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LETTER FROM THE ABBOT

DEAR FRIENDS,

IN each of our lives, usually from early adulthood on, we are motivated to find our place in the world, to achieve certain dreams, to build a career and a family, to have a home and financial security, to make a difference where we work or live, to love in a way that gives life to others and to ourselves. We search for guidance and listen to voices that seem to help us achieve our goals and to become someone esteemed in the eyes of others.

IN the midst of all this building up and doing of good, we eventually reach an emotional and spiritual impasse which our accomplishments or our good will cannot overcome. We become discouraged, often in mid-life but sometimes much sooner. This leads some to doubt their faith in God or in themselves, to abandon what they consider their naïve ideals and aspirations. Some may choose to leave their primary commitments in marriage and others their careers to find a contentment or happiness that hasn't been present in their years of striving. With our gigantic efforts, whether we accomplished everything we wanted or not, we find ourselves at some point terribly dissatisfied. There is a certain emptiness that has grown within us.

All that we have done, which may have been very good, seems not so good in our eyes or not recognized by those we expected to appreciate what we have done for them or for the world.

PERSONAL failure or the betrayal of significant other persons make us anxious so that one hides from others in isolation or strives to find fulfillment somewhere else, to fill the emptiness with something that will really satisfy and something that doesn't dissipate with time. Within us all there is a longing for unfailing security, for an intimacy that doesn't disappoint, and for a place in this world that assures us both. We may either falter into a helplessness that stops striving at all or we become frantic to find our paradise lost. We may fall into addiction or compulsions of various kinds to fill the void which is aching within us.

IF we do not discern this state carefully, we may be lost in false strivings which are ultimately a denial of the transcendent and of the spiritual realities within us which await our attention. The reality and presence of God are really the only remedy to this dilemma—a life experience which sooner or later afflicts the soul.

THERE is a grace to all this which is hidden beneath its pain and emptiness. It is at the bottom of our soul where there is no place to go but God. Our strivings must become more and more Godward so as to find our true self and the One who loves us beyond human measure. This experience of powerlessness and meaninglessness are beyond our control but are within God's grasp.

THE emptiness which feels like the worst loneliness can become for us a blessed solitude in which the tenderness of God touches our inmost self. As Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert solitude for forty days, a reality we enter during Lent, so we are invited into a similar solitude with its dark challenges and hoped-for victory over all that oppresses us. Jesus, having gone into the deserted places for us and before us, we know how fully He identifies with us in the present dark reality we are going through. He is the compassionate high priest who understands and sympathizes with our weakness, who suffered like us and for us so as to become the source of our eternal salvation (**cf. Hebrews 4:15 & 5: 8-9**).

OUR belief in the unconditional love of God and in the eternity of His presence is the conviction that only in God can we strive for meaning, for wisdom and for deep contentment that will not ultimately disappoint us. Spiritual maturity is the result of many surrenders of the inadequate self, in the midst of loss and trial, to the bounty of the Almighty. But our self-surrender must be made over and over through every season of life for it to transform our strivings into the intimate security of communion with God, the source of all that is good in life and in eternity.

OUR efforts must be redirected toward trusting God to do for and in us what we could not do for ourselves. Our willingness to trust is often the result of trying everything else but surrender to God or to the circumstances of our lives which challenge us. Hidden within our existential emptiness is God's fullness waiting to be invited to infill and fulfill us. From one perspective, trust is the outcome of felt powerlessness and the spiritual conviction that only God can be my All. If I let God be my God, no matter what, then I am empowered not by personal success, not by having it my way, not by pleasing others, but by dwelling in the Person and in the unfailing love of a God who will not ultimately disappoint.

THE season of Lent provides us with the opportunity to remember our footing, to deepen our prayer, to purify our motivations and to become more wholeheartedly servants of the Suffering Servant who came to this world and to our personal lives to help us "value the things that really matter" (**Philippians 1: 10**). We enter the season with the whole Church, Head and Body, and receive inspiration and strength to enter the desert, looking forward to "holy Easter with joy and spiritual longing" (**RB 49:7**). I pray that all of us might become everything that God desires for us through the transformation of self in humility, obedience and faith as we traverse together on this journey through Lent and through the rest of our earthly pilgrimage.

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

A LENTEN MEDITATION
Fr. Luke Dysinger, O.S.B.

AS we begin our Lenten observance we ought to recall the place Lent occupies in the sequence of liturgical seasons. As we progress through the liturgical year we encounter Lent not at the beginning, but rather as the fourth of the five great seasons in the Church Year. As we move sequentially through these seasons the Church supplies us step by step with essential tools we need in order to make spiritual progress. Without these tools Lent can easily become for us an exercise in futile and empty asceticism. The structure of the Church Year hints that we are not permitted to begin this great season of fasting, almsgiving, and prayer until we have meditated on the great truths the earlier seasons teach.

THE Year of the Church begins with Advent, the season in which we “lift up our eyes” to behold the one who comes to us from the heavens. Here we are taught to contemplate, that is to behold with inner vision, the Christ who comes to save us from sin. We study the ancient prophecies of the People of Israel and we strive to peer beyond the fabric of time in order to see the one who came in the flesh in human history, who comes daily in our hearts, and who will come at the end of time to unite all things to himself. We then study the mystery of the incarnation through a sort of liturgical prism that refracts our faith through a series of richly-varied feasts. At Christmas we meditate on the wonder of the Word made flesh. Then the martyrs Stephen, the Holy Innocents, and Thomas Becket soberly remind us of the world’s deadly response to news of the incarnation. At Epiphany we join the Magi and the wedding party at Cana to learn how widely Christ’s call extends and how rich the banquet is to which we are invited. Then we stand with Jesus’ cousin John and behold the mystery of the triune God at Christ’s baptism. And finally we meditate on the beginning of Christ’s ministry and his miracles of healing as we taste all-too-briefly the first few weeks of Ordinary Time.

IT is only after being thoroughly steeped in contemplation of the Incarnation and of Christ’s power to heal that we are permitted to begin the season of

Lent. During Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, and our brief sojourn in Ordinary Time, the Church teaches us how to find Christ in ancient prophecy and human history. We learn the art of spiritual exegesis, of prayerfully beholding God in ancient stories and in history. Now in Lent we are ready to practice this contemplative art on the “text” of our innermost selves. We train our sharpened spiritual vision inward onto our own personal story, containing as it does both the magnificence of our potential and the tragedy of our sin. In Lent we dare to contemplate in our daily struggle with sin that same history of salvation we learned to relish during Advent and Christmas. In Lent the Church invites us to read the “book” of our own lives in order to discover there the power of the Incarnate Word who reaches down with his healing touch into our personal brokenness and vice.

A HELPFUL model of what we undertake in our Lenten journey is provided by the desert father, St. Evagrius Ponticus, whose feast-day of February 11 often falls near the beginning of Lent. In chapter 17 of his treatise *On Various Tempting Thoughts* Evagrius offers the metaphor of the human soul as a “shepherd”:

17. The concepts of this present age - these the Lord gave to man, like sheep to a good shepherd: for it is written, *He has placed the world in his heart*; (**Ecd. 3:11**) yoking to him *thumos* (indignation) and *epithumia* (desire) for [his] support, so that with the first he may drive away the concepts of wolves, while with desire he may lovingly tend the sheep, assailed as he often is by the rain and winds.

WE are “shepherds”, responsible for an interior universe of thoughts and ideas which God has placed in our hearts as his supreme gift. We often think of our inner lives as full of distractions; but Evagrius suggests that the many ideas and thoughts within us are not primarily distractions to be dispelled, but are rather God’s gift to us – a flock we are to shepherd. These “sheep” are not themselves temptations: they are a precious part of us over which we are to exercise stewardship. As “fellow-workers”, (the Greek word literally means “yoke-fellows”), we have received from God the two powerful

energies of *epithumia* (desire) and *thumos* (indignation, often translated as “anger”). These two powers are intended to be of help to us, enabling us to reach out in compassion or powerful protection, as the occasion demands. Evagrius, along with many of the early church fathers calls the proper use of these energies acting “according to nature”.

WHEN exercised “according to nature” *epithumia* or desire contributes the virtues of temperance, love, and continence. In chapter 4 of his Rule St. Benedict describes this holy desire when he says that we should “desire eternal life with all spiritual ardent yearning” (*omni concupiscentia spirituali desiderare*). He even makes the awakening and proper use of this holy longing the goal of our Lenten observance: we “await holy Easter with the joy of spiritual desire,” (**RB 49: *cum spiritualis desiderii gaudio sanctum Pascha exspectet***). According to Evagrius we use *thumos* or indignation according to nature when we protect the sheep by driving away “wolf-like” temptations to misuse or misdirect our thoughts. For St. Benedict this is the energy of the spiritual soldier who fights “for the Lord Christ, the true king, by taking up the strong and bright weapons of obedience,” (**RB Prol. 3**). Thus *thumos* should be for us the source of courage and patient endurance.

ONE of our chief tasks in Lent consists in discovering how to use the energies within us according to nature. Evagrius invites us to do this by periodically resting from the work of “tending our sheep” through what he calls “conversation with the psalter” (*Thoughts, ch 17*). The Book of Psalms and indeed the whole of sacred scripture can become for us a source of spiritual refreshment. Similarly, the liturgies and especially the gospel readings during the Sundays of Lent are guidebooks for our Lenten journey into the recesses of our souls. Lent should be for us a season of repentance and catechesis. Together with the penitents of the early church and the catechumens of our own day we begin this holy season by meditating on the symbolic matter of ashes, which remind us of our frailty and sinfulness and of the urgency of our transformation in Christ. Then in the weeks that follow John the Baptist again becomes our guide and teacher, urging us to “turn away” from sin and begin afresh. Still later we climb the Mount of

Transfiguration to behold the glory of the Father streaming from the face of Christ. Then, fully conscious of our own fears and inconstancy, we walk with Christ into Jerusalem, into the Upper Room, into the garden, into death and the tomb, and finally (but only with him as our guide!) into hell itself. Our Lenten journey with Christ through the darkened labyrinth of our own hearts can only be undertaken in the light of the Easter candle we kindle at the Great Vigil. We carry with us the lessons we have learned during the season of the Incarnation; and we look forward “with the joy of spiritual desire” towards the season of the resurrection.

STATIONS *of the* CROSS

A Sequence of Poems *by* James Green

I. The Judgment

I am wondering, when you judged the man,
did you consider any precedent?
Or was the crime so plain and evidence
so incontrovertible that the law
was obvious? After all, the man’s claim
of innocence was weak if you ask me.
A man should plead, not banter, at his trial,
especially when the polls are so one sided.
I am wondering, too, when you sentenced
the man, did you know you were going to
lose your job anyway, victim yourself?
(A riot looks bad on a resume.)
Didn’t you know that the washing of hands
was in the script and judgment rarely fair.

II. The Cross

A cross that size weighs several hundred pounds

or so, about the same as timbers you
once managed on the job in better days.
Your burden must have been more than raw weight
of wood or even loss of blood to make
your shoulders sag so sadly. I can see
it in your eyes: more frightful than your blood.
It's not the same as pain but something else.
Their laughter would have been my burden, taunts
my cross, because I've learned that suffering
wears better when you put it on yourself.
Obedience the same. Just bear your cross,
they say, but my knees buckle with a weight
that no one sees. The cross itself is only wood.

III. The First Fall

I try to imagine the weight, the sting
of sweat irrigating lesions cross-scored
on your back and blood crusted from the same
oppressive heat that cooks the hard dirt road.
I can't, really, but I know any man
would buckle and it helps knowing even you
have limits like the rest of us. Weak knees come with
humanity and weaker hearts.
No one expected you to go the distance,
not in that condition. I don't recall
the first time I fell nor can I remember
most of the others. Only when the terrain
is familiar and only when the weight
of hope is heavier than despair.

IV. Mary

By the time you were able to push through
the jarring crowd to the edge of the road,
he rounded a turn, passing the point where
you hoped to meet his eyes, but all you saw
from behind were the welts, uneven steps,
and each wince of his flesh as the lancer
prodded him forward. Pushing ahead you
broke from the crowd at the intersection,

and faced him, your son, and your own despair.
In the temple the ancient man warned you
that the sword was going to pierce your soul
too—the wounds and the burden would be yours.
Then, childbirth muted the pain of prophecy;
now, his pain mutes your memory of his birth.

V. Simon of Cyrene

Your eyes betrayed you as you stood beside
the road; your detachment too conspicuous.
And you thought it was random. When they
seized you by the arms, a shaft of fear lodged
in your heart then reamed its way down to your
sandals dragging short furrows in the dirt
before the burden of another's cross
became yours, before the burden of your
resentment became dull resignation.
It shows in the thickness of your steps now,
the way each foot falls slightly short of where
it is aimed, if aimed at all. The weight you wear
is not of glory, but of duty.
Glory comes later, you will learn; they will
say so. Now all you know is the numbness.

VI. Veronica

Veronica, were you named True Image
before you wiped away the rivulets
of blood from his face, or afterwards, when
others saw the imprint upon your veil?
And what became of the sacred relic,
this shroud of mercy you clutched in your hands,
pressed to your face like a kiss, face to face,
blood stained by wounds you wiped and your tears?
The true image, Veronica, remains
in faces, seas of faces, still crying
from the pain of betrayal and in eyes
dulled by despair; and your veil, Veronica,
I still wear, although indifference is now
the only stain I see, the only smell.

VII. The Second Fall

Each time I fall the distance seems to grow
a little shorter, and the instant of
capitulation not as anxious as
the one before. And I have learned
repair is always easier when knowing
that it doesn't need to last, or that
humiliation doesn't matter if
you don't admit to others that you stumbled.
The second time you fell was different
from all of my descents; at least you strained
against the leaving of your will to carry on.
Not me. Surrender rarely makes a sound
until recrimination falls on top
of me, its weight alone a crushing blow.

VIII. Women of Jerusalem Weep

She kneels on the stone floor, in the shadows
in the back of the church, shawl pulled tightly
over her head, across a broad back humped
in prayer unaware of the comings and
goings of the rest of us and she weeps.
I try not to notice, but something tells
me it is all right. And by the way her
shoulders sob in short beats, the way a heart
skips, I can tell that this is the prayer that
Jesus had in mind. This is the prayer that
began in Jerusalem, the one he
said to save for ourselves and our children.
Does she pray for a miracle? If she
is not to pray for him, then what else?

IX. Third Fall

I never saw a man get up when falling
to the ground like that, so thorough is
the sound of flesh when dropped upon the ground,
so utter is the vacant stare and lifeless

is the quiver of the fingertips.
It should have ended at this place, I thought,
before you wobbled to your knees, the dirt
caked where your face had pressed against the road.
What was your prayer? What did you ask for, hunched
there on your knees without the breath to clear
your mind? If strength, does not that make the pain
last longer than it must? Relief? That seems
to be another word for my will be done.
I need to know when I lay in the street.

X. Stripped

Indignity seemed so irrelevant
at this point in the day, I thought. And yet
they yanked away your clothes like modesty
might matter to a man this close to death.
Surprised by your indifference, some jokes
were made about the value of a blood
stained robe, and there were the to be expected
smirks directed at your nakedness.
You have such touch for irony. The price
that they would give the robe seems such an insult
(although it proved enough to build cathedrals).
I see now why they had to take your clothes.
What other way but poor would you decide to go?

XI. Procedures for Crucifixion

*Excerpted from an army training manual,
Rome, in the reign of Caesar Tiberius.*

Crucifixion is designed to cause death
by the process of prolonged suffocation,
thus procedures are prescribed. The placement
of the spikes must be precise, else death
will come too swiftly. Fasten wrists with arms
extended fully on the patibulum.
The spikes must pierce the wrists and not the palms
(the wrist's anatomy bears greater load).
Raise the patibulum and secure it

to the stipes, previously positioned.
Adjust the pedestal so knees form a
perpendicular angle, then place one
foot over the other and fasten both
to the base with one spike above the toes.

XII Coroner's Report

In probability the cause of death
was myocardial infarction caused
by toxic levels of carbonic acid:
pericardial and pleural fluids
were evident by discharge from a wound
inflicted more than likely after death;
distortion of the limbs, contusions, and
some sixty dorsal lacerations noted.
Because the corpse has vanished final tests
were not performed and circumstances of
the disappearance cause some speculation
on events before and after death.
Investigation of its whereabouts
continues and a final ruling pends.

XIII. Joseph of Arimathea

I had a certain credibility
the others lacked, so I approached the Pilate
to petition for the body's burial.
They thought a lower profile might be best
(and understandably). There were some forms
to sign and legal issues raised about
a proper title to the tomb, the kind
of details that so often clutter grief.
And so returning, I relieved the guard,
unfastened limbs and lowered him, then draped
the shroud. So utter was the agony,
so utter was this death as he lay limp.
She sponged his breathless lips and nursed his wounds,
rearranged the folds of the shroud like swaddling.

XIV. Burial

They say that funerals are for the living,
that the rituals will help with closure,
as though grief is something we control,
or bury in a tomb conveniently.
Then why does it still amplify when I
recall the way you'd laugh at your own jokes
or how a hug from you would always last
an extra heartbeat? This grief does not abate.
What do we bury when we seal the tomb?
I followed them in twilight to the garden,
watched their ministrations from a distance,
watched them pray before they left, then prayed
myself that part of me might go with you
into the night.

WHY I OFTEN THINK *of* JESUS' PASSION

Anne Bremser, Obl., O.S.B.

Anne, an oblate of the Abbey, has offered us these reflections based on her own long term experience of, and reflection on, personal illness.

I WAS asked, by a good friend, why I had mentioned that I often think of Jesus' Passion, and why I didn't make an effort to think of happier things. It is because I find it a joyful thing to be a part of the redemption of the world. There is so much suffering in it, we middle class people in North America can't even imagine. It makes my suffering look like nothing. I have a house and a bed with nice clean sheets, and a housekeeper to change and wash them, and a pantry full of food that can be refilled any time, and medical insurance that gives me access to literally the best medical treatment in the world, and a husband who loves me, and children who also love me and respect me, and I have the resources to build a huge labyrinth in my backyard, with a stream and many flowering plants, and cactus wrens nesting in the front window, and 3 cats that love me and take care of me

when I am alone, and many friends, and two paid for cars and all the fleece for spinning I could use in a year, and the same for sock yarn and knitting, and a million books... and a custom red wheelchair that is very comfortable, and a brand new iron to iron my closet full of nice clothes, and a new vacuum cleaner, too, not to mention a washer and dryer with hood ornaments that are in a laundry room, not a garage or down at the local "Sudsy Tub"...More than 90 percent of the world doesn't have half these things. They are being torn out of their homes to run into the desert without anything, hoping they might find some of their family, and if they are lucky they might find an international aid food station, where, if they are lucky they might get a bowl of cereal before it runs out, and if they're lucky they won't get any of the diseases of people who are suffering from malnutrition and stress, and are living too close together with inadequate hygiene...Or they are living a mile away, and mom and dad have lost their jobs to outsourcing, and the car has broken down again, and there is no money for groceries, and they've already been to the local church for the once a month food allotment, and because the family is intact they aren't eligible for AFDC, and the water and electricity are being turned off tomorrow for non-payment, and the youngest needs new glasses, and the teacher sent a note home requesting \$25 worth of school supplies, and they have no idea how they are going to pay the rent in two weeks...You catch my drift. I think about this all the time. And all the other ways that people suffer through injustice, personal or societal.

IF, as we are taught, and I choose to believe, my suffering, that I can't prevent and didn't ask for, is redemptive if I unite it with Christ's, how can I help but be happy about it? If my suffering makes a difference in this sorry world, then I will suffer, and be glad for the opportunity. I've been asked why I think about Christ's Passion and not something happier, for instance, the Resurrection. Thinking of Christ's resurrection is a very happy thought, and an important one, and I do think of it often. Every day that I feel a bit better is a resurrection day. Every day that I can get out of bed and do something useful around the house is a resurrection day. It makes me very happy, because it is what follows the suffering. If I hadn't had the pain, I wouldn't appreciate the absence of it nearly as much. The ability to be useful is the outcome of having had the surgery, or put up with the leg binding, or had the chemotherapy. Jesus could not have overcome sin and death if he hadn't suffered on the cross, giving himself for us out of unimaginable love. United with Christ in suffering, I am also, through my baptism, united with

his resurrection. “For if we have grown into union with him, through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection.” (Romans 6:5)

WE all should be able to unite our suffering to Christ's on the Cross. That's the whole reason he did it! He became human like us, experienced joy and sorrow, illness and wellness just like us, adulation and humiliation, love and hate, gentleness and torture, and finally died, just like we do, even though he was God. He did it so that we would not only know how much he loves us, but so that we would know that he understands, and is with us when we suffer. Only a God who became small and vulnerable like us could bring us to believe, no, to know that he understands how we feel. We never suffer alone. He did it to conquer sin, which is the absence of love, and death. Death of the soul happens long before the death of the body.

WHEN bad things happen it is so easy to despair, to wonder why it has happened to us, especially if we've tried to do all the right things. We've gotten good grades in school, we've worked hard, we've been faithful to our vows to our spouse and to God. We've gone to church, we've donated to good causes and volunteered our time. Why, when we've done what everyone said would keep us safe in every way, is this terrible thing happening to us? We become angry. Sometimes we blame God, and our anger is directed at Him. So many people have lost faith, or worse, begun to hate God, because they have had sickness, death, tragedies in their lives, through no fault of their own. I have heard from many doctors and nurses that they see this all the time. This is the real sickness. But if we really have faith, and have listened to what Jesus said about those who suffer, we will know that it is not because God is punishing us, or is gratuitously cruel. The poor and victims of social injustice are often thought to have done something to deserve their misery. This false belief has been around forever. Today it is found in people who believe that good people, those that have the blessing of God, will be prosperous and healthy. There is a similar New Age belief that our thoughts are real, and that as children of god, divine beings, we can create the life that we want if we are spiritual enough..It makes it easy on the conscience, because these ways of thinking blame the victim. Why should we help someone who either deserves what he got, or won't help himself? That homeless guy on the corner must be there because he's irresponsible. or an addict, or unspiritual.. But Jesus made it very clear that this isn't how it is. Before Jesus cured the blindness of the man at Siloam, he was asked by the Pharisees what sin the man or his parents had committed, and “Jesus answered, neither he,nor his parents sinned, it is so that the works

of God might be made visible through him.” John 9:3. We know that God isn't punishing us, or hurting us, or intentionally inflicting pain. These things happen because they have to, for reasons far beyond our ability to understand. As God said to Job, “Where were you when I founded the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding... who laid the cornerstone, while the morning stars sang in chorus...” We can't understand the ultimate truths of why and how the universe works the way it does. But when we persevere in faith and hope, when all around us is ruin, we “make the works of God visible” to those around us. We become hope and inspiration for others.

DO you know the doctrine of the Body of Christ? He is the head, and we are the body. Since the head can't live without the body, and the body can't live or act without the head, what happens to me happens to Christ, and what happens to Christ happens to me. So my illness happens to Christ, and his suffering on the cross happens to me. The same goes for you if you are aware of it. St. Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, said that “As a body is one, though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...” Again, since we are one body I (and you) share in His divinity, as He shares in our humanity. Since I share in His divinity, and am part of His body, my suffering and his suffering are one. My suffering can then become part of what Christ suffered for the salvation of the world. To show the whole world what love is, and what it is willing to endure. “It (love) bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (**Cor. 13:7**) I am a pretty happy person. It is in large part because I know all this, and am confident that it is true. My suffering isn't a waste.

THERE was a day when I felt particularly bad. I was also alone. I thought, with the author of Ecclesiastes, that it seemed that all our effort, even our short lives, are to no purpose. I was lying in my bed, almost unable to move, wondering what days like that are for. I thought of how short our lives are compared to the rest of creation. If you think about the age of the Earth, and then the age of the stars, by comparison, the age of a person is like nothing. We are” like grass, soon to wither.” Who are we, these short lived creatures on a small planet on the outer edge of a minor galaxy? And then I remembered. It is because I am a member of the Body of Christ that my days have meaning. All of them. Even the bad ones. We tend to think that the bad ones are, at best, to be gotten through as quickly as possible. Later in the afternoon, I got a call from a friend. There was trouble. Another friend had been badly hurt by false rumors. In the same day, first suffering, then the

opportunity to help someone in trouble, providing emotional support for that person, first in listening, then in prayer, and lastly in enjoying simple time together. The upset person that arrived left comforted. That day did have purpose. Every day has purpose, whether we see it or not. That day, I was able, at the end, to see.

IN his letter to the Ephesians, Paul said that “living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the Head, Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body's growth and builds itself up in love.” And also, “As a body is one, though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ.” ” If I am some essential part of the Body of Christ, and all the parts are essential, what happens to my suffering brother or sister, also essential parts of the Body, happens to me, and to you, and to Christ. I think about Jesus' passion because we are all called to grow into Christ by living the truth in love. And the greatest act of love ever, was Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. We are to be Christ for others, and realize that they are Christ, too. All of us, parts of one body. Me, Christ, all of us. I am never alone. And I have the honor of making up whatever is lacking in His suffering. (“Now I rejoice in my suffering for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church.” Col. 1:26.) And in this way, I also share in His resurrection. It is something that I can look forward to.

SO, I often think of the passion of Christ. I think about how much he wanted to live. Of his agony in the garden. But his love for his people was so great, and his faith in God was so perfect, that in obedience, he went willingly to his death. Remember, he was fully human, and he had fear and an instinct to live just like us. He would have had to rely on faith, not the knowledge of the Omnipotent, if he were truly sharing the human condition. I think about that. On the cross, he cried out, “Why have you forsaken me?” The cry of the human being who has lost the consolation of the presence of God. And he lost it when he was at his greatest need. Just like us. But still, he never lost his sure knowledge that somewhere God was there. He commended his spirit to God. He ultimately trusted in Divine Providence. It is hard being this sick. It is hard watching my family suffer as they worry about me, and try to deal with each crisis, big or small. No one ever said life was easy. But Jesus did say to take up our crosses and follow him. And that his yoke was easy and his burden, light. It is only easy if we do as he did, let go of our

fear and trust in God. If we do this, accepting that which we can't change, we are free to live gratefully with what we have. We are free to be happy. Despite the pain, both the physical kind, and the emotional kind, sharing in the cross, the opportunity to participate in destroying the absence of love, and then loving greatly, I find is a very great grace, and an honor and a blessing, all unasked for and undeserved. So there it is.

HOMELESSNESS AND BENEDICTINE HOSPITALITY

Joanna Cory, Obl, OSB

ON the wall just next to my front door is a plaque that reads, “All are to be welcomed as Christ.” I sometimes wonder what it would be like to open the door to welcome Jesus into my home—a well kempt Jesus, of course. It’s natural to think of Jesus as someone we can identify with. He would be someone who bathes daily, combs his hair, and wears clean and well kept clothes. It’s easy enough to welcome someone who is tidy into our tidy homes. I imagine, however, that Jesus and his disciples weren’t always as neat and well kempt as we would like to think. The fact is that in the days of Jesus, someone who traveled as he did could not always find the means of good grooming accessible. In those days, hospitality was shown to the stranger, in part, by offering water to wash the dust of the road off his tired and dirty feet—a simple, but very much appreciated offering.

IN the sixth century the monastery was seen as a safe and inviting haven for the traveler and for those who were in search of peace and rest. Now, as then, Benedict reminds us to graciously welcome the stranger--as is. In Chapter 53 of The Rule of St. Benedict we are reminded to show proper honor to *all*, to meet the stranger with all the courtesy of love, and to address the guest with all humility. RB 53:18 reminds us “. . .great care and concern are to be shown in receiving poor people and pilgrims, because in them more particularly Christ is received.” That seems pretty straight-forward for a monk who lives in community and in an environment conducive to the care of the stranger. It may be a bit more difficult for the person who lives out in the world.

FORTUNATELY, these days we do not have strangers knocking on our individual doors for sanctuary. We have only to walk a few blocks from home, however, to encounter pilgrims and strangers who are seeking peace and rest. These are people to whom hospitality is rarely extended. They are the invisible people in our midst—our homeless brothers and sisters. Any given morning on our way to work we may see the disheveled man carefully picking through the dumpster for food, the elderly woman discreetly combing through trash cans for recyclables, or the fellow on the corner with his sign asking for spare change. How are we to express hospitality to these members of our extended family?

WE aren't talking about the socially acceptable hospitality of offering tea and cookies and ever so polite conversation to the ladies' group. We aren't talking about setting down a plate of food in front of a homeless person without acknowledgement, or quickly shoving a quarter out of the car window, or smiling yet averting our eyes when passing a bag lady. We are talking about offering real, deep down Benedictine hospitality. Benedict is asking us to open our hearts in abundance of love to all. This means being available to the homeless people around us with eye contact, attentive listening, availability of time and heart. For those of us who have not had that sort of personal encounter with a homeless person, it can seem daunting.

IN *Practicing Resurrection*, Nora Gallagher recites the story of a 12th century English church which has a large, black marble line laid along the width of the back of the sanctuary. A sign explains that it was laid there to keep the women back, as a sort of protective barrier. What are the black lines that we have laid at the doors of our hearts? Are fear, prejudice, and distrust keeping us from flinging wide open the doors of our hearts to extend hospitality to the homeless people in our community? Benedictine hospitality is about transformation of heart. It is about addressing and dispelling the fears and apprehensions that we harbor so that we are able to open our hearts in attentive, compassionate care for those around us—all of those around us. By allowing ourselves to be open to the mystery of the other and open to the action of God in our lives, we grow closer to Him, ourselves, and the strangers in our midst. We are able to truly reach out in loving kindness to the poor and homeless people around us. We are able to welcome homeless people into our space and hope that we are privileged to be welcomed into theirs.

IN the larger community, we can model Benedictine hospitality to others by refusing to dehumanize our homeless brothers and sisters. We can remember that “homeless” is not a noun but an adjective that describes a person who happens to be poor and have an alternative living situation. We can write letters and cry out when an injustice or criminal act has been perpetrated upon a homeless person. We can call on our government officials to provide more shelter, job skills programs, and day care. They are our brothers and sisters and members of our extended family. As recited in our baptismal vows, we can “seek and serve Christ in all persons” and “respect the dignity of every human being”. We can become aware of the issues affecting homeless people in our respective communities and vote to make compassionate changes.

IN this Lenten season, let us fast from fear and prejudice. Let us fast from the busyness in our lives that prevents the availability of self. Let us eradicate the line at the door of our heart that prevents the movement of Love in our hearts, so that we can feast on true Benedictine hospitality—the acceptance and love of all.

POPE BENEDICT’S GREAT ENCYCLICAL -
“Spe Salvi” By Hope We Are Saved
Simon J. O’Donnell, O.S.B.

ON November 29, 2007, Pope Benedict issued an encyclical which seeks to fine tune the essential uniqueness of the Christian life and thought. It is a letter which is critical of the world as we know it, inside and outside of the Church, and it is a letter which is filled with hope that the Christian of today will heed a call to renewal that will be truly deep and challenging to the world.

THE Question: what separates Christian thinking from all other thinking? The demands on human existence can be so demanding that we can get lost in obtaining all those things that will make for our security and happiness. But the first believers soon learned that this search did not bring genuine

happiness nor fulfillment. Rather, they had been given a hope in the death and resurrection of Jesus that surpasses human desiring and human reaching: and the hope is eternal life. Nothing but faith can bring us to this gift. And if this is what makes Christian thinking so unique it means that the Christian has found a reliable subsistence that comes not from his efforts or his own desires. This is very profound, indeed, it changes everything

- Relationship to the material elements
- Freedom from excessive slavery to material possessions
- Possession of a treasure that is not earned but extends beyond our reach, and
- Brings us ultimately to the goal of life: eternal life, life with God.

THE Question: what is different between the Christian and the world in their stance toward suffering? The experience of suffering is oppressive and sometimes overwhelming, especially that of innocent suffering. The temptation is to flee, to turn away, to deny, or to throw all we have at suffering to overcome it and drive it out of our experience. For the Christian neither flight nor false optimism are the answer. The answer revolves around endurance, carrying the sufferer and the suffering. A “cruel and inhuman society” results when neither the sufferer nor suffering is attended to. The Christian is called to a compassionate embrace of the suffering and to a solicitous sharing and lifting up of the suffering. The realization of the impossibility of removing all suffering is a challenge, not to despair, not to abandoning the human effort of health professionals, but of discovering the truth about humanity. Both its fragility and its dignity come forward in the face of suffering.

THE Question: what is the place of the individual, the place of community in God’s plan? Amongst the many problems that have been passed to us in the last few centuries is that of the place of the individual. The place of the individual has been so exaggerated that we seem to have uprooted the person from the community. This has been to the detriment of our thinking about salvation, about the nature of religion, about sacramental life, about our definition of happiness. Once again, and very strongly, Pope Benedict emphasizes that salvation is essentially communal and this presents a challenge not only to the world but to western religions, not just Protestant but Catholic. We must rethink our notion of religious practices and salvation in light of their communal dimension.

THE Question: where do we go to learn the message of this encyclical? The Pope invites us to the “school of prayer”. This school is not a

temporary place of learning from which we long to graduate, it is more like an alumni association to which we belong for life. But in this school we learn the nature of hope, the place of suffering, the inner call to reach out to human fulfillment and perfection according to the plan of God.

I find in this papal letter an infusion of inspiration for looking at the crises and the perils and the dangers in today's world. Why has so much human thinking in the last centuries led us down unsatisfactory paths? Why the increase of violence? Why the inordinate emphasis on the individual? Why the false hope in political systems? In scientific endeavors? Have we looked in the wrong places? Have we been duped into false hopes? Have we missed the riches of our own Christian heritage? It is not enough to answer "yes". We are challenged to find a reasonable approach to look at missteps and to find the right path.

THE encyclical is a challenge to dialog:

- Among Christians – to discover not the information provided in the Bible but the “performative” challenge of the Bible message: to change and find a new manner of living in the world
- Between Christians and non-believers – to discover the limits of “scientific” and “political” salvation schemes and to come to recognize the transcendent giftedness that forms the human person and that shapes the vocation of the person
- In our own hearts – to sharpen the nature of our faith response and the manner in which we hold the hope of salvation, the gift that opens the way to life and frees us from useless burdens in this life.

THE encyclical is worth the attention and careful reading of every Christian. It may well demand frequent “sit-downs” with others to plumb its depths and challenges.

QUARTERLY BOOK REVIEW

Fr. Philip Edwards O.S.B.

Gilead a novel by Marilynne Robinson

Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux New York 2004

THIS book is not hot off the press; it has been with us for at least four years and has won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature. Many of you have likely read and savored it already; it is truly worthy of prize and re-reading, one of those wonderful tales with many levels of meaning and insight that can be enjoyed simply (or complexly, if one so insists) as a personal saga of the heart, humane and holy, humbly true to the failings and frailty of human tragedy and to the transcending hope of the Spirit of love.

YOU can't find Gilead on the two-paged map of Iowa in our Common Room's Rand-McNalley's Road Atlas for the United States, Canada and Mexico nor in the Postal Service's Book of Zip-codes – nor, since the overgrazing and wanton wood-cutting of the twentieth century, will you find much left of the pleasant back country east of the Jordan River, the first part of the Promised Land taken by the Israelites after crushing Sihon. King of the Amorites, and Og, King of Bashan, once a grassy, oak-studded hill country and home of Pistache lentiscus whose resin is likely the source of the mastic called “Balm of Gilead”. Here Jacob and Laban found reconciliation of sorts, and Jephthah's daughter soothing wooded heights on which to bewail her virginity. Here royalty in rout (of the houses of both Saul and David) found refuge -- and it was from Tishbe in Gilead that the prophet Elijah flamed forth to confront the court of Ahab and Jezebel. Gilead is a name resonant for the Bible-bred pioneer and settler of rest, refuge, reconciliation and hope.

“. . . a stranger might ask why there is a town here at all. Our own children might ask. And who could answer them? It was just a dogged little outpost in the sand hills within striking distance of Kansas. That's really all it was meant to be. It was a place John Brown and Jim Lane could fall back on when they needed to heal and rest . . .” (p. 234)

“It was just that kind [of hope] the place was meant to encourage, that a harmless life could be lived here unmolested. “There shall yet old men and old women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand for every age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof” That is prophecy, a vision of the prophet Zechariah. He says it will be marvelous in the eyes of the people, and so it might well be to people almost anywhere in this sad world. To play catch of an evening, to smell the river, to hear the train pass. These little towns were once the bold ramparts meant to shelter just such peace.” (p.242)

[**THIS** last quotation, of course, is part of the heartbroken recognition of failure both on the part of the town and of the protagonist himself to fulfill his godson's desperate expectation, but it still articulates what the name should mean.]

THERE was a man whose name was John, filled with the spirit of the prophet Elijah,

Driven by that prophetic flame from the rock-bound New England coast to the gray plains of Free-Soil Kansas and onto the battlefields of the War Between The States that left him single-eyed and still burning for justice, uneasy with refuge and retirement, fractious with family, fleeing and frustrating his namesake heir to flicker out in the unknown shadows of those gray plains where he first preached salvation. His son inherits his pulpit but repudiates his battling message for words of peace and takes his grandson with him to seek out his grave in Kansas and be reconciled with his memory. The grandson, in his turn angry with his father, finds himself like C.S. Lewis surprised by joy in his old age with a young wife and very young son, and tries to come to terms with these memories by writing them out for his son to read when of an age to do so after his death.

“Your mother told you I’m writing your begats, and you seemed very pleased with the idea. Well, then. What should I record for you? I, John Ames, was born in the Year of Our Lord 1880 in the state of Kansas, the son of John Ames and Martha Turner Ames, grandson of John Ames and Margaret Todd Ames. At this writing I have lived seventy-six years, seventy-four of them here in Gilead, Iowa, excepting study at the college and at seminary.” (p. 9)

“My mother’s father was a preacher, and my father’s was, too, and his father before him, and before that, nobody knows, but I wouldn’t hesitate to guess. That life was second nature to them, just as it is to me.” (p. 6)

“I grew up in parsonages. I’ve lived in this one most of my life, and I’ve visited in a good many others, because my father’s friends and most of our relatives lived in parsonages. And when I thought about it in those days, which wasn’t too often, I thought this was the worst of them all, the draftiest and the dreariest. Well, that was my state of mind at the time. It’s a perfectly good old house, but I was all

alone in it then. And that made it seem strange to me. I didn't feel very much at home in the world that was a fact. Now I do." (p. 4)

"...the strangest thing about this life, about being in the ministry. People change the subject when they see you coming. And then sometimes those very same people come into your study and tell you the most remarkable things. There's a lot under the surface of life, everyone knows that. A lot of malice and dread and guilt, and so much loneliness, where you wouldn't really expect to find it, either." (p. 6)

"One great benefit of a religious vocation is that it helps you concentrate. It gives you a good basic sense of what is being asked of you and also what you might as well ignore. If I have any wisdom to offer, this is a fair part of it." (p. 7)

"The word "preacher" comes from an old French word, *predicateur*, which means prophet. And what is the purpose of a prophet except to find meaning in trouble?" (p. 233)

DESPITE – or perhaps because of – a shared religious vocation, the fathers and sons of each generation are continually torn by frustrated expectations and unreconciled differences in which they die – yet are genuinely and loyally mourned and revered after death by the succeeding son. The elder son, Edward, banished from the parsonage table because of his principled refusal to offer a false Grace at mealtime provides southern shelter from the Midwestern winters for his parents in their broken old age; his books smuggled to his younger brother nourish the questing intellect and adorn the preacher's bookshelves – but the young parson remains in the faith of his fathers and in Gilead. The perceived failure and caving in of his father, "a man who acted from principle, as he said himself" (p.7) reinforces both his anger and his commitment to stay in the pulpit of Gilead Congregational. As he sets down his thoughtful memories for his own son, he is able to come to a better understanding and reconciliation in his heart, especially with his nagging alter ego, the son of his best friend and bearer of his own name – even baptized by him! Here there are names: John, Della, Robert, but who is the one to whom this memoir is addressed and what is the name of his mother, that one who looks with "a kind of furious pride, very passionate and stern" (p. 1) who came to faith through his preaching of a rainy Pentecost Sunday and was baptized by him? Will that son come to read, to understand and forgive? Will he be another John Ames? Will he choose Gilead?