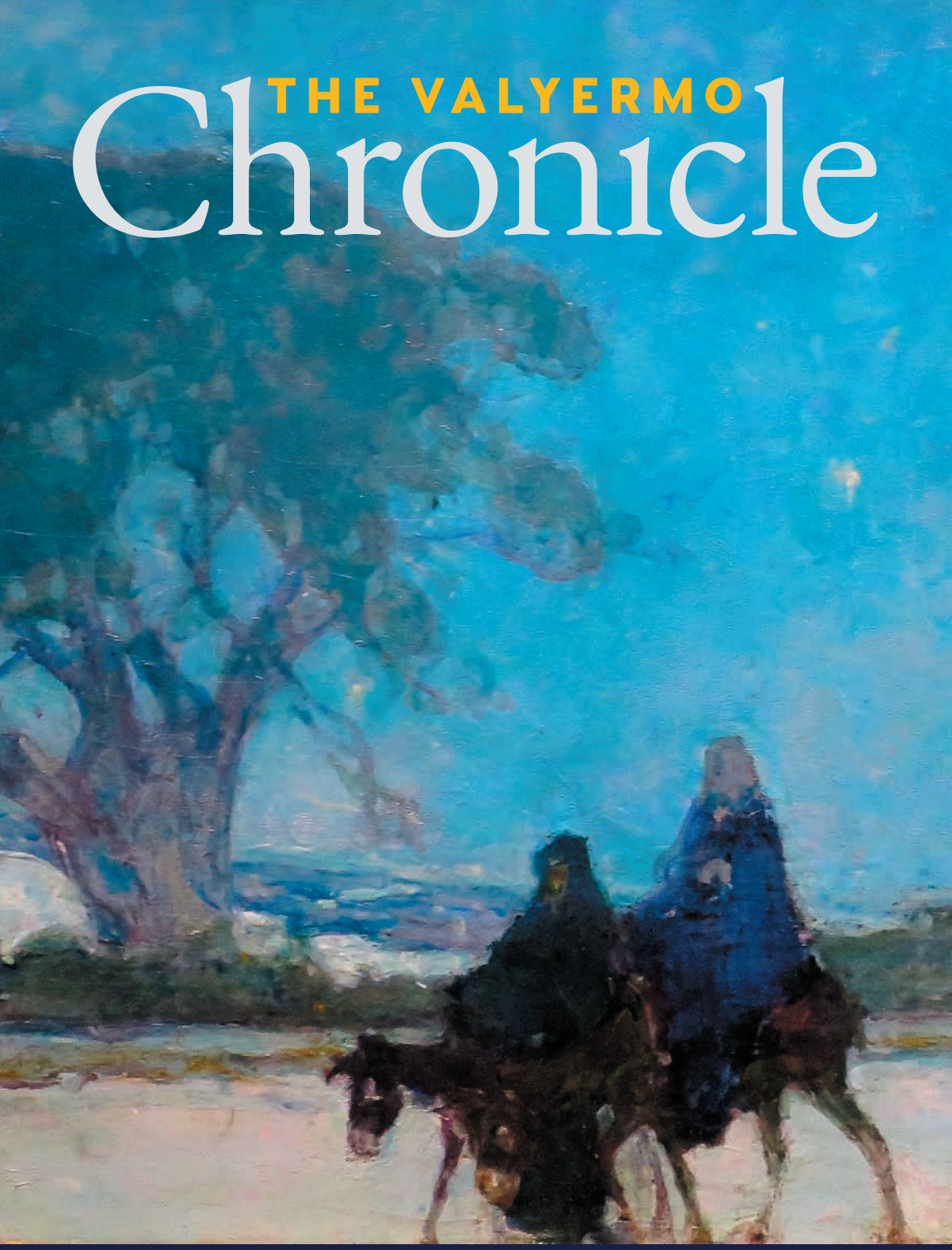
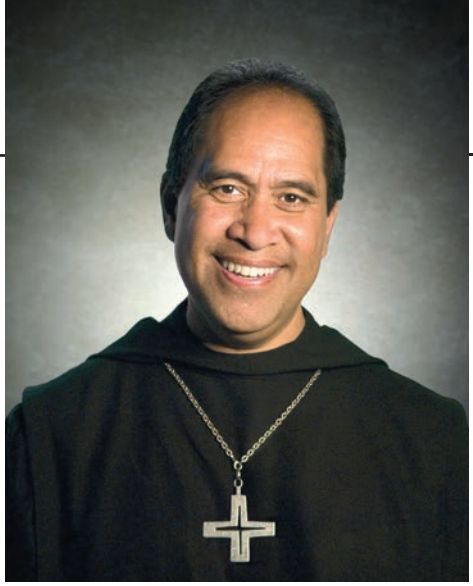
THE VALYERMO Chronicle



NUMBER 268 FALL 2021

LETTER *from the* ABBOT



SEVERAL YEARS AGO I WENT with Fr. Patrick to Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) to pick up two monks from Europe. One of the monks I had briefly met at a meeting several years before, but I really didn't remember what he looked like. The other one I didn't know. Fr. Patrick had never met either one of them. I secretly hoped, without telling Fr. Patrick, that I would remember what the one monk looked like, otherwise we could be in big trouble. So we went to the Tom Bradley International terminal at LAX, where all the international flights arrive.

We, with hundreds and hundreds of other people, waited patiently in the waiting area while the arriving passengers went through the mandated check points in customs. We knew it could be a long wait, but that was also part of the fun of it. The Tom Bradley terminal is truly a great place to people-watch because people of all types are there from different parts of the world, some in native dress, some speaking other languages, some doing 'interesting' things, and of course there are the usual ones who are there on official business carrying signs with the name of the passenger they are picking up. I thought to myself, why didn't I think of that, since I really didn't remember what the monk looked like. Anyway, it was too late.

We patiently stood in the waiting area for the passengers to round the corner and come into view. If you have never been to Tom Bradley Terminal to collect someone, just picture a model on the runway walking in front of hundreds of people. That's what it's (sort of) like. The arriving passengers who have just traveled thousands of miles, many of whom look disheveled and are too tired to even smile, are now hauling their suitcases and boxes before hundreds of pairs of scrutinizing eyes, looking for a familiar face; eyes that are perhaps asking questions like: Where are you from? What's in that big box? Which flight were you on? Are you the one I'm supposed to pick up?

My eyes were peeled on the walkway, hoping to recognize among the hundreds arriving that one familiar face I had briefly met years before. I suppose Fr. Patrick was there for moral support, since he had no idea of what or whom to look for. And even though I tried to describe the monk to Fr. Patrick, it really did no good for either of us, since my description was vague at best. We were not wearing anything in particular that would tell anyone we were from Saint Andrew's Abbey.

We waited and waited and waited. After about an hour, I started to get worried. Yes, of course, I thought it could be just that there were long lines in customs, but it could also be that we missed them. There were so many passengers coming through. At one point, I moved to another location to where passengers gathered, those who were not yet met by family and friends. Nothing. We waited some more. After what seemed like another hour or so, I thought

of calling the Abbey to check on whether or not anyone had called the Abbey, specifically our missing monks. It was then that an older gentleman whom I had never seen before with silvery white hair and a friendly face approached Fr. Patrick and me from behind, and said "Excuse me, are you monks?" Unbelievable. It turns out he was the monk whom I had never met. How had he found us in the midst of all these waiting people. Did he notice something about us?

This sort of thing happens frequently at the Abbey too. For example, when a priest who is unknown to me comes to the Abbey and is not dressed in clerical attire, I can tell he's a priest, even without knowing him or speaking with him. The same is true for a religious Sister. There is just 'a look', they all seem to have that gives off a certain vibe. Perhaps this is what the monk from Europe saw in Fr. Patrick and me. I don't know because I didn't ask.

It makes me wonder, if there is something about Christians in general that people can see which makes them identifiable as followers of Jesus Christ? It reminds me of the ancient letter to Diognetus, (c. 130). Here's an excerpt:

"Christians are indistinguishable from others either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life. […] With regard to dress, food and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be live in […] And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may

Continued on page 21

THE VALYERMO
Chronicle

№ 268 ✠ FALL 2021

ST. ANDREW'S ABBEY
PO Box 40,
Valyermo, CA 93563-0040
saintandrewsabbey.com

ABBEY RETREAT OFFICE
(661) 944-2178
retreats@valyermo.com

ABBEY BOOKS & GIFTS
artshop@valyermo.com

ST. ANDREW'S ABBEY CERAMICS
(888) 454-5411, (661) 944-1047
standrewsabbeyceramics.com
saintsandangels.com

DEVELOPMENT OFFICE
(661) 944-8959
development@valyermo.com

ABBEY YOUTH CENTER RETREAT OFFICE
(661) 944-2734 or (661) 944-2161

THE *VALYERMO CHRONICLE*
is published quarterly.

CREDITS
EDITOR: Aelred Niespolo, OSB
DESIGN: Michael Schrauzer

COVER IMAGE:
Henry O. Tanner, ***Flight into Egypt***

(Unless otherwise noted, all illustrations are from Wikimedia Commons)
Printed on chlorine-free, FSC-certified paper.

Gottesdienerinnen: "SERVANTS OF GOD"

MARIE PAL-BROWN

IT'S A DAY AFTER, AND I'M still brimming with awe.

To preface, I have never heard God speak to me, audibly — not as the credulous and imaginative child I was nor as the adult returned to her faith. Likewise, I don't address God with concrete words, be they petitions, expressions of gratitude, or things of a confessional nature.

I read the Hebrew psalms and Bible passages, prayerfully. I recite the ready-made versions of the Lord's Prayer and Hail Mary, both in German, for that is how I know them.

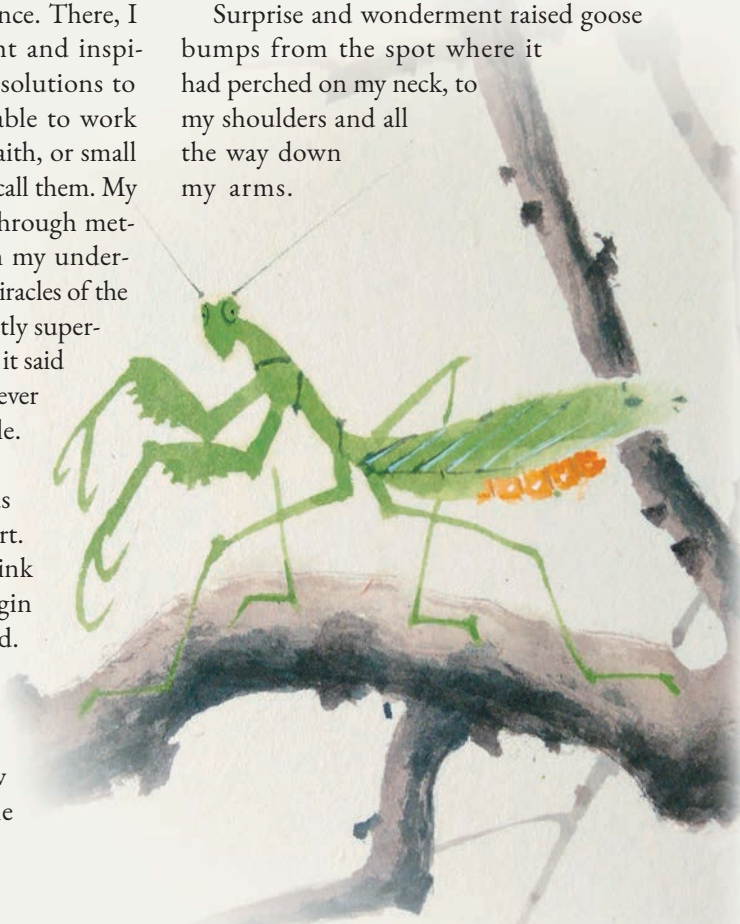
Much of my prayer time consists of waiting for God in meditative silence. There, I intuit His presence as insight and inspiration, often in the form of solutions to conundrums I hadn't been able to work out, answers to questions of faith, or small epiphanies — "Godshots," as I call them. My encounters with Him come through metaphoric language, whether in my understanding of Bible texts, in the miracles of the natural world, even in apparently superstitious affirmations. I've heard it said that God seeks us out in whichever way He finds us approachable. Such consolation!

Yesterday's experience was a "visitation" of a different sort. It came in what I'd like to think of as a message of divine origin mediated by the created world. Perhaps, only I would interpret it in such glorious terms, but that's what counts, after all. It's what I hear, and how I understand a tailored-to-me avenue that God has carved out to reach me in ways I can discern. Besides, lacking objective proof of the Divine, isn't it everyone's subjective participation, or rejection as the case may be, in the God encounter that ultimately matters?

I was a few minutes into my afternoon quiet time, reading from *In the School of the Holy Spirit*, a slim volume on discernment by the French theologian Jacque Philippe, in preparation for my prayer/meditation. A faint tickling sensation on my neck, just below the hairline, distracted me. Suspecting it was an ant or a leaf from my time out in the garden — hoping it wasn't anything as creepy as a caterpillar — I flicked it off.

What fell into my lap was a praying mantis.

Surprise and wonderment raised goose bumps from the spot where it had perched on my neck, to my shoulders and all the way down my arms.



Now, it sat motionless on the fabric of my leggings. For a time, I just gazed at it, captivated by this visitor, simultaneously drawn to and repulsed by its ghostly appearance. The translucent body, spiderlike hind legs, and pale lime coloring reminiscent of illustrated fairytale books from another era. The triangular shape of its head and bulging white eyes evoked the image of an alien being.

Once attraction won over repulsion, I placed my index finger near it. Almost immediately, it heeded my bid, placing its forelimbs on my skin, weightlessly. Its elongated body followed, carried by four more limbs. It continued to crawl along the length of my finger, my palm, my arm. It would briefly pause, as if its legs were about to collapse under its weight, or as if to orient itself, before continuing its random path.

Then the final gift: True to its name, it clasped the hand-like parts of its forelimbs, briefly and almost imperceptibly, in a gesture of prayer. In that moment, I grasped the message it had sent been to deliver.

My own speck of consciousness meeting with another, very different, speck of consciousness — one human, the other insect, Divinely brought together — I entered what I perceived as a place of oneness. Along with it came a sensation beyond tranquility. Pure awe, perhaps. And gratitude.

A small stretch of eternity passed, in which I felt in a bubble outside of ordinary time. We were alone, the praying mantis and I, divinely linked. Finally, I walked out into the garden, the motionless creature cupped in my palm. I chose a canna lily leaf to set it free to resume its insect life. It had completed its mission as "*Gottesdienerin*" — woman servant of God — the German term, equally descriptive as the English "praying mantis" with its Greek root meaning "soothsayer or prophet."

I returned to my armchair facing the small altar in my study. Still reveling in the memory of my encounter, I struggled to find quiet within. Again and again, the image of this uncanny looking creature revisited. Again and again, it was as if its weightless presence were crawling on my neck and finger, once more. Finally, when I found some semblance of equanimity, the praying mantis image gave way to a backlit canvas before my mind's eye. It stretched across the whole breadth and width of my interior landscape. What appeared was a multitude of pink-and-white petals unfolding in continuous motion, filling the space and spilling beyond my frame of reference.

I became curious to understand this post-visitation message, but, at the same time, I wanted to let it rest and filter into my awareness in its own time.

The weeks of wrestling with worthlessness and anxiety over imagined obstacles on my path had come to an abrupt end. The "praying prophet," the "*Gottesdienerin*" had fallen into my lap to deliver what seemed like a Divine message: that my deep desire to formally join St. Andrew's Monastery as an oblate had been favorably recognized.

The God who knows my struggle, my faith and my doubt, I want to trust, has confirmed His plan for me. He spoke to me in language native to my nature, not the language of literalness, but through a message coded in symbol.

I marvel at His choice of an ordinary garden creature to bring me exultant tidings. ✠

MARIE PAL-BROWN was born near Cologne, Germany. Educated at Durham University in England and the SDI in Munich, she emigrated to America in the early sixties. She is the co-author of three works of lexicography. Her poetry has appeared in various anthologies. ***Daughter of the Enemy, A Memoir***, was published in 2018.

FOR ROSA

This is the dining hall (the refectory, says Marie).
The others, breakfast over, have moved on.
I stay.

Rosa is now putting things away—
(Last call coffee!)

Fr. Philip trudges over, bussing his plate, bowl, cup, silver.
Rosa intercepts him. She offers, he accepts.

Her hands full after the shuffle, Fr Philip grins, shrugs—
Rosa slowly maneuvers past—oops –
Silverware, a piece, clangs, or more like a ping
Onto the floor
She blushes, makes a face,
Bends, and adds it back to the collection.

It's a spoon—
A spoon? I call to Rosa,
Means a man is coming—

Rosa comes closer, Wha'? I explain:
A dropped spoon means a man is coming
A dropped fork, a woman
Oh.
Or, it could be the other way around.

But the spoon, its tender curves
The fork, it's thin spindling rails

What about the knife?
And the Word, these words?

Do not be afraid. Only this:
Something is surely coming.

Garrett Brown, Obl Osb.
06,26,21.

A GERMAN SAYING

Isn't part of prayer no longer saying anything?

The Word, words — and then, no words.

The silence, gracious, magnanimous
The silence within the silence
The quieting
Greens upon greens
Grey bark
Blonde logs
Bees abuzz, sparking the daisies

I am saying Good-bye, for now
Pieces of all this and the silence –
Please, enter and come with me?

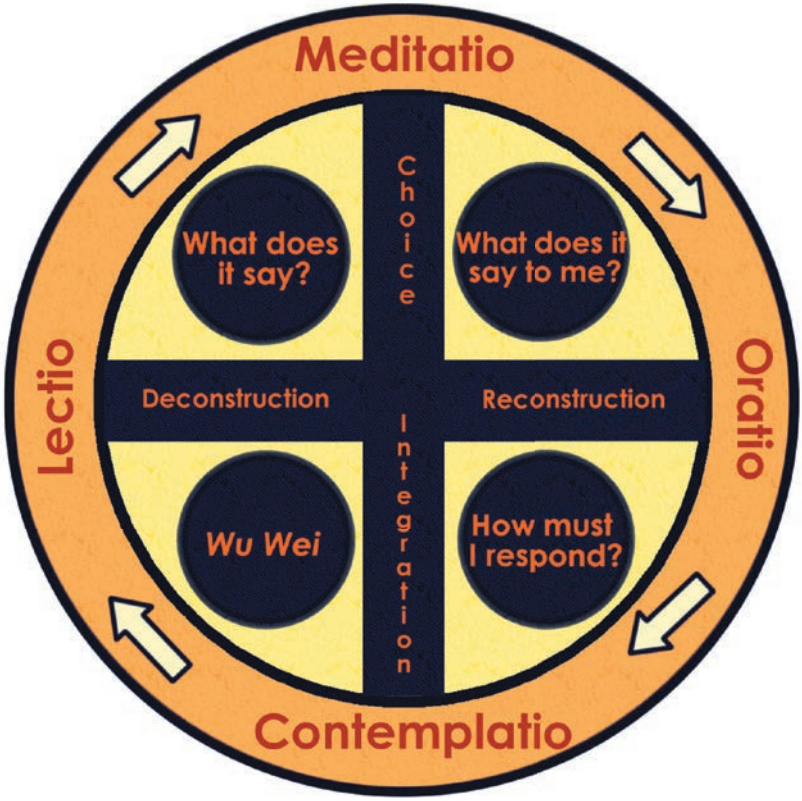
This is how we become dreams
"The memory of all that"

We pray and become the prayer
Praise, we are part of all that's praised
Give thanks -- for an instant,
I am humbled, filled
Emptied —

I am poor in all things
I am rich in all things
I am in prison, I am wounded
I have wronged, I've been wronged
I am enraged, I am in tears
I am dying, I am sick, I am so torn
I give up — I die, and then?

"I have a crying eye and a laughing eye."

Garrett Brown, Obl Osb.
06,27,21.



Understanding Lectio Divina
THROUGH IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA

BY MICHAEL R. CAREY, PH.D., OBLATE O.S.B.
Gonzaga University / Saint Andrew's Abbey

FOR MANY YEARS I HAVE TAUGHT AT JESUIT schools using the foundational method called Ignatian Pedagogy. Basically, Ignatian Pedagogy makes use of the same transformational dynamic that the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola use, and for the last fifty years has been identified as having three key elements: *Experience*, *Reflection*, and *Action*. What this means practically is that learners first have an *experience* (or for adult students, recall an experience) upon which they *reflect*—not only individually but in collaborative learning with others—to more clearly understand the meaning of their experience in order to be inspired to take some new *action* in their lives.

My own insights into how this process of Ignatian Pedagogy works has been supported by my study of another method of learning: the Benedictine monastic approach to reading sacred literature called *Lectio Divina*. For me this is slightly ironic, since the Jesuits — i.e., the members of the religious community of men founded by Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century — see themselves as on the opposite end of the religious continuum from Benedictine monks. Monks focus on community, and their vows of stability, obedience, and constant conversion direct their attention to the importance of relationship and engagement of the other in order to fully develop as a person of God. Jesuits, on the other hand, are all about the "mission," and community life is there — or is not there — insofar as it is supportive of the individual Jesuit's fulfillment of his mission as an instrument of God's will.

But what is especially interesting to me is the fact that Ignatius of Loyola was deeply influenced by the monks at the Benedictine abbey of *Santa Maria de Montserrat*, just north of Barcelona. Ignatius had previously been seriously injured by a cannonball during a battle defending the city of Pamplona against a French army in May 1521, and then had spent a year recovering from his injury at his home in Loyola. In addition to physical recovery, Ignatius had a spiritual conversion, and so he decided to travel to the well-known pilgrimage site at *Santa Maria de Montserrat*, where he lived for one month in a retreat there. After his retreat, during which he left his sword and his armor at the famous statue of the Black Madonna, Ignatius headed back on the road to Barcelona, only to end up spending a year living in a cave in Manresa, where he wrote the *Spiritual Exercises*, a handbook for those who facilitate conversion in others. I have stood outside the cave where Ignatius lived in Manresa, and from it I could see the monastery on the mountain of Montserrat far off in the distance. It is clear to me, therefore, that understanding what Ignatius experienced in his encounter with the Benedictine monks of the abbey of *Santa Maria de Montserrat* is critical to understanding the dynamics present in the *Spiritual Exercises,* and therefore in Ignatian Pedagogy as well.

One of the things Ignatius was introduced to by the Benedictine monks at Montserrat was certainly *Lectio Divina*, as it had been a key element of their monastic practice since at least the 6th century. *Lectio Divina* has to do with a monk's personal process of reading, usually from scripture, as part of the monk's daily life in the community, which includes liturgical prayer and manual labor as well. By the time Ignatius would have been exposed to *Lectio Divina*, four movements would have been identified in the process of this "sacred reading": *Lectio*, *Meditatio*, *Oratio*, and *Contemplatio*.

LECTIO: WHAT DOES IT *SAY*?

The first movement of *Lectio Divina* is simply *lectio*, or reading. By reading, however, is meant a much deeper, slower process of engaging the written word than we are used to today. For the monk, this first movement is getting at the question "What does this text *say*?" If it is scripture, then understanding not only the meaning of words but the cultural context of the words, as well their meaning within a specific time and set of circumstances, is required. For non-scriptural texts, the same is true: what is the writer of these words trying to say, what is the meaning and purpose of his or her writing? A Benedictine friend of mine — Fr. Simon O'Donnell — once told me that it is like the "read-through" that actors do before beginning the rehearsal of a play. The actors and the director need to get inside the script, to

understand the point of the play, before they can begin to think about how to bring it to life on the stage.

MEDITATIO: WHAT DOES IT SAY *TO ME*?

The second movement builds on the understanding of the text to begin to let the text resonate within the reader. In the early day of monasticism, this phase was described as ruminating on the meaning of the words, evoking the image of a cow slowly "chewing its cud." Using the analogy of the actors preparing for a stage play, *meditatio* is like the rehearsals during which each actor and the director try to understand how to bring the written words of the playwright to life on the stage. For the monk doing *Lectio Divina*, *meditatio* means trying to understand the implications that the words the monk understood during the *lectio* phase have for him or her in the here and now of the monk's life. The monk is asking: "What do these words say *to me*?"

ORATIO: HOW MUST I *RESPOND*?

For the monk, the reading of scripture or any of challenging text is designed to lead the monk to do something. The ultimate goal of the monk's life is to attain what is called *purity of heart*, which is the ability to see God's will clearly and without distortion, so that the monk may serve God more effectively. For our actors, their performance is the response; for the monks, constant conversion; for both, the meaning of the text falls on hard ground and dies if not translated into action. For the Benedictine, prayer is not simply asking God *for* something, but surrendering oneself to God in order to *become* something. The monk thinks: "I know what this text says. I know what it says to me in my life. Now, what is God asking me to do with what I have learned? How must I *respond*?" This question is the common one asked by all seekers, by men and women of all spiritual traditions, by all people of good will: How should I live?

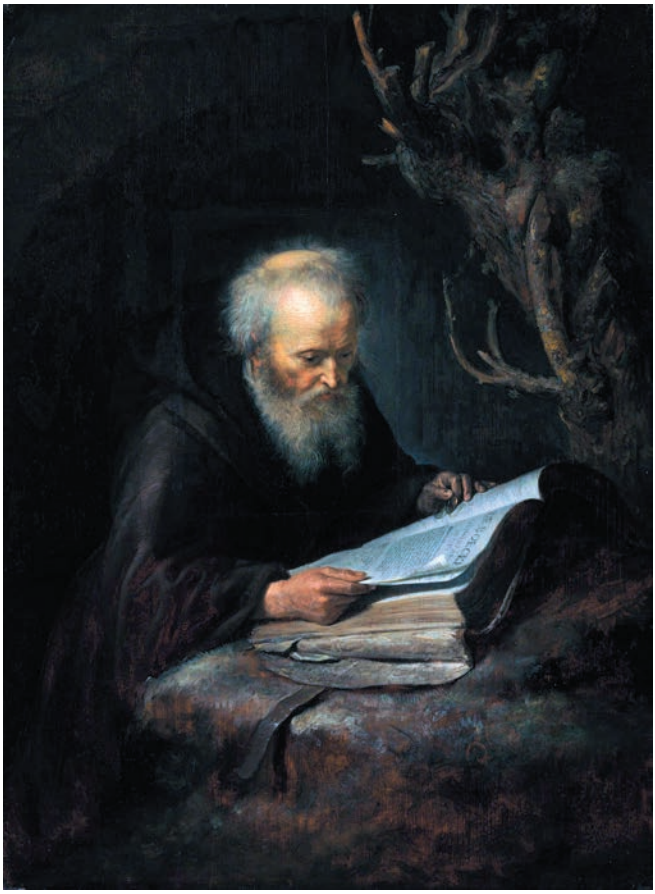
CONTEMPLATIO: *WU WEI*

The individual monk has practiced *Lectio Divina* being conscious of being in the presence of God. *Contemplatio* means that now the monk rests in wordless gratitude for that presence, like our actors after the curtain call feel a sense of wordless rest. I like to think of that wordless rest in the presence of God as a way of underscoring that if the monk has truly surrendered to God during this experience of *Lectio Divina*, then to end the method simply on the answer to the question of what the monk must do doesn't really make sense. That is, the monk also must let go of the illusion that he or she is in charge of what happens next, that without God the monk can even *do* anything.

One way I think about this is related to what Taoism describes as *wu wei*, i.e., passive action. Although I am not an expert in Taoism, I think *wu wei* means that one does everything one can to be completely at the Universe's disposal, to be what one should be in each moment. For the Christian monk, this *wu wei* is grounded in his or her confidence that all is in God's hands, and what happens will be for the best if the monk can fully be an instrument of God's will. Muslims say *insha'Allah*, or "God willing" after they describe some action they plan to take. Even the person who doesn't believe in God knows that control is an illusion; all the more for the monk who wants to ultimately surrender to God's will.

TRANSCENDENTAL PRECEPTS

The four dynamics of *Lectio Divina* can be viewed as similar to the Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan's notion of



GERRIT-DOU, "A HERMIT-SAINT READING IN A CAVE"

transcendental precepts: imperatives which impel the human subject toward transcendence by an ever-deepening authenticity and which cut across all categories and apply to every human activity. Lonergan articulated these precepts not as an innovation in philosophy, but as a restatement of the classic approach of St. Thomas Aquinas to know how we "know." The four transcendental precepts and the *Lectio Divina*, therefore, come from the same common root of the search for meaning. The Precepts, and their *Lectio* equivalents, are:

1. Be attentive (*lectio*): Are we aware of what is happening? Or are we oblivious? Do we create buffers between ourselves and the reality of the world? Do we avoid looking at the "hard facts" or the real consequences of our actions? This precept is similar to the phase of *lectio*, in which the reader fully engages the meaning of the text.

2. Be intelligent (*meditatio*): Do we try to understand what is happening? Or are we obtuse, lacking a sharpness to our minds? Do we, in fact, avoid reflection? This precept corresponds to *meditatio*, to going beyond the meaning of the text to its meaning for the individual.

3. Be reasonable (*oratio*): Do we actively search out the truth of what is happening? Or do we rest with our first impressions or with what we desire would be the case? Do we argue our own position to the exclusion of other, possibly contradictory, ideas? This precept demands the same of the individual that *oratio* does in *Lectio Divina*: what is the meaning that goes beyond the text and beyond the individual?

4. Be responsible (*contemplatio*): Do our actions reflect our understanding of what is happening? Or do we act in ways that are contradictory to what we know to be true? Do we, in fact, numb ourselves to authentic action that flows out of authentic understanding? In the same way that this precept demands that the individual take seriously the implications of the first three precepts, the *contemplatio* phase requires a total commitment of the individual to action that takes seriously the presence of a higher power.

IGNATIAN DYNAMICS OF TRANSFORMATION

When Ignatius of Loyola spent a year of his life in a cave near the river Cardoner outside the town of Manresa, his mind was occupied with making sense of his experiences at Pamplona, at Loyola, and at Montserrat. Using the movements of both *Lectio Divina* and the Transcendental Precepts, we can begin to articulate the dynamics that Ignatius uncovered in his long search for meaning.

Dynamic One: Deconstruction

In *Lectio Divina*, the reader must engage the text on the text's own terms; in the Transcendental Precepts, the thinker must first have a clear grasp of the facts. Ignatius' experience at Pamplona was of a devastating blow to both his body and self-image, delivered through the medium of a French cannon ball. We might say that the cannon ball forced Ignatius to engage the reality of his life, to be attentive to the "hard facts" and consequences of his actions. Imagine if Ignatius and his comrades had defeated the French that day in Pamplona. Would such a victory lead him to question the purpose of his life, or would it simply serve to reinforce the choices he had made?

Deconstruction is a key element to transformation for Ignatius, because it is the fruit of his being fully aware of his situation, that is, that his stature as a soldier was dependent completely on the health and vigor of his body and his success in battle. Take that health and success away, and the meaning of his life was taken away as well.

When we look at our own situation clearly and forthrightly, not accepting the "cover stories" that we use as buffers between reality and us, things do begin to fall apart. In his cave at Manresa, Ignatius reflected on his journey thus far and understood that the first step of his transformation came when he became really clear on what the implications of his current life were. The cannon ball shattering his leg left him unable to avoid being attentive, unable to keep the illusion that life was what he made it to be.

Dynamic Two: Choice

If Ignatius had remained in the deconstruction wrought by the French cannonball, he would have simply become one more waste product of the endless cycle of violence that defined his world, and to a great extent still defines ours. There is something wired into the human person, however, that draws us beyond such deconstruction, and this is what Ignatius experienced: that is, when I understand the meaning of a text, it would require serious numbness on my part not to wonder about its meaning for my life; if reality breaks through my defenses to shakes me to the core, it would take some energy on my part to avoid asking the question: "What do I do now?"

As Ignatius reflected on his experience at his childhood home of Loyola, thinking back on his old life and reflecting on the possibilities of something new, he understood that he needed to make a choice to move forward with his life, to let what had happened to him at Pamplona truly inform his future in order to fully make sense of the breakthrough of reality into his life that was occasioned by the French cannonball.

The reality of who he would be was not entirely clear to Ignatius when he left his home to travel to Barcelona: he had chosen to become a servant of God, yet what that meant exactly was still forming within him. What was important was that he had made a clear choice to begin this journey, to seek how to live out the meaning of his experiences at Pamplona and Loyola.

Dynamic Three: Reconstruction

Ignatius traveled to the monastery located at Montserrat to think and pray about his decision to become a servant of God rather than a soldier of a king or a nobleman. He sought clarification of the demands of his choice, and it is at the monastery that he received spiritual direction from one of the monks for a month. By the end of that month he hung up his armor for good, traded his fine clothes for those of a poor man, and set out on the road as a pilgrim.

Ignatius understood his experience at Montserrat as indicating that he must take seriously the choice he made at Loyola. As when he did *oratio* in *Lectio Divina* at the monastery, Ignatius asked: "How must I respond?" Having been *attentive* to his reality, having come to an *understanding* of its meaning for him, he was now ready to be *reasonable* as to the implications of this meaning for his life.

Reconstruction defines the new life that Ignatius embraces at the statue of the Black Madonna at Montserrat, where he leaves his sword and armor. This new life is not fully formed, nor completely clear to Ignatius, and so he ends up spending a year in the cave with that view of the monastery processing who this new "Ignatius" was now that the old Ignatius had disappeared into his personal history.

Dynamic Four: Integration

For the year at Manresa, Ignatius struggles with his search for meaning. Having rejected his old way of making sense of the world, having chosen to be a different person — a servant of God — he responded by living his life as differently from his old self as he could. Instead of fine clothes and a handsome appearance, Ignatius wore rags that he never washed, and let his hair, beard and nails grow uncut. Instead of taking care of the health of his body by eating well and exercise, he fasted and did physical penances. Instead of being a man of the world, he rejected the world, preferring the splendor of his visions rather than the beauty of the surrounding countryside and culture. But all this was done by Ignatius with the thought that he was now in more control of his life than before.

It is helpful to reflect on Ignatius' struggles in the cave at Manresa, because they illustrate an important dynamic of his transformation. When he choose to reject his old way of making sense of the world — what we are calling *deconstruction* — he stepped out on a path of reconstructing a self, but at this early stage, his new self was more defined by what he *was not* (i.e., the vain and proud *hidalgo*) than by what he *was*. It is not until Ignatius had, while sitting under the stars by the river Cardoner, a breakthrough mystical experience of God's presence in all things, that he shifted from what he was not to what he had become, and now understood himself to be an instrument of God's will on God's terms, not on his own. Because God was ultimately in control, not Ignatius, Ignatius could now take authentic action. *Wu wei*.

LECTIO DIVINA AS TRANSFORMATION

My reflections on the Benedictine influences on the transformational experience of Ignatius of Loyola and on the *Spiritual Exercises* he composed in order to assist others to experience transformation all lead me to more deeply respect the power of *Lectio Divin*a as not only a way to read scripture, but as a method to engage our own existential questions at a deep spiritual level. This engagement is the inner work that is necessary for all people--especially leaders — for transformational learning to take place, through the Ignatian method of *Experience*, *Reflection*, and *Action*.

VENTURING OUTDOORS*

BEN HARRISON, MC

EVEN IN MY EARLIEST MEMories I can detect a difference between my feelings about the world of people and the world of nature. I would say that even from the age of two or three, I experienced family life, my first immersion in social realities, as a place rife with tensions, demands and expectations—and the world of gardens, pastures and woodlands as places of respite. Oh, there was the incident of the charging bull, but that was an exception.

I don't believe our family was any more fraught with tensions than any household harboring three teenagers and one young child. And I certainly don't want to suggest that I wasn't loved. On the contrary, with three siblings older than me (by nine, eleven and thirteen years), I was positively doted upon. Most of the time they treated me as their little pet, though there were times when I was simply a pest. I remember when I was about two, my sister Shirley took me on a walk in a shady street and hushed me to listen to the soft plaint of the mourning doves. My brother Rany took me on an expedition through a field thick with wild flowers to the barn where the bull lived.

From very early, in family, neighbourhood, school and small-town life, I found social realities, though at times reassuring, also, often, conflictive. My tendency was to take refuge in nature, maybe I could even say, to seek a relationship with the world beyond the confines of society. I suppose even then I was an introvert, a budding contemplative. I was fascinated by the little world of mossy tree roots and ants on flagstone walkways. I would play with broken bricks under the lilac boughs and watch the wren singing from his little terracotta nest pot. All of my family loved the outdoors and, on our walks, pointed out curiously shaped rocks, twisted trees and striking landscapes. When interpersonal relations got stressful, my first response was to turn to the world of nature.

After the trauma of my mother's death when I was eleven, first I turned in on myself and became something of a loner. But when my father remarried a couple of years later, I was more and more out, in all weathers, wandering alone or with a friend through our tree-lined streets, down along our little river, out across cornfields and cow pastures, and into the deeply forested mountains that were only a forty minute walk from home. That feeling of being a misfit common to so many teenagers drove me to seek comfort in these solitary escapes. I suppose my adolescent angst was exacerbated by

* Published in Spirituality, Vol. 27, No. 157, July/August 2021

a deep sense that somehow my mother's death was a sign that I wasn't worthy of love. Of course, my family tried to compensate for that loss, but a mother's love is irreplaceable.

So, when my proper Protestant monotheism and the gentle Christian faith of my elementary school years had been thus violently shattered by my mother's death, I put all that childish credulity aside and began to seek other ways to make sense of reality. It seems that, even as a youth, I needed some sort of metaphysical framework into which to slot my life, to find some sense of fitting into the larger scheme of things.

As I entered my teens, the solace I found in nature became more focused. First I tried worshipping the gods of nature. I wrapped myself in my green, brown and yellow Indian blanket and bowed to the rising sun. I gazed at the moon, charted its phases and gave my mind and heart to the tidal influence of its pull. I built a little altar of stones in the back yard, with a view of the winter-grey ridge of mountains huddled like hierophants over the rolling farmland of the Shenandoah Valley. I read about medicinal and magical plants and concocted potions hoping, long before the psychedelic age, to journey outside myself or deep within. I wrote a hymn to the god of death. But all of these experiments lacked the authenticity of those other moments of emergent clarity that came unbidden as I watched the river slide, silver, by the bending reeds, or listened to the wind clacking the bare limbs of locust trees on a stormy winter night.

Even now, I can be seized by an almost heart-breaking sense of tenderness when I come across an ancient tree with its roots roped around an outcrop of rocks; or a pile of stones with a few clumps of long grass and bramble sprouting among them in the shaded corner of a field; or a low, moss-covered wall by a brick walkway in a neglected graveyard.

These moments of insight, these intuitive glimpses of a Presence, of the underlying oneness of all things, helped me survive the loneliness, loss and self-loathing that cohabited my struggling, adolescent soul. I suppose there was a natural progression from seeing the forces of nature as distinct powers toward seeing the unity lying beyond or beneath them. At one point in my mid teens I called myself a pantheist, and the creed I formulated read, "I am because I am and because I am part of God, who is only because he is."

That concept of being, that abstraction from all separate things toward a principle of is-ness, was the bedrock of my natural faith. I had no patience with the conventional, personal God of my Christian up-bringing precisely because that concept was freighted with so much social and interpersonal tension, laden with so many demands, duties and prohibitions. But I hungered for some kind of deeper, unifying vision that could embrace and harmonize the conflicts within me.

Then I started reading Alan Watts on Zen and was transported into that paradoxical place beyond all dichotomies, even the one between being and nothingness. Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy*, recommended by a Quaker friend, introduced me more deeply to the mystical view of life. My spiritual search always teetered along the border between the personal, social reality of my emotionally charged relationships with people on one hand and the more open, impersonal

world of nature on the other. Even now as an old man, I straddle that divide, still feel the stress that the claims of people and society arouse in me, still find comfort in what carries me beyond that place of tension and distress — the meta-social, the metaphysical, the transcendent.

Skipping ahead a few years, in university I had studied literature and ancient history, always with an eye to the deeper truths embedded in art and culture. After seeing how the wisdom of the Egyptians and Babylonians influenced the Hebrew scriptures and how the philosophy of classical Greece and Rome prepared the ground into which Christianity was born, I took a course on the Dead Sea Scrolls. It was a small class, taught by a rabbi, and I was the only non-Jew. It was a fascinating class. And it was while reading for that class that the deeper meaning of Exodus 3:14 hit me for the first time.

Moses, an outcast and a wanderer far from the family tents, in the midst of barren wilderness, has a mystical experience, an encounter with the Absolute, and that mysterious One reveals himself as "I Am", as "He Who Is." For the first time I realized powerfully that it was just possible that the abstract principle of being that I had settled on as my ultimate truth, what Pascal called the God of the philosophers, might also be the Holy One whom the Bible revealed. In that case, God was not the anthropomorphic projection of social norms as caricatured by conventional religion, but was the paradoxical, ineffable Absolute experienced by mystics and lovers.

These insights from my youth help me even now. These past weeks my community has been dealing with bureaucracies regarding passports, visas and permissions required for our work with prisoners and homeless people. My neurotic insecurities arouse deep anxieties — fear of failure, disapproval, rejection — not only on the part of governments and agencies but also by colleagues and confreres. Though I know that I exaggerate these fears and that they pose little real danger, I still feel the stress. What helps? A walk in the winter sunshine, early buds on forsythia bushes, a mistle thrush singing from the chimney pot and the knowledge that our little planet continues faithfully circling its sun. My worth does not derive from how well I succeed in dealing with bureaucrats, nor even from how well I perform my duties, but in the fact that I balance my way along the ledge between being me and being naught — and that on either side of that ledge is — what is his name? — "Who Is!"

What we call nature, all that lies beyond the walls of our social construct and sometimes pushes its tendrils through the bricks, has, then, since my earliest years, been the comforting presence to which I turned when beset and besieged by the expectations of other humans. Sometimes I found on my hikes moments of laughter at the antics of a stoat, awe at the rolling dive of a raven, or serenity resting my gaze, from a high rock, on the multi-textured leaf-patterns of the Eastern deciduous forests. There were rare, fleeting instants of ecstasy, when I was overpowered by the desire to one myself passionately, body and soul, with the sensuous contours of rolling mountains, or immerse myself in a pool beneath a desert waterfall, or swim in the fish-filled swells of a tropical sea. But often my solitary searches to recapture that peace were wrung with the anguish of loneliness or frantic longing for a friend. I could accept creation as it was, why could I not accept myself? Why was I so lonely? Why did I feel so unlovable? How could the judgments and condemnations of elders and peers contaminate the pure bond with the elemental world that first spawned my being?

I was only three or four, and I was in the pasture across from our house on St. Charles

Avenue, watching my sister and her friend climbing in an apple tree. Mute with fear, I saw the black bull coming, and they did not, until it was bearing down on us. Shirley instantly dropped from the tree, grabbed me and ran for the fence. We both rolled under just as he came to a thundering halt at the barbed wire barrier. Shirley's friend was marooned in the tree until the bull got bored and strolled back to his barn. It really happened. It wasn't a dream. I asked, and Shirley remembers it clearly.

Nature is spoken of as a mother, and she often nurtures and caresses her children. But sometimes, absent-mindedly, she bites off heads and gnaws on limbs. I love her, but I watch her moods. A few years ago, walking along the cliffs at St. Bee's Head, I saw the limp, black necks of eleven guillemots crushed under a rock shelf that had collapsed on the ledge on which they were nesting. Below, the surf churned and sucked against the rocks as always.

As a young man I craved union with the cosmos, and I writhed with longing to be free of the burden of myself. I was a child of nature and yet felt trapped in it. Sometimes it seemed like a welcoming friend, but other times it looked at me through eyes glazed with indifference, or even with overt hostility. Trekking in the Lake District a few years ago, I realized that I find scenes of unadulterated nature, containing no human artefact, forbidding and scary. There needs to be some small sign of human presence, as in an oriental landscape — a bit of a stone wall, a path over a plank bridge, an abandoned shed.

It may seem that I have confused two notions. The idea that I sought comfort in nature may seem to be intertwined with the idea that I sought solace in what transcends nature. But as I reflect more deeply, I see that these are two stages of the same movement, the movement outwards — first out of the doors of home and town into nature, then out of the doors of the created world to whatever lies beyond. What lies beyond that door? Scientists propose that there was nothing before the big bang. Is that void, that Nada, the context in which our universe is still expanding? Do we use a capital N for that nothing? When I go out of doors from my status as a creature, do I find some nirvanine peace? Is there an icy emptiness or a welcoming warmth? Is the nothing that stands beyond creation a principle, a mystery, a banality? Can I speak of it? To it? I to Thou? Or is silence my only option? Or a scream of terror? Or a groan of woe? Or a sigh of surrender? Am I trapped?

Perhaps both of these manners of going out parallel a more basic movement — the going out from myself, the escape from the tangles of my fear-driven self-absorption. For, I can imagine no fate worse than dying trapped forever in myself. To have no hope of release from that prison would be hell indeed. Maybe that is the intuition that lies at the core of all human fear of death — the recognition that nothing is more frightening than being inescapably walled in by one's own loneliness and self-recrimination.

And nothing fills me with a sense of exultation more than the thought that someday I may be liberated from the narrow confines of my own self-consciousness — that I may be given some sense of the height and depth and breadth of the spiritual freedom that is the gift promised to a heart longing to go out from itself in love. When I open the door of self, I find a path, a way that winds through valleys of shadows and light, in the company of a friend, to that other door, the gate that leads to the freedom where conflicts cease, where peace is restored, where we are home at last with all that is, and with the One Whose going out from self is the deepest source of all that is.

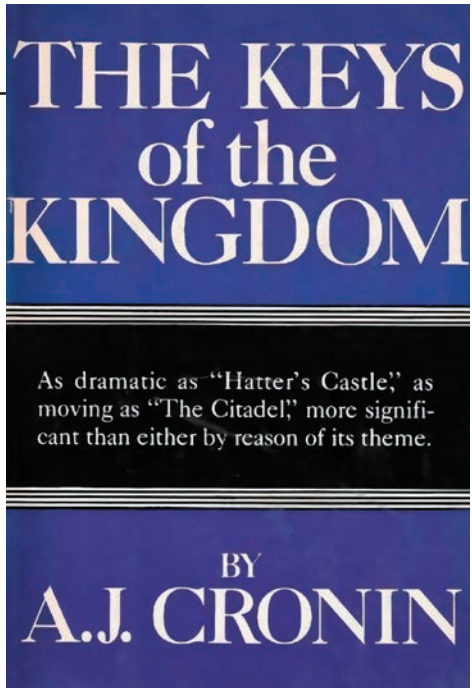
BOOK REVIEW

MARY KAUFFMAN, OBL.OSB

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. (Luke 14: 11)

. . . he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. (Luke 1: 51-52)

The sixth step of humility is that we are content with the lowest and most menial treatment, and regard ourselves as a poor and worthless worker in whatever tasks we are given . . . (RB 7)



LOOKING OVER BEST-SELLER lists in the United States from the 1940s, I was intrigued by many of the books and authors I saw. I decided to take a time-travel trip and read some of those novels from an era and culture somewhat familiar while also distinctly alien to our current times, yet novels that continue to reflect eternal aspects of the human condition.

A.J. Cronin (1896–1981), physician and author, composed numerous novels as well as plays and non-fiction books spanning an almost 50-year writing career. He was raised by parents of two different Christian faiths and fell away from both creeds while a young man at medical school, becoming an agnostic: "When I thought of God it was with a superior smile, indicative of biological scorn for such an outworn myth." But during his early years of medical practice in Wales, Cronin worked among people who lived in the poverty and hardships of a coal-mining town, and their deep religious faith made him start to wonder whether "the compass of existence held more than my textbooks had revealed, more than I had ever dreamed of. In short I lost my superiority, and this, though I was not then aware of it, is the first step towards finding God." He returned definitively to the Catholic faith a few years later after hearing an atheist lecturer try to explain how everything, in the beginning, came from nothing. These experiences shaped the themes of many of his novels, and in *The Keys of the Kingdom* we see the contrast in "faith" between the arrogant and superior and the humbler classes.

The protagonist is the sturdy Scotsman Francis Chisholm, who was orphaned as a young boy and sent to live a Dickensian childhood in grim circumstances with greedy and abusive relatives. The one exception was an uncle, a street preacher who treated young Francis with kindness. This uncle endured ridicule and poverty for the sake of preaching the Good News of Christ and was the boy's first example of someone living out the Gospel faith.

Francis is eventually rescued from this dark life by a loving spinster aunt and finishes his education at a seminary prep

school, where the principal is a priest of both firmness and love, another example of life lived in the Spirit and a role model for Francis. A childhood friend, Anselm Mealey, also attends the seminary with Francis and becomes the prototype of the Clerical Climber. He is smooth, suave, gifted in speech, and somewhat the goody-goody; as the tale progresses and both boys go on to priestly vocations, Mealey rises in the religious ranks to become a bishop with an important administrative post and is eventually Father Francis Chisholm's direct superior.

Chisholm, meanwhile, has been relegated to a mission outpost in China as a result of his somewhat "peculiar" priestly behavior, not always abiding strictly by the rules. During his time at this mission, he has continual experiences of spiritual growth through his encounters with the Chinese Christians of all stripes, other Christian missionaries, the nuns who work with him, and the Chinese officials and upper classes he must deal with.

Much of the plot turns on the conflicts between at times over-simplified one-dimensional characters: clerical careerism vs pastoral care, a gentle ecumenism vs a condemning judgementalism, bounds of nationalism vs those of faith, aristocratic class vs working people; all are starkly personified. We have the happy, generous atheist vs the angry, self -righteous Christians, the dogmatic vs the faithful--- most all of these conflicts encompassed by the greater conflict between arrogance and humility.

We see this conflict early in the novel in the story of two "miracles," one staged for public acclaim and the other experienced in a quiet hovel; we see it in the contrasting behaviors of the nuns who work under Chisholm's direction — and WWI nationalism also becomes a source of great division among the nuns; we see it in the attitudes of different clergy members towards the Chinese converts (the numbers and income are not where they are supposed to be; there is no success rate on the episcopal graph) and towards their non-Western cultural expressions of the Catholic faith. Chisholm, in his role as frequent nonconforming cleric, often has more sense of fellowship with those outside of his Catholic faith than he does with those in it, as his keen sense of kinship and fellowship with Methodist missionaries who work in the area with him and his strong bonds with his Chinese parishioners and some townspeople show.

Though all through the book Chisholm is portrayed as a man of constant self-questioning and genuine humility, he faces a final test of his values that is a source of "terrible confusion of mind a spirit." A man who believes in turning the other cheek and rarely responds with anger to provocations, he is forced by circumstances to make an agonizing choice between two actions, either of which will result in the deaths of others. His pacifism is put to the test as he must actively participate to stop one of two looming acts of human destruction---which is the lesser of the two evils, which one has the possibility of a greater good arising from it? But either choice involves loss of life.

In his final years, he is a man conscious of his own flaws but also clear-sighted and compassionate as to the contradictions and complexities in others' natures, especially as regards the often double-hearted actions and values of his own Church's clergy. Yet he honors the tenets of hierarchy and obedience; though he may disagree and argue with others, he never tries to break the system or hold himself superior to others. An especially poignant scene towards the end of the book illustrates how his genuine humility can affect others. An influential Chinese Mandarin comes to Chisholm with a request for baptism: "Once, many years ago, when you cured my son, I

was not serious (he had asked then to be baptized but Chisholm turned him down as the Mandarin asked out of a sense of duty). But then I was unaware of the nature of your life . . . of its patience, quietness and courage. The goodness of a religion is best judged by the goodness of its adherents. My friend, you have conquered me by example."

Based on my own experiences growing up in the Catholic Church of the 1950s, I know many of the dichotomies and prejudices portrayed in the book were reality. (This is not a condemnation but a lived observation, as there are of course many historical, political, and cultural---that is, human — causes for these; and the Church, in spite of us flawed humans, is always working on its own reformation.) All Christians in that first half of the 20th century seemed at odds with each other, damning each other for profession of the wrong denominational creed. There were suspicions and resentments of other faiths outside of Christianity, and it went both ways. Emphasis on the superior roles of the clergy and religious fostered a significant divide between clergy members and congregations, with the laity feeling second-class Catholics --steerage passengers on the great Barque of St Peter. The Church had then, as now, its vast treasures of beauty, order, tradition, and learning, but it was also rife with legalism and a hierarchy that was a close-to-royalty class. This is the Church at the center of Cronin's *The Keys of the Kingdom*.

This is a beautiful book, full of thought-provoking characters and incidents, as well as a loveliness of style. The novel's language belongs to an era of sophisticated vocabulary, so some readers may be challenged by it ; the vocabulary is also uniquely Scottish at times, and some of the terms, especially in the beginnings of the book about life in a Scottish fishing village, are definitely foreign to Americans. Also, a few of the characters are flat and undeveloped as their roles are to each embody one particular trait. But there are enough characters of human complexity who will touch your heart and make this a moving read. (A caveat: this book was made into a film; but to appeal to audience interest and attention span, it covers about a quarter of the book's content. It starred Gregory Peck as Father Francis Chisholm . . . really? No. Vincent Price played the suave bishop, another casting that didn't seem to work. So if you do decide to watch the movie , do so at your imagination's peril.)*

Of special interest to those connected to St Andrew's Abbey is the portrait of early 20th century China, since our Valyermo congregation originated with those Benedictine monks who, after settling in China in 1929, were forced to leave China during the time of Mao in 1953 to find a new home in the United States. A reader better understands the conditions in China that led to the rise of communism and the expulsion of foreigners.

Father Francis Chisholm reflects his past and future namesakes. He follows in the footsteps of Francis of Assisi in his acts of charity and compassion, his struggles with his own weaknesses, and his self-sacrifice of human comforts. And Francis Chisholm is the prophetic version of the future Pope Francis, the pope whose image of the Church as a "field hospital" is an apt description of Chisholm's parish and mission work.

Our God is a God of reversals and surprises. *The Keys of the Kingdom* portrays the way God often brings his Kingdom to fruition through unexpected persons and events. It is a book set in the past but full of hope for our Church's future.

**The editor has to chime in here as he was, many, many years ago, deeply moved by the film as he watched it on television while living in England. Different today? Don't know, but I do remember being in tears at the end.* ✠

LETTER FROM THE ABBOT

from page 3

be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them. They share their meals, but not their wives. They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law. […] They suffer dishonor, but that is their glory. They are defamed, but vindicated. A blessing is their answer to abuse, deference their response to insult. For the good they do they receive the punishment of malefactors, but even then they rejoice, as though receiving the gift of life. They are attacked and persecuted, but no on can explain the reason for this hatred."

Since there was nothing Fr. Patrick and I did that gave any indication we were monks, I have to believe it was the Holy Spirit who led the monk to us. Nevertheless, this memory does remind me that as believers in Jesus, there is (or ought to be) 'something extraordinary about our lives' that make us stand out in a crowd, not necessarily by how we look, but how we live.

Abbot Damien

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.

PLEASE NOTE: At this time, proof of COVID-19 vaccinations are required for any "in-house" retreat stays. For those who choose to opt-out, please know that we are doing our best to continue offering some retreats online via ZOOM.

OCTOBER

18–21 Still Full of Sap, Still Green: A Spirituality of Aging **SOLD OUT**
29–31 Love Was His Meaning: The Spirituality of Julian Norwich **FULL**

NOVEMBER

1–4 Autumn Artists' Retreat
8–11 Guess What's Coming For Dinner!: A Cooking Retreat/Workshop
15–19 Priests' Retreat: Thriving in the Call of God
24–26 Thanksgiving at Valyermo **SOLD OUT**
26–28 Advent Retreat
27 Taller Adviento en Español **CANCELLED**
29–12/3 Mysticism of Teilhard de Chardin **CANCELLED**
29-12/3 God is Love at the Heart of All Creation

DECEMBER

6–10 Ammas, Monks, and Archetypes
10–12 Experiencing the Liturgy as Contemplative Prayer
11 Aquí y ahora: viviendo en el espíritu
14 Release–Renew–Reinvent
17–19 Spirituality and Art
24–26 Christmas at Valyermo **FULL**
31–1/2 New Year Retreat: "Behold, I make all things new! (Rev. 21:5) **SOLD OUT**

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

REMINDER: Consider our Monthly Recurring Donation Program Credit Cards, Voided Check Authorization, Personal Checks, or Online Bill Payments Accepted. Each method is safe and simple and you can make changes at any time. Please refer to the adjacent donation form for detailed steps. Call or email the Development Office if you have any questions: (661) 944–8959 or development@valyermo.com. Thank you for your support!

ST. ANDREW'S ABBEY PO BOX 40, VALYERMO, CA 93563-0040

DONATION FORM

YES, I would like to support the monks and their ministry by donating the following amount.

DONATION OPTIONS *Please check one.*

ONE TIME DONATION

☐ $_____

RECURRING DONATION

☐ $1/day ($30/mo) ☐ $2/day ($60/mo) ☐ $3/day ($90/mo)

☐ Other ($_____ per month)

PAYMENT OPTIONS

CREDIT CARD PAYMENT *Charge the amount indicated above to my credit card (one-time or recurring):*

☐ VISA ☐ MASTERCARD ☐ DISCOVER ☐ AMERICAN EXPRESS

CARD NUMBER EXPIRATION DATE

SIGNATURE

CHECK TRANSACTION

☐ ENCLOSED IS MY CHECK *for the one-time donation amount indicated above.*

☐ ENCLOSED IS MY VOIDED CHECK. *By sending this check, I authorize St. Andrew's Abbey to withdraw the indicated amount from this account each month for my recurring donation.*

☐ MONTHLY CHECK. *I prefer to mail a check for my recurring donation each month.*

To change or stop your donation at any time,
simply call St. Andrew's Abbey Development Office at (661) 944-8959.

DONOR INFORMATION

☐ *Check here if this is a change of contact information*

YOUR NAME

MAILING ADDRESS

MAILING ADDRESS

PHONE NUMBER E-MAIL ADDRESS

PRAYER REQUEST

Dear ABBOT DAMIEN, *please include the following request for the monks to keep in prayer:*

Your donation is tax deductible. Thank you for helping us to preserve this house of prayer.
If you wish to remember the Abbey in your estate planning, please call (661) 944-2178.
You do not need to make any donation to ask for our prayers.
Please place this donation form in the return envelope provided.

ROOTED IN CHRIST · SUSTAINED IN PRAYER · ALIVE IN MINISTRY

St. Andrew's Abbey
PO Box 40
Valyermo, CA 93563-0040

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED