

# VALYERMO CHRONICLE

## SUMMER, 2008, No. 220

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### A SEASON *for* REFLECTION *and* RENEWAL

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**WE** wish to share with you the good news that our monastic community at Valyermo is now beginning an intensive period of study and reflection that will lead to a renewal of our monastic life and a common vision of our future. We have been invited to undertake this project of renewal by Abbot Ansgar Schmidt, O.S.B., the Abbot President of the Benedictine Congregation of the Annunciation, of which St. Andrew's Abbey is part.

As many of you know, the abbatial term of office of Francis Benedict has now ended, and we are all deeply grateful to him for the sixteen years during which he served with unflagging devotion as superior of our monastery. The new Welcome Center and Youth Center Chapel are the most recent and visible reminders of Fr. Francis' deep commitment to our community. We invite you to join us in giving thanks to God for all Fr. Francis has done as he retires from leadership, first of all to rest from his labors, and eventually to assist in the ministries of our monastery.

The conclusion of Fr. Francis' term of office as abbot has provided the monks of Valyermo with a unique and much-needed opportunity to spend an extended period of time "taking stock" of our monastic way of life and studying our many apostolates. Abbot President Ansgar has recommended that instead of undertaking the arduous project of electing a new abbot

immediately, we should instead regard the next two years as a “sabbatical” during which we will study and implement the recommendations of the two canonical visitations he has recently completed here at Valyermo.

During this period of study and renewal the superior of our monastery will not be an abbot, but rather a “Prior Administrator”, who will have all the rights and authority of an abbot. Fr. Damien Toilolo O.S.B. has agreed to serve as Prior Administrator; and during his term of office he will shepherd our community through this process of renewal and reflection culminating in an abbatial election, probably in two year’s time. Please keep Prior Damien and all the monks of Valyermo in your prayers; and watch future *Chronicles* for further details concerning this exciting new chapter in our community’s history.

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## LETTER FROM ABBOT FRANCIS

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DEAR FRIENDS,

AS we face each day, there are new challenges personal and familial, within church and the larger society including the world community. We are motivated to find solutions or we feel paralyzed, at least temporarily, because there seems to be no solution that could resolve the issue at hand. This becomes an experience of powerlessness and calls us to enter more deeply into the mystery of what is.

THERE is so much bad news which daily confronts us. Our society is filled with many current insecurities which affect all of us: the rising cost of fuel and other energy sources; corporate greed and self interest; current financial insecurities including the housing and mortgage crisis, the weakening of the dollar, the instability of the stock market; the battle of words and the posturing of candidates in the political arena; the quandary over foreign policy due to the military interventions in the Middle East and its toll on American lives and capital outlay; the many philosophical and moral viewpoints competing for our allegiance, some which certainly do not respect the dignity of the human person or show respect for life in all its stages; crime and addiction; on and on. We are all the recipients of broken

promises and too often the promise of a better tomorrow has not yet arrived. Added to these realities are the many failings and shortcomings within each one of us. These bring the external dilemmas or injustices described above much closer to home because of what we do through particular acts or alternately through passive omission of the good that ought to have been done.

**IN** the face of such difficulties, we can lose sight of what is most important in our lives— the reality of the presence of God in the midst of it all. What we celebrate in faith and in the Church year is the mystery of God’s caring intervention in the midst of human trial and suffering. The core of the Gospel message is the paschal mystery, that reality in which we know that God participates in every aspect of the human condition, that God has a plan for this world and for each one of us, that God will be victorious over every hardship or loss, even death itself, by going through it for us and with us continuously until the end of our personal lives and until the end of human history.

**HANS** Urs von Balthasar remarked about Jesus that “he would allow his own vessel to be shattered, thereby pouring himself out; by pouring out one single drop of the divine Heart’s blood he would sweeten the immense and bitter ocean. This was intended to be the most incomprehensible of exchanges: from the most extreme opposition would come the highest union, and the might of his supreme victory was to prove itself in his utter disgrace and defeat. For his weakness would already be the victory of his love for the Father, reconciliation in the eyes of the Father, and, as a deed of his supreme strength, this weakness would be so great that it would far surpass and sustain in itself the world’s pitiful feebleness. He alone would henceforth be the measure and thus also the meaning of all impotence. He wanted to sink so low that in the future of all falling would be a falling into him, and every streamlet of bitterness and despair would henceforth run down into his lowermost abyss.”

**THERE** is in the spiritual journey an ever deepening movement into God, into the love of God, into the eternal design of God through the passages of this life which so often seem cruel and incomprehensible. Entering into powerlessness with Jesus in His passion and death as He has entered into our powerlessness, in history and for ever thereafter, we approach what von Balthasar calls the “highest union.”

**THIS** highest union is a communion within the human condition leading us to the Person of Jesus, as fully God and fully human, who has embraced in

history and for all history the whole of our human destiny with us. This embracing is the embrace of Divine-human love — God’s self donation, a pouring Oneself out for our sakes. This is the experience of the saving power of love. When we become aware of this reality, of this kind of personal relationship with God, our whole perspective begins to change in the face of every challenge, difficulty, insecurity or suffering.

**ALL** of life is now perceived as a gift, not just for the present moment but for eternity. Every human experience, whatever it’s content or expression, whatever its positive or negative impact, becomes a place of communion, of “highest union.” In His Person (through His personal passover), Jesus went through death itself, conquering it, and restored life — the life of the resurrection — for all of us. In this risen life, begun in faith and baptism, we know that the God who loves us has every intention to lead us through every exigency toward the totality of life and the fullness of our human potentiality, not in this life alone but into eternity.

**IN** our re-creation through faith and baptism, we are promised more than our hearts could possibly imagine. We enter into the mystery of the outpouring of Divine Love, which continuously unfolds and is revealed in our life with God and fills us with “the unspeakable delight of love” as St. Benedict assures the disciple in the Prologue of the Holy Rule.

**THIS** gift is ultimately the living presence of the Giver, communion with the Divine Lover, friendship with the best of Friends. Contained within the gift is an invitation, a call to be love in this world, to nurture love in every human relationship, to act justly, to serve wholeheartedly the others’ good, and to pour oneself out in the likeness of Jesus’ own self-donation. In this call, we are to become, however gradually over many years, more perfected images of God in the world so as to radiate more pristinely God’s likeness in virtue and love through everything we say and do. What we have received as a gift enables us to give ourselves as the best gift to God and one another. This loving receiving and giving, Divine and human, refashions us — as creature, as believer, as intelligent participator, as friend, as spouse, as monk, as servant. All that Jesus is and all that He models for us is the invitation to become like Him, pleasing to God, salvific for others and this world.

**I PRAY** that God will awaken in all of us the divine Love that gives unto the end and becomes a sign of God’s victory over sin and death and promises more than we can ask for or imagine. I hold you in my prayers.

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

[2] *Homily for Holy Thursday*, by Fr. Damien Toilolo, O.S.B.

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## HOMILY for HOLY THURSDAY

*Fr. Damien Toilolo, O.S.B.*

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**IF** washing the feet of others was all we had to do to be good Christians, the Christian life would probably be less complicated. All we'd have to do is pick up a basin, add soap and water, grab a towel, and start washing. If that's all we had to do to be faithful to the Lord, it would be so easy. But you know, ironically, that is basically all we have to do. All that God asks of us is to carry out — like Jesus — the ordinary and common tasks of everyday life with genuine love and care for others.

**THE** common practice in the days of Jesus was to wash the dirt and dust from the feet of guests as they entered the home. And in doing this, the host of the home showed honor to his guests. By washing the feet of the disciples, Jesus bestowed honor upon them. He honored Judas, who would betray him; He honored Peter who would deny him; Jesus gave honor to those who would abandon Him in His great time of need: those who would fall asleep as He prayed for courage, those who would keep their comfortable distance when He was on trial. In other words, when Jesus performed this customary practice of washing their feet, Jesus looked beyond what these men were about to do; He looked beyond their failings and shortcomings — and even their sins — and He saw, not what they do, but who they are: children of God, creatures made in the image and likeness of God, his brothers. And He sees that in us as well. Jesus looks beyond our imperfections and sins and faults and sees His sisters and brothers.

**AS** followers of Christ, we too are called to perform the ordinary tasks of life with the attitude of Jesus — not just the servant attitude of Jesus, but the attitude of Jesus that looks beyond what people do, that looks beyond what they do for a living, that looks beyond their past, that looks beyond their accent when they speak English, that looks beyond their sexual orientation, that looks beyond whether they prefer Gregorian chant or Breaking Bread.

As disciples of Christ we are called to perform these ordinary tasks of daily life with the attitude of Christ that looks beyond all that, and more, and to see what Jesus sees: our brothers, our sisters.

**THIS** evening we celebrate the Lord's Supper, that night when He gave us the Eucharist, His body broken for us and His blood poured out for us. And it is this act of other-centered love that we are asked to imitate. That's what these past six weeks were all about. We gave up certain things, we promised to do certain things, hoping that they would help us to imitate Christ more fully; hoping that they would help us to become more and more like Him.

**TO** imitate Christ doesn't necessarily mean to literally die on a cross, but it does necessarily mean unconditional love. God asks us, invites us, to imitate Him in loving others. And Jesus has given us an example of how to do that, through His extraordinary sacrifice on the cross, and also in carrying out with love, the ordinary tasks of everyday life.

[3] *Homily for Easter Sunday*, by Fr. Simon O'Donnell, O.S.B.

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## HOMILY *for* EASTER SUNDAY

*Fr. Simon O'Donnell, O.S.B.*

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**THE** empty tomb and the first appearance of the Risen Jesus are wonderfully imaged in the Gospel of John, Chapter 20, 1-18. I mention these verses because they do form a linguistic unity around the primary and central theme of the first Easter. The theme is the tomb. The word is used nine times, it is as if the evangelist wants us to catch and hold that image, not just any tomb, but an empty tomb. It is a surprising event even if it were to point only to a stealing of the body. All movements in this passage are to the tomb, from the tomb, and in the tomb. The persons involved and all the actions focus on this thematic movement, every word spoken in conversation is focused in or from or to the tomb.

And what are the actions around the tomb. Seven times we find the verb "to come," seven times the verb "to see," two times each the verbs "to turn," "to stoop," "to run," and three times the verb "to enter in." Let us attend to these movements. Not only do they come to the tomb, they run. It seems that they must be anxious to see what is happening there. They do not converse on the

way, they run; each must have had a single purpose to energize them for this action. What do they anticipate? But anticipate they must have!

**THEY** come because they want to see. Is it just their curiosity they want fed, or was it an intuition they wanted confirmed? The satisfaction of curiosity is not humble and so it was an intuition that sought to nourish. They bent down to see, Mary turned to see. These are not the postures of the humiliated, but rather the humble postures of those who want their intuition realized. Their intuition was that Jesus was raised from the dead. They did not know the reason for the empty tomb but their suspicion, born of their attention to Jesus, was the necessity of a line of fulfillment of scripture in which He would rise from the dead.

**YES**, they could hear in the words of Jesus the hope of their ancestors, the hope of their contemporaries. “Though I lie face down in the dust of death.” “I shall live because of God.” “Though the snares of death entrapped me.” “I shall live in his presence forever.” “Though my body shall return to dust.” “I shall live forever.” “Though my eyes be closed in death.” “I shall see my Redeemer.” “Though you abandon me to Sheol.” “I shall be shown the path of life.” “Though the bonds of death hold me fast.” “I cry out to the Lord and he hears me.” “Though I sink into the abyss.” “I know You will deliver me from Sheol.” “Though my eyes are closed in death.” “I fix my hope on thee, O Lord.” “Thought my flesh sleep in the earth.” “I shall not know decay.” (Quotations are mostly from the Psalms, 1–40)

**THESE** are the holy intuitions of our ancestors that fed the hearts of those who hastened to the tomb. And though they may have read them in the Scriptures of old, they most especially saw them in the life and deeds, words and gestures of Jesus himself. And because Jesus himself was alive with this holy intuition he not only taught them to his disciples, but he taught them more. He told them:

“It is necessary for the Son of Man to be betrayed, to suffer and die, and to rise on the third day.”

“I am the Resurrection and the Life, any who believe in me, even if they die, shall live forever.”

**AND** at the sight of the empty tomb this holy intuition was again enkindled — the fire of imagination began to work. Will we see him? Can we move from the tomb to the vision of the Living Jesus? Until he appears this holy intuition becomes fed with faith and hope and compels them to a common place, to a shared life. This shared life is no longer out of fear and sheer

disappointment. This is the rudiments of a new kind of shared life, a community in which they begin to re-collect the memories of his deeds and words, of life and gestures of Jesus. They fed one another with these recollections. Can you imagine what they were doing; can we, can you do what they did? They rehearsed his words:

“Just as the Father has life in himself, so the Son has life in himself.”

“I am the way and the truth and the life.”

**THEY** remembered his deeds: how he found it possible to not only forgive the sinner, not only to heal the sick but to give life to the dead. They began to see the purposes of God in his pledge to destroy death and to restore life, to confirm his love for the old creation but a marvelous new creation, a mountain where tears of sadness and the web of death have no presence. They began to see the purposes of God in his dealings with his Beloved Son, that there is to be a wonderful third day in which there is a miracle, a rising to life.

**THOUGH** all move from the tomb, it is Mary who remains, and she does a marvelous symbolic act: at the voice of Jesus she turns from the tomb, she turns to Jesus, she sees him. In this symbolic act Mary, and eventually all the disciples and all the followers of Jesus turn away from the place of death, the tomb, and turn to Jesus, the living one. In this action we find the movement to a fuller faith. It is no longer holy intuitions that are confirmed, in the presence of Jesus the Living One is the focus of all attention. This is the faith that confesses:

jesus is risen from the dead, alleluia!

**SUCH** faith is not merely a confession of belief; it is acceptance of a call, a vocation. Like Mary, we enter the community of faith but we must also say with her: i have seen the lord! This is not a vision for her eyes only, it is an apparition, a revelation: the lord has made himself known to me! And this is the message to the disciples, to the Church, to us. Not a message held by one or another, but a ceaseless prayer of the belief that the Living Lord will be experienced in my life.

**THE** three personages in today’s gospel had this experience. They not only knew Jesus, they loved him; they not only were friends of Jesus, they were sharers in his mission, in his new life. And because of this they, and we, must live in a new way. And the new way is not delayed until the last day. As they, and we, are sharers in his mission to bring his living and healing presence to a world broken not only by the pain of physical suffering but by the pain of the absence of love, the Risen Christ and his followers sow love.



When the fabric of peace is torn in a violent world and in a ruined heart, the Risen Christ and his followers plant the seed of peace, not a peace won with arms and bribes, but a peace born out of respect for each member of the human family who bears on his soul the imprint of the Risen Christ.

**THE** Risen Christ and his followers trample on competition to advance collaboration, the Risen Christ and his followers embrace the poor and forgotten with the embrace of life, the Risen Christ and his followers are still at the table not as lord but as servant. The followers of the Risen Christ are cocreating with Jesus the world as God sees it, as God desires it. We are not only hastening the day of life, we are planting the seed of new life in our world and in one another.

**WE** no longer confront an empty tomb, we confront the living Jesus; we no longer bring the message that he is not here; we become the very bearers of the Risen and Living Christ, we carry his power and his purpose in the world.

[4] *Homily for the Second Sunday of Easter*, by Fr. Simon O'Donnell, O.S.B.

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## **HOMILY** *for the* **SECOND SUNDAY of EASTER** *Fr. Simon O'Donnell, O.S.B.*

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**LAST** Sunday we reflected on the first half of John, Chapter 20. There we saw the frantic and frenetic movement of the three whom Jesus loved to and from the tomb. They seemed to be filled with anxiety and doubt when confronted with the empty tomb. But they also fed upon the ancient intuition that life is God's gift even after death. Now on this Sunday we find those who were running to and fro are in gathered as one, awaiting the next news, the next event. And in this gathering they are becoming like Church — a safe environment, an expecting ambience, a conversational space in which hopes and disappointments, joys and sorrow, are remembered, recounted, and serve as stories of engaging Jesus.

**IN** the first day of the week, that day so much like the first creation though now it will be a new creation; a day like the day of the first chapter of John — so much so that we have a cover, front and back, for the stories of Jesus in the proclamation of Chapter one and in the proclamation of Chapter twenty. In Chapter one Jesus is coming, he comes unto his own, and his own

do not recognize. In Chapter twenty, three times as if emphatic, Jesus came, Jesus came, Jesus came. He has come unto his own. He stands in the midst of them to create the first community of faith, no longer a gathering compelled by fear, but a gathering alive in hope; *Jesus is risen from the dead!*

**TO** create this new community of faith Jesus must speak a “Peace be with you” and he must breathe on them, infusing in them the Spirit. In this act there is born a Church, a place where in the very gathering there is the invocation of the Spirit to rest upon the gathering, to bring it to the fullness of faith, and to the fullness of life contained in the promise of faith.

**THERE** are three unique things in the latter part of the chapter. There is the gathering — for the purpose of assimilating the events of these last days. There is the Christ who comes — for the purpose of bringing to faith and faith in him as living! There is the Spirit who rests upon the assembly. In the morning of Easter there was a bubbling energy, strength for running, strength for hoping; in the evening of Easter there was quiet, a waiting. In the morning of Easter they searched, in the evening of Easter Jesus came. In the morning of Easter, there was no peace; in the evening of Easter Jesus speaks: peace be with you! The ancient greeting that is more than greeting, for on these words is found the gifts of heaven carried unto the receiver of greeting. Easter morning concludes with the recognition of the gardener become Jesus, Easter evening concludes with the apostolic and ecclesial proclamation: we have seen the lord! Easter morning ended in wonder; Easter evening ended in mission. go into the world and plant the seed of life, become church, the home of the living christ.

**TO** be the Church is to be the gathered for the coming of the Risen Christ, those who know unity because of the blessing of peace and the forgiveness of sins; to be the Church is to be gathered at the desk of the living Word, those who listen and reflect the stories of Jesus and strengthen their faith; to be the Church is to be gathered at the table of life, to receive the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation; to be the Church is to be gathered at the missionary sending of the disciples: As the Father as sent me, so I sent you: go forth to be the bearers and bestowers of life. Amen! Alleluia!

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[5] *The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Darwin*, by Janice Daurio, Obl. O.S.B.

## THE GOD *of* ABRAHAM, ISAAC, *and* DARWIN

*Janice Daurio, OBl. OSB*

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**PRAISE** the Lord, my soul!  
Lord God, how great you are,  
clothed in majesty and glory  
wrapped in light as in a robe!  
(Ps. 104: 1, 2)

**WHY** do we believe in God and what kind of God do we believe in?

**THE** present spate of books in defense and praise of atheism is a great blessing for Christians. For one thing, it keeps us humble. We don't stand on moral high ground alone: many atheists lead lives of virtue. Nor do we have the intellectual upper hand at the moment. But this contemporary atheism movement affords us the opportunity of returning to the rich intellectual traditions of our faith: is belief in God rational?

**IN** a word, yes. Does that mean that by deft argument a Christian could convert an atheist? No. But it does mean that there is nothing irrational about faith. Indeed, the Christian view of the world is consistent with the best of modern science and with the deepest respect for life and the world.

**IN** the Catholic tradition, arguments for God's existence have a long and noble history. When talking to atheists, although we don't share with them a belief in the authority of scripture, we do share with them a belief in the authority of reason. In the Catholic tradition, reason plays an important role. Faith is not reason's competitor but its helpmate. God is relying on you to use reason as well as faith. The conversation-stopper, "it's a mystery," so beloved of Catholics of a certain age, cannot be used to encourage intellectual laziness.

**CATHOLICS** hold, with Galileo, that God wrote two books: the bible and nature. We can read off of nature what God wrote there. That God exists, what God is like, and what God is up to in the universe can be reliably gleaned from contemplating nature as well as from reading the bible. In the Catholic vision of things, reason as well as faith, and the world as well as the bible, are objects for contemplation, study and prayer.

**THE** most popular argument for God's existence today is the design argument. You've heard it in talk of Intelligent Design, the teaching of

which causes much political debate. If something gives every appearance of having been purposely designed, then it probably was.

**UNTIL** Charles Darwin's groundbreaking work on the origin of species, an intelligent designer was the best explanation we had for the obvious, undeniable complex order in nature. But with Darwin, say critics of the Design argument, we now have an alternative and better explanation of the order in nature, namely, evolution. Evolution explains why nature looks designed. Evolution is a process of astonishingly long periods of time whereby the advantages living things have are preserved and passed on and the disadvantages left behind; cumulatively, then, the things in nature, especially us, look designed.

**BEFORE** Darwin, supporters of the intelligent design argument could draw from the scientific method to defend the existence of God, the intentional and intelligent designer. The scientific method requires thinking people to choose the most probable explanation: Either natural objects of ordered complexity happened to be so by chance, or they were designed. It's much more likely that they were designed than that they got that way by design (think of the complex order of the human brain or the human eye!). There seemed to be no way to explain order in complexity by chance.

**WITH** Darwin's explanation of the evolutionary process, there was a way. Given huge enough stretches of time, and the retention of advantageous properties, things that were not designed look designed.

**NOW** the same scientific method that had allowed Christians to argue for an Intelligent Designer required them to give it up. The relevant part of the scientific method is what is sometimes called "Ockham's Razor": posit the fewest number of entities when explaining a phenomenon. If we can explain the appearance of human persons without relying on the existence of an unseen intelligent designer, then do so. We can explain this way, and so we do.

**DO** we "need" God, the Intelligent Designer, to explain the order in nature? No. Are we within our rights to assert the existence of God? Yes. Belief in an Intelligent Designer, though not required by the existence of natural objects of ordered complexity, is consistent with them.

**IN** fact, the rich reward for Christians who eagerly seek new inspiration for ancient truths from modern science now have the exciting prospect of having evolution enhance our understanding of what God is up to in the universe

**WORK** in the evolutionary sciences, initiated by Charles Darwin, offers Christians — who think that reason is reliable and that nature is God’s other book — a new, exciting way to understand creation and how God works in and through it. Evolution helps Christians to avoid the false Magician God: human beings just appear with no necessary link to prior life forms. Evolution helps Christians to avoid the false Trickster God: fossils and how far down they appear in the earth trick us into thinking that there were simpler life forms from which we developed. The “Intelligent Designer” god of anti-evolutionists is also false: too small to be the true God. Evolution restores the true God: the playful, artistic free God, who is under no compulsion to create human beings in the most efficient manner, and who finds the numberless and amazing diversity of life forms, and our connection to them, to be a grand idea of his own choosing. Even more exciting, understanding the evolutionary process and our place in it, invites us to see ourselves as co-creators of the universe. God began creation an immeasurably long time ago, but it is still going on. We, as wise husbanders of natural resources, as preservers rather than destroyers of natural beauty (plant a tree rather than cut it down!), carry on God’s work of creation.

**EVOLUTION** also shows how elegant the Creator is. Consider this comment from a scientist, quoted in *Finding Darwin’s God*, by Brown University molecular biologist and Catholic Kenneth Miller: “If you deny evolution, then the sort of God you have in mind is a bit like a pool player who can sink fifteen balls in a row, but only by taking fifteen separate shots. My God plays the game a little differently. He walks up to the table, takes just one shot, and sinks all the balls. I ask you which pool player, which God, is more worthy of praise and worship?” (By the way, I strongly recommend this book, as well as *Science and Religion* by Georgetown University theologian John Haught. Together, they come to the same conclusion about science and religion: one from the science end and the other from the religion end.)

**EVOLUTION** is the greatest source of inspiration for a theology of creation that has come along in a while. For not only do we note God’s handiwork in the connectedness of all living things, but we continue the act of creation by ourselves being part of it, as we, caught up in the exciting dance of creation, move — rush

— from the Alpha of the beginning to the Omega of the goal of creation: all united with Christ at the end of time. I teach philosophy at a community college in Ventura County. Sometimes, just to make sure that my students are following along (there are new clever ways of mental wandering, aided

by cell phones), I say something outrageous. I like to say, “If evolution is false, then God doesn’t exist!” I have to repeat it, because what they hear or think they hear is, if evolution is true, then God doesn’t exist. (When something we hear is so opposed to what we expect, we almost literally can’t hear it.) Once I’m satisfied that they are paying attention, I explain that you can have God (or god, or a god) without evolution and you can have God with evolution. The question is not God or no God, but what kind of God?

**RECALL** that astounding phrase from the Mass, as the priest is preparing the bread and the wine: As you have shared in our humanity, so may we share in your divinity. Think of it: share in God’s divine life. How do we do that? By being wise cocreators with God, bringing the new — more accurately renewed — creation along to its fulfillment.

**ALTHOUGH** it would be inappropriate to speak of God or an intelligent designer in a public school biology classroom, it’s good (even required, I’d say) to speak of evolution in a Catholic theology class. But in all the talk of the creator as Intelligent Designer, we’ve lost track of creation as intelligible design.

**THE** astonishing and undeniable fact is that natural things are intelligible and that we are intelligent readers of that design. We can know not only that God is but who God is by his having made intelligent creatures perfectly matched to intelligible natural things—we are able to read the plan. It’s astounding, for example, that dna is such that there are creatures like us who can decipher it.

**THE** psalter, the foundation of the prayerbook of monastic communities, contains many psalms in praise of nature and its creation, the Alpha event.

May the glory of the Lord last forever!

May the Lord rejoice in his works!

(Ps. 104: 31)

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[6] *First Confession and Spring has Now Unwrapped the Flowers*, by Ann Fleck

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**TWO POEMS: *First Confession & Spring has Now Unwrapped the Flowers*, by**

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## First Confession

**WAITING** to be dispersed to the priests  
Ranged amid the stained light of the sanctuary.  
The children, dressed anyhow, crowd the aisle.  
This is not the day of white dresses and veils, black pants and shoes,  
Not the rite of seed and wine, The great rite of collation, male and female,  
grass and grape. Before the blood, before the broken ground, the deep play  
of contrition.

In the pew ahead of us a little girl leans against her mother.  
Her thin dress, about to be outgrown, is beginning to fade.  
But a red length of rickrack loops the skirt and retrieves the trick  
Of letting out a hem, then dressing the faded seam  
That circles the skirt like a lone latitude  
With a bright zigzag of trim.

What couldn't they salvage?  
Bacon fat in the cookies,  
The odor of woodsmoke and sugar fattening the house,  
Shirts torn up for rags, the buttons cashiered to the button box,  
Ornaments mitered out of last year's cards,  
A collar turned to expose the fabric where it is whole and new.

*I fought with my brother, Father.* Jacob embraces Esau.  
A mother winds a length of rickrack  
Off the card, measures and cuts,  
Eases it over the place that has been outgrown,  
A beauty co-extensive to the wound.  
A filigree of blood meanders down the hand  
Cobbled to a cross, nailed open, its work finished,  
Becoming, like each of the children's misdeeds,  
A word that can be undone.

## “Spring Has Now Unwrapped the Flowers”

**THE** last of night pools in the little valley.  
Over the tidal sound of the wind,  
slow chafing steps approach the darkened chapel.  
A young monk has left a small black case  
at the side altar, lit two candles, and departed.

The old priest steps in out of the last of night  
vested for Mass, the stiff green chasuble  
glimmering in the half-light.  
He is the fourth of the magi,  
this morning done wandering, having found at last  
the thing he searched the earth for.  
One hand clutches a bundle of papers to his chest,  
the other a new-fangled cane, its top deeply crooked, its bottom  
four-footed and splayed  
like the old-time paintings of a running horse.  
I kneel in the dark, unseen, the congregation.

At the side altar, he clears the low step and begins.  
Holding the spiral bundle an inch from one eye  
(he looks like he's peeking under a door to see, or doing close-work)  
he reads from a giant script in a language  
I don't first recognize.  
It's English, heavily accented  
his old voice whistling softly,  
as over a blade of grass. Somewhere outside the chirping of a bird  
joins it:  
"Almighty Fodder."  
He opens the black case and fetches out the wine,  
the bottle plastic against falls.  
Its red kindles weakly in the light of the candles.  
Like the cook in her kitchen, he measures carefully,  
chalice and cruet brought right up to his nose.  
Grown young he drinks the wine off briskly.  
The breaking of the Host jars the deserted chapel  
like the kid in the congregation who yells an answer  
to the preacher's rhetorical question.

He cleans the chalice deftly now,  
and fits the vessels back into the case,  
seeds returned to the pod.  
Mass over,  
he rummages through balkish, complicated layers  
of chasuble and cassock,  
then digging deeper draws out a rumpled handkerchief



the size of a rose in full bloom and lays it on the altar.  
He grasps the cane, gathers his kit, and backwards,  
like a boy getting over a fence,  
Takes the tiny step out of the niche.

I say my rosary. He, grown old again,  
chafes his way in half-steps to the door  
lit greyly now by dawn and disappears.  
Rain, come courting, answer to my prayers,  
blows drily against the windows  
as though outside a young man tosses gravel at his girl's window.  
I pull on my coat and head for breakfast.

But happening to look back, I see him.  
Standing in the outer door, in black,  
cassock, bomber jacket, beret,  
green vestments shed,  
he surveys the weather he's helped call forth,  
assisting now at day.

— Ann Fleck

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[7] *The Side Altar* by Bro. Ben, M.C.

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## THE SIDE ALTAR

*Br. Ben, M.C.*

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**HERE** I am, yet again, in the shadow of Your presence. On a plank bench I sit again before the cast concrete altar with its oval womb-hollow, in which a small soul could nestle. The brick floor has not changed these thirty-five years since that time — You know “the walls, altar and hour and night.” Some seasons, cottonwood fluff gathers in the gaps; other seasons, trodden leaf-fragments or snow grit.

**THE** wrought metal tabernacle flashes enamel patches, coagulate red and the blue-green of deep waters, amid linear shapes: prehistoric forms, stick-figures, the Fish, and the oft-repeated “X” cross on which St. Andrew, the

little man, *andros, vir*, opened his arms and heart to Christ's ultimate claim. Some nights I heard a mouse in the wall behind the paneling.

**THAT** is the setting. The moment is silence, each moment the one silence. And from within that metal chest, tabernacle, tent, Something, Someone that hides in the poverty of bare bread exerts a force more powerful than gravity, more insistent than hunger. That power once drew me from straying, into the Shepherd's fold; from uncertainty, across the threshold of Peter's precincts; from rootlessness to a compelling urge to give my little to the One who gave me all; from hesitancy to a determination to clinch that belonging with undying vows; from temerity to a desperate plea not to be brought to the test.

**THEN** that strength drew me away from here and led me to other tabernacles in distant continents, and taught me to seek that self-same mystery hidden Emmanuel-like in the broken hearts of strangers (brothers, sisters) encountered in dingy shelters, gypsy caravans, prison cells, drug dives, psych wards and back alleys.

**THROUGH** all those years, scattered like desert rains, times of solitude reassured me that You still wanted me. Now yet again, for a few moments, I sit in the shadows on this plank bench before this hollowed altar, and I beg you, Lord, to finish what you have started — never stop pulling me until I am hidden in the hollow of your heart, lost to myself in the quiet place from where you draw all to Yourself.

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[8] *Entitlement, A Spiritual Reflection*, by Cheryl Evanson, Obl. O.S.B.

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## ENTITLEMENT, A SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

*Cheryl Evanson, Obl, OSB*

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**YOU'VE** seen them. They come in all shapes and sizes. They wear their importance like an Armani suit or a Versace gown. The self-constructed pedestals on which they stand bear inscriptions touting their superiority in everything from power, wealth, and position to intelligence, education, and talent, even beauty. From their perches they look down upon those who are inferior with disdain. If they do condescend to associate with those beneath them, it is for their own purposes, gratification or in a patronizing manner or as 'noblesse oblige'. They are, after all, special — privileged. And they are

generally quite easy to spot. Less obvious are those who use their age, gender, race, culture, even their disabilities or economic disadvantage to demand certain rights and privileges. Their mentality is, “I was born, therefore, society owes me!” And if you are especially observant, you will notice the religious ‘elite’ from every order, every rank and file, who use their collars or habits to signal all they have given up and earn them the right to expect extra-ordinary attention and deference. They too, must be counted among those suffering from a syndrome called entitlement. Not that any of these is entirely to blame. They actually come by it quite honestly.

**ENTITLEMENT** is an affliction pandemic in scope, but particularly acute in the United States. Our Constitution ‘guarantees’ all U.S. citizens the right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” However much it succeeds or fails, that mentality has permeated the moral fabric of our society. It has a positive side, but a very dark side as well. I have the right — I deserve — I am entitled is its mantra. It implies that the rights of the individual supercede the rights of the many. It breeds unhealthy competition — a win-lose posture where power controls both human and natural resources. It is by virtue of this sense of entitlement that the collective ‘I’ of American society, and perhaps Western democracies in general, believes it is okay to exploit weaker nations, monopolize resources, endanger the environment ... and so on. After all, it’s a right — our collective right — my right. However stated, it’s all about ME!

**MAKE** no mistake. This is not an indictment of the Bill of Rights, of philanthropy, of responsible leadership, of true personal freedom, or of a social/political system that promotes ‘success’ or ‘happiness’ as an individual defines it. It is not that power or wealth or position is intrinsically evil or wrong, any more than intelligence or education or talent or beauty. It is not that the young or old, the poor, the infirm and the disabled don’t need and shouldn’t receive assistance. It is not that the clergy or religious are unworthy of or shouldn’t be shown respect and appreciation. I believe the problem is a matter of attitude.

**AS** Christians and Benedictines, we are each challenged to examine our attitudes. Do we resemble any of those described at the beginning of this reflection even a little? We must ask ourselves if there is a bit (or perhaps a lot) of pretentiousness in our attitude toward those who are different from us — the unemployed or homeless, the alcoholic or the addict, the prostitute, the cohabitating couple or the unwed mother, the physically handicapped or the mentally challenged, the socially awkward, the homosexual, the immigrant or the rapper, the Muslim — or anyone who is underprivileged,

undereducated, or disenfranchised in any way. Do we see and treat these, not as underlings, but as our peers — our brothers and sisters — beloved in the eyes of God?

**WE** must ask ourselves if we expect or demand preferential treatment for any reason or for no particular reason other than we want and believe we deserve it — the best car, the best house in the best neighborhood, the best service, the best seat at the table, the best room in the house.... We must ask ourselves if we have succumbed to rampant materialism and consumerism — if we have failed to teach our children that designer jeans and hundred dollar sneakers and iPods are just stuff — stuff that they neither need, deserve, nor should base their self-esteem on. We must ask ourselves if we have taken unfair advantage of the welfare system or ‘outwitted’ the IRS. We must ask ourselves if we have been good stewards of the earth — if we bother to recycle or use natural resources judiciously. And we must ask ourselves if we display or harbor a spiritual arrogance that is more pharisaical than Christian — a holier-than-thou attitude or a sense of entitlement based on our religious affiliation or because of our membership or role in community or religious life.

**MANY** of the Gospel stories address the issue of entitlement. An excellent example of the very human propensity (even as disciples) to desire the higher place, is when the wife of Zebedee, mother of James and John, insists that her sons sit, “one at your right hand and the other at your left in your kingdom” (Matt 20:21-23). Just three chapters later, Jesus condemns the scribes and Pharisees saying, “Everything they do is done to attract attention, like wearing broader phylacteries and longer tassels, like wanting to take the place of honor at banquets and the front seats in the synagogues, being greeted obsequiously in the market squares and having people call them Rabbi” (Matt 23:5-7). Just as power can lead to entitlement, it can also lead to corruption. “...you appear to people from the outside like good and honest men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matt 23:28). Contrasted with these disapprobations are the Beatitudes (Matt 5:1-12), the paradigm of ‘right’ (pun intended) attitude and the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), in which Jesus’ mother, Mary, the exemplar of that right attitude, beautifully expresses all that is antithetical to entitlement. At the heart of each is humility.

**ST.** Benedict is no less insistent on ‘adjusting’ the attitude of his monks. He devotes an entire chapter of his rule to humility (RB 7) for their edification. It should come as no surprise that this is the longest chapter in the Holy Rule. He begins it with a scriptural reference that reiterates Christ’s

teaching: “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled, and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted” (Luke 14:11; 18:14). All Benedictines, professed or oblates, in community or in the world, are called to reflect upon and practice the twelve degrees of humility. They constitute an important part of the Rule and the Benedictine vow/promise of *conversatio morum* — conversion of life.

**MONASTICS** are not the only ‘religious’ who would benefit from an evaluation of attitude. The clergy abuse scandals have brought to the forefront the sad reality that some feel they are above the law. But it goes deeper than the abuse issue. At the root of the scandals and subsequent ‘cover-ups’ is clericalism—political power and a mindset of privilege and all its trappings within the clergy — what Fr. George Wilson, S.J. terms “the death of the priesthood.” A friend and former Jesuit muses that anything that turns into a lower case ‘ism’ becomes entitlement and destroys what it’s really about. (Hmm ... imperialism, materialism, consumerism, racism, classism ... catholicism, protestantism ... monasticism?)

**NONE** of us is immune to this disease of heart and soul. Perhaps humility is the antidote. Humility, though not an easy pill to swallow, is essential for our spiritual growth and for our psychological and physical health and wellbeing. Humility puts our self-importance into proper perspective. Humility serves as a springboard for balance in our lives. Humility allows us to see and accept others as worthy of respect and love. Humility enables us to say, “I’m sorry” or “I was wrong.” Humility spares us disappointment or even bitterness when things don’t go our way. And humility has remarkable side-affects — acceptance, compassion, and serenity among them.

**HUMILITY** has even greater potency when taken with liberal doses of gratitude. The words “thank you” are often spoken carelessly or off-handedly, if at all. Deep, heartfelt gratitude is something we rarely experience no less express, so deep-rooted is our attitude of entitlement. Gratitude enables us to see the world with different eyes. Gratitude enables us to see everything — not as our due — but as gift.

**PERHAPS** entitlement is simply a stage in our spiritual or psychological development. Perhaps it is a synonym for the ‘original sin’ of pride and all the resultant offenses against each other and the God who has so loved and gifted us. Perhaps we can be healed of this affliction through the practice of humility and gratitude. Perhaps, then, entitlement could be eradicated altogether. And perhaps our world could be a place for all to enjoy life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Perhaps we could live in peace and

harmony with the whole human family. Perhaps we could see everything as a gift. Perhaps we would not misuse or abuse these gifts, especially the gift of our earth. Perhaps we would adopt a new mantra/motto: Our attitude is gratitude! Perhaps we could truly live our vocations as Christians and Benedictines. Perhaps all of this is possible only in the world to come. Perhaps we should try anyway.

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[9] *Companioning Another on the Spiritual Journey*, by Fr. Joseph Brennan, O.S.B.

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## COMPANIONING ONE ANOTHER

### *on the SPIRITUAL JOURNEY*

*Fr. Joseph Brennan, O.S.B.*

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**THE** authors William Barry and William Connolly in their book *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* present the quintessential picture of who the spiritual director is and what are the special qualities or charisms he or she must possess:

...**IN** the understanding of spiritual that we propose, it is clear that the person of the director is central. He or she must be in a conscious relationship with God and also be able to relate well with people. To facilitate the development of another's relationship with God, the spiritual director (and every ministering person) needs to be a sacramental sign of God's loving care.... It is not simply their knowledge that is central, but their whole being. This is especially true of spiritual directors: their person, their faith and hope and love, their capacity for relationships become crucial for the work they do (p. 135).

**THE** first quality that is mentioned as essential for the spiritual director is a conscious relationship with God which also enables fruitful and meaningful relationships with other people. I share the conviction of Barry and Connolly that anyone who is involved in the process of companioning another on the spiritual journey must be a person of prayer, one who is growing in his or her own relationship with God. That this has a direct bearing on the success of the spiritual direction session became apparent to me on various occasions while serving as a spiritual director in a very busy parish. Whenever I found myself too tired, too busy or too pressured to pray, meetings with my

directees became most difficult. It was as if I had lost my point of reference. The God conversations of the directees were almost incomprehensible to me. I felt out of touch, not fully present to what was being shared. I was an instrument out of tune. I knew my own prayer life; my attention to my relationship with God was the missing link. Without a healthy prayer life I was a blind and deaf guide.

**BARRY** and Connolly state that the spiritual director “needs to be a sacramental sign of God’s loving care.” Reflecting on this particular charism I picture the setting of spiritual direction as an Emmaus walk. In the course of the conversation between the director and directee the presence of Jesus is made manifest. In this context it is not only the director who is a sacramental sign of God’s love by reflecting the attitudes, the mind and heart, the presence of Jesus at work within his or her own life. The meeting then between director and directee as he or she reveals the face and presence of Jesus at work within his or her own life. The meeting then between director and directee becomes a graced moment for both as together they encounter the risen Lord and listen to his work.

**THE** need for the charisms of faith, hope and love may seem all too obvious to mention; but the importance of these gifts and their ongoing cultivation in the life of the spiritual director justify their explicit reference by Barry and Connolly. A reflection on each of these as they affect the relationship between director and directee is valuable.

**TO** say that the spiritual director has faith means that he or she has an abiding conviction based on experience that God desires relationship and intimacy with every human person. Furthermore, he or she knows that this God is actively present in a unique way not only within his or her own life, but also in the life of the directee, this faith involves an awareness and understanding of God’s gentleness — a gentleness that flows from God’s reverence and love for all whom he has created. God’s gentleness never violates the freedom and uniqueness of each person. Patiently, yet unrelentingly, the Spirit moves within the life of each individual, handling with care the fragile vessel of clay which the Spirit embraces. As the director grows in faith and becomes more deeply attuned to God’s loving reverence and gentleness, so he or she will mirror these qualities in the relationship with the directee.

**WHEN** the spiritual director is a person of hope, he or she lives in confidence that God never gives up on anyone of us but embraces us in all our weaknesses, loving us into wholeness. This is beautifully expressed in

the words taken from a Hasidic tale: “Just as it is humankind’s way and compulsion to sin and sin again and again, so it is God’s way and God’s divine compulsion to forgive and pardon again and again” (quoted in Martin Buber’s *Tales of the Hasidim: The Later Masters*, 61). When the spiritual director lives in hope, he or she is able to encounter weakness and brokenness in a directee time and again, never giving up on the person, but enabling him or her to recognize God’s constant, faithful presence bringing about growth and new life in unsuspected ways.

**LOVE**, mentioned last, is the most important charism and encompasses all the rest. Love thrives in the spiritual director who has come to know how precious he or she is in the eyes of God. From the experience of knowing that he or she is the “apple of God’s eye.” One in whom the Creator takes great delight, the director is able to celebrate this love with the directee. It is the director’s deeply conscious awareness of God’s overwhelming love for him or her that animates each and every relationship with directees, producing every kind of fruitfulness. Through the eyes of love the director begins to see the directee as God sees him or her. This special charism manifests itself in the form of what the spiritual writer Bernard Tyrell describes as “existential loving” — being genuinely glad that the directee exists. I can think of no more essential quality for a spiritual director to possess than this. With it all things become possible in the relationship between director and directee; without it no relationship can survive.

**IN** conclusion, these words of Barry and Connolly could serve well as an admonition for all who take up this special ministry of companionship on their spiritual journey:

**SPIRITUAL** direction proposed to help people relate personally to God, to let God relate personally to them, and to enable them to live the consequences of that relationship ... the Mystery we call God is just that — mystery; not mystery in the sense of an unknown, but eventually knowable, stranger, but mystery in the sense that he is too rich, too deep, and too loving to be knowable and is, therefore, God. Spiritual directors can only be helping companions to those who travel the way of such a Lord. This, the only authority they can have is the authority of their own persons as a people who belong to that Lord and to his community and who seem to take seriously their own relationship to him and to his community” (p. 136-7).

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[10] *Baptism and Monastic Profession*, by Fr Matthew Rios, O.S.B.



## BAPTISM *and* MONASTIC PROFESSION

*Fr. Matthew Rios, O.S.B.*

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“Lord, Receive Us According To Your Promise.”

*How the Liturgical Prayers at Baptism and Monastic Profession  
Reveal More Than We Hear*

**THE** richness of the Rites of Baptism and Monastic Profession speak about us and the stages of our journey with God. If we take a closer look at the prayers of both Rites, we find bits and pieces here and there of a treasure that tells us who we are and our relationship with God. In this article, I would like to weave the themes of: (a) stages of our conversion as reflected on by two of our contemporary theologians and the Rule of St. Benedict, (b) the parallelisms of the Rite of Profession and Rite of Christian Initiation (RCIA) specifically in the prayer formularies, (c) how these Rites shape us in our true identity and dignity. I’m writing this article in the light of transitions in the monastic community.

**BOTH** the rites at the RCIA and Monastic profession begin with an invitation to prayer which recognized that both catechumen and novice have “answered God’s call.” Answering a “call” is a common movement of conversion that presupposes an initiative on God’s part. It is a movement of conversion which is a part of what the contemporary theologian, Louis Marie Chauvet, characteristically would call a three-step process. The first step is a pause in life where one hears the kerygma. The second step is a coming to faith which is expressed by a sacramental gesture. The third step is the opening of the eyes on an absence, an absence that “knows it to be henceforth in-dwelt by a presence.”

**THE** threefold model of conversion is also similar to that mentioned by Aidan Kavanagh in his book, *The Shape of Baptism*. Kavanagh sees “proclamation, baptism, and the outpouring of the Spirit” as those steps which “constitute the integrity of initiation.” These three steps as identified by Chauvet and Kavanagh can be readily seen in the Rule of Benedict. The basic pattern is described in the Prologue and explained more fully through the chapters dealing on the formation of a monk. This schema can also be seen in the series of prayers in each rite.

**IN** the RCIA, the first stage of the conversion process is reflected in the celebrant's invitation to prayer "He (God) has called them (catechumens) and brought them to this moment." When the celebrant says "he has called them and brought them to this moment," he is implicitly recalling the moments when the catechumens have previously been formed in the previous days of their purification and enlightenment. Likewise, in the invitation to prayer at profession, the Abbot recognizes "the ones have been called to follow Christ." In today's current common monastic formation program, the novice usually has spent at least a year in an intensive formation program and another three years in a Juniorate formation program before he is allowed to make his solemn profession. Just as the disciples on the walk to Emmaus first had to stop and listen to the words of the stranger, the Rule of Benedict begins with the injunction, "Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart." Benedict assumes the reader to be a searcher and begins his Rule by instructing the reader to pause, stop and be attentive to words of instruction. He continues by saying, "In his goodness, he has already counted us as his sons ... with his good gifts which are in us."

**IN** the profession rites, following the litany of the saints, the Abbot prays that the rite may "purify them from all sin." In the RCIA, the celebrant prays that the rite may "lead them to a new and spiritual rebirth." It speaks of newness, where in biblical usage it connotes both *neos*, which means newness in time and *kainos*, which means newness in nature. If we apply these meanings, *neos* refers to the reality of salvation brought about by the water of baptism and *kainos* to the new nature of both the baptized and the solemnly professed. This prayer for newness can be interpreted as reflecting the second phase of conversion expressed in the sacramental gestures of the two Rites.

**LET'S** move further. The ritual of monastic profession contains rubrics which both recall, and are modeled on, the sacramental gesture of baptism: clothing, laying of hands/consecration, kiss of peace. In early monastic tradition, monastic profession was even seen as 'second baptism.' Profession was seen as the "door way by which the monk or nun entered into the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus." In one account, a monk made a remark that "It is clear that the monk's habit (cowl) contains a great mystery for one who is faithful to the monk's way of life. For it is made in the shape of the cross."

**IN** their early writings, monks described some points of contact between baptism and profession, many of which strike us today as trivial, but three points may be taken seriously. First, both baptism and profession involved renunciation. St. Ambrose in his sermon to the newly baptized, *De Sacramentis*, used a striking juridical imagery to show that baptism is a pact with God as monastic profession is a pact with a document signed by the monk expressing his vows. Second, the clothing of the newly professed monk is compared to the clothing of the candidate for baptism. Third, there is a point of similarity in that it was believed that both baptism and profession remit sin. In the words of St. Bernard of Clairvaux:

**WE** are, as it were, baptized a second time, when through mortifying our members here on earth, we once again put on Christ, being formed in the likeness of his death. But as in baptism we are rescued from the powers of darkness and brought to the kingdom of eternal light, so in this second regeneration, we also escape from the darkness – not of one original sin, but of our many actual sins – into the light of many virtues.

**MONASTIC** life is a means of sharing in the paschal mystery. It gives life by inflicting death. Not a ritual death or a relatively painless symbol common with many rites of passage, but a systematic demolition of identity with a view of recombining all its elements in a later synthesis. However these reference and similarities to baptism in the ritual of profession should not obscure the radical uniqueness of baptism. In the RCIA, the prayer for the sacrament of baptism says, “He (God) now anoints you, with the chrism of salvation, so that united with his people; you may remain forever a member of Christ who is Priest, Prophet and King.” It is a clear expression of baptism’s nature of being permanent and character giving which monastic profession never conveys. It is also a clear statement that makes the RCIA a sacrament and much distinct from a monastic profession.

**BOTH** rituals however reflect the third stage of conversion where Chauvet refers to as the divine indwelling that “makes present what is deemed an absence” which is the work of the Holy Spirit. In the prayers of the laying on of hands in the RCIA, the celebrant recognizes the Holy Spirit as “helper and guide.” He prays for the gifts of wisdom, understanding, judgment, courage, knowledge and reverence, wonder and awe in the presence of God. In the prayers of consecration for the monk, a prayer of praise is included. Then it is followed by a prayer recalling baptism, a prayer to receive the monk’s promises (vows), then finally an epiclesis with an accompanying prayer for perseverance, protection and guidance. While monastic profession

is not exactly a sacrament of confirmation, it is expressed as a prayer for the Holy Spirit to take an active role in the monk's life and spirit. Further, in the prayer for the blessing of the cuculla, the gifts of humility, simplicity, and poverty, purity of heart, joy, peace, and holiness of life are asked for the monk. It is again an example of very similar content of prayers for both rites. In the prayer accompanying the clothing with a baptismal garment, the celebrant in the RCIA prays for "everlasting life" whereas the Abbot prays for his monk "to one day enjoy the fellowship of the angels, and all the saints who have worn the habit before him." Both prayers are begging again for the blessings of an eschatological life.

**WHAT** is more striking in both prayers are the number of times that God's help or grace is invoked for the full initiation of the catechumen and for the fulfillment of the vows that are being professed. The rites continuously petition for such grace on behalf of those being baptized and professed. It includes the petitions: "be their helper and guide" or "grant him the grace of perseverance." The closing prayer after the litany petitions: "By the grace of the Holy Spirit, purify them from all sin and set them on fire with your love." The prayer for the newly baptized in the laying of hands is "Send your Holy Spirit upon them to be their helper and guide" and for the newly professed, the Abbot prays, "Send them the spirit of holiness, help them to fulfill in faith what you have enabled them to promise in joy." These prayers are then within the categories of our model of conversion which Aidan Kavanagh calls the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

**THIS** outpouring of the Holy Spirit is also within the schema of Chauvet as mentioned earlier which is illustrated in the Emmaus story by the disappearance of the Lord and the disciples' perceived continued presence of the Risen Lord in his absence. Because the disciples have emptied themselves of their self-will and their preconceived notions, they can be filled with the Spirit. This impulse to action or performance shows up in the following verses of the Rule for monks "clothed then with faith and the performance with good works, let us set out this way." The intensity of the impulse is conveyed in the Rule by the running theme: We must run now and do now what will profit us forever or in the phrase our hearts overflowing with inexpressible delight of love. The newly baptized do so in the same manner. Each stage of the RCIA reflects a progressive integration and intensification of the catechumen's relationship to God, Church, and the world. The RCIA demands a level of spirituality that is not simply attained by stage transition. It recognizes *metanoia* which is intellectual, moral, and religious. That is why the prayers are appropriately been consistent to invoke

the Holy Spirit in these stages of conversion, for this metanoia can only be possible with God. Without a doubt, the prayers in the liturgy speak more than what we can see, more than what we thought they meant to be. It is worth indeed a second look.

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## QUARTERLY BOOK REVIEW

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

***Secret Fire: The Spiritual Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien*** by Stratford  
Caldecott

Darton, Longman and Todd, Ltd. London, 2003, isbn 0232 524777

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**IN** Peter Jackson's film rendition of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* there is a memorable image of the standoff between Gandalf the Wizard and the monster Balrog. Amidst the crumbling ruin of Moria, the dwarfish stronghold, Gandalf stands erect with a staff of brilliant light, checking the roaring monster of fiery darkness so that his friends may scramble to safety before a fiery tendril whips him into the abyss.

**IN** his Introduction, Mr. Caldecott tells us, "The title [Secret Fire] hardly needs explanation to anyone who has read *The Lord of the Rings*, or seen the Peter Jackson movie; Gandalf the wizard names himself a 'servant of the Secret Fire' during his confrontation with the Balrog in Moria, and he is in fact later revealed as the bearer of the Elvish Ring of Fire, Narva the Great. But the fire he serves is not simply that of the ring he bears. Fire is a much bigger and more complex theme in the stories than that. Indeed the secret fire is at the heart not just of *The Lord of the Rings*, or *The Silmarillion*...."

**SO**, drawing “upon the stories themselves, along with the History of Middle Earth, edited from Tolkien’s papers by his son Christopher, but also upon the published letters, Tolkien’s own essays, short stories, and poems, and some of the best critical and biographical works that have appeared in the last few years,” Mr. Caldecott, the Director of the Chester-ton Institute for Faith and Culture in Oxford goes “in search of Tolkien’s secret fire, which the Enemy also sought but failed to find, ‘for it is within Iluvatar’.”

**HIS** exploration winds through five chapters, each with significant subsections to arrive at a conclusion about Tolkien’s achievements, with four brief appendices concerning particular persons and issues of contemporary interest.

**THE** first two of these chapters (“The Tree of Tales” and “A Very Great Story”) follow the gleam of the needling dance of the Aurora Borealis as the budding philologist and veteran of the Great War delves into the silvery mist of Finnish myth and Anglo-Saxon elfdom, nurtured and prodded by his own Fellowship of mythopoeists at Oxford, the Inklings. The third chapter (“A Hidden Presence: Tolkien’s Catholicism”) deals directly with his lifelong faith in Word and Sacrament. The last two chapters (“Let These Things Be” and “Behind the Stars”) expands and interweaves these strands of starlight, sunshine and shadowy fire that radiate and illumine these tales that “sound the horn of hope in a darkling world”(p. 9). It is finally in the fifth chapter’s concluding subsection that Caldecott spells out that “the ‘secret fire’ is Tolkien’s term for the distinctive creative power of Eru. It is God’s ‘secret’ for only God can truly create *ex nihilo* (from nothing). For Tolkien the fire represents life, love and creativity, the wisdom and love of God that burns at the heart of the world and sustains it in existence — it is a willed emanation from the creative energy of God’s own self; it is the life of God shared with the world ... the divine eros ... the active creation of beauty. We find this wild, passionate, creative and fiery love of God is enshrined in the very heart of the Bible as the Song of Songs” (pp. 107-8).

**AND** so we are brought again to Gandalf and the Balrog:

The Balrog reached the bridge. Gandalf stood in the middle of the span, leaning on the staff in his left hand, but in his other hand Glamdring gleamed, cold and white.... “You cannot pass,” he said. The orcs stood still and a dead silence fell. “I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor. You cannot pass. The dark fire will not avail you, flame of Udun. Go back to the Shadow! You cannot pass.”

The fire that is of God burns without consuming. Lesser fires may give light, and they may be used to give life and form to other creatures, but at the same time they consume the fuel on which they depend. Thus all lesser fires depend on God's gift of being, of fuel, of substance, continually renewed. The Enemy wishes not to depend on God, not to receive from him, but instead to be self-sufficient. That is not possible. Even the Balrog owes his existence not to Melkor, but to Iluvator.... In the New Testament, the secret fire is revealed to be not merely a force or power, but a person in his own right. The Spirit is personified Love that burns between the Father and the Son, the Love that gives life and grace. No wonder Melkor sought it, and no wonder it could not be found, for it can be known only by those to whom it is given..." (pp. 108-10).

**ALTHOUGH** Caldecott had said earlier in this last chapter that "the Christian revelation does not enter explicitly into *The Lord of the Rings*" (p. 105), he has opened the third chapter with a quotation from "a letter to his friend Robert Murray, SJ, in December 1953 containing Tolkien's famous comment: *The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision ... the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism" (1142) (p. 50). What is so beautiful is the seamless bonding of the many layers of truth — and how much richer for the believer without taking anything away from simple pleasure of the story in itself.

Caldecott points out that "Tolkien saw in the Christian revelation the meeting and fusing of legend and history, and in the Body of Christ the restored bridge from this world to the other. He persuaded C.S. Lewis of this (though Chesterton's *Everlasting Man* was already an influence) during a walk in the grounds of Magdalen College, celebrated in Tolkien's long poem *Mythopoeia*.... Myths of a dying god resurrected, or fairy-tales of healing and of virtue vindicated, exist because we cannot help seeking what we were made to find. Nature was made for grace. Our hearts spoke true, and in Jesus Christ the Author of the world has once and for all vindicated those fleeting glimpses of 'Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief, which art affords us ... with the posthumous publication in 1981 of his letters, this side of his life was exposed to view, and it became clear the Catholic belief and sensibility he received from his mother and later from his guardian, Father Morgan, whom he called a 'second father,' permeated every aspect of his life." (p. 51)

**ONE** would expect no less from an earnest Chestertonian; Caldecott pursues his search with unflagging enthusiasm and a perseverant confidence in hope

and light, tempered with a well-read knowledge and a gracious awareness of less confident viewpoints. He does not pretend to supplant the standard biographies and studies to which he frequently refers, but simply reinforces much of the common knowledge with his faith-full perspective. “Tolkien thus stands with the rest of the Inklings and those who believe that Christianity does not abolish mythopoeia or poetic knowledge, but makes possible a new era of ‘baptised mythology,’ mythology that is no longer religion but ‘fairy-tale,’ an indispensable poetic evocation of a great mystery that is still unfolding within the world. ‘Art has been verified. God is the Lord, of angels, and of men — and of elves. Legend and history have met and fused.’ Christ may have come, but ‘the end is not yet’. When it does come, even then there will be no end to the making of stories and of music” (p. 115).

Deep within Mordor, looking up at the sky, ‘Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.

**IT** is the glimpse of high Elvish beauty that inspires heroism, whether in the Third Age or this, the Seventh Age of the Sun” (p. 118).