare myself with your father, at least I have the desire to imitate him.”

“Why then,” I asked him, “Do you study Latin and scholastic philosophy and theology? At your venerable age, it must be hard on you.”

“Between you and me,” he answered, “It is only because Father Abbot and Father Edouard, my spiritual counselor, have talked me into it.” You see, Brother Ta-teh, he went on after a short pause, “My Confucianist training has taught me never to disappoint people knowingly. I cannot shake off my Confucianist training any more than you can shake off your Buddhist training completely.”

Father Peter-Celestine was ordained to the priesthood in 1935. After World War II, in August 1946, Pope Pius XII appointed him [titular] Abbot of St. Peter’s of Ghent. He died three years later, January 15, 1949.

Following my own profession of vows, I was sent to the Abbey of Maredsous, along with other young student-monks or “clerics,” to begin the first year of the six-year study for the priesthood.

The Abbey of Maredsous had produced Abbot Columba Marmion and such scholarly monks as Dom Germain Morin, Dom Ursmaire Berliere, and Dom Philibert Schmitz. As an “intellectual Abbey,” it

looked down on St. André, a “missionary Abbey.” This came as a shock to me. Even though superficial and sketchy, my study of the history of the Benedictine Order had taught me that from the year 596 A. D., when Pope St. Gregory the Great sent Benedictine missionaries to England, until the year 1000 A. D., when the powerful Order of Cluny was born, for five hundred years the Benedictine monks devoted themselves to missionary labor for the evangelisation of pagan Europe. If they had not done so, would there have been such thing as “Christendom.”

But all intellectuals, be they monks, are not necessarily proud and disdainful. Dom Idesbald, the Prior and Novice Master of Maredsous, told me that “True intellectuals are humble people.” He himself was a model of humility, simplicity, and kindness. I found this out a few days after our arrival at Maredsous. Late that afternoon, I knocked at his door. He had just returned from a walk and was washing his feet in a small tub of hot water. “It makes you feel good,” he said. “Soaking your feet in hot water refreshes you mind,” he said again (I thought I was hearing Jesus say, “Learn from me; I am gentle and humble of heart; and you shall find rest for your souls” — Matthew 11:29).

Another meek and humble man was our professor of History of Christianity. He revealed himself in a prosaic manner. Speaking one day about an intricate political event in the Middle Ages, he said, “It is a *Chinoiserie*” Suddenly realising my presence among the students, he took on a sorry look and cut short his lecture. I followed him to his room and said, “I would have used the term *Chinoiserie* myself, for we Chinese can be just as complicated as the historical event you were describing.” we exchanged jokes, laughed together and became friends.

V

AFTER COMPLETING the study of philosophy at Maredsous, we, “young clerics.” continued our ecclesiastical formation at the Abbey of Mont-Cesar, in Louvain. As I had been told before joining the Benedictine Order, Mont-Cesar was also an “intellectual Abbey.” And like Maredsous, it counted among its members such big-name scholars as Dom Bernard Capelle, the Abbot, Dom Odo Lotin, Dom Bernard Botte, and Dom Maieul Capuyns. But it was not forbidding at all. Its red-brick Romanesque structure had something of the warmth of our own Abbey of St. André.

Upon my arrival at Mont-Cesar that October evening, I was greeted by the Prior, Dom Albert de Meester.

“So you are a Chinese.” he said. “Aren’t you by any chance one of those babies I bought for five francs a piece?”

We laughed together at the distasteful practice current among Catholic missionary societies, which, as a means of raising funds for the upkeep of their personnel, invited gullible European Catholics to “adopt” or “buy” abandoned “Chinese babies” which probably existed only on paper.

The Abbey of Mont-Cesar was the theological school or “Clericate” of the Belgian Congregation of Benedictines and the Congregation was made up of the Abbeys of Maredsous, Mont-Cesar, St. André, Tyniec (Poland), Trinidad (British West Indies), Singeverga (Portugal), and Glenstal, in County Limerick, Ireland. We were thirty or forty clerics or theological students from different countries. During my second year of theology, Father Vincent Lebbe sent from China two of his Little Brothers of St. John the Baptist to study with us.

Ten monk-scholars made up the faculty, including Dom Bernard Capelle, the Abbot. For reasons known to him alone, Dom Bernard Botte, Professor of New Testament Exegesis, disliked me supremely. One day, during my second year, he thought he could “catch” me and throw me out of his class. I had forgotten to bring my New Testament note-book. So as not to come late to his lecture, I used loose sheets to take down notes. Thinking I was doodling, as I often did in other classes, he interrupted his lecture, stepped down from the chair, and rushed straight to my place-only to find a diligent student, dutifully summarising what the professor had been talking about. Frustrated, he “caught” me at the quarter oral examination by asking me questions no second-year student could possibly answer with any fluency.

I liked our professor of Canon Law but I was allergic to this subject. A month or so before the summer examination, however, I studied Dom Leclef’s course in Marriage Law particularly hard-for no other reason than fear of vengeance. In honor of the Cleric Master, we had put on an hour-long variety show, in which there figured a dummy dressed in the Benedictine habit complete with hood and all. The next morning, just before the Canon Law class, someone put the dummy next to my seat. At first Dom Leclef pretended not to see it, but after ten minutes of lecture he could stand its presence no longer. “Take it out.” he shouted. No one moved. “Take it out, I say.” Brother Duez, the senior cleric, hoisted it on his back and marched out of the class room. After the class, I apologized to Dom Leclef. “Oh.” he answered with a wry smile, “It’s quite all right.”

It wasn’t all right at all. At the Canon Law examination, both oral and written, I thought I had answered all the questions

fluently. But the day after I returned to St. André for the vacation, Abbot Neve summoned me to his office.

"How come," he asked, frowning, "You got zero in Canon Law?" I told him about the dummy incident. "That," he remarked with a hearty laugh, "is the Pope's Mule." (He was referring to Alphonse Daudet's tale, in which the Pope's mule gives a resounding kick on his keeper's hindside for a wrong the keeper did him thirty years before. The irreverent Daudet call the kicking action "An ecclesiastical grudge".)

Back at Mont-Cesar after the vacation, the first thing I saw was our names and examination marks posted on the class room door for all to see. The practice was unwholesome, I felt: it humiliated the average students. That very night, someone who obviously felt the same way I did,

secretly rewrote the results, upgrading the B and B- students, and degrading the A and B+ students. It was great fun to see the students' reaction as they entered the class room in the morning-the radiant smiles of the average students and the dejected countenance of the smarter ones.

Abbot Capelle never discovered the culprit. Neither did he ever discover who had poured salt and pepper into his and the other professor's water jug before supper that evening. Never had I heard so much coughing in a monastic refectory. It must have been the work of one of those friendly (or mischievous) leprechauns or poltergeists, who, they say, like to entertain senior monks.

The Adventure continues in the next issue of the Chronicle. ❄





ON THE STEPS OF A CHURCH a crowd presses in on a newly married couple, eager to greet and congratulate them on this joyful occasion. As the crowd slowly breaks into smaller groups, with different family members talking and children running and shouting, the parish priest stands alone on the steps of the church, watching this scene from above. However, his mood does not match the joy of the occasion; rather, he is in interior anguish. As he slowly begins to walk amongst the crowd, you hear him lift a raw prayer to his Lord: "I know you are everywhere, but I can find you nowhere."

This scene, which the director Terrence Malick depicts in his movie *To the Wonder*, captures an element of pain that I think every believer eventually runs into: one discovers that there is a discrepancy between what one knows about their faith and how one experiences their faith. Like the priest, the anguish arises not from the fact that God is absent; rather, it arises from a frustration of not being able to find

Our ONENESS with CHRIST

Caryll Houselander on
the Indwelling of Christ

REV. MR. MICHAEL MASTELLER

him when one *knows* that he is present. It is the kind of pain that can happen in a marriage: the pain of being alone while living within a covenant of love.

This is why I love reading the spiritual writings of Caryll Houselander: she understands this sense of alienation and she sets herself the task of speaking words of hope into this place of pain. Her message is simple: we must come to rediscover the presence of Christ who dwells within us. "Realization of our oneness in Christ is the only cure for human loneliness. For me, too, it is the only ultimate meaning of life, the only thing that gives meaning and

purpose to every life.”¹ This truth—our oneness with Christ—stands at the center of all of Houselander’s writings and her conviction of this truth was rooted in a deep spiritual experience.

It was the early 1920’s and the young Houselander—in her early twenties and a fallen away Catholic—was riding a subway below London on her daily commute. As she gazed around the subway car at her fellow passengers, Houselander received a “vision” that she describes in her autobiography:

Quite suddenly I saw with my mind, but as vividly as a wonderful picture, Christ in them all. But I saw more than that; not only was Christ in every one of them, living in them, dying in them, rejoicing in them, sorrowing in them—but because He was in them, and because they were here, the whole world was here too, here in this underground train; not only in the world as it was at that moment, not only all the people in all the countries of the world, but all those people who had lived in the past, and all those yet to come. I came out into the street and walked for a long time in the crowds. It was the same here, on every side, in every passerby, everywhere—Christ.²

What strikes me about this vision is the way in which Christ’s presence is depicted as a *dynamic* reality; as Houselander describes it, Christ is not merely present in every person, but he *incarnates* himself into their mood, their situation, their life: he is “living in them, dying in them,

rejoicing in them, sorrowing in them.” Christ is not beside us watching, nor is he ahead of us waiting: he is within us living and sharing in our experiences and the struggles which we encounter.

Houselander saw that many Christians treat Christ as an “unreality.” for instead of discerning his presence within them, they easily fall under the illusion that Christ is outside of themselves. When we think Christ as beyond us, we perceive the spiritual life as a process by which we bring ourselves to Christ, and we treat our “life in Christ” as a work to be accomplished through our own effort. For Houselander, this is all wrong, for not only is it exhausting and burdensome, but it misses the entire point of the spiritual life, which is to receive the love already extended to us. To reveal these dynamics, Houselander crafted this parable:

Picture yourself a husband and wife. The husband, out at work, has thought all day long of his wife, he has been longing to go home, to tell her of his love, to spend a long delightful evening with her. He has brought a little gift for her to prove to her—if proof be needed—that wherever he is, his thoughts fly to her. He starts eagerly for home, expecting that she will come to greet him, will light up with joy at his first words and will be ready to sit down and rest, while in his own way he tells her all he has been thinking and doing all day.

He listens for her step coming to the door. She does not come. He calls her. There is not answer. What is wrong? He goes in to find her

1 Caryll Houselander, *A Rocking Horse Catholic: A Caryll Houselander Reader*, Ed. Marie Anne Mayeski (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1991) 22.

2 *A Rocking Horse Catholic*, 21.

sitting dejectedly in the corner scribbling, she does not look up at first, then with averted eyes and hanging head she advances and offers to him a sheet of paper. He looks, reads, the greeting dies on his lips, in dismay he sees this—

“List of the little things I have done today which may offend you:

I spilt a drop of milk.

I folded your shirts a little carelessly.

I allowed my mind to wander from the thought of you twice while preparing your dinner.

I allowed a shirt button to remain under the chest of drawers and bought another in place of it.”

And so on . . .

“My dear,” says the poor man, “are you feeling ill?”

“Wait!” she says, a gleam of melancholy joy in her eyes, “I have another list.” She produces another paper and he reads:

“Pin-pricks provoked for you to-day.

Pricked my finger on purpose while darning your socks.

Refrained from turning on the wireless.

Ate nauseating cheap lunch.

Allowed the baby to cry all day without stopping.”

A bleak chill wraps the husband’s soul; he sits down silently. “What is wrong,” he thinks, “have I proved such a brute that she actually thinks all this can please me?—and my poor little child left crying, too?—perhaps she is ill—.”

He is going to question her tactfully when suddenly and more brightly she hands him another list. “All the things I want you to give me.”

It is a long list; while he reads it she turns on the wireless, and the evening passes. The lovely evening is lost. He knows only one thing—he does not understand—they are miles and miles apart—they are both alone.

Christ understands, he can even smile at these efforts to please Him, but the fact remains, if you treat Him like that, then in your soul, “the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.”

“Treat Christ as the real Person that He is, don’t fuss and worry about your soul,”³ Houselander tells us, because when we consume ourselves with excessively tidying up our lives, we will never find him. There is an irony here: in our anxious efforts to attract God to ourselves, we can overlook the humble reality that he is already within us, and so we endure lonely evening after evening alienated from the beloved who is right before us.

What Houselander wants to teach us is that we must reverse this mentality: we must see that Christ is *always present within us* and that no matter how broken, sinful, or unpresentable we feel we are, this truth never changes. Houselander goes so far as to say that even mortal sin is not able to drive out this presence of Christ within us:

I saw too the reverence that everyone must have for a sinner; instead of condoning his sin, which is in reality his utmost sorrow, one must comfort Christ who is suffering in

him. And this reverence must be paid even to those sinners whose souls seem to be dead, because it is Christ, who is the life of the soul, who is dead in them; they are his tombs, and Christ in the tomb is potentially the risen Christ. For that same reason, no one of us who has fallen into mortal sin himself must ever lose hope.⁴

While this may seem a bit bold, Houselander is only echoing the teaching of St John of the Cross, who also emphasized the profound presence of God in every soul: "It brings special happiness to a person to understand that God is never absent, not even from a soul in mortal sin (and how much less from one in the state of grace)."

Christ is always with us, but the alienation occurs when we are not with him. We want to raise ourselves above the restrictions, situations and emptiness that we think keep us back from life and from the Lord; but the Lord has chosen to enter these spaces of darkness and emptiness so that he may touch and redeem them. To find Christ, Houselander encourages us to be courageous in accepting our life as it is and to receive the presence of Christ within us: "We are all asked if we will surrender what we are, our humanity, our flesh and blood, to the Holy Spirit and allow Christ to fill the emptiness formed by the particular shape of our life.."

When we surrender ourselves to Christ, the latent power of his resurrection is unleashed within us, so that our life is no longer merely our own, but we will discover that Christ is with us *within* our experience of life.

Christ has lived each of our lives, he has faced all our fears, suffered all our griefs, overcome all our temptations, laboured in all our labours, loved in all our loves, died all our deaths. He took our humanity, just as it is, with all its wretchedness and ugliness, and gave it back to us just as *his* humanity is, transfigured by the beauty of his living, filled full of his joy. He came back from the long journey through death, to give us his Risen Life to be *our* life, so that no matter what suffering we meet, we can meet it with the whole power of the love that has overcome the world.⁵

Maybe our inability to find the Lord arises from our unwillingness to let him be what he wants to be for us: a loving spouse, a helpmate for the soul, a companion in life, a true friend who loves us unconditionally, the epitome of mercy and faithfulness. "Listen. Be silent. Let Christ speak to you. Forget yourself, forget your soul, let Him tell you how He loves you, show you what He is like, prove to you that He is real."⁶ If we humbly return to ourselves and root our prayer in the hard realities of our lives and open the arms of our hearts, we will feel the weight of Christ's head as he leans forward to rest his head on our breast. Then we will find the Lord as he wants to be found: incarnated in our own flesh and with us in our own life. ✕

Michael Masteller is currently in his final year of formation and studies as a seminarian at St John's Seminary in Camarillo, CA. This past October, Mr. Masteller was ordained to the transitional diaconate for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and in June of 2021 he will be ordained to the priesthood.

4 *A Rocking Horse Catholic*, 21-22.

5 Caryl Houselander, *The Risen Christ* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958) 2-3.

6 *This War*, 35.

Living Life Deliberately

The Benedictine Vows of Relationship

BY MICHAEL R. CAREY, OBLATE OSB

I have been an oblate of St. Andrew's Abbey for many years; I first set foot on its grounds at Valyermo in 1971 when I was a 19-year-old sophomore at Loyola Marymount University. My initial experience was as part of a three-week theology course that LMU offered at St. Andrew's, taught by Benedictine Augustine Flood and Jesuit Tenny Wright.

Living with the monastic community and following their daily rhythm—praying with them, eating with them, washing dishes with them—filled my imagination with the possibility of a life lived more deliberately. I left Valyermo at the end of the three weeks and returned to my life in Los Angeles, but I immediately thought about the possibility of joining the community that had affected me so positively and dramatically.

However, at that time I was a typical college sophomore, and I was questioning everything I had grown up with, including my faith. I clearly remember wondering if my not necessarily believing in God would be a problem if I joined the monastic community (as I said, I was a



typical sophomore). I decided that it probably would be awkward at least, and so I limited myself to many return visits to Valyermo to revisit my experience of “living life deliberately.” By the time I had returned to my belief in God and my understanding of myself as a Roman Catholic, I had met the person who would become my best friend and eventually my wife, Mary Ann; she and I will soon celebrate our 47th wedding anniversary, and we together we have five daughters (all of whom are very grateful for my sophomore issues with my faith life in 1971).

Although I didn't end up seeking to join the community of men at St. Andrew's, their lives lived deliberately under the *Rule of Benedict* still transformed my life. I often returned for private retreats even after Mary Ann and I moved our family to Washington State—in fact, if I was going through a difficult time in my spiritual life, Mary Ann would recommend that I take some time to be at Valyermo. Over the years I read as much as I could about Benedictine spirituality, especially about the

dynamics of the *Rule of Benedict*, and my study influenced both my relationship with Mary Ann as a husband and my relationships with my daughters as a father; it also influenced my work as an educational administrator and eventually as a leadership studies scholar and teacher.

Why would I be so affected by the life I experienced being lived at Valyermo, especially initially when I wasn't even sure of my faith? As I learned more about the defining document for the monks at St. Andrew's specifically and for Benedictines generally—that is, the *Rule of Benedict*—I began to recognize the dynamic that had so grasped me as a young man and still captures my heart: living life deliberately requires that we take seriously that we never stand alone, but rather we only make full sense because of our authentic relationships with others. I think that is what Benedict was getting at in his *Rule*, and it is summed up in the three vows each monk takes when entering the community: Stability, Obedience, and *Conversatio*, or “constant conversion.”

Back in 1971 I went into the St. Andrew's bookstore and bought my first book written by Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*. That book helped me to understand what *living life deliberately* meant for the monks and for me: purity of heart. In that book, Merton wrote:

In the language of the monastic fathers, all prayer, reading, meditation and all activities of the monastic life are aimed at *purity of heart*, an unconditional and totally humble surrender to God, a total acceptance of ourselves and of our situation as willed by him [Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 68].

And how do monks go about their search

for purity of heart? In Chapter One of the *Rule*, Benedict describes four kinds of monks: *cenobites*, *anchorites*, *sarabaites*, and *gyrovagues*. The *cenobites* and the *anchorites* are described by Benedict as the former being on the way to achieving and the latter having already achieved purity of heart. The *sarabaites* are viewed more critically by Benedict, however; they will not realize purity of heart because they lack *obedience*—they follow their own will. Likewise, the *gyrovagues* are judged in a pejorative way by Benedict; what prevents them from reaching the goal of purity of heart is that they lack *stability*—they follow their desires. For Benedict, the *cenobites* are to be preferred to all others in the sense that they understand the limitations of the self and seek God through relationships with others in community.

The negative description of *gyrovagues* and *sarabaites* in the *Rule* can be better understood by the fact that stability and obedience are two of the three vows that Benedictine monks take when they enter the community. I think that each vow represents and helps to effect both authentic relationships and the inner transformation required for purity of heart. Taken as a whole, each vow describes one aspect of that which is required for real community to exist, and taken separately, each one sets up the conditions for the next vow to be realized.

In agreeing to live under Benedict's *Rule*, each individual pledges stability. A superficial understanding of stability limits it to the concept that a monk remains in one monastery for life. In fact, the concept of stability goes beyond physical location—and therefore the monastery as well. Stability is about the minimum conditions for the development and continuance of relationship. By stability,

the monk makes a commitment to stay in relationship even when it is difficult. In this sense, stability is similar to the marriage vows of spouses who commit themselves to each other “in good times and in bad.” Stability also embraces the precept that everything involves relationship. If autonomy or individualism is the operating logic of a group of people living together, then relationship is difficult and real community almost impossible. Stability, therefore, is the foundation of both relationship and community. Having said this, it is important to note that one needs to develop a certain amount of personal autonomy (healthy independence as opposed to embeddedness) to be able to contribute to an authentic, healthy, and life-giving relationship.

Since I teach leadership studies to graduate students, I often use this concept of Benedictine stability in my dialogue with my classes: stability means that leaders and followers trust each other to want the same things because they are motivated by the same needs and values; it means that they take the best possible interpretation of each other’s actions. Stability requires and produces patience, allowing things and people to have the time they need to process events and situations and to be productive. Further, stability implies forgiveness, and the belief that no mistake is unredeemable. In all this, stability says to both leader and follower that whatever problems there are to be dealt with must be dealt with here and now. Assuming as an exception a dysfunctional community from which withdrawal is required in order to maintain one’s mental or emotional health, the insight of stability is that people who run away from organizational problems will find that the problems run after them.

The second vow made by monks entering the life guided by the *Rule of Benedict* is that of obedience. Obedience has often been characterized as the relinquishment of individual will in favor of mindless submission to a superior. For Benedict, however, obedience means obedience to the Truth; the Latin root for the word obedience is *audire*, meaning “to hear” (interestingly, the Latin root for *absurd*, or meaninglessness, is “to hear nothing”). Benedict urges members of the community “to hear”—to listen carefully for the Truth as it is present in each situation. Toward the end of the *Rule*, monks are exhorted to mutual obedience; as in stability, this is both cause and effect for authentic relationship and community. By opening themselves to hear how the Truth is present in other members of the community, the monks learn how it is present in them. Benedict sees this mutual obedience as essential to purity of heart.

Again, in my role as a leadership scholar, Benedictine obedience has much to offer me and the students who join me in communities of learning. If stability keeps individuals from abandoning each other and the community, then obedience builds upon that commitment to find out what the individual and community response should be. Obedience is not some ploy to maintain authoritarian leadership, attempting to control (or indoctrinate) the consciousness of followers. Obedience demands more from the leader, requiring leaders to go beyond agenda, bias, and fear to become open to what is best for all. Similarly, obedience demands that followers move past a “stimulus-response” approach to decisions, and become open to hear what truth there may be in community policies or plans.

Conversatio has been loosely translated as “constant conversion,” and is the third major vow of the monastic life lived under the *Rule of Benedict*. If stability sets up the preconditions necessary for relationship to flourish and community to exist, and obedience defines the attitude of openness that allows members of the community to engage each other mutually, then *conversatio* (continual dialogue) demands that this entire process go beyond occasional acts of friendship or collaboration to become a way of life. *Conversatio* is essential to complete what stability and obedience begin—the realization of mutual and respectful interdependence: through it, relationship and community become ways of *being*, rather than of *doing*.

When I reflect with my students on the leadership lessons of Benedictine *Conversatio*, I usually offer an example from my life lived deliberately with Mary Ann. About a year after we married, we were having some difficulties in our relationship, and I remember contemplating whether we had made a mistake by getting married (Mary Ann was wondering the same thing). I remember that as we talked through our difficulties, the concept of stability was very present to us; that is, we both were fighting the human desire to flee our uncomfortable situation. We stayed in very difficult conversations with each other until we could “hear” what we were being called to do, and that call was to change how we related both to each other and to our extended families. We renewed our stability with each other so we could then be obedient to the Truth of what was best for us, both individually and as a couple (again, for which our five daughters are quite grateful).

I tell my students that in that first year of marriage it was as if I was telling

myself “must remain stable, must remain stable” even as a part of me wanted to escape back to my single life. And I tell them that remaining stable became easier and easier after that, because Mary Ann and I learned that we could be more faithfully obedient to what we were being called by God to do when we were together than when we were apart. I then add that if—after nearly fifty years of being in relationship with Mary Ann—I were still saying to myself “must remain stable, must remain stable” when we had a disagreement about something, then I really would not have learned very much about what it means to be a mature person, nor would I be *living life deliberately*. *Conversatio* means, for the monks and for me, that I go beyond individual acts of stability and obedience and *become* stable and obedient. I cannot *become* that without my relationship with Mary Ann, nor can the monks at St. Andrew’s *become* that without their relationships with each other.

In June 2021 I will celebrate fifty years of learning from the monks of Valyermo, from Benedictine writers like Thomas Merton, and from the *Rule of Benedict*. What I have learned is that we are all called to have an unconditional and humble surrender to God through a total acceptance of ourselves and of our situation as willed by God. And that surrender to God requires that we live in a community of authentic relationships, which I have learned experientially through my nearly fifty years of being with Mary Ann. Throughout both my marriage and my relationship with the monks of Valyermo, then, I have learned the wisdom of Benedict’s requirement to practice Stability, Obedience, and *Conversatio* in *living life deliberately*. ❖

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BOOK REVIEW

MARY KAUFFMAN, OBL.OSB

Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town in Judah...

—Luke 1:39

Joseph rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed for Egypt.

—Matthew 2:14

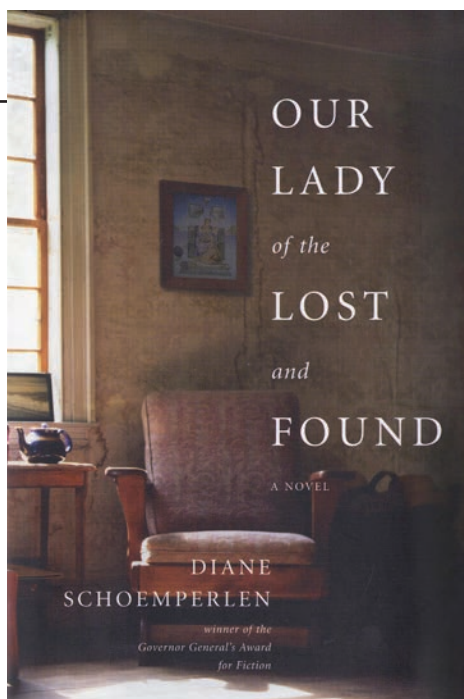
Here on the West Coast of Turkey lies one of the most important sites to both Christians and Muslims. This is believed to be the home of the Blessed Virgin Mary during her last few years on earth. According to Church tradition, the Disciple John took Mary into his care as directed by Jesus from the cross, and brought her to Ephesus to avoid the persecutions of Christians in Jerusalem.

—The Catholic Travel Guide

... (T)his America owes its own Redemption, life, and freedom in a unique way to the infinite love of our Mother Mary Most Holy of Guadalupe... Mary would say then to Jesus, "... I am going to convey your Redemption to them, and I am going to visit them."

—From a 1796 sermon by Fr Ramon Peres de Anastaris

FROM THE TIME WE FIRST encounter Mary in Luke's gospel, we see she is a traveler, journeying throughout the New Testament, Christian tradition, and later in around-the-globe appearances. But suppose a time comes when all this travel is a bit fatiguing, a kind of divine jetlag sets in, and a metaphysically and literally down-to-earth Mary needs a place to rest for a while, a place where no one knows her and no petitions will be sent her way...and she shows up unexpectedly at your home one day so that she can have that semi-reclusive rest?



OUR LADY OF THE LOST AND FOUND

A Novel of Mary, Faith, and Friendship

DIANE SCHOEMPERLEN

This is the imaginative and intriguing early premise of *Our Lady of the Lost and Found*. Author Diane Schoemperlen is a non-Catholic Canadian writer who became interested in the Virgin Mary after seeing a TV documentary on miracles and visions. She began a quest to learn more about this woman Mary, and her novel is the fruit. Her overall tone is a gently wry humor, sometimes touched with irreverence; but along with the flippant wit are profound moments of pathos, joy, sadness, and seriousness. The book contains sometimes overly detailed description of places and events, which I find a trait in many modern authors and can annoy some readers. At the risk of being overly cute, however, I would compare this novel with the perfect chocolate croissant: the exterior

is light and flaky, having a surface fluff, while deep in the interior is a surprisingly intense and rich center.

The book has two cores, one that focuses on Mary, her apparitions and interactions with various saints, and her visitation and time with the narrator; the other focuses on the first-person narrator's growing self-awareness, self-questioning, and reflections on such topics as faith, writing, history, and time. These two themes are woven together in a non-linear, back-and-forth pattern, as peripatetic as the travels of Mary to her various sites of apparitions, a pattern that could be burdensome to some readers. Milagros, small tin figures representing petitioners' pleas and prayers of thanksgiving to Mary, themselves tell a story of knowing and discovering what was lost in order to find. They are a presence at the opening and closing of the novel, closing the circle of movement of Mary, of ideas, of stories of loss and finding.

Mary arrives as a congenial, undemanding houseguest. One of her first act is to remove from her clothing the many Milagros, which resemble the charms women put on bracelets as signs of parts of themselves. She makes coffee, reads, watches the news with her hostess, converses, listens, and goes shopping (the name on her bank card is Mary Theotokos). She helps clean the house, meets some of the neighbors, and listens to the radio (a Gregorian chant station) while she cleans the kitchen. She relates and gives commentary on her experiences with a sense of humor and earthiness—*It was time to take action, Mary said, time to fall back on that old standard of reward and punishment . . . Now I was speaking their (humans') language. Now they understood*—and notes her relationships with different saints.

Schoemperlen has done her research well. The apparitions recorded in the book are all well-documented, with the exception of one fictional event at the end of the book, and I was often sent to my computer to get more information. I watched a video interview of a woman who as a child saw Mary at Beauraing in Belgium; I checked to see if Catherine of Siena really did all that was mentioned in the story; I never realized Anthony of Padua (our help in finding what is lost) was actually Portuguese and that his tongue is preserved in an Italian basilica. One chapter lists all recorded and documented Marian apparitions of the twentieth century, beginning with Fatima in 1917 and ending with a 1996 image of what some perceived as Mary showing up in glass panels on the Seminole Finance Corp building in Clearwater, Florida (I had to look this up, too—yes, it's true, and says much about the faith in the eyes of beholders). Guadalupe, St Meinrad, Teresa of Avila, the Ursuline nuns—many apparitions and encounters are found in the novel, stories told by Mary to her hostess, all from Mary's point of view, of course. I occasionally but rarely found a piece of data in question, but it was never enough to detract from the whole picture of an event.

I learned that the largest Marian library in the world is at the University of Dayton. In its collection is a pamphlet written in 1945 by Florent E Franke, MD, entitled *Hail, Mary! Six Thousand Titles and Praises of our Lady*. These titles included Overflowing Heart, Gate of Life, Tower of Ivory, Morning Star, and Mystical Rose—all of which fascinated me as a Catholic child growing up in Chicago; metaphor comes early as a particular gift to Catholic children. Zelatrix, whose meaning I had to look up, was also there. And as of 2004, the Virgin Mary tied with

Princess Diana for woman most often on the cover of *Time* magazine, with eight appearances each. These are just samplings of interesting Marian tidbits interspersed throughout the book. Yes, Shoemperlen has done her research.

A fictional autobiographical element is the novel's other center. The first-person Narrator, whom I shall call "N," stays anonymous throughout the book. She also never reveals the name of her town, just letting the reader know it is a mid-sized town on the North American continent. She is somewhat of a modern-day everywoman. She gives us a great amount of detail, though, about the routines of her daily life, which can seem overwhelming but serves to establish her *bona fides* as a "normal," sane person; she is confirming that her experience with Mary is not that of a crazy person or a psychotic episode. N's background is modern-typical; she was raised in the Methodist church but has had little church attendance since childhood; she had little knowledge of Mary or interaction with Catholics until her college years, and even that is sketchy. She calls herself a neo-agnostic who trusts in the intellect but concedes there may be a higher supernatural power, fitting the current slot of "spiritual not religious." Her flippant humor is often self-deprecating or targets current culture, noting many of the ironies of modern life. Mary serves as the nonjudgmental, patient, and sympathetic listener to this surprised hostess that evokes that second center of the book, the story of N's growth through this visitation to the core of Lost and Found.

Time, history, ideal vs reality, faith vs doubt, fact vs fiction, good vs evil, subjective vs objective, and truth vs data are some of the dualistic puzzles she ponders throughout the book, quoting an eclectic assortment of figures on these topics: prophets, poets, popes, physicists,

philosophers, doctors, and historians count among them, including Evagrius Ponticus' reflection on the eight evil thoughts. She considers kinds of knowledge, wondering why so many people find it easier to believe unimaginable pieces of scientific information (such as that if the DNA contained in one human being were stretched into a single strand, it would reach from the earth to the sun and back again) than to believe in God. She is perplexed by her own loss of knowledge and bits of memory. Her questioning often revolves around what is lost and what is found, a central theme that relates to almost everything else in the novel. Lost and found also relate to her reflections on writing and reading; as N, like the author, is a writer by profession, meditations on this craft, on its meaning and process, ultimately become a book about truth, faith, creativity, reading, and writing.

Some will find all this pondering, well, ponderous . . . but if you are a fervent reader/frequent questioner/closet writer, you will enter into the meditations with your own reflections. (Some may also find my book reviews ponderous.)

The ending brings resolution for N, a way of reconciling either/or opposites "and travel into the uncertain territory of both/and. Time to accept that these, irony, paradox, and prayer, are the still points, the thin places, the perfect quantum qualities." She has realized that "losing one thing can open the door to finding something better," and that "sometimes what looks like irony turns out to be in fact grace." Her conversations and experiences with Mary have altered and reshaped her life, that she is "both the same ...and not the same person I was when I began. I know that I have barely begun to fathom the gifts that Mary gave me." In many ways the end creates a perfect circle back to the beginning, and the finding of a lost charm bracelet mirrors

the Milagros that were introduced at the start. I found when I finished this book I had both a more imaginative picture of the Virgin Mary and a great respect for a non-Catholic writer who could combine interesting objectivity and respectful subjectivity into her story of the Mother of God. *All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ . . .* Chapter 53 of the Rule enjoins us to have a particularly reverent attitude towards those who show up at our doors. Are we ready for the surprise

guest, bringing gifts we don't understand until later? Can we, at least sometimes, find the Divine in the unexpected around us? Imagine the possibilities if we do.

I recommended this book to a dear friend, who is not Catholic. And she loved it. I met her for lunch sometime after she had finished it, and she brought me a gift: a beautiful Milagros cross with a golden leaf-shaped heart at its center that she had recently found at a local thrift shop.

But I don't think it was ever lost. ❖





2021: UPCOMING RETREATS

Due to the ongoing effects of COVID-19, the remainder of this year's retreats are listed as tentative dates. We will be confirming each month's retreats as the year goes on. Please be aware that dates are subject to change due to the pandemic. We will post the latest retreat updates on our website "Retreats" page or our "Home" page. We thank you for your patience and understanding.

MARCH

VIA ZOOM 1-5 Priests' Retreat:
Walking the Way of the Heart
Through the Gospel of John...

VIA ZOOM 20 Taller Cuaremal en Español
29-31 Holy Week Retreat

APRIL

- 1-4 Sacred Triduum
- 13 Release-Renew-Reinvent
- 16-18 Dealing with Death
- 19-23 Transformation for A New Creation
- 23-25 The Wisdom of Early Monasticism
- 26-29 Spring Artists' Retreat

MAY

- 5-7 The Reality of the Unseen:
Looking at Mysticism and Religious
Experience as a Gift of Being Human
- 7-9 Poverty of Spirit
- 10-14 Priests' Retreat: Walking the Way
of the Heart Through the Gospel of John...
- 21-23 Pentecost Retreat
- 31-6/4 Mysticism of Teilhard de Chardin

JUNE

- 4-6 Caring for our Common Home
- 22 Release-Renew-Reinvent
- 23-25 Discernment in Daily Life
- 25-27 Faith and the Human
Condition: Adrienne von Speyr
& Hans Urs von Balthasar

For complete and current details about all upcoming retreat offerings,
including descriptions and presenter information, please visit our website:

SAINTANDREWSABBEY.COM (Click the Guest House link)

FOR RESERVATIONS, CALL THE RETREAT OFFICE: (661) 944-2178

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