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[1] *Letter From the Abbot*

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## LETTER FROM THE ABBOT

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DEAR FRIENDS,

**THE** recent devastating fires that blazed throughout Southern California brought home to me how fragile are our lives and well being. Whatever the cause of this or other natural disasters, there is no insurance that our lives will not be turned upside down by circumstances beyond our reckoning or control. St Francis de Sales remarks that we naively “desire not to meet with any difficulties, any contradiction, any trouble in our path; we want consolations without dryness or distaste, advantages without drawbacks, health without sickness, repose without labor, peace without troubles.”

**OUR** adult lives, however, are filled with troubling experiences which cause us to struggle, to wonder, to ponder, and to reshape our values so as to enlarge our understanding of what really matters in life, what 12-step spirituality calls “life on life’s terms.” Natural disasters usually have natural causes, but other forms of human suffering are not always as discernable. In

more interpersonal or societal challenges, we can tend to project the fault upon others. That projection may be accurate or quite opaque. We are never absolutely sure that we are without fault as we face misunderstanding or betrayal. We can also project upon God, making Him the cause, directly or indirectly, for our present suffering or loss. We often ask questions of God that may be answered only after long periods of quandary and grieving, prayer and reflection. All suffering takes time to absorb and process. We wonder about the will of God and how God's purpose is served in such difficulties that we all experience in varying degrees. Of course, everything is potentially a growth experience but at what cost?

**UNFORTUNATELY**, the will of God is often seen by us as totally fixed and not always friendly to our personal hopes and desires. I believe, however, that God's providence is a mysterious reality, that our lives are in constant relation with God and that His will is not as fixed as it is caring. God has a master plan for our lives and our destiny, and there are variables He allows as we make choices which may take us onto a detour rather than lead us on the more direct path to spiritual serenity and readiness to embrace all that is for the sake of God. Some of the sadness we experience is our clinging to false attachments or transitory happiness without desiring to grow beyond our present level of spiritual and human maturity. A difficulty, crisis or even a tragedy make us align our priorities closer to what is revealed in Scripture and portrayed in the life and words of Jesus. Loss leads us on the path of discernment where we look more deeply at the most important values on which we have set our lives and relationships.

**I LIKE** to paraphrase "God's will" as God's intentional desire for my/our ultimate happiness in this life and in the next. St. Paul remarks that "God makes all things work together for the good of those who have been called according to his decree" (**Romans 8:28**). There is an eternal good awaiting us. It supersedes the temporal good that we desire to receive. It compensates for the temporal losses we endure. Such hardships lead us to desire eternity more than any earthly gain.

Jesus encourages us to a life of beatitude (**Matthew 5: 3-12**) where his disciples are called blessed if they are poor in spirit, sorrowing, lowly, hungry and thirsty because they will certainly inherit the eternal good which will fill them with the utter fullness of God. In St. Luke's description of the great discourse of Jesus, woes are added to the beatitudes (**Luke 6: 24-26**) which

remind us that disciples of the kingdom are to expect adversity as catalysts toward the ultimate good that God intends. St. Paul encourages the persevering believer with these words: “I consider the sufferings of the present to be as nothing compared to the glory to be revealed in us” (**Romans 8: 18**).”

**DURING** the seasons of Advent and Christmas, we meditate upon the gift of the Savior to our human family at the appointed time, and through every season of history including the now of our individual lives. God descends to embrace in its totality our human condition and to elevate us to the status of children of God. Jesus, born in poverty and obscurity, is threatened with extinction even from His infancy due to jealousy, pride, and misunderstanding of God’s intentions for this world. The gift of His only begotten Son was truly the fulfillment of His promise to be God with us—Emmanuel. Foreigners and shepherds were the ones to receive the good news and came to reverence the newborn God-man, birthed not in a palace but in the obscurity of a stable. Every believer looks to these sacred historical events to emulate their beauty and truth and to embrace the reality of God’s condescending love and imminent presence among us from that sacred moment of His human birth unto the age of ages.

**GOD** is the source of our peace beyond human reckoning, of our courage in the face of sorrow and loss, of our security in the intention of God that we shall receive as a gift not only the goods of this life but the greatest good—Jesus who brings us through all exigencies into the realm of God’s unconditional and undying love. May our Lord bestow upon you peace, courage and security by your sharing in the Divine life, given in Christ Jesus, which overcomes all adversity, even death itself. May your life become more and more a gospel of joy that encourages others to persevere along the way until we meet our God face to face.

**IN** God’s unfailing love,  
*Abbot Francis, O.S.B.*

# BELONGING AND COMMUNITY – STABLE ROOTS

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*Rosemary De Gracia*, Obl., O.S.B.

**LIVING** the Rule of Benedict today places us in a countercultural stance. Of the various aspects that fly against the conventions of our excessively busy lives and constant enticements to change rests the Benedictine vow of stability. Stability, at best misunderstood, is enmeshed in values abhorrent to post-moderns—giving way to vague feelings of discomfort. Are those of us drawn to living out our Benedictine charism—including stability—so odd? It is perhaps easier for those of us who are “older” to ascribe this partially to culture. But are we really that different from the time of Benedict in which the gyrovagues wandered from monastery to monastery. Benedict highly values community and praises the stable monk—the cenobite who lives in community and is willing to struggle with its challenges in growth to holiness.

**MANY** of us were raised in the fifties or before by families considered “stable”. In this sense stability was seen as a positive value—life was “Leave It to Beaver” predictable—families largely untouched by divorce, dad in a job for the same company for many years, mom at home waiting with a snack when you came home from school, stores closing at least by 9:00 pm on weekdays—never open on Sundays, simple choices with limited offerings—rarely more than two or three brands of an item to choose from, Church on Sunday and everybody pretty much attended one denomination or another. Conformity to social norms had a high value and expectation. But did we really understand why we did it?

**OUR** subsequent decades have been characterized by rapid change—so much so that many are feeling anchorless. Our reflective times entice us to seek greater simplicity, greater stability and Sabbath rest from the churning society around us. Although many changes have brought great good, they have also set many of our relationships up for failure. Our physical mobility from place to place makes sustaining long term friendships difficult, our movement from company to company or career to career does not allow depth to develop or skill sets to be fully learned. I am on the threshold of

professional retirement after over twenty years in municipal management. Every year in preparing the budget, I would include funding for educational reimbursement for employees wishing to pursue work-related higher education, also planning that I would return to complete the Masters Degree that I had started many years ago. I finally made good on that promise to myself last year and began a program that included a human resources class and spent considerable time probing the topic of succession planning.

**I HAD** long watched a “brain drain” as more and more talented workers left without transmitting their knowledge to their successors—in some cases successors could not be found. Employees often do not stay in one place long enough to be adequately trained. Ironically, in my first graduate class back, we were told that before the end of the program, we were unlikely to be in the same job as when we entered—and this was presented as a good, exciting thing. This sociological framework, however, merely serves as a backdrop for its relevance to the Rule of Benedict.

**WHAT** do we think of when we consider the integration of the Benedictine value of stability into our daily lives? Several months ago, I sent out e-mails with two questions to a small ecumenical sample of Benedictine oblates from various monasteries: *1) How do you live out monastic stability in your lives as oblates, and 2) How does this inform the various relationships in your life?* Their responses spoke to the struggles they experienced in living stability. Several spoke about remaining in a church community that no longer fed them spiritually because to leave would harm the community: “So I am still there and it is sometimes a struggle, but I think Benedict would approve. And it is an opportunity to practice humility and love those with whom I do not see eye to eye...” Another spoke of living out her Benedictine stability in the context of faithfulness to her husband and three children, “...remembering my personal rule and acceptance and accountability gives me the stability I need to live my life. I couldn’t take care of my three lively boys without it.” Others spoke longingly about their ties to their particular monastic community and the reciprocal nature of that commitment. “Stability to me has some sense of the place where one is most at home and from which one carries that sense of ‘home’ elsewhere... Stability to me also means a physical thing of not getting too buffeted by the external things. Reminders that bring me back to that central peace come from thinking about the crunching on the rocks and sometimes the bobbing of the lights from the flashlights as we walk to Vigils

beginning at 4 am, and how we all are there.” One of our oblates spoke at a retreat a number of years ago of her practice of taking St. Andrew’s with her wherever she goes. In stressful situations, her sense of stability is in her pocket-- small rocks from the creek bed which she can grasp to give her a sense of calm. I tried it—it works. It gave me the calm I needed to deal effectively and kindly with a very troubled employee when nothing seemed to be reaching her.

**THE** Camaldolese Benedictines who espouse the hermit life, speak of an idiorhythmic balance between the eremitic and communal lives. One of my Camaldolese oblate friends shared her rule of life:

In my experience stability is an interior quality, the gift that comes in finding the place of human experience where one’s deep self has come home: there is a shift to being/becoming. From this place of stability one enters the deep work of living one’s life. Stability has been both my experience and my choice each time I acknowledge a deep certainty within. It is an aspect of the journey of self-knowledge which is to me the journey to God. This stability that is gift/choice anchors me in the monastic family living the tradition of the “threefold good”, and all of my relationships are impacted by my living in that spirit. To give one example, deep commitment to an idiorhythmic experience of life invites an authenticity and dynamism while assuming a slow and reflective stance. Relationships that thrive are those that can include these qualities.

**SEVERAL** respondents spoke of their attraction to place—the monastic space which, upon entry, felt welcoming and sacred, a coming home. Many of us felt like a spiritual homecoming had occurred when we first sat among those well prayed-upon bricks of our chapel. It’s often the first place I seek upon arrival. The late Abbot Francis Kline titled a book on monasticism, “Lovers of the Place”—and we do love the Abbey. The monastic charism of hospitality is a felt presence and grows from the stability of the community. In a recent sermon, the Reverend Doctor Charlotte Methuen of Oxford speaks of our need for “holy vulnerability”—that in acknowledging our vulnerability, we are able to receive and allow the giver of hospitality the opportunity to mediate God’s grace to us.

This seems to me to be related to stability, accepting hospitality is not a hasty moving on to the next person, not a looking out for someone

who is more important, It is about staying in the place and with the people that have welcomed you, about attentiveness to what they have to offer. Reflecting on the Benedictine vow of stability, Ambrose Tinsley writes that Benedictine stability of place is to the place but also to the people living there, it is about being “rooted and founded in love”, “about being called to be rooted, changed, open to the word” in that place. There is something important here about focus: about staying with things, about not rushing off to the next thing, about recognizing the potential of every moment of time, and every place to be sacred...

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**OUCH!** How many times have I reveled in the ability to multitask? How many times have I attended a social or even a church event and “collected people contacts” as I went from person to person without staying long enough to hear their stories, to be present, before scanning the room for someone more interesting with whom to converse. Was I practicing hospitality? --not really. The quality of these relationships is shallow; stability requires depth of relationship— even with those of divergent opinions, those who push my buttons, those interactions for which I require God’s grace to have the sense of welcoming community which Benedict envisioned.

**LIVING** out stability is different from laity to monk, yet our interactions with the community must reinforce the stability they are called to live. We are with, but not of, the monastic community, and there are boundaries which must be respected for their monastic health as well as ours. The admonition against “murmuring” must also apply to us—our prayerful support during various periods of difficulty must uphold a certain distance. Stability, of necessity, involves relationships and reconciliation. As we know in our own family dynamics-- sometimes healthy, sometimes not, the overarching focus on God’s love and faithfulness must cement these relationships but allowing for a certain elasticity to permit growth and expansion. As laity, we are held to the same standard in our own community relationships—whether Church or work community, family or oblate group. We can all learn lessons from the monastic vow of stability.

**WHAT** do we seek when we seek community? Do we have exchange relationships in which we expect mutual affirmation—that our willingness to

be community for another implies that the other will reciprocate? Do we reside in a network of competing communities which foster a sense of fractured community identity and work against our singleness of heart? Do we have the community at home, the community at work and the community at church? I think community has become an over-used buzzword without a great deal of reflection about what it means to us. Really fostering a sense of community over the long haul as the Rule was intended to model is a huge commitment with significant challenges. Stability is not just for the long haul—it's really the all-haul, one's entire life. It requires really sinking into community and the beauty of ordinariness, of living with the same people year in, year out and the lessons of tolerance and patience which remove the rough edges and polish the living stones that we are.

**WHEN** Benedict speaks about the tools of the workshop in Chapter 4, he refers to the workshop itself as the stability of the community—the “unavoidable nearness of the others” becomes an extension of ourselves. Archbishop Rowan Williams puts it thus:

...the promise to live in stability is the most drastic way imaginable of recognizing the otherness of others—just as in marriage. If the other person is there, ultimately, on sufferance or on condition, if there is a time-expiry dimension to our relations with particular others, we put a limit on the amount of otherness we can manage. Beyond a certain point, we reserve the right to say that our terms must prevail after all. Stability or marital fidelity or any seriously covenanted relation to person or community resigns that long-stop possibility; which is why it feels so dangerous.

**FOR** laity, this translates most closely as our families—they are always with us. When our children were little, it was the frustration that we never had any time for ourselves, as they become older, we feel neglected—as our parents age, we revisit the care concerns we had when children were younger—and it's time for us to share the frustration they had with us. Like us, monastic communities gain and lose members, and we share in some small way in both the joy and the pain.

**SO** what is our sense of belonging to a community; what is the glue that connects us? For those of us who affiliate through oblation, what does that belonging mean? When we take the oblation promises, these are



distinguished from vows which are canonically binding, which cement the relationship between the monk or nun and the community. But I think that many of us take the promises to live the Rule very seriously and modify our lives to conform to the ideals of community which we have adopted. How well the sense of monastic community extends to its lay affiliates often depends upon that integration. The Rev. Brian Taylor, a protestant minister and oblate reflects thus:

The parallel to the Benedictine vow of Stability is, for those of us outside the monastery, the unconditional covenant of marriage and other lifelong relationships. Unconditional, covenanted relationships simply say that if I'm going to be here in this situation – let's say this college, this relationship, this friendship, whatever it is – I'm going to really be here. I'm not going to have the back door halfway open thinking that I can leave at any time, thinking that if 'da spark is gone' I can just check out.

**I, AS** an oblate of about ten years now, find it ironic to be talking about stability, as I am currently in the midst of the greatest instability that I have experienced in a number of years. Four years ago I lost both my husband and my employment within days of each other. As my husband was home on hospice care, I was sitting in a City Council meeting watching as they decided to privatize my department. As my husband lapsed into the comatose state shortly before death, I noticed that I was unable to pray other than to frantically repeat—over and over again, the Jesus prayer—Lord Jesus Christ, son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner—the repetitions were minimally coherent, a way to still the growing panic as he approached death and I didn't know what to do with myself. I also knitted two afghans and read all of the Harry Potter books to date—four at that time—while sitting at his bedside.

**I REMEMBER** a time that this prayer was replaced with these lines from Hamlet: "...to die, to sleep, to sleep! perchance to dream:... For in that sleep of death what dreams may come, When we have shuffled off this mortal coil..." I could remember no more...it had been over forty years since memorizing them in high school English. As these lines surfaced again and again, I found them strangely comforting—even when he did die at home. Three weeks later, I was here at a retreat on the apokatastasis, Christ's descent to the netherworld before his resurrection. Fr. Luke showed a movie Saturday night---Robin Williams in "What Dreams May Come"

about a man's descent into the void to rescue his beloved wife who had died in an accident. At first, probably because I was still in shock after Ralph's death, I didn't make the connection. When I did, it was the surrounding community that made it bearable.

**OVER** the next year and a half, while dealing with my grief and that of our five children, I also experienced the collective grief of my co-workers, as one-by-one, they left for other employment. Each departure was a death; many had been there up to thirty years. On the one hand, we were immensely fortunate that we were just transferred to other departments. However, the anxiety produced by being placed in new surroundings learning new, unfamiliar skills, broken from the close-knit family of co-workers, was devastating to many--one died of a heart attack within the year. Some have adapted and considered the change an opportunity; others remain in mourning over what was in the past. What pulled me through was community—my parish and oblate communities were enormously supportive. What kept me going was routine—the stability of action made comfortable by the day-to-day sameness, the ritual dependability that the structure would be there—would not let me down. I was one of the last to leave my department; I was the transition person who aided the placement of others. I joined a department in turmoil—within two years we had four interim directors—none with day-to-day responsibility for our operations.

**IN** the midst of this, our children have married, moved, given birth, graduated children, etc. -- life goes on. In January I sold our home and moved into a friend's condo. This new experience of community after a 33 year marriage/family community expression feels transitional—I'm still getting rid of a 33 year accumulation of books, fabric, tools, furniture etc. to be free of the attachments. It is enormously freeing; it brings a new ease of life that I never thought possible. I was one who had many emotional attachments to things—whether it was the person who gifted me or a shopping experience in some out-of-the-way locale. I now have great joy in giving things away; of bringing joy to others.

**AND** I have formed new spiritual bonds. My roommate and I have established an horarium of sorts to start the day with lectio and prayer. As Benedict has stressed the importance of lectio to the stability of a community, so we see that our day takes a significantly different tenor if our schedules pull us from faithfulness to practice. Although we rarely see each

other evenings or weekends, our prayer time at the beginning of the day is sacred.

**SO** where is our rootedness in this post-modern world? Where do we feel that we belong? One who speaks compellingly of belonging is Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche communities—an international network of more than one hundred communities in thirty countries for people with intellectual disabilities. He writes:

Belonging is the fulcrum point for the individual between a sense of self and a sense of society. It is the rock on which we stand, in security, knowing who we are, capable of inner growth as we discover other realities born and developed in other groups and cultures.

*(Becoming Human, Vanier)*

**HE** distinguishes society from belonging as the place we learn to develop our potential and become competent and belonging as the place where we can find a certain emotional security—where we learn a lot about ourselves—our fears, blockages, as well as our capacity to be life-giving. Healthy belonging engenders mutual respect. As it ties to monasticism, Vanier also sees healthy belonging as the way a group humbly lives out its mission of service to others.

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[3] *Live Simply, Live Godly*, Dr. Lauraleigh O'Meara, Obl., O.S.B.

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## LIVE SIMPLY, LIVE GODLY

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*Dr. Lauraleigh O'Meara, Obl., O.S.B.*

**THIS** article is a thank you for Fr. Aelred Niespolo, O.S.B. because after his work shop on Christian Ecology, I came away with a new and environmentally better perspective on what it means to be a protective steward of God's creation. Only eleven people benefited directly from the seminar, so I wanted to share part of what I learned with our Chronicle audience. This information is too important to lie dormant.

**DURING** the retreat, Fr. Aelred's supporting materials did anything but. He filled the large dining table in the guest lounge in layers of articles, magazines, and books on multiple environmental issues written from a

variety of perspectives. This was the first retreat I have attended where I actually lost sleep by getting up early and sitting up late to read the secondary sources. I was not alone in this. God came first, though, and we spent much time in close analysis of the Creation story: Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood, and what He really meant when giving us “dominion” over the Earth. Three models emerged, each gentler and more integrative than the first. In other words, on a continuum, we can crush Creation under foot, or serve it in the manner of Christ.

**By** now you have probably figured me for another tree-hugging liberal come to chant the praises of Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*. Perhaps. We did see the movie, after all. But here I am going to appeal far more often to your wallets rather than your politics; to your concerns on health and well-being rather than to ideologies; to your sense of equality and justice rather than the right to consume (however blindly).

**THE** Global Warming issue is simply solved by individuals; if one is willing to stop being politically stubborn for just a moment and really *see* what the remedies are. Suspend your disbelief, and take a long look at this list. According to the website [www.climatecrisis.net](http://www.climatecrisis.net), we can change a light bulb, drive less, recycle more, inflate tires properly, use less hot water, buy goods with less packaging (remember that when you are unloading the new DVD player), adjust thermostats slightly, turn off electrical devices when not in use, and plant trees. What is new or radical or difficult about these suggestions? Honestly! We have been told to turn stuff off and not waste things all our lives. Most of these ideas put money in our wallets directly, and all help us to resolve a climate crisis that may (or may not) be imminent. What does it hurt to try?

**MARCIA** Bunge, in “Biblical Views of Nature,” offers a scriptural framework for an “environmental ethic” to bring accord between the Creator’s vision of “dominion” and humanity’s often self-serving practices. As Bunge notes, in the bible, there is “a mandate that we treat the natural world with care and respect” (Food and Faith 85). She cites passages from Genesis, the Wisdom literature, the Psalms, and the New Testament in support of her assertions. In Psalm 145, god’s compassion and kindness toward every living creature is particularly resonant. But what to do with a nation of committed carnivores voraciously in search of the lowest possible price per pound of flesh? Eating simply and sustainably is not all soy grits

and tempeh. It is about eating less and eating better so that we can replace hazardous and inhumane farming practices with more godly ways of treating the natural world.

**SHOP** farmers' markets for local, fresh fruits, vegetables, and eggs. By cutting out the middlemen, we support family farms and reduce fuel usage for truck and rail transport. Besides, eating with the local seasons assures optimal produce at optimal prices. If one is not a vegetarian of one type or another, it is also worthwhile to seek out a quality specialty meat market. My butcher stocks Vintage natural Beef from the San Joaquin Valley. It is raised in the open air on 100% vegetarian feed. The cattle take no growth hormones, no antibiotics, and are not exposed to pesticides. They also receive three blood tests over a lifetime to rule out diseases such as Mad Cow. The kill, too, is "split-second." The shop's lamb, pork, and poultry are raised (and dispatched with) similarly. Yes, this quality costs, but so does health care for diet-related disease.

**MICHAEL** Schut tells us that the second most hotly traded commodity on American markets (after oil!) is coffee (*Food and Faith* 227). However, the bulk of this coffee is grown on land stripped of natural vegetation in the glaring sun, which eliminates most indigenous life forms. Heavy fertilization, too, is required to support this sun-grown process. It also holds small farmers in economic bondage as they do not own their land and must borrow for fertilizer and equipment costs (Tod Sisolak, *Food and Faith* 230). But there is an answer to exploitive practices – 100% Organic, Shade-Grown, Fair Trade coffee. Our Abbey stocks and sells this product as a fundraising project in three types: French Roast, French Vanilla, and Decaf. Prices range from \$9.95 to \$10.95 per twelve ounces of whole beans.

**WHAT** does it mean to carry the 100% Organic, Shade-Grown, Fair-Trade designation, and why, besides our commitment to Abbey fundraisers, should we buy it? A certification of "100% Organic" means that the farmer spent five years eliminating all inorganic fertilizers and pesticides from the land, using solely natural, non-toxic products and agricultural husbandry skills to produce the coffee. "Shade-Grown" means that the land is not stripped, slashed, and burned; the farmer instead (commonly in cooperation with other farmers) introduces or keeps taller plants to shade the growing coffee plants, which in turn stabilize erosion and provide habitat for many different birds, plants, and animals. The farmer benefits too from fruit and firewood

(Sisolak 230). All this care results in better tasting coffee. “Fair-Trade” is critical, as it means that “a third party certifies that coffee beans are bought from indigenous farmers for a fair, set price... (Jake Batsell, *Food and Faith* 228). Starbucks, committed to fair wages, paid on an average of \$1.42 per pound of green coffee beans in fiscal 2006 ([www.starbucks.com](http://www.starbucks.com)). Conversely, coffee traded at \$1.15 per pound in August 2007 (*Investors’ Business Daily*).

**GIVING** back to the environment may be something of a selfish practice at first because my sacrifice makes *me* feel good. I organize my household more efficiently and pocket more money as a result. I buy quality food and drink delicious coffee, enjoying an improved diet and more sensory pleasure. But I cannot escape the spillover benefits of being a better steward of God’s creation, no matter how intoxicating my personal improvements. My changes bring about positive things for farmers and ranchers, for birds, plants, and animals, for the land, sea, and sky, and ultimately for humanity itself. And God will see that this very, very good.

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[4] *Encouraging Students to be More Human*, Simon J. O’Donnell, O.S.B.

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**ENCOURAGING STUDENTS**  
*to be MORE HUMAN*  
*A graduation address at high school graduation 2007*

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*Simon J. O’Donnell, O.S.B.*

(The four-part series will continue in the next issue)

**THERE** are secrets to human living! Not secrets in the sense that what is needed is deliberately hidden from the masses. But there are secrets in the sense that if we seek to uncover them, our lives can become full of meaning. I would like to share two secrets with you.

**THE** first secret is to possess an ease of manner in the presence of the world, of those close to you, and of yourself. Learn to become at home where you are. Not a few people miss this secret because they have forgotten a word of tremendous importance. The word is honor. A person

without honor is not fully human; a person who has not learned to show honor is not fully human. To be honorable and to give honor are privileges of the human person. It is truly a human act, befitting men and women who have learned the meaning of life, to respect life, to enhance life by the proper moral, religious, and intellectual dispositions.

**WE** live in a time when honor is not popular. Part of the reason is that so many people who hold positions of honor seemingly prove less than honorable. Part of the reason, too, is that we live in a time when too few people examine the real worth of another, the full human dignity of the other. We live in a time when it is too easy to reach out for the momentary and the fragmentary, when it seems right to take rather than give, correct to manipulate rather than allow another full freedom to be and to grow. But honor! There is something wonderful about acts of honor. The person who is esteemed, honors others. The person who is revered, respects others; the person who is exalted, graces others with wit, charm, dignity, respect, true reverence. The person who is not honored finds it very difficult to give honor; the person who is put down finds it not easy to grace others with wit, charm, dignity, respect and true reverence. To show honor it is necessary to give an answer to the question who is honorable? One answer only is possible: every man, woman and child on the face of the earth. Never think it is a benefit to dishonor another, never think it is virtuous to think of another as less honorable than yourself.

**HOW** can we be sure that we are honoring another?

**FIRST**, never give recognition or honor out of routine observance. In every situation, you must judge how to pay more than lip service to your neighbor. Create new ways to show honor.

**SECOND**, never be exclusive in showing honor. All are to be honored without prejudice. This applies especially to those whom we least tend to honor: the old and the oppressed, the infirm and the poor. You will advance the art of being human when you respect persons in every condition. Indeed, you will become exceedingly honorable yourself.

**THIRDLY**, never hold back in showing honor. Honor that is not shown at the proper time is not honor. We can never wait until we are honored to show honor to another. We need to forestall honor for ourselves and surpass

others in showing honor. This is no fad. Society and public life, family and private life, economic and moral life, the stuff of living depends greatly on the willingness to outdo one another in showing honor.

**THE** second secret is courtesy. Courtesy is demanded if the goal I have in mind is clear, that is, to live in peace with everyone. In human terms that means we must learn to be courteous, for courtesy is a means to that peace. Courtesy is the art of living with others, others whom I may not have chosen as my best friends, but others with whom I will live, will journey with me in life.

**IN** fact, courtesy, originally, was the art of getting along well with one's fellow travellers, the art of being-with-others.

**LET** us reflect for a moment on the kind of person we would like as a traveling companion. Kind, obliging, amiable, these would fit. Respects me, my rights, is concerned about me from the heart, willing to share my burdens in traveling—these would help too. I want to be happy with my traveling companion. The courteous person is all of this; he does not needlessly disturb me, squeeze me into corners, nor try to make me into a copy of himself. Through words, gestures, and manners he gives me room to live and be myself.

**THE** key to courtesy is two-fold: first, no one can want to manipulate and control the other. That is, no one can want to be the boss for courtesy is living with another. It is not living over or under another; and secondly, there can be no hypocrisy in courtesy, the gestures and the words, the courteous gestures and words, have to be from the heart.

**THE** courteous person possesses an art: it is the art of detecting the fitting word and gesture. For that reason the courteous person is a beautiful person. He accommodates himself in each and every person whom he meets. There is something very simple about the courteous person. Think about it, we never recognize courtesy so much as when we are shocked by the discourteous. Courtesy is noble and regal. To be affable, to be easy to speak with – to be courteous, it is a pleasure to be with such a person.

**IN** Christian terms, to live at peace with everyone means forgiveness. It is not everyone who is able to forgive, more than an art it is a grace. To forgive from the heart is necessary but the foundation of forgiveness is to



know that we have been forgiven by God. God has completely forgiven us. In human relations we must learn to speak words of forgiveness. No one ever need be afraid to say “I am sorry, forgive me.” As with courtesy, there is a two-fold key to forgiveness. First, I can never selfishly assume my own rights. I do not demand deference. I must defer to the other. Secondly, I must be willing to swallow my pride and to see and admit that I am wrong. The one who never recognizes the wrong he does will never seek forgiveness for the harm he causes.

**LET** me make an inquiry. What is the single most lack in our world? Without waiting for your answer, I will give you mine. It is the lack of willingness to listen to others. There is no debate, no discussion, no colloquy. We only have monologues. In a monologue there is no need for honor and courtesy. Honor and courtesy are willing to listen, even to words with which I cannot agree.

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[5] *Quarterly Book Review*, Fr. Philip Edwards, O.S.B

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## QUARTERLY BOOK REVIEW

*Fr. Philip Edwards O.S.B.*

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*A Rabbi Talks With Jesus* (Revised Edition)

By Jacob Neusner

McGill-Queen's University Press 2000. ISBN 978-0-7735-2064-2

Reprinted 2001, 2007 “This is a revised and expanded version of *A Rabbi Talks With Jesus: An Interfaith Exchange*, published by Doubleday in 1993.”

**IN** reviewing the Pope's recent book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Jack Miles begins by saying,

“...Ratzinger's theme throughout—in conscious opposition to historical criticism's long preoccupation with the historical Jesus and the language of his message—is that the Jesus of the Gospels is God incarnate and, as such, constitutes his own message in his person. He is God made known by being made human: the Word Incarnate. Against the views of many exegetes (though not against my own),

Ratzinger finds this ‘High Christology’ in the synoptic Gospels as well as in the Gospel of John. He welcomes the fact that in *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, the eminent rabbinical scholar Jacob Neusner sees a claim of divinity even in the Sermon of the Mount, though, of course, Neusner politely declines to recognize the claim...”

**INDEED**, in Chapter IV (pp.69-79) of his book, Pope Benedict says:

“More than other interpretations known to me, this respectful and frank dispute between a believing Jew and Jesus, the son of Abraham, has opened my eyes to the greatness of Jesus’ words and to the choice that the Gospel places before us...I would like as a Christian to join in the rabbi’s conversation with Jesus so as to be guided toward a better understanding of the authentic Jewishness and the mystery of Jesus.”

**BOTH** Pope and Rabbi seem to share a common comfort zone in the keeping at bay the deconstructive controversies among the exegetical heirs of the ‘Higher Criticism’; they try to come to the text as given and accept the evangelist’s account as valid expression of the Jesus presented in this Gospel as the “new Moses”, “the son of the living God.” The Rabbi’s book is truly a literary tour de force in keeping strictly to the Matthean account from the Sermon on the Mount to the apocalyptic discourse in the courts of the Temple, but one may carp at using as counter texts: the Mishnah and Talmud did not come to be written down until much later and often in conscious rebuttal rather than in positive formulation of contemporaneous thought. In the Rabbi’s village (cf pp.123-125) pride of place goes always to the sage Pharisee’s rational argument than to the Prophet’s hysterical hyperbole.

**IN** the first (1993) edition of Neusner’s book, the Preface lists specifically the preceding four books (of the more than 950 credited to him by Wikipedia), “on the subject of Christianity as seen from the perspective of Judaism...Each of these books makes its own point and moves in logical succession from its predecessor to its successor, of which this one comes as the natural climax...I argue that Judaism and Christianity are entirely autonomous of one another; Christianity is not “the daughter religion”, and there is no shared and ongoing “Judaeo-Christian tradition”. *The Bible and Us: A Priest and a Rabbi Read the Scriptures Together, with Andrew M. Greeley* (New York: Warner Books, 1990) conducts a sustained argument to make the point—on my part—that Judaism and Christianity do not intersect,

even when they read the Bible. The upshot (in my view) is that even when the two religions read the same document, they bring different questions and reach different conclusions—no shared tradition there. My dear friend Father Greeley takes the opposite view. He thinks he won the argument, I think I did, and we're both closer friends than ever before...this last [book] constitutes one kind of dialogue that I think a practicing Jew can propose to have with Christianity, a flat-out argument with Jesus himself. It is not the only dialogue, it is surely not the best, but I do take Christianity's founder seriously, without condescension ("a great prophet, but...") and without dissimulation ("a great rabbi, but...") I argue that the way forward is by telling stories to one another. That is what gave me the idea of telling the story that I set forth in this book." (pp. xv-xvii)

**I**N the revised expansion of this Preface into Chapter I "Come, let us reason together" of the current edition, the previous books are not mentioned—nor is Father Greeley, but in reassigning much of the text of the first edition's Afterword into this chapter, Neusner would seem to subsume these references into the larger recounting of his formation as a Judaic scholar under Christian and secular auspices from childhood in West Hartford, Connecticut, through Harvard, Oxford, Columbia, Union Theological, Dartmouth and finally at the University of South Florida where "...a Roman Catholic president, who opens luncheons with a simple prayer that everyone joined and no one finds embarrassing, and some Methodist and Southern Baptist professors all joined together to receive me and where 'I have found my place.'" (Pp.13-14)

**HIS** point remains the same: "By the truth of the Torah much that Jesus said is wrong." "Where Jesus diverges from the revelation by God to Moses on Mount Sinai, he is wrong and Moses is right." (pp.4-5) "...In response to the message of Matthew's Jesus, a practicing Jew such as myself, speaking for myself alone of course, but well within the faith of eternal Israel, can frame an argument...among the sayings attributed by Matthew to Jesus, there is much in Matthew's story of Jesus that simply reviews well-known teachings of the Torah of Moses, for example, Jesus' well-known paraphrase of Leviticus 19:18; 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' With that and much else that is good Torah-teaching, no faithful Jew would want to argue. But much set forth in the fulfillment of the Torah in fact either violates the clear teaching and intent of the Torah, or offers a religious message inferior to that of the Torah as Israel reads the Torah. And an argument on that set of

teachings to which judgments such as these pertain is precisely what I offer in these pages.” (pp.7-9)

**THE** Pope’s urging led me to read the Rabbi’s book; I found it at first reading intriguing but annoying, even exasperating and eliciting many conventional and time-worn prejudices that have muddied the Gentile conscience for far too many years—but when I calm down and reread more attentively, I find my “objections” largely foreseen and dealt with. The basic objection remains against disclaiming of any relationship, the “non-intersection” autonomy of the two faith communities; we may be an embarrassing byblow of the hysterical Hellenistic heretics of the prophets’ corner of the village, but to be a Christian is to claim the Daughter of Zion as Mother and the One Who called Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses and all the prophets as Father.

If I might interject, sidestepping the Matthaean boundaries for the moment, it was “...in Antioch the disciples were for the first time called ‘Christians’...” (Acts 2:26) In Antioch, not Jerusalem, where the followers of ‘the Way’ “with great joy...continually in the Temple blessing God” (Lk 244:52-53) and day by day, attending the Temple together and breaking bread in their homes...praising God and having favor with all the people...”(Acts 2:46-47) Convinced of being in the true line of the Prophetic Promise, these “men of Israel” see in the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth “both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:35) “Whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old...(Acts 3:21)”...you are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God gave to your fathers, saying to Abraham ‘and in your posterity shall all the families of the earth be blessed’. (Acts 3:25) They remained convinced of being “Jews” in observance of traditional ritual purity such as circumcision and the dietary laws, while acknowledging the coming of the Messiah—perhaps very like the “Messianic Jews for Jesus” that annoy the good Rabbi—and many Christians?

**IN** the wake of the destruction of the Temple and the quelling of revolts, the “sect” is expelled, “excommunicated”—and retaliates with taunts and recriminations that flavor the “apostolic preaching” in Acts—and the pejorative portrayal of the scribes and Pharisees of the Gospel narratives. It is in Antioch that the Gentile character of the growing community becomes predominant—and in the classic popular conception of the Petrine office moving from Jerusalem to Antioch to Rome one can see the development of

an independent Gentile identity that could certainly by the time of Constantine provide the Rabbi with two “non-intersecting” religions—at least sociologically—for confrontation. But to be a Christian is still to claim an adoptive relationship along with the Scriptures such as were received from the Greek-speaking diaspora of the original Covenant. There the argument belongs to the arch-Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus.(cf Phil 3:4-6)

**NEUSNER** himself does indeed find at least a temporary home for Jesus and his disciples in the “prophets’ corner” of his tripartite village (pp.124-6) but finally only the “sage” counts: “We cannot split up our village into the priests’ neighborhood, the prophets’ neighborhood, and the sages’ neighborhood. We are one village. Jesus and his disciples lay heavy stress on teachings of the prophets, because Jesus is teaching the disciples—and all Israel he wants as his disciples—how to prepare for the coming of God’s rule, which is near at hand. So he speaks of the forgiveness of sin and of atonement at the end of days, which is upon us. The Pharisees lay heavy stress on teachers of the priests in Leviticus and want Israel to live in accord with those rules that the Torah of Moses set forth for the sanctification of the priests. We really do conflict, because we agree: the one calls for salvation at the end of time, the other, sanctification here and now. How are we to live together?”

“Well, for on thing, much depends on humble matters. And here, there is a point of contention between Jesus and us Pharisees. For as I said at the outset, I believe in Judaism now and so identify with the Pharisees then. Is the kingdom in the here or now? Or only in the coming future? And where, and how, and under what circumstances do I serve God and live the Godly life? Or to put matters in humble terms: does God care what I eat for breakfast?”

**ACCORDING** to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel, I suspect that one should say, “Yes, He does” (Mt 23:23)—but returning to the Pauline field of argumentation, it would seem that He cares more about “how” than “what”. Christians are often lax and careless in listening to Jesus “...these the greater issues of ‘justice, mercy, and faith’ you ought to have done without neglecting the others ‘the mint and dill and cumin’.” We do so often eat and drink no matter what or where in incontinent lust and gluttony and without giving thanks—and so belie God’s kingdom in our lives—but “the kingdom of God does not mean eating or drinking this or that, it means righteousness and peace and joy brought by the Holy Spirit.” (Rom 14:12)

**WELL**, I suspect that the other Pharisees might retort to Paul “And what is righteousness if not the keeping of the precepts, including the ‘what’ as well as the ‘how’?”—and, of course, there is always the implicit “why” but health and hygiene, while very much a part of the commandment not to kill, are not the point of ritual purity which is only concerned with the Divine Imperative of the mandated precept.

**PRACTICALLY** speaking, the Rabbi is right; table-fellowship will always be problematic—it takes more than Mrs. O’Brien’s cracker to work it out; few of us Christians can manage to realize or understand the ramifications of keeping both food and utensils faithful to the dietary laws. But if we are listening to both Our Lord and St. Paul, we should repent of our two thousand year rhetoric that has unfortunately from earliest patristic times colored our teaching and preaching with disdain—and worse—for those who remain in “eternal Israel”. Can we not both, however non-intersected, continue to chant and savor the Book of Psalms?

“I bind myself to do your will;  
Lord, do not disappoint me.  
I will run the way of your commands;  
You give freedom to my heart.”

**(Ps 118V/119:31-32)**