

spiritual life

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194 Letters to the Editor**195 Your Servant Is Listening**

By William R. Matthews, Ph.D.

**200 The Body in Spiritual Practice:
A New Asceticism**

By James A. Wiseman, OSB

**216 What It Means to Me
To Be a Carmelite**

By Robin Stratton, OCD

222 Spirituality of the Eucharist

By Dominick D. Hankle

232 Lovely, Dark and Deep

By Ken Giovanelli

241 Book & Media Reviews**250 Book Notices****253 Back Issues of *spiritual life*****254 Index to Volume 47 (2001)****256 Editorial**

Our cover photo: *The majesty of this snow-covered mountain in Glacier National Park, reflected in the lake below, invites us to praise our God who is present in all of creation. (Cleo Photography)*

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Letters to the Editor

I just wanted to let you know that I deeply appreciate the hard work you put into making *Spiritual Life* magazine a huge success. May God's love and peace be with you.
J.C., Arizona

I was especially heartened by the Summer 2001 editorial, the article by Ellen J. McFall on Existentialism, and the coverage by Kevin Culligan, Keith Egan, and Lawrence Cunningham on the novel *Lying Awake*. You are certainly publishing some helpful material [for] the spiritual life.

T.F., New York

I recall having sent you a letter suggesting, among other things, that you include more about St. Teresa of Avila. Whether or not my suggestion had anything to do with it, I am glad to see this recent issue (Summer 2001) has an article of great interest involving her life and ministry. The intellectual challenges posed by the other articles are good, as well. I am copying the article by Ellen McFall for a friend....
R.H., New York

We welcome your comments. Please send them to The Editor, spiritual life, 2131 Lincoln Rd., NE, Washington, DC 20002, or e-mail to: editor@spiritual-life.org.

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William R. Matthews, Ph.D.

Your Servant Is Listening

MY WIFE, IRENE, AND I ARE BLESSED with two hard-of-hearing grandsons. Chris and Nick are brilliant boys with eyes as bright as the Christmas star, compensating for what they cannot sense with the powerful use of what they can. “None so blind as those who will not see,” says Jesus. “None so deaf as those who will not hear.” How much my grandsons teach me!

The Challenge to Listen

Last Lent our pastor challenged us to listen to the New Testament from Matthew’s “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah,” to Revelation’s “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.” Although he suggested tapes, Irene and I decided to read to each other eight pages of text a day from my larger print version of the NRSV.

As the forty-day task progressed—her soft voice, my teacherly tones—I confess I heard little. My ears were blocked with personal concerns that shouted down my own religious story and the stories being read to me. Hearing is a metaphor for the gift of all our senses. Seeing, feeling, tasting, and smelling are also gateways to God’s creation and thus to God himself. Failure to use them blocks access to his love.

William R. Matthews

A wise human being once said, “If every time we met someone we gave him our full and complete attention for four minutes, come hell or high water, it could change our lives.”¹ Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote something similar: “It is the province of knowledge to speak and it is the privilege of wisdom to listen.”² Thomas Banville asserts in *How to Listen—How To Be Heard*,

The most interesting people I know are those who do the least talking, the ones who let *me* talk. They’re also the most comfortable to be with because they allow me to *be*.³

Something in the human animal requires, for fullness and maturity, the skill to listen to others. Without hearing, we would be unaware of the dangers lurking outside the flicker of the night fire. Others before us have confronted life’s terrors. Listening and heeding enable us to avoid these terrors. But insistent that we see for ourselves, we frequently ignore such warnings. How frustrating it was for the biblical prophets not to be heard. Banville claims,

Listening isn’t a passive thing; it’s work. I don’t know of any harder mental labor than listening to the words uttered by another for the feelings they reveal—or conceal. But if you care, it’s a labor of love.⁴

Listening for God

All listening is hearing God, in whatever language he chooses to speak to us: bible or sermon, nature, spiritual reading or prayer, or experience. We especially meet God in the language of other people: wives and husbands, friends, children, and the people we pass in the street. We discover God through his presence in others. The right use of my ears is sacred. If I remain deaf to the music of life, I shut myself out from who and whose I am. “Just be quiet, please,” a voice reminds me, “I, God, am trying to tell you something.”

In our egotistic age, we have turned conversation with God into something inward and individual. God no longer exists for us out there among the stars. He is, we claim, if anywhere, inside us. Thus we scratch around in our own hearts and minds to find the evidence for his presence. I have no quarrel with those who seek to listen to the still small voice within. I struggle to hear it myself, almost never

Your Servant Is Listening

with any success. The self-generated noise of my own affairs drowns it out. Ninety-four-year-old Roy, who sits beside me in church every Sunday, complains the organ roar overwhelms his limited hearing, making his hearing aids scream. But almost hourly, I blare out my own organ roars—a cacophony that muffles God’s voice even if he should speak again with thunder.

I dare not assert that my “I” is a temple worthy to house all love, power, and wisdom. As a human being, I am painfully aware of my own insufficiency when it comes to God and my relationship to him. We are all beggars, was how Martin Luther put it on his death bed. If I seek for God’s voice only within, what a limited God I am doomed to hear. I need to go outside myself and listen to the voice of his creation: in the whisper of snow on the window, in the bee fumbling in the flower, in the laughter of children, and in the funeral homily.

*All the events of my
life somehow bear
God’s word to me*

The great English Romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, responded to the song of the skylark this way:

Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow
The world should listen then
—as I am listening now.

Listening to the other—skylark, human, wind, flower, or tree—can be a profoundly devotional experience. Thomas Hart, in *The Art of Christian Listening*, writes,

For all the events of my life somehow bear God’s word to me, and to mull them in search of their significance in him is to listen and respond to his word in as true a sense as to reflect on a passage of scripture.⁵

He continues, “Is this not too because there is a kind of pervasive sacramentality in the world which bears God to us, so that when we touch the depths of any experience we touch him?”⁶ Christian love

William R. Matthews

means opening oneself to others, accepting others, and giving the loving gift of my listening. Banville says, “Being listened to is such a rare experience that *any* indication of being heard will literally turn the speaker onto the listener.”⁷ I suspect this is how God may feel as he agonizes over the deafness of his human creation.

Listening to All

All these other beings struggling along the trail with us—fellow seekers and sufferers—have a story and can add a unique facet to our stories. But we must listen to and expect to hear the voice of God speaking through them. In this way all men and women are priests and can minister, bringing the word to others. The child with the hurt knee, the schoolgirl reveling in the “A” she received, the football player who has scored a touchdown or executed a fine block, the essayist who writes as well as he can—all of these are God speaking through the lips of his beloved, you and me.

Open ears require a surrender of ourselves for the benefit of other human beings, a sacrifice in love for others. Such intense listening

Jesus is God's speech

makes life full and complete. One who listens gives up self-interest for the interest of others. It requires more than attention to the sounds of another's language; it means joining the other emotionally and physically.

One who listens intently understands that, in the communication of one's innermost being to another, all we are is the language of bodily stance, gesture, facial expression, tone of voice, inward emotion, and feeling.

Jesus is God's speech, telling us who God is. Listening is the greatest gift of love one can give because it assumes the overwhelming worth of the speaker. The word comes from a spouse, a little child, a forsaken enemy, a pastor, or from heaven above. Most of us are blessed with hearing—another of God's superlative gifts. To be God's, to be other people's, and to be mine requires that I try in some way to hear.

“This is my beloved son. Listen to him.”

Your Servant Is Listening

William Matthews, Ph.D., lives in Harrisonburg, VA, and is Professor Emeritus from Augustana College in Sioux Falls, SD, having spent forty years as a teacher and academic dean in various schools. Currently he writes full-time and has been published in leading Christian journals.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Thomas G. Banville, *How to Listen—How To Be Heard* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1978) p. 18.
2. *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Third Edition (New York, Oxford, 1980).
3. Banville, p. 140.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
5. Thomas Hart, *The Art of Christian Listening* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980) p. 59
6. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
7. Banville, p. 189.

James A. Wiseman, OSB

The Body in Spiritual Practice: A New Asceticism

THE TOPIC OF THE BODY IN SPIRITUAL PRACTICE is vast. I must, therefore, circumscribe my treatment and choose to treat it in two principal ways. First, while not completely ignoring insights from other religious traditions, I will focus on the one I know best—Catholic Christianity. Second, I will deal mainly with three particular points within this tradition: (1) the understanding of the body as such, (2) the role of the body in prayer and meditation, and (3) the body in the context of marriage. In all three cases, I will discuss past attitudes and will then describe how these attitudes have changed in recent or, in some cases, not-so-recent times.

Clarifying Terms

Before turning to these specific points, I should say something about a couple of terms in the title of my article. “Spiritual” is a word that has long been suspect in many circles, insofar as it was understood to imply a severely otherworldly, anti-corporeal approach to life on earth. Scholars working today in the field of spirituality—itsself a relative newcomer among the various academic disciplines—

The Body in Spiritual Practice: A New Asceticism

have labored mightily to avoid that connotation. Christian writers have done this mainly by seeing spirituality as related to living under the guidance of the divine spirit, the Holy Spirit.

Scripture scholars point out that when St. Paul in his various letters contrasts “the spiritual person” with one who is “carnal” or “fleshly,” the distinction is not between the corporeal and incorporeal but rather between those whose whole being and life are ordered or influenced by the Spirit of God and those whose attitudes and behavior are opposed to God’s Spirit. In this article about “the body in spiritual practice,” I am therefore not attempting to forge some union between two realities that are diametrically opposed (“body” and “spirit”) but am trying to show how a proper use and understanding of the body is in fact an integral part of a genuinely spiritual or Spirit-filled life.

Another term from my title that deserves some comment is “asceticism.” This comes from a Greek verb *askein*, which could be translated “to train, to exercise, to strive.” The verb appears in the Acts of Apostles where St. Luke describes St. Paul’s words to the governor Felix when the Apostle was on trial in Caesarea. Paul says at one point, “I always strive (*asko*) to keep my conscience clear before God and man” (Acts 24:16). The same notion, though using different Greek words, appears elsewhere in the Pauline writings. In First Corinthians, for example, Paul famously contrasts the training done by athletes with the kind of training that he practices.

Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. Thus I do not run aimlessly; I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. No, I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified. (1 Cor 9:25–27)

If the term “spirituality” has often had negative connotations, the same could be said of “asceticism.” For example, Huston Smith, in his widely read book on the world’s religions, describes the way the future Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama, went about seeking enlightenment once he left his father’s palace. Noting that at one point the young prince deprived his body of food almost to the point of death by starvation, Smith comments, “This experience taught Gautama

James A. Wiseman

the futility of asceticism and inspired what was to become the first constructive plank of his program: the principle of The Middle Way between the extremes of asceticism and indulgence.”¹ Contrary to what Smith’s wording implies, in fact asceticism need not be extreme. Professor Walter Kaelber provides a more acceptable meaning of asceticism when he defines it as “a voluntary and somewhat systematic program of self-discipline in which immediate gratifications are renounced in order to attain a higher spiritual state or a more thorough absorption in the sacred.”²

Even if self-discipline is not a particularly popular topic these days, if we’re honest we’ll surely admit that it is necessary—whether one is a runner preparing for the Boston Marathon, a student getting ready for comprehensive exams, or any one of us trying to live according to some particular religious or secular ideal. One of the main purposes of my article is to consider how the understanding of this kind of self-discipline in Catholic Christianity today differs from that of previous eras, especially as regards bodily discipline.

Christian Understandings of the Body

Let us turn then to the first major part of my presentation—the way the human body has been understood within my own religious tradition. In the Gospels, the body (*soma* in Greek) is not a concept of primary importance. When mentioned at all, it is sometimes distinguished from the soul, as when Jesus says, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna” (Mt 10:28). There is nothing especially derogatory about the body in such a saying, though there is clearly a certain subordination of body to soul in terms of importance. In St. Paul’s letters, the body is by no means seen as something evil. Indeed, for Paul, *soma* is often spoken of as being exceedingly precious, as when he writes,

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you...and that you are not your own? For you have been purchased at a price. Therefore glorify God in your body. (1 Cor 6:19–20)

The Body in Spiritual Practice: A New Asceticism

Nevertheless, there are also some Pauline passages that are less positive because he regrets that bodily life here on earth inevitably prevents his being fully present with the Lord. Paul accordingly writes to the Corinthians:

We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yet we are courageous, and we would rather leave the body and go home to the Lord. (2 Cor 5:6–8)

Negative Perspectives

This ambivalence about the body—its being a temple of the Holy Spirit on the one hand but an obstacle to full union with Christ on the other—has been present in the Christian tradition down the centuries. At times, however, the negative aspect became far more accentuated than it ever was in St. Paul's letters. This evolution, or better, this "devolution," was in large measure due to influence by certain strands of Greek philosophy on Christian writers.

Although it would be grossly unfair to portray Plato as unambiguously anti-corporeal and although the major Christian authors who respected his thought did not appropriate it in an uncritical way, certain passages from Plato's own works and from those of some of his disciples did influence the Christian understanding of the body. The so-called Platonic dualism between soul and body is especially evident in certain parts of the dialogue known as the *Phaedo*, as when Plato has Socrates say,

So long as we keep to the body and our soul is contaminated with this imperfection, there is no chance of our ever attaining satisfactorily to our object, which we assert to be truth.... It seems that so long as we are alive, we shall continue closest to knowledge if we avoid as much as we can all contact and association with the body, except when they are absolutely necessary, and instead of allowing ourselves to become infected with its nature, purify ourselves from it until God himself gives us deliverance. (*Phaedo* 66b–67a)

Philo of Alexandria, the Jewish philosopher who lived at the time of Christ and had considerable influence on later Christian writers like Origen and Clement of Alexandria, took up this Platonic strain.

James A. Wiseman

Like St. Paul, he too used the imagery of the athlete, but in a way that was more denigrating toward the body. He writes,

The athlete refers all to the good health of the body, and, body-lover that he is, would abandon the soul itself for its sake; but the philosopher...cares for the soul and disregards that which is in reality a corpse, the body, with the sole aim that the best part of him, his soul, may not be wronged by an evil thing, the cadaver to which it is bound. (*Allegories of the Laws* 3.72)

Under this kind of influence from Hellenic thought, it is not surprising that Clement of Alexandria, who died early in the third century, should have taught that the Savior, Jesus Christ, did not have a human body just like our own but rather a heavenly one that was free of all bodily needs and passions. For Clement, even the advanced followers of Christ, those whom he called the genuine Gnostics, did not experience such passions as anger, fear, or lust but underwent merely those “affections that exist for the maintenance of the body, such as hunger, thirst, and the like.” And Christ, he taught, did not undergo even these affections. Clement writes,

In the case of the Savior, it would be ludicrous [to suppose] that the body, as a body, demanded the necessary aids for its duration. For He ate not for the sake of the body, which was kept together by a holy energy, but in order that it might not enter into the minds of those who were with Him to entertain a different opinion of Him.... But He was entirely impassible (*apathes*), inaccessible to any movement of feeling—either pleasure or pain. (*Stromata*, ch. 9)

About forty years after Clement died, and further south in the same land of Egypt, was born a man who, though unlettered, became even more influential than Clement. Anthony of the Desert, generally reckoned as the founder of the Christian monastic movement, undertook the life of a desert solitary after consulting with a number of ascetics who lived on the outskirts of villages near the Nile River. After spending several decades in quite complete seclusion, he emerged at the urging of others and quickly attracted a fervent band of disciples. The *Life of Anthony*, written by his friend St. Athanasius after the hermit’s death, became one of the earliest best-sellers in Christian literature.

The Body in Spiritual Practice: A New Asceticism

Much of Athanasius's portrayal of Anthony is endearing. He tells us that if someone who had never met the man wanted to locate him in a crowd of monks, he had only to spot the person whose face was radiant with joy. Despite an austere lifestyle, Anthony is said to have lived to the remarkably advanced age of a hundred and five and to have been so healthy at the time of his death as still to have all his teeth. Clearly this saint's asceticism—his fastings and nighttime vigils—did not in any sense produce a lugubrious, emaciated specter but rather a vibrant person full of joy in the Holy Spirit. From our contemporary perspective, however, there are also darker sides to what Athanasius writes. At one point he says,

When [Anthony] was about to eat and sleep and provide for the other needs of the body, shame overcame him as he thought of the spiritual nature of the soul. Often when about to partake of food with many other monks, the thought of spiritual food came upon him and he would beg to be excused and went a long way from them, thinking that he should be ashamed to be seen eating by others. (*Life of Anthony*, ch. 45)

Two chapters later, Athanasius writes that Anthony never bathed and that no one ever saw him undressed, nor did anyone ever look upon his naked body until he died and was buried.

Nine centuries later, the saint whom many consider the most Christlike of all—Francis of Assisi—was similarly ambivalent about caring for his body, though with effects much more deleterious to his health. In Thomas of Celano's *Second Life* of the saint, there is a striking account of an exchange that Francis had with an unnamed friar. Francis was now near the end of his life, broken in body largely as a result of the severity of the mortifications he had practiced for so many years.

Thomas says that on this occasion, when it seemed proper to the brothers to apply some soothing remedies to the saint's body, Francis first sought counsel of this one friar, expressing the fear that by accepting the treatment he would be indulging his body too much. The wise brother, after calling the saint's attention to the fact that his body had served him faithfully for so many years, then asked, "Where then, Father, is your generosity, where are your kindness

James A. Wiseman

and discretion? Is this a worthy way to repay a faithful friend—to accept a kindness willingly, but when the giver is in need not to repay him as he deserves?” After some further conversation along these lines, Francis came to agree and addressed his body with these words: “Rejoice, brother body, and forgive me, for, behold, I now gladly fulfill your desires; I hasten to give heed to your complaints.” Thomas of Celano adds, however, that Francis’s change of heart had come too late. His body had already collapsed in every part, and death came shortly thereafter (*Second Life of St. Francis*, ch. 160).

One further aspect of a negative understanding of the body in the Christian tradition concerns what St. Benedict refers to in chapter eight of his monastic Rule where he says that between the two early-morning services of Vigils and Lauds there should be a short inter-

*One is obliged
to regard one’s
body as good
and to hold it
in honor*

val “during which the brothers may go out [from the oratory] for the needs of nature.” The functions of bodily excretion have often been considered altogether unseemly within the Christian tradition. One of the later reform movements within Benedictine monasticism was the seventeenth-century Trappist reform. Although, contrary to popular belief, Trappist monks never took a vow of silence. They did practice silence in a very strict way so that, until quite re-

cently, they regularly used sign language except when they had to converse with either their abbot or their confessor. There was, of course, a sign for “bathroom” (or “toilet”), a compound sign—it means “shame-house.”

Positive Perspectives

To most of us, I think, that is a sad commentary on what the body and bodily functions have often signified within my tradition. Let me, however, turn now to show the other side of the coin, for which I am happily not limited to recent works only. Among the really wonderful women writers in the history of Christian spirituality was the fourteenth-century English anchoress Julian of Norwich. Her so-called *Showings* (or *Revelations*) were quite appropriately the very

The Body in Spiritual Practice: A New Asceticism

first volume published in that eminently successful and still ongoing series of “Classics of Western Spirituality” from Paulist Press. In the sixth chapter of the so-called “Long Text” of her work, there is the following passage:

The highest form of prayer is to the goodness of God, which comes down to us to our humblest needs. It gives life to our souls and makes them live and grow in grace and virtue. It is nearest in nature and promptest in grace, for it is the same grace which the soul seeks and always will, until we truly know our God, who has enclosed us all in himself.

A man walks upright, and the food in his body is shut in as if in a well-made purse. When the time of his necessity comes, the purse is opened and then shut again, in most seemly fashion. And it is God who does this, as it is shown when he says that he comes down to us in our humblest needs. For he does not despise what he has made, nor does he disdain to serve us in the simplest natural functions of our bodies.... For as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skin, and the bones in the flesh, and the heart in the trunk, so are we, soul and body, clad and enclosed in the goodness of God.

The editor of one modern translation of Julian’s Middle English text notes that this passage, “earthy yet discreet,” does not appear in one of the two extant manuscript versions of the “Long Text,”³ but it is very likely that Julian herself did write it and that it was omitted from one manuscript only by a squeamish copyist, for it does bridge the sense from the previous paragraph in a way that is typical of Julian.

In so writing, Julian anticipated by six centuries the positive appreciation of the body that came to expression in one of the most important documents of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Its very first chapter, on the dignity of the human person, says the following about our essential nature:

The human person, though made of body and soul, is a unity. Through one’s very bodily condition one sums up in oneself the elements of the material world, which are thus brought to their highest perfection and can raise their voice in praise freely given to the Creator. For this reason, one may not despise one’s bodily

James A. Wiseman

life. Rather one is obliged to regard one's body as good and to hold it in honor, since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day. (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 14; translation slightly modified for inclusive language)

Rather than quote from other recent ecclesiastical documents to bolster this point—though this could easily be done with texts from Pope John Paul II—let me instead recount something from the life of someone I know. There lives in Washington, D.C., an elderly woman to whom I regularly bring the consecrated bread of the Holy Eucharist since she is now very frail and largely housebound. Although her apartment is not too near my abbey, it is actually a privilege to visit her, for I have never met anyone who receives the Eucharist with such deep devotion. I usually stay for a while afterward to talk with her and recently asked her how she had come to live in this country. She is Austrian by birth and lived in Vienna until shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, when she came to the United States. She told me that at the end of the war she planned to return to her native land but was persuaded by an acquaintance to remain in our

A new asceticism, one that cares for the body as a precious gift from God

country and help care for a small group of American soldiers who were amputees, some of them without a leg or an arm, several actually missing both arms. Though not a professional nurse, she gave herself wholeheartedly to this

charge and even, at her own expense, eventually visited the families of seven of these men in different parts of the country.

As one can well imagine, these amputees needed all manner of assistance, not only with feeding but also with urination and defecation, but in the latter instances they were reluctant to accept the help of this woman who was then in her midthirties. To meet this dilemma, she first told them, "There's no need to be embarrassed. This is just our bodily nature." But when it turned out that her words alone did not suffice, she told me, "Well, I decided to sit down on the

The Body in Spiritual Practice: A New Asceticism

toilet in their presence and urinate, and after that they willingly accepted my help.” When she told me that, I could not but think of her as a modern-day Julian, exemplifying in her very behavior the truth of that English mystic’s teaching that God does not despise anything he has made and that all that we are, soul and body, is “clad and enclosed in the goodness of God.” In people like this, as well as in official Church documents like *Gaudium et Spes*, we can see a marked change from some of the attitudes found in Athanasius’s *Life of Anthony* and in the Trappist sign language.

In a lengthier article, I could also say a lot about various kinds of self-discipline called for in properly caring for the body: avoiding overeating (especially in light of recent findings about the high percentage of Americans who are unhealthily overweight), going easy on junk food, and making sure that one gets enough sleep. Cornell University psychologist and sleep expert James Maas recently said that more than half of the population of the United States is carrying a substantial sleep debt. This is prevalent among adolescents and young adults, who are the age group involved in most fall-asleep automobile crashes.

Maas believes that for most people eight hours is the minimum amount of sleep needed per night, the period between the seventh and eighth hour being especially important as the time when, in his words, the mind best “repairs itself, grows new connections, and puts it all together” (from an article in the *CUA Tower*, 19 January 2001, taken from U-Wire Reports). The traditional motto of Jesuit education, *mens sana in corpore sano* (a sound mind in a sound body), in many ways encapsulates what I am calling “a new asceticism”—one that cares for the body as a precious gift from God instead of neglecting it or stifling its development through imprudent mortifications.

The Role of the Body in Prayer and Meditation

I trust that even the little I have said thus far has been enough to indicate that genuine spirituality is concerned with much more than the devotional practices of prayer and meditation, even though there may have been a time when spirituality was practically equated

James A. Wiseman

with such exercises. But if prayer is not the whole of spiritual living, it is an important part of it, and here too one may rightly speak of “a new asceticism,” though once again we have some ancient antecedents.

Some readers are probably familiar with a number of books about prayer written in the early or middle part of the twentieth century. One, by Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro, archbishop of Bologna, was published under the title *Metodi di Orazione Mentale* and so translated into English as *Methods of Mental Prayer*. Several Trappist abbots published books with similar titles: Dom Vital Lehodey’s *The Ways of Mental Prayer* and Dom Godefroid B elorgey’s *The Practice of Mental Prayer*. Note that the very term “mental prayer” conveys a sense that there is no particular role for the body in one’s practice of prayer. Indeed, the last-named author, in line with a long tradition, defined prayer as “an elevation of the soul to God” and began his book with the following words:

Prayer is a divine colloquy arising from the intimate spiritual relationships which exist in faith and in charity between God and the soul. It depends upon God and the soul. The soul must use its intellect and will to know God, to love him, and to converse supernaturally with Him. But it can only do this when...it is moved and aided by divine grace.... For true prayer, both God and the soul must play their parts in harmony and union.⁴

To be sure, there is nothing in this or similar books that express positive disdain for the body, but the overall neglect of any reference to the body is telling, giving the impression that the prayerful person at his or her best is more an angel than a human being. Some early ascetics even claimed explicitly to be trying to live an angelic life on earth.

Nowadays, the very language used by writers on prayer tends to be quite different. The term “mental prayer” is generally avoided, and those contemporary writers who do look to the past for insights and inspiration pass over authors like Lehodey and B elorgey in favor of much older writers like Gregory Palamas, the fourteenth-century defender of the Eastern Orthodox monks of Mount Athos against their critics. Gregory’s own sources were monks like Nicephorus the Hesychast and Gregory of Sinai, many of whose writings are now

The Body in Spiritual Practice: A New Asceticism

available in books with such titles as *Writings from the Philokalia on Prayer of the Heart*. In our own time, Bishop Kallistos Ware and other Eastern Orthodox writers have emphasized the intimate role of the body in this kind of prayer, whose method has three main features:

(1) A particular bodily posture is adopted: [one is] seated, with the head and shoulders bowed, and the gaze directed toward the place of the heart or the navel. (2) The speed of the breathing is slowed down, and the words of the Jesus Prayer ["Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me"] are coordinated with the inhalation and exhalation of the breath.... (3) Through a discipline of "inner exploration," attention is concentrated upon specific psychosomatic centers,...especially the heart.⁵

The widespread practice of this form of prayer today, not at all confined to the borders of Eastern Orthodoxy, is an indication that persons are more apt to adopt a way of praying that has a recognized role for the body as over against methods that come across as too severely mental.

Bishop Ware and others have noted that this "prayer of the heart" shows striking similarities with certain techniques used in yoga, though it would be difficult to find proof of direct influence. One recent book that discusses both ways is entitled *Prayer of Heart and Body*, by the Paulist priest Thomas Ryan. After giving a clear introduction to the practice of the prayer of the heart in part one of his book, Fr. Ryan turns in parts two and three to a consideration of ways in which one could use yoga to foster what he terms "prayer of the body." There is no space to summarize these parts of his book, which include illustrations of some basic yogic *asanas* (postures) that one could correlate with the prayerful recitation of a traditional text like the Lord's Prayer. I certainly don't want to imply that yogic techniques are at all necessary for a deep prayer life. Nevertheless, I do think it is worth hearing some words of a health-care worker whom Fr. Ryan quotes in the chapter entitled "How Yoga Can Help a Christian Pray." This woman said,

For me, yoga and prayer are inextricably linked. When I perform the various asanas, I am praying with my body. These series of physical exercises help me to achieve a sense of stillness and

James A. Wiseman

peace in which prayer becomes easier and the nagging worries of the day seem less urgent.... At the end of many yoga classes I have been overcome with a profound sense of awe, gratitude and adoration. The transcendent God seems somehow closer.

She then goes on to provide a word of caution:

It is precisely because yoga is a spiritual practice that I have always taken seriously those Christian leaders who warn of its dangers. Yoga is a technique that can help prayer, but Christian prayer is never merely a technique to achieve a state of transcendence.... Although grace is a gift that no method can manufacture, I feel that yoga disposes me to pray more tranquilly and to be open to whatever gifts God may wish to give.⁶

This, I believe, is very balanced and sound advice that can help us appreciate something of the value this woman has found in the practice of yoga, especially how it helps her “pray with her body.”

The Body in the Context of Marriage

Fully aware that I can only scratch the surface of any of the topics that I am treating, let me finally consider the place of the body in the context of marriage. That the body is central in marriage goes without saying; that this centrality has often been very problematic in the Christian tradition is little short of tragic. Marriage itself was long regarded as objectively inferior to celibacy, a position based on such scriptural texts as Jesus’ praise of those “who have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 19:12) and St. Paul’s clear preference for celibacy on the grounds that married persons are anxious about “the things of the world”—how they may please their spouses—and so are “divided,” while the unmarried need be anxious only “about the things of the Lord” and so “may be holy in both body and spirit” (1 Cor 7:32–34).

Certainly there is not the slightest hint in such passages that marriage is evil, and in fact the early and medieval Church strove mightily against heretical movements that claimed it was. Nevertheless, in theologians like St. Augustine there did develop views about marriage that are quite removed from the Church’s teaching today. I am by no means an Augustine basher. I consider

The Body in Spiritual Practice: A New Asceticism

his *Confessions* one of the most impressive books I have ever read. Even his treatment of sexuality and marriage has been interpreted rather sympathetically precisely by some leading women scholars of our day, such as Mary T. Clark and Margaret Miles.⁷ But I am surely not alone in cringing at those passages in his voluminous work in which sexual intercourse, the most intimate communion possible between husband and wife, is said to be inescapably sinful, excusable only with a view to a desired outcome of progeny. In one of his sermons he writes,

My brethren, understand the sense of Scripture concerning our ancient fathers, whose sole design in their marriage was to have children by their wives.... Whoever exceeds the limits which this rule prescribes for the fulfillment of this end of marriage acts contrary to the very contract by which he took his wife. The contract is read in the presence of all the attesting witnesses, and an express clause is there that they marry “for the procreation of children,” and this is called the marriage contract. If it was not for this that wives were given and taken to wife, what father could without blushing give up his daughter to the lust of any man?... Nevertheless, if [the couple] cannot restrain themselves, let them require what is due, and let them not go to any others than those from whom it is due.... If they exceed the bounds of the marriage contract, let them at least not exceed those of conjugal fidelity. Is it not a sin in married persons to exact from one another more than what this design of the “procreation of children” renders necessary? It is doubtless a sin, though a venial one. (Sermon 51 in the Maurist edition, sec. 22)

Or again, in his *Soliloquies*, when Augustine presents himself as being in conversation with Reason personified, there is this exchange: Reason asks, “What about a wife? Would you not be delighted by a fair, modest, and obedient wife...?” Augustine replies,

No matter how much you choose to portray and endow her with all good qualities, I have decided that there is nothing I should avoid so much as marriage. I know nothing which brings the manly mind down from the heights more than a woman’s caresses and that joining of bodies without which one cannot have a wife. (*Soliloquies*, bk. 1, ch. 10)

When one considers that probably no writer apart from St. Paul has had more influence in the Christian West than Augustine, one can

James A. Wiseman

readily see what obstacles lay in the way of those who have sought to develop a more positive understanding of what Augustine calls “that joining of bodies without which one cannot have a wife.”

The change has, nevertheless, come about, not least because of the way some husbands and wives have honestly described how sexual intercourse has in fact fostered their love for one another and for God. As one fine example of what I mean, consider the following words of Joseph and Lois Bird:

Prayer is the directing of one’s thoughts and actions toward God;... If we think of conjugal prayer in these terms, we should have little difficulty recognizing the marital union as a profound prayer. In turning to each other in sexual love, the couple turn toward God. Their act of love becomes a profession of faith, and of hope, as they give themselves in cooperation with [God’s] plan.

[Nevertheless,] recognizing on an intellectual level the holiness of the marital union and *experiencing* spirituality in the conjugal act are not the same thing. Most Christian couples, we feel sure, would agree that marital relations are blessed by God, but few can say they experience a benediction in the act. Why? Probably, two reasons: First of all, marital sexuality is seldom presented as a spiritual encounter. As children, we learned only a negative view. Parents, in their concern with the dangers of sexual immorality, stressed *sin*, and little else.... But there is another, more important reason. Discovering the presence of Christ in the sexual union is a reward which is found not in a blinding flash of insight, but through gradual awareness, paralleling the growth of husband and wife toward the goal of mutual sanctity. It is the marriage, the total relationship, which must mature.... The *whole* marriage grows, or no growth takes place. Husband and wife come to *know* Christ, to *love* Him, and to *see* Him in their sexual union, as they strive to *know*, *love*, and *see* each other.⁸

The experience of married persons like the Birds challenges St. Paul’s words about spouses being “divided” because they are anxious about pleasing their spouse. The Apostle’s implication is that seeking to please one’s spouse distracts a person from the Pauline ideal of pleasing the Lord, of glorifying God in *all* that one does. Couples like the one just quoted simply do not experience that kind of disjunction. Loving each other in what is physically the most

The Body in Spiritual Practice: A New Asceticism

intimate way *includes* their loving God. This insight, which was once expressed in a more general way by the great theologian Karl Rahner in his reflections on the unity of the two great commandments of love of God and love of neighbor,⁹ is of particular importance for married persons. Indeed, it may be considered a privileged instance of that “new asceticism” that has been the overall theme of my reflections.

Conclusion

From the above reflections, we can see more clearly the positive nature of the body—our body—in general, in prayer, and in marriage. We can learn to respect our bodies as temples of the Spirit, as holy in the eyes of God.

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8. Joseph W. Bird and Lois F. Bird, *The Freedom of Sexual Love* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 149–51.
9. Karl Rahner, “Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969), pp. 231–49.

Robin Stratton, OCD

What It Means to Me to Be a Carmelite

During a community “Learning Festival,” four of us were asked to address the above topic. What follows is my reflection as it was addressed to my Carmelite sisters.

MY MOTHER DELIGHTED IN TELLING visitors that on my second Christmas, just before I was two, I was so excited over a pair of fuzzy slippers that my whole body shivered with delight. My passionate self expressed itself quite early on.

Early Religious Experiences

When I was eight, I had a gentle and wonderful experience of God. Though at the time I had no name for it, the experience has remained with me all my life. It occurred as I sat on the warm grass by a spring runlet in a little ravine across the street from our government housing project in Charlestown, Indiana. I was lost in a sense of wonder, oneness, and goodness that held me for I don’t know how long. My contemplative sense of life was established that day.

What It Means to Me to Be a Carmelite

The summer I was ten, I discovered personal prayer—not saying prayers but an undifferentiated experience of a loving relationship with the person of Jesus. I also had my first conscious desire of being a nun, which I assumed at that time would be a teaching sister.

During high school, I taught catechism and worked as a camp counselor with poor little kids from broken homes. Both of these experiences were formative. When I was sixteen, and first thinking about becoming a Carmelite, I had many desires. I wanted to be a teacher or a social worker or a missionary. I had great dreams of what I would do with my life. Although I don't really remember reading Thérèse at that time—but I may have—I distinctly remember realizing one day that prayer was the universal vocation, that through prayer I could reach the whole world.

Carmelite Vocation

My first understanding of religious life was that I could live my life as a spouse of Christ, and my first understanding of Carmel was to be a spouse of Christ and pray for the whole world. Sometime during novitiate, I discovered that my longing for motherhood could be fulfilled by living out Thérèse's words: "To be, by my union with you, the mother of many souls." Once, in a very dark time before my solemn profession, I received a letter from a friend who was also in formation, though about ten years my senior. She wrote, "You are not in Carmel for yourself. In fact, you are there less for yourself than for any of God's people." So, in Carmel, I am called to be "a mother and forget about myself."

In my early thirties, after I came to live among you and began to relate to people outside the monastery, the symbol of motherhood shifted to that of midwife. In prayer and relationships, my role was to assist the life already present in another and allow it to grow away from me. I left center stage and discovered that to be a Carmelite was all the things I have mentioned. It was, however, to be part of something so much larger than myself—like being a voice in a symphony chorus, blending with others who share this great mystical tradition we call Carmel.

Robin Stratton

To be a Carmelite is to be part of a community that cherishes the mystical tradition in the Church, a tradition that encourages intimacy and union with God as goals to be sought—as goals worthy of the human endeavor. As our sister St. Edith Stein prayed, “Please help me to be worthy of living at the heart of the Church’s holiness and to offer myself for those whose lot lies in the world.” Carmel gives full scope for my passionate being to yearn toward the All and

*To be a Carmelite
is to have a life-
long love affair
with God*

allows me to fail only because I have such infinite desires. To be a Carmelite is to have a lifelong love affair with God in silence, solitude, and community. It is to sing the praise of God—the Good God who remains Infinite Mystery even when encountered in the human face of Jesus. It is to share God, given and received, wherever I am and with who I

am. It is to seek the face of God all the days of my life and to invite others to such intimacy by the way I live, pray, worship, and relate.

Being a Carmelite means belonging to—or perhaps belonging with, in one of my sister’s favorite phrase of the moment—“a group of hermits.” It is to be invited and challenged to bring and offer my extroverted passionate self and my introverted passionate self—each held in tension with the other (and that itself is no small feat)—to God and to community, both local and extended.

Spousal Relationship

The great secret of my life—and I suspect it is no secret at all—is that I am still deeply and passionately in love with God, and I believe God is still deeply and passionately in love with me—but not only with me. God who is love is passionately in love with all creation, and my love affair is a sacrament of this universal love. Spousal theology, despite the bad rap it gets at the present time, remains at the heart of my life. For me to be spouse is not to be special—it is to be sign and sacrament. In the same way that our being contemplatives bears witness to the deep reality that all are called to attend to their own contemplative depths, so with spousal theology.

What It Means to Me to Be a Carmelite

We are each called to the most profound intimacy with God—an intimacy that alone can satisfy our infinite desires, an intimacy the mystics symbolize in the language of marriage. This image is inadequate, as are all images, but spouse is who I am at my core.

To be a Carmelite is to hear the cry at the heart of the world—the cry of yearning for God—and to suffer that cry in my own skin. It is to utter that cry with my whole being before the face of God in prayer. It is to be, as was said of the monk Caedmon, “a humble and joyful singer of songs.” To sing my life for God is to give God everything: “better and worse, richer and poorer, sickness and health.” It is to say, in the words of a doggerel verse I learned when I was very young, a verse that sometimes sings in my being even now,

Lord, I would give my life to Thee
Not solemnly, not grudgingly,
No, I would take my life and fling it at Thy feet
And sing and sing
That I could give Thee this small thing.

To be a Carmelite is to have been lured by God into the desert, into solitude, into community, and into the heart of the world. It is to say to God sometimes, in the words of Peter, “It is so good to be here;” and at others in the words of Jeremiah, “You duped me, Lord, and I let myself be duped.” It is to stand before the immensity of God, experienced as a pool of fire, and be commanded to leap in, knowing full well that the leaping will mean death to some cherished illusion. It is to sit in emptiness and sometimes know the breath of God so gently that it raises the hairs on the back of my neck. It is the rhythm of life and death, light and darkness, arctic cold and desert heat, spring blossoms and autumn decay. It is life in its fullness and emptiness, and being able to say through it all, in the depths of my being, “Be still, my soul, for all of this is but a vestige of God whom you cannot see, whom you desire.”

Community of Carmel—Past and Present

Being a Carmelite is living with each of you whom I love passionately. It is being part of a worldwide, centuries-old tradition that embraces communities who died together as did our sisters of

Robin Stratton

Compiègne; communities who let their sister go alone, as did Teresa Benedicta's; communities who lived with a Thérèse or an Elizabeth of the Trinity in their midst; as well as those who refused to expel a Fra Angelico, despite his paternity, and whose chronicler wrote in his necrology only that the monk was a great painter. Carmel is comprised of communities that are a microcosm of the world from which we come and in which we live—communities of men and women full of desire, both celestial and terrestrial.

To be a Carmelite is to live in the infinite mercy and goodness of God. It is to recognize that I live from mercy received to mercy given—mercy being another name for the compassionate love of God. It is to live in my flesh what I hope for everyone: to be free to *be* for God and God's dear people; to be free *for* God; and to give God a heart and skin in which to act freely. It is to love everything that is beautiful, true, and good—to be able to see everything in God and God in everything. And, it is to know in my own flesh and bone the sin of the world and to believe, as Paul Claudel wrote, that “in the deepest places of the soul festering with sin and evil, a sanctuary lamp still burns.”

To be a Carmelite means walking in the light of St. John of the Cross's invitation to the soul “to become God by participation.” It is living by St. Teresa's admonition, “The purpose of prayer, sisters, is good works, good works.” It is being “Love in the heart of the Church” with Thérèse and moving inexorably toward “Life and light and love” with Elizabeth. “It is walking with God among the pots and pans” and “frying my little omelet for the love of God” as did Brother Lawrence. To be a Carmelite is to experience abandonment, hatred, death, chaos, and loss of meaning as they are evidenced in the world's pain. To be a Carmelite is to become prayer.

Love for My Sisters

One night, when I was in the hospital, I told the infirmarian something I've known for a long time but have never said aloud (perhaps grave illness gives one the freedom to make such an utterance). I said, “I know I'm frail, I know my weaknesses sometimes hurt others,

What It Means to Me to Be a Carmelite

I know I'm not what I would wish to be, but I love the sisters passionately—with every fiber of my being—and I want to give myself to them even when I cannot do so." Even when my poverty, my selfishness, and my insecurity get in the way, I still know in my soul that giving myself to you is one very important facet of giving myself to Christ. It's part of the marriage pact. When my sinfulness gets in the way of my loving, your forgiveness enables me to go on; when I am able to be of service, I am full of joy.

I'm deeply grateful to have been asked to share with you, my sisters, what being a Carmelite means to me. I hope you know that you are the dearest people in my life. You are they who have stood with me in my temptations. You are the face of God in my daily life. Your love has nurtured me, challenged me, and grown with me. You risked accepting me, and I risked accepting each of you. You have walked with me, as I have walked with you, in dark and lightsome days. You bore with me as I grew up in this house. You gave me roots and wings. I came to you with great desires for God. You watered my desires and gave them space to flourish.

I've never gotten over the grace of God's having brought me to this house, and not a day goes by that I am not profoundly grateful for each of you. All my dreams have not been fulfilled. Some have died in the service of something greater. But my deepest desire—to be God's woman in this house of prayer—continues to be realized year after year. My life would not be half so rich were it not for each of you.

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Dominick D. Hankle

Spirituality of the Eucharist

HOW DO WE BEGIN TO DO JUSTICE to the subject of the Eucharist. Volumes are written about it. Over and over again, we hear the same themes. So much has been said, but it's still never enough. Yet because we can say no more, we repeat the same things. Much like the priest at Mass who continues to call out, "Pray for us" after each saint's name, those who have tried to describe the Eucharist begin to call out the same philosophies and ideas again and again. In this brief undertaking, I want to describe Eucharist from a spiritual perspective. This method looks at the breadth of discussion surrounding Eucharist instead of drilling down into any one particular theme.

Five Themes

I will look at five particular themes, each of them drawing out a unique spirituality but none of them being any better than the next. These themes are the Eucharist seen as mystery, the Eucharist seen as science, the Eucharist seen as poetry, the Eucharist as a call to mission, and the Eucharist as a mystery rediscovered. These are by no means an official categorization of the Eucharist but simply a means to wrap that which is unfathomable into a workable framework. Yet, we cannot consider too deeply or too lightly what is drawn

Spirituality of the Eucharist

from the contemplation of the meaning of Eucharist. In doing so, we too easily see only bread and wine or too academically describe Christ's presence in the elements. Eucharist is indeed both, but it is also something the soul experiences. One approaches the mystery of the Eucharist as if it were a gray mist of Easter morning in which two women approach the tomb of one they love. At first he is not there, yet, when they look deeper with the eyes of faith, they see a man dressed in white calling out their names. When we look for Christ in the Eucharist, we can't find him sometimes because we are too focused on the search. Only when we are surprised and jolted back into a state of inactivity, or receptiveness, can we see him there in the bread and wine. This article is simply an attempt to be like these two women in the Gospel—disciples looking to find Christ where we know he should be, yet where he is often overlooked.

The Eucharist as Mystery

We've often looked at mystery as something to be solved. This is also the case with the Eucharist. However, it was not always so. We find in the early Church that there was much being said about the Eucharist, but none of it was considered a uniform theology of the Church's understanding of what happens at the meal they celebrated week after week. Early Christians were deeply aware that a profound event was unwrapping itself before them during their Eucharistic celebrations, however they chose to focus on the experience of the mystery instead of trying to solve it. Gary Macy makes this point in his book *The Banquet's Wisdom* when he describes the ancient mind's disposition concerning this celebration:

The Eucharist is first and foremost a ritual meal, a sharing in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ by the community founded in his name. It is something one does, not something about which one talks. No more important statement can be made about the Lord's supper. It is a celebration, a way of life: a celebration of a way of life.¹

Macy goes on to comment that the first book written specifically on the Eucharist doesn't appear until the ninth century. The early Church was living the mystery. It was constantly allowing the

Dominick D. Hankle

mystery to unfold and did not feel the need to wrap too much verbiage around it. Eucharist, seen as a mystery, allowed a diversity to exist that, later in the Church's life, gets lost. Recognizing the Eucharist as a mystery allows for a creative spirituality that can draw a person closer and closer to the divine.

This type of spirituality calls us to look beyond what lies in front of us and moves us to a deeper experience of the Eucharist. It is the one thing about Eucharist that is always refreshing and revealing no matter how often we participate in it. It is the one thing that turns the Eucharist into an icon as opposed to an idol. Theresa Sanders wrote an article entitled "The Otherness of God and the Bodies of Others" in which she quotes a theologian named Jean-Luc Marion. Marion describes the difference between an idol and an icon:

The difference between icon and idol lies in their relations to the human gaze. The gaze strains itself to the divine. When the gaze finds a landing place, when it ceases to overshoot and transpierce itself, an idol is created.²

For us to come to this understanding of the Eucharist, we must recognize the mystery in the sacrament. Knowing the mystery is there for us to immerse ourselves in keeps us from focusing on the static elements and pushes us to encounter the divine. This is one aspect of Eucharist that must be maintained to keep the transformative element of the Eucharist alive and active in our lives.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux understood mystery as it pertains to the Eucharist. In her book *The Story of a Soul*, she begins to tell the story of her first Holy Communion. At a certain point she chooses to stop describing it. She gives such great detail describing what it meant to receive Christ in the sacrament, how she received instruction, etc., and then she simply stops. Her reason for stopping captures this whole idea of what it means to celebrate Eucharist as mystery. St. Thérèse gives the following reason for ceasing to use words to describe her experience:

But I'm not going to give every detail. Some things lose their fragrance when opened to the air, and there are stirrings of the soul which cannot be put into words without destroying their delicacy.³

Spirituality of the Eucharist

This woman, known as “The Little Flower,” captures so simply what it means to experience Eucharist as mystery. No words can capture it. As soon as we use words to describe it, we automatically give up some of its beauty. When we focus our gaze on the action itself, it becomes an idol that is simply set up for worship instead of an icon to connect us with the divine.

The Eucharist as Science

Lest we fall too far in love with mystery, let us not forget that Eucharist has a scientific flavor surrounding it. If we dwell too exclusively on the mystery that surrounds Eucharist, we fall into the trap of overspiritualizing the sacrament. Although Eucharist has its mysterious elements, we cannot forget that it is also a physical thing of which we partake by eating and drinking. If we overlook the physical aspects of this sacrament, we end up with a theology that looks like Zwingli’s—a reformer who saw in the Eucharist only a spiritual communion in which the elements of the sacrament undergo no change. This is not what we profess to believe as Catholic Christians. For us there is a definite change, and we no longer receive simply bread and wine.

*Thérèse of Lisieux
understood mystery
as it pertains to the
eucharist*

A discussion concerning the scientific element of the Eucharist at some point must focus on St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Thomas has given us the word “transubstantiation.” It is during this time that people began to use their intellect to grasp the mysteries of the Church. The questions concerning the Eucharist become the “what happens” and the “how” that make us approach the sacrament in a scientific way. This is not bad but simply another element in understanding Eucharist. Its greatest contribution is not allowing us to look at the Eucharist as simply a mental and spiritual event, but rather anchors us again in the physical reality that something real is happening during the celebration.

Dominick D. Hankle

In the Theresa Sanders article I mentioned earlier, we find she uses a very scientific approach to derive the insistence on the otherness of God and its connection with the otherness of the body. In fact, in this article Sanders walks through Jean-Luc Marion's very scientific explanation of why transubstantiation is the most adequate way of preserving the absolute difference between God and humanity. Sanders does not shy away from stating she will use a modern theology called "deconstructive theology" to attain her goals. She writes,

What I hope to do in this essay is to take up some of the insights of postmodern theology and to explore how they might fruitfully engage a Catholic Eucharistic theology.⁴

What I'm trying to show in this section is that the Eucharist can be seen as having a scientific side in the history of its understanding. The insistence that science, or more appropriately metaphysics, has a place in understanding the Eucharist reminds us of the physical reality it presents. Those theologians like St. Thomas were not attacking or seeking answers to simply drive home their point. They were most often driven by love. Their love of God drove them to use reason and sometimes the scientific methods of their time to embrace the one they loved. Today, many theologians do this for the same reason.

The Eucharist as Poetry

Poetry has a special ability to take the human language and use it to bring out different images. It uses literary tools like metaphor, cadence, and rhyme to place images into our heads and point us to a deep understanding of the soul of the author. Eucharist does the same. Many theologians have embraced the poetic element of Eucharist to help us understand what it is and also what it calls us to do.

Of all the places you might think you would not find the poetic element concerning the Eucharist is the place I want to start—the Council of Trent. Trent expressed the poetic nature of the sacrament by describing the Eucharist in terms of the cross and Christ's sacrifice. Trent takes us into a liturgy pointing beyond itself, beyond time, and into the realm of heaven. All the wording and rhetoric ensure

Spirituality of Eucharist

that we are reminded of the sacrifice of the cross. Like a well-written poem, the prayers, the actions, and even the emphasis on the priesthood stand for something. They make us look past what is happening now and see both the reenactment of Christ at the Last Supper and the cross. The Council of Trent picked up strongly on the theme of sacrifice, and through liturgy and doctrine, like the words of poetry, set the theme to dancing. Whether you like what Trent had to say or not, it did take a practice that may have been moving in an almost criminal direction and ensured that it became a very strong metaphor describing Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

John E. Keegan's article, entitled "In Christ—Eucharist and Suffering," expresses another poetic element in the study of the Eucharist. This article helps us see the gift we have in the Eucharist as a vehicle for healing those who suffer and portrays a very poetic description of what the sufferer finds in this ritual. Doctors can spend hours with their patients detailing their illnesses: how they were contracted, what they are doing to their bodies, and how they will attempt to heal the patients. All of this academic and procedural vocabulary, no matter how compassionately voiced, is overwhelming. It still leaves a distance between the ones trying to provide healing and the one who is in need of the healing. The Eucharist can use words, symbol, and a number of tools that remind us of poetry to close the gap that nothing else can close. In the article Keegan writes,

Ritual, however, heals. The rite of Holy Communion does not offer intellectual rationalizations for the patient's suffering. The wound is too deep for that; too much evil can spring from it. What the rite does is more powerful. The minister, offering the Eucharist, clearly proclaims: "This is the Lamb of God..." this proclamation offers the person a way not to drive God away from his or her suffering, but to attempt to fathom God's presence within it.⁵

What a great example of how the Eucharist resembles a great poem. In the words used, a person finds a way to be drawn into a different mindset. Similar to when we read a poem that brings images of hope or courage into our minds, this ritual through its use of words brings to mind for the sufferers the image of a God who suffers

Dominick D. Hankle

with them and perhaps is very much like them. They find in this healer no gap, no distance, but rather the presence of one who says, “I am here, and I will help you.” The doctors may have used words that were full of intellectual themes and could keep the doctor separated from the patient. There may have been no poetry in what was said. In the Eucharistic rite, however, intellect and rationalization are put aside, and the words used by the minister bring the sick person the presence of God. This, much like good poetry, goes beyond words and touches the soul.

In the strictest sense, Eucharist is not exactly a particular poem, but as the reading of a poem puts us in touch with the author’s soul, so too does Eucharist. Here, however, the author of Eucharist is Christ, and the soul is the Holy Spirit.

The Eucharist as Mission

To receive and take part in a Eucharistic celebration is to commit oneself to living a life that reflects the promises contained in the Eucharist itself. It means we are to be broken and shared, and that we are to feed one another. It means giving ourselves to God and community. It means living the eucharistic mission.

We have forgotten that participation in the Eucharist is not simply an event we go to watch. Eucharist is a call to action. When we eat the bread and drink the wine, which is Christ, we are transformed to be more like Christ. To be more like Christ means to participate in the mission of Christ as our own. Eucharist must become this call to action. In the book *The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World*, Monika Hellwig writes,

Eucharist has been a spectacle, something that people came to view, to view with reverence, with hope, gratitude and contrition, but nevertheless to view, standing outside the action. The purpose of the liturgical reform has been precisely to change us from viewers into intimate participants.⁶

Monika Hellwig is pointing out that today, more so than before, we are called to live as a eucharistic people and not simply to be an audience who watches others play the game, sing the song, and live

Spirituality of the Eucharist

the life. We are reminded by what we see at liturgy that we are “intimate participants.” “Intimate” means we know the one we share with in a way that is special and unique. We share with this other person a part of our lives that we share with no one else. The person we are sharing with is Jesus Christ. This intimacy calls us to do what pleases the one with whom we are intimate, and with Christ that means loving and serving him by loving and serving each other. This is the call to mission.

Hellwig makes it clear that if we want to imitate Christ, we must see ourselves as Eucharist. We must become immersed in the mission of Christ by our participation in the Eucharist. Hellwig writes,

Jesus becomes the food of life for his followers when they come into a new life and discover that it is by living for others that they find fulfillment of their own being. It is only with this breakthrough that the hunger for creative love is authentically satiated.⁷

One of the lovely side effects of participating in the mission of Christ is that not only do we relieve the pain (spiritual hunger, according to Hellwig) of others but *we* are fed and we feel the joy and relief from hunger. Eucharist is a call to mission. If we lose sight of this theme, we fail to share “the bread come down from heaven.” For if we do not eat and share the bread that God gives us to eat, this “manna”—offered to sustain us in order to serve him through the service of others—will spoil. Then we will be left hungry, just like those we failed to reach out as an expression of the eucharistic mission.

Reclaiming the Mystery Again

We have moved from mystery to specific explanations—addressing the how and when the elements become Jesus—and now back to the mystery. As we read above, liturgical reform, as well as a fresh look at how we see the Eucharist, is calling us back to the mystery. In a book written by David Power, called *The Sacrifice We Offer*, he outlines some things he believes should happen so we can have a fresher look on the meaning of Eucharist for the Catholic Church today. He reminds us of the need to take a fresh look at ourselves when he gives this very practical piece of advice:

Dominick D. Hankle

It is necessary for each Church to critically and constructively review its own liturgical and doctrinal tradition. It has to see what is open to challenge in it, to recognize its limitations as well as its fundamental inspirations, asking how it may be received into the life of the Church today.⁸

What Power is telling us is that we can't allow ourselves to define a living and organic sacrament like Eucharist in terms that become too restrictive and choking. When we do this, we are tempted to define a liturgy that no longer captures the mystery but rather locks us into a set of mundane rubrics.

In his article on the implementation of liturgical reforms—*We Gather Faithfully Together*—Cardinal Roger Mahony lays the foundations for a living and expressive liturgy that captures the spirit of mystery. One line in this document describes the starting point for rediscovering the mystery in Eucharistic celebration for Churches across the country today. The line is simply this:

We begin to believe we are an assembly celebrating and being transformed by the liturgy. We begin to believe it and act that way.⁹

If we begin to believe there is mystery into which we are to be absorbed, we will act it out. If we believe we have a part to play in this mystery, we will live it out. Liturgical reform and a renewed love for the writings of the patristic period are helping us rediscover that there is a mystery about Eucharist we can't give up. If we give up the mystery, we would be giving up the blood of the Church—the very life that has flowed through her for two thousand years.

Conclusions

Can we say that the Eucharist is limited to the five themes I've described in this writing? I would hope not. This would cause the very problem I hoped to avoid. I have used these five themes because they are the fruit of my reflection on the Eucharist. There are as many themes and ideas as there are Eucharistic celebrations being prayed throughout the world. However, by my categorizing the Eucharist, I hope to have shown that the Eucharist should never be boxed into a restrictive and confining definition. Although I believe

Spirituality of the Eucharist

there must be some “rules of engagement” to keep us focused on the truth that has transcended the history of the Church, I don’t want us to freeze eucharistic theologies into any particular historical period. The spirit is always seen as someone moving and breathing, and I believe it is the spirit that speaks to all believing Christians concerning the Eucharist and its role in their lives.

Each theme I chose to write about is a reflection of my own spirituality, a spirituality still growing and reaching to a God that is so often hard to see, feel, smell, and touch. Yet, somehow, in some small parish in some small town, God finds a way to stoop down and lift up his little child (me) and encourage me to go forward and embrace his mission. How does the transcendent make itself known to such a weak and limited creature like me? One very simple way is through a simple meal of bread and wine. Therein lies the mystery, the poetry, the science, and the mission, to be rediscovered again and again.

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NOTES

1. Gary Macy, *The Banquet’s Wisdom: A Short History of the Theologies of the Lord’s Supper* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), p. 15.
2. Theresa Sanders, “The Otherness of God and the Bodies of Others,” *Journal of Religion* 76 (4), 1996, p. 574.
3. St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), p. 52.
4. Theresa Sanders, “The Otherness of God and the Bodies of Others,” p. 573.
5. John E. Keegan, “In Christ—Eucharist and Suffering,” *Church Spring*, 1998, p. 19.
6. Monika Hellwig, *The Eucharist and the Hunger in the World* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), p. 3.
7. *Ibid*, p. 34.
8. David Power, *The Sacrifice We Offer: The Tridentine Dogma and Its Reinterpretation* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), p. 187.
9. Cardinal Roger Mahony, *We Gather Faithfully Together, Part Two* (1997), p. 26.



The Staff of **Spiritual Life** Wishes You
A Blessed Christmas
and
A Happy New Year



Ken Giovanelli

Lovely, Dark and Deep

A Meditation on Robert Frost's poem—"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"—as an Icon of the Contemplative Journey

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"

Whose woods these are I think I know. His house is in the village, though; He will not see me stopping here To watch his woods fill up with snow.	He gives his harness bells a shake To ask if there is some mistake. The only other sound's the sweep Of easy wind and downy flake.
My little horse must think it queer To stop without a farmhouse near Between the woods and frozen lake The darkest evening of the year.	The woods are lovely, dark and deep, But I have promises to keep. And miles to go before I sleep, And miles to go before I sleep.

THOSE ON THE CONTEMPLATIVE JOURNEY to God bear endless witness to the words of St. Augustine: "Lord, you made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." If there is anything certain about the journey, it is this: no matter how deeply we progress toward God, we will always be restless. And why should we expect otherwise? Journeys are not for tourists. Journeys can be arduous and dangerous. As spiritual wayfarers on the road to God, we often lose our way, take wrong turns, get

Lovely, Dark and Deep

sidetracked, grow weary. We may even lose our lives. But, there are also blessed moments of rest. At these times of quiescence we may even feel that we have somehow “arrived” at our destination. Yet, even these times of peace and renewal are fleeting. We grow restless once again; we hunger for more. If we are serious about our journey, we soon come to realize that the road home to the Beloved forever beckons us further ahead. God calls us ever deeper.

One of the fruits of this endless, restless search for the Beloved is the desire to share an expression of our experience. How do we describe to others—as well as ourselves—what we have received in prayer? We know that there are times to be silent about what God has bestowed upon us and times to speak out. We have tasted the Lord and found that he is good, and we wish to share our joy with the world. But, words often elude us. So, we often turn to books written by others who have gone before us on the contemplative journey. We create art and music, and we write poems—all in our feeble attempt to translate the transcendent gift of the Beloved into some articulated, recognizable form.

Over the centuries, many symbols and images of the authentic journey to God have come down to us through the writings of holy men and women—most notably the Spanish Carmelite mystics, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. Both Teresa and John employed the ancient and universal metaphor of spiritual courtship, betrothal, and marriage as a description of the soul’s journey to God. But, their genius took them further, deeper. Teresa’s images of the interior castle and the watered garden, as well as John’s ladder of love, the living flame of love, and the ascent of Mt. Carmel—with its attendant dark nights—represent the peak of spiritual literature. Because these symbols and images are true and bear the eternal imprint of the Holy Spirit, they can be just as vital today in the third millennium as they were when they were first written down centuries ago. We may even appropriate them for our own personal journey. Nevertheless, this endless and restless search for God compels us to look ever afresh for new symbols and images, new “icons” to model forth the joy and wonder of the contemplative journey for new generations of seekers.

Ken Giovanelli

New Symbol

I recently encountered such a symbol in the most unlikely of places. While thumbing randomly through an old anthology of American poetry, I came across the well-known poem by Robert Frost, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” Like countless others, I had first read “Stopping by Woods” in high school and, like countless others, had been charmed by the simple rhyme scheme and “Currier & Ives” imagery. But, I was too young then to appreciate the depths and implications of the poem. Despite its deceptive simplicity, “Stopping by Woods” was written by a man in his fifties, facing questions that no high school student ever confronted. Indeed, Frost once commented that the poem “contained all I ever knew.”¹ Although the inspiration and composition for “Stopping by Woods” came to him rather effortlessly after a late-night ramble in a New Hampshire snowstorm, Frost always felt that those sixteen simple lines were, in his words, “loaded with *ulteriority*.”²

As I reread the poem for the first time in many years, a curious thing happened. The words and the images were the same as when I first casually read them as a high school student. But now, near the same age as Frost when he composed the poem, I discerned new meanings emerging, as it were, from the rich darkness of the snowy night—meanings that had nothing to do with the natural insight of maturity and everything to do with the experience of grace that is received in the spiritual journey. For I suddenly beheld the poem in a new light, especially the line, “The woods are lovely, dark and deep.”

Mature prayer can certainly be likened to traveling through “the woods.” Dante opens *The Divine Comedy* with the words, “Midway through life’s journey, I found myself in a dark wood.” As I read Frost’s poem, I realized that the three adjectives Frost used to describe the New England woods could also be applied quite beautifully to the stages of one’s prayer life.

Images of Our Relationship with God

In the first stage of our relationship with God, when prayer and all things spiritual often come easily and sweetly to us, the journey

Lovely, Dark and Deep

can certainly be lovely. In the second stage, corresponding to the “nights” of St. John of the Cross, the woods are dark. And for those who persevere in prayer despite the aridities and nights of the second stage, the journey to union with the Beloved will truly become deep—indeed, a depth beyond words. Although these stages may “interpenetrate” one another, there is usually a trend, a general bearing, from the lovely, through the dark, to the deep.

But, it was more than just the singular line about the woods that moved me. There were also the images of the “house in the village,” the “little horse,” the “frozen lake,” and especially the transforming symbol of silently falling snow. In short, “Stopping by Woods” struck me not only as an “icon” of the contemplative prayer experience but also as a unique symbol of one’s life-long journey to God.

And so, I offer these brief meditations on Frost’s poem simply as one person’s view of this journey. Perhaps there will be an image that provokes a question or answers something deep inside you. Perhaps you may discover entirely different meanings. Perhaps, in the end, the only valid question I can ask of you is, “Are these woods yours, too?”

Beginning the Journey

Whose woods these are I think I know
His house is in the village, though;
He will not mind me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

We know whose woods these are: these are *our* woods, the woods deep within us. A dark, shadowy place, at once strange and familiar, full of dreams and desires, roots and tangled undergrowth. Deep woods that bear no signs or clearly-marked paths, but which, nevertheless, beckon us to enter and seek a Mystery we somehow know is hidden deep within the darkness. Although we may enter these woods often, we soon find that the deeper we travel, the darker the woods become. The journey does not get easier but more difficult. Yet, we surrender time and again to this impulse to search through the inner geography of our personal wilderness. Why? It’s hard to

Ken Giovanelli

say. Although answers may elude us, those who embark on this journey within can be sure of one thing: we don't enter the deep woods to find ourselves. We enter them to find the Beloved.

When we are deep in these mysterious woods with no name, all that we know is that we are far from the village, far from the tidy, well-furnished house where we usually live. We know that a false person lives in that house—our false self, the “I” with all of its appetites and attachments. This false self is the one who wants to be noticed and admired in the village where everything is in its proper place, where everyone has a purpose, and where we may even have a “name” for ourselves among other people. This false self has no interest in entering the woods.

But there's another “I” who lives within us and wants no part of the neat and tidy house or the bustle of the village. This is the part of us—the *imago Dei*, the true self created in the image of God—who somehow knows that God does not come calling at the front door of our house. The Beloved does not make the journey to us; we are called to Him. And so, one day, after deciding to venture into the woods, we mount our little horse, whose name is “Desire,” to help bear us on the journey.

The Woods Are Lovely

Desire knows the way into the woods, at least the beginning, where the path is broad and easy. But the woods darken very fast. As we ride deeper into the thickets, the path narrows, and night begins to fall. We begin to worry—about the journey, about the house we have left behind, about the size of the trees and the depth of the forest. We feel the urge to turn back to the comfort and order of the village. But Desire is confident and surefooted. We give up the reins and entrust the journey to our little horse, who takes us deeper into the woods, into the darkness.

Then, suddenly, softly, before we are even aware of it, something beautiful happens: snow begins to fall. A few flakes, gently at first, ever so gently. But soon a silent cascade of snow, like manna from heaven, fills the woods around us and fills the spaces within and

Lovely, Dark and Deep

without us, and we understand there is no need to wonder just when the snow began or when the snow will end. It is simply snowing. We are simply here and the snow is falling upon us. And, as the snow falls, you realize that every path in these hidden woods is slowly and quietly becoming obscured by the gentle blanket of white.

There is a moment in your journey when you know that you have arrived at the place you were meant to be. You did not know ahead of time that this would be *the* place. There were no signs, nothing to tell you, “*Stop here.*” But with a knowing beyond knowing—a knowing that is more love than knowledge—you sense that this is the place to stop searching and simply rest, the place to let go of the journey, the place to let go of the thought that gently asks, “Is this snow the gift of contemplation?” This is the place to let go of everything and allow the snow to fall like a benediction upon you and the branches and every space between you and the branches. Yes, you whisper to yourself, in the snow the woods are lovely.

The Woods Are Dark

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

How many moments have passed? How much snow has fallen? Our little Desire was content to stop for a moment, but already we sense a restless movement beneath us. “Come,” our little horse seems to say, “this stopping in the snow in the middle of nowhere, without the solace of a nearby farmhouse, makes no sense. Shouldn’t we be moving forward?”

And we know about that nearby frozen lake. That dark, cracked ring of ice—the place where every sin and wintry inclination is locked in upon itself far from the light. In Dante’s deepest ring of hell, there is not fire but ice. The damned are frozen into lakes of their own sin—their turning against God and man. From this place where we have stopped to rest, we cannot see the frozen lake that bears our name, but we know it is out there, through the trees, not

Ken Giovanelli

far away. And yet, in the unfathomable mercy of the Beloved, the snow falls and covers the lake, and it disappears beneath a mantle of white and fire.

Oh yes, this is the darkest evening of the year. Whether it is the darkness of this most blessed evening or the blinding swirl of the snow, we realize that we cannot see. But, we are not afraid of blindness—this nonseeing actually fills us with an indescribable hope. St. John of the Cross says that faith is a dark night for the intellect, that God is a dark night to the soul. We must always remember that the darkness is a sign that the Lord is near. As the psalmist sings, “darkness is not dark for You, and night shines as the day, for darkness and light are one.” So, finally, at rest in the unbearable bright snow of God’s seeing, we realize our sight is no longer required. Yes, you whisper to yourself: in the snow, the woods are truly dark.

The Woods Are Deep

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

Our little horse grows restless once again. Is it a sense of mission or duty that prompts you to vigorously shake your harness bells? Is it the profound stillness that compels you to make your presence known, to fill the silence with sound? “Come,” Desire seems to say, “there are a thousand things yet to do! Enough of this resting and accomplishing nothing. When do we arrive home?” Desire is movement and can’t understand why we’ve abandoned our journey, if only for a few moments, in this place without warmth, comfort, or security. “Come,” our little horse says, “let’s go! It’s time to awaken our desire and get on the road again.”

And yet, the sound of the harness bells, like a monastery bell sanctifying the surrounding earth and sky, has only deepened the silence. If sight is no longer required at this sacred moment, we realize that the same abandonment applies to the sense of hearing. A moment before, it was so quiet we could hear every downy flake as it

Lovely, Dark and Deep

flew through the branches above us. Now we understand: in this place of falling snow, there *is* a difference between silence and solitude. If silence is the absence of sound, solitude is presence. As the easy wind of the Holy Spirit dances away through the trees with the sound of the bells and the *tick* of each flake, we become aware of a space that remains after our hearing has disappeared. Now, we hear with the Hearing of God how much deeper depth is than presence, how much deeper solitude is than silence. Yes, you whisper to yourself: in the snow, the woods are truly deep.

Here, my Beloved, in this place without seeing and hearing, I gaze into a Light beyond sight, and listen to the Word beyond sound. And then, beyond the moment when I believe I have become lovely, dark and deep for You, the loveliness, the darkness and the deep woods disappear and I become Your Snow.

Return to the Village

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep.
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Once we have become snow, it would be beautiful to remain so forever. But God does not wish us to gaze and listen forever—not here, on this journey. There will be time and eternity for gazing and listening, later on.

Suddenly, there is a movement between the sound and the solitude...and we remember ourselves. We remember once again that we are in woods that are lovely, dark and deep. We remember once again that we ride a horse named Desire. We remember once again that there is a journey we must complete that does not end here, lost in these woods full of snow.

No, our home is not here in the woods, but in the village. We remember that there are promises to keep and promises to keep: to love the lonely and brokenhearted, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to heal the blind and the lame, and to visit the sick and imprisoned. In other words, we are not alone. Those who live in the

Ken Giovanelli

village also need to be shown the path to God through woods that are lovely, dark and deep. The Beloved wishes us to tell our sisters and brothers not to be afraid. He wishes the snow to fall upon them, too. So, we gently rouse our little Desire and, with the sound of bells hidden in the sweep of the wind, return home. *And this is the miracle: I find that now, even in the village, Your snow continues to fall.*

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Reviews

Thérèse of Lisieux: The Way to Love. By Ann Laforest, *OCD*. Sheed & Ward: 7373 South Lovers Lane Road, Franklin, WI 53132, 2000. Pp. 159. Paper. \$15.95.

Who could have fathomed that an obscure young contemplative woman who died in a small French town in 1897 would become a saint for our third millennium? According to Sr. Ann Laforest, we are just beginning to mine the depth of St. Thérèse of Lisieux's timeless message.

Laforest highlights the "exceptional universality" of Thérèse, the youngest doctor of the church, coining the phrase "the Thérèse event" that comprises her whole life and her mission to share her Little Way with the world. In her book, Laforest briefly situates Thérèse's family in the context of their political milieu and later refers to the ecclesial culture of her time.

In chapter 1, Laforest offers an insightful analysis using contemporary psychological theories regarding Thérèse's abandonment issues in early life. Born healthy, but unsatisfied with her mother's milk, she suffered her first abandonment—her mother could not adequately nurture her. At nine weeks she was at death's door. Rose Taillé, a farm woman, breast-fed her until she was fifteen months old, giving her also "the essentials of hope, the rudiments of language, the basics of a 'learning style,' and psychological birth." Torn away from her surrogate mother (her second abandonment), her return home was traumatic. It took months to readjust and bond with Zélie, her mother,

who died of breast cancer when she was four (her third abandonment). "At the age of nine and a half, Thérèse experienced a new and terrible abandonment" by her eldest sister Pauline who entered the cloister of the Carmelite monastery. In her experiences of abandonment, God's grace transformed Thérèse's difficulties into graces for her mission. At the age of ten, a vision of a smiling Blessed Virgin cured her of a serious childhood illness, which some modern analysts have called "clinical psychotic depression." One theologian termed this illness a "mystical trial." The wounds of Thérèse's loss of her mother and mother figures underwent healing with the appearance of Mary, a loving mother. Throughout her life, this memory kept her "psychologically and spiritually anchored."

In chapter 2, Laforest draws our attention to Evelyn Underhill's marks of authentic Christian mystics and applies them to Thérèse. Then, Laforest relates the notion of Christian sacrifice to the stages of mysticism. She recalls Rahner's notion that "every human being is born with an inherent aptitude for the experience of God." In Laforest's analysis, one can readily see how Thérèse's "human development" corresponded "with the process of grace in her spiritual journey."

Chapter 3 discusses the Little Way. While its mission began in the cradle, it was through a lifelong fidelity to the Gospel that Thérèse discovered it. Three years before her death, she "was ready to synthesize her doctrine." She experienced a love that enabled her to overcome the struggle to survive. Her

Reviews

experiences reinforced her belief in love; her contemplative prayer was love in action. The genius of her Little Way comes not from her education but from her “mystical intimacy with God.” The experience of God’s love came first. The key to understanding the Little Way is the interplay between littleness and mercy. Laforest describes the Little Way as “rooted in love as a power, an energy, a verb and a force.” Thérèse manifests a love that “is a force that connects all of creation with God.” Hers is a direct spiritual journey that demonstrates how to tap into love.

Chapter 4 develops the scriptural foundations of the Little Way. Thérèse had a remarkable ability to integrate her life experiences with the Scriptures, which she quotes over a thousand times in her writings. Her phenomenal memory helped her recall texts, and she discovered the hidden truths about God in the Scriptures. Although her language camouflages the sublime realities she expresses, Laforest demonstrates concretely how the Little Way is scripturally based. In Isaiah and the four Gospels, Thérèse mines the concept of spiritual childhood. She connects the words about the Pauline Jesus (“Do this in remembrance of me”) with the words and actions of the mandate in the Gospel of John (washing the feet of the disciples and commanding, “As I have done, so you must do”), suggesting a contemporary theology of Eucharist.

Chapters 5 through 9 show the unique contribution of Laforest’s work. They deal with Thérèse’s prophetic vision, the Little Way and liberation theology, the theology of nonviolence,

Thérèse and Dorothy Day, and mercy and solidarity in Christ—“Thérèse loves and challenges the Church.” While upholding the vocation of priesthood and praying for priests, she did not defer to a hierarchy of status. For her nothing can be real that is not rooted in love. Laforest applies an interdisciplinary approach using theology, psychology, spirituality, and Scripture to provide a solid foundation for liberation theology including nonviolence, mercy, and solidarity in Christ. In the Gospels, Jesus manifests a preferential option for the poor. In *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council documented themes of liberation theology encouraging “theologians to develop Scripture’s teaching on the unity of justice and faith.” Laforest parallels three of the principles of the Little Way with three principles of liberation spirituality: conversion, poverty of spirit, and intimacy with Jesus. She portrays the principles concretely by reviewing the life of Oscar Romero.

In Chapter 7, Laforest states that Thérèse’s Little Way is a path of nonviolence: “Jesus, the revelation of God’s Person, bore ultimate witness to nonviolence” in his passion, death, and resurrection. The author recalls three people known for nonviolence: Mohandas Gandhi; Dorothy Day; and Martin Luther King, Jr. Dorothy Day believed that Thérèse’s message releases “a spiritual force upon earth that is counteracting violence and replacing it with grace which is infinitely more powerful.” Laforest compares the virtues of the Little Way with the Catholic Worker Movement.

Reviews

Finally, Laforest treats mercy and solidarity in Christ. While Thérèse acted as a merciful person throughout her life, the astounding greatness of God's mercy dawned on her only in the last years: "Thérèse's merciful love flows from her intimate union with the God of mercy." Mercy "reveals the image of God within." Mercy can be politically dangerous because society tends to cling to the status quo. When exercised on a political scale, mercy "humbly dares to challenge what is violent in those structures." Qualities of mercy include being nonjudgmental, forgiving, and generous. With a global perspective, Thérèse's mercy emanated "from her mystical intimacy with God," pointing the way to peace and offering hope to a desperate world.

This easy-to-read book would appeal to those who know Thérèse well and those who don't. It is a must read. Since there are many gems to mine in this work, it is worth reading a second time. Laforest shows how the Little Way is biblically rooted and how Thérèse's spirituality is meaningful for today's pluralistic world.

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The Family Cloister: Benedictine Wisdom for the Home. By David Robinson. The Crossroad Publishing Company: 370 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017, 2000. Pp. 191. Paper. \$14.95.

What could the celibate author of a sixth-century rulebook for monks possibly have to offer frazzled parents of today? In *Family Cloister: Benedictine Wisdom for the Home*, David Robinson sinks his teeth into the deeply spiritual yet highly practical *Rule of St. Benedict*, revealing surprising gems for modern families.

As husband, parent of three teenage boys, and Presbyterian pastor, Robinson brings fresh questions to Benedict's ancient text. How does one meet the individual needs of children without playing favorites? How is a loving parent to discipline children, teaching them what is right without being abusive? How can we use our material goods to meet not only our own needs but also to help others outside the family? Reflecting on Benedict's *Rule*, Robinson provides us with chapters dealing with family design, spirituality, health, harmonious living, hospitality, and growth.

In the preface, Robinson explains that the word "cloister" means "partition" or "enclosure." Just as monks or nuns form a religious community that is in some ways apart from the world, so too does the family have boundaries. However, this "setting apart" is not in opposition to others in "the world" but is rather a way of defining the intimacy of a beautiful place, open to growth and interaction with the rest of the larger

Reviews

community. Like the monastery, Robinson views the family cloister as a beautiful, secret garden: “In our family we gather around the table at mealtime, hold hands, and pray together. This simple act of family devotion is the essence of the family cloister.... A cloister is an enclosed place within which goodness and beauty flourish. I believe God has designed the family to be a place of spiritual growth, a holy enclosure encircled by divine wisdom and love” (p. 9).

Robinson views both parents—or a single parent—as the “abbots” of the family cloister (“abbot” means “father”). For Benedict, the head of the monastery is not to wield power like a ruling tyrant, but rather to guide the monks, primarily by personal example. Abbots teach others best by being full of the simplicity, humility, and gentle love of Christ. Robinson reminds parents that this is key to good parenting. Parents must think of the long-range, genuine good of their children. They must be willing to practice what they ask of their children.

Benedict is concerned that his monks live together harmoniously. Reading between the lines, one can spot his attempt at providing certain rules that are meant to prevent arguments before they occur. Consider, for example, the following section of the *Rule* written by Benedict about the appropriate sleeping arrangements for monks, which Robinson readily applies to the nightly routine of putting children to bed. Benedict states, “Sleep in separate beds; a lamp must be kept burning in the room until morning; sleep clothed; remove their knives, lest they acciden-

tally cut themselves in their sleep; always be ready to arise without delay when the signal is given; the younger members should not have their beds next to each other; on arising, quietly encourage each other, for the sleepy like to make excuses” (p. 80). The nightly rituals of bedtime, for both monks and children, are fairly evident here: turning on the night light, setting aside favorite toys (knives?!), finding personal space, heeding the morning alarm clock, and seeking to overcome crabbiness when awakening in the morning. How many nightmares and family hassles might be avoided if we took to heart Benedict’s simple advice!

Chapter 3, “Family Discipline,” offers keen insights about the challenge of disciplining children. Loving parents teach their children what is truly right and good. I was stunned to discover that Benedict’s methods for dealing with monks guilty of grave faults included the imposition of a period of exclusion from the table and conversation with others, much like the contemporary practice of “time-out” for preschool children. Benedict’s hope is always that the offender will be restored to full participation in community living. Robinson reminds us that punishment of children should always aim toward restorative justice and not exist merely as a vent for a parent’s anger.

Benedict’s *Rule* reveals his awareness that monks of various ages and abilities have differing needs. While parents are often aware of this variation, they may feel uncertain about how to adapt prayers and spiritual practices for the individual needs of various

Reviews

family members. *The Family Cloister* is packed with creative, practical ideas that Robinson has devised for deepening family spirituality and harmony. He gives us guidelines for establishing family meetings, lists of Scripture themes, simple ways to pray the psalms, and ideas for celebrating the liturgical seasons together. At the end of each chapter, the "Family Cloister Bulletin Board" summarizes main ideas and practical activities for simple reference.

The Family Cloister is the most innovative book I have seen in the area of family spirituality. Like Benedict's *Rule*, *The Family Cloister* is well grounded in Scripture. Benedict's spirituality lends itself to finding God in the everyday family environment yet challenges us to seek greater holiness. *The Family Cloister* is so faithful to the spirit of Benedict that, if I didn't know better, I would have thought Benedict wrote his rule specifically for families with small children.

Robinson's message is obviously based on personal experience, with careful attention to keeping the suggestions open to single-parent families, blended families, or any family configuration with children who have not yet left the nest. (Attention to lived experience of families is something often lacking, in this reviewer's opinion, in many books written about raising Catholic families.) Robinson's style is realistic and humble, not preachy. He reveals how parents can realize holiness in their own lives without abandoning children to join a monastery. *The Family Cloister* reminds us that our children are gifts to be nurtured:

"Our children belong to God, and God gives children to parents for a brief time. These gifts are given to prepare us for eternal life in God's family" (p. 152). Spiritual parenting means providing a secure, loving place in which each child may grow to his or her own unique and full potential. *The Family Cloister* will help parents accomplish this noble goal.

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Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ. By Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt. *Studies in Spirituality and Theology Series.* University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, IN 46556, 1999. Pp. 290. Hardcover. \$35.

Bauerschmidt takes an original angle on the work of Julian of Norwich, and this approach is evident from the earliest statement of his thesis: "Julian should be read as one who theologically imagines the political" (p. 3). In this claim, Bauerschmidt is refreshingly out of step with current academic trends. The postmodern, Western world usually separates politics from theology in much the same way as politics and ethics have been mistakenly separated for centuries. Bauerschmidt recognizes that all human beings have commitments to some myths that directs and inspires human activity. It is a critical step: "Central to my argument in this book is the contention that *all* politics is 'imaginary,' in that all societies are

Reviews

'founded' on a *mythos*, an ideological coding that makes the political entity what it is" (p. 5). In Bauerschmidt's exhaustive study of Julian's *Revelation of Love*, he demonstrates very well that her religious devotions yield political wisdom, and vice versa.

In Chapter 1, "Imagining the Political," Bauerschmidt explores the *mythos* out of which Julian was working in the fourteenth century. It is his contention that the transition between feudalism and modernism at the time left room for a new political image that was quite different from both: the mystical body politic of Christ. The greatest resource for this image, according to Bauerschmidt, comes from the regular ritual celebration of the Mass. Believing, as he does, that "culture shapes our understanding of the body, which in turn shapes our understanding of culture," Bauerschmidt sees in the "human body of the God-man, Jesus Christ" a resource for the body politic of medieval Europe (p. 17). The regular community action of the celebration of the Eucharist, which emphasized for Christians their unity in a common life of Christ, did much to shape the political imagination of the Middle Ages.

It is within this context that Julian herself sees the body of Christ as open and generative. In Chapter 2, "I Desired a Bodily Sight," Bauerschmidt demonstrates that Julian's image of the human body is different from those of her contemporaries. Living in an age that focused on Christ's humanity and an "affective devotion" to his suffering love, Julian transforms the image of the body. Her attention is not on the body's inferiority as a spiritual medium but on

its capacity to unify all Christians with Christ's suffering body. This unity, in turn, invites participation in God's own nature.

While Chapter 3 continues the focus on the image of Christ's body, Bauerschmidt shifts emphasis here from Christology to Ecclesiology. This chapter contains a fascinating account of how a human body can function as a metaphor for a social body. In addition, it holds particular interest for feminist reflection for two reasons: (1) There is an interesting discussion of women on the margins of medieval life (pp. 73–76), and (2) Bauerschmidt also attends to Julian's development of the image of Jesus as mother (pp. 90–95).

As far as the marginalization of women is concerned, Bauerschmidt sees in that injustice a resource for women who sought to identify with Jesus the Christ: "Yet, within this misogynist tradition, certain women used their marginalization as a means by which they could follow and imitate Christ precisely because of the way in which marginal status is encoded within the image of Jesus himself, who, as the letter to the Hebrews puts it, 'suffered outside the city gate'" (p. 74). It is also possible that by seeing in Jesus a body that revealed female possibilities (i.e., as pain opens to generate new life), Julian did something to elevate the status of the female body in her time. In "view of the development in the long text of her understanding of Jesus as mother, it certainly seems possible that she had come to a more positive assessment of femaleness than normally prevailed in medieval England. While femaleness was still coded

Reviews

as marginal and dangerous, the margin and the danger were now mapped onto Christ's bodily humanity" (p. 76).

Bauerschmidt points out that Julian achieves the identification of Jesus with the female body, not by attending to social gender roles but by riveting her attention on physical, bodily evidence. So, it is not Jesus' gentleness or forgiving nature that reveals his femaleness, but his flesh itself is colder, more moist, and more vulnerable than male flesh. Female flesh (and especially the virgin female flesh from which Jesus' body was made) was thought to be very fragile. Yet this vulnerability is turned on its head by Julian's boundless love for the God-man. Though his human body is clearly male, Jesus is able to personify as well the qualities normally limited to women: "Within the body of Christ our mother is the infinite expanse of his empty womb, which is the shape of his desire for us" (p. 95). Julian's images do, at times, require a little mind-bending, but anyone interested in religious meanings of the male and female bodies will profit from wrestling with this material.

Bauerschmidt turns his attention in Chapter 4 to the Trinity by way of theological anthropology. The trinitarian relations of Father, Son, and Spirit, he says, help Julian to reread the social relations of feudal times. "Julian," he argues, "imagines Christ's body as a sociality in which the gift-exchange between lord and servant is purified according to the model of trinitarian reciprocity, rendering not the static egalitarianism of modern liberalism, but the drama of the servant's exaltation" (p. 189). The "reciprocal exchange

of gifts" that marks the Trinity becomes for Julian the trinitarian charity that ought to mark social and political relations.

The accumulated power of this extraordinary work is summed up in Bauerschmidt's concluding chapter where he applies what he has learned from Julian's politics to contemporary challenges in political and social life. In his reimagining of the political, Bauerschmidt suggests some very unpopular ideas: that obligation is the ground of human freedom (p. 196), that acting in the world by "performing" the Gospel offers a mythos out of which we might live political life (p. 197), that human beings redefine the *polis* "not by borders or geography but by the practice of ongoing discernment of the mystery of God in Christ" (p. 197), and that non-violence and compassion characterize human action (p. 195). I highly recommend this original, insightful, and provocative study.

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The Way of Saint John of the Cross: A Guide Through the Dark Night of the Soul. By Susan Muto. *Sounds True: P.O. Box 8010 / BP98, Boulder, CO 80306-8010, 2001.* (Four audio-cassette tapes). \$29.95.

Exploring the four great works of St. John of the Cross—*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, *The Living Flame of Love*, and *The Spiritual Canticle*—Susan Muto

Reviews

contemplates in her first audio-book the ultimate reason for which we were created according to this saintly doctor of the Church: we were created for love.

In tape one, Muto begins by laying out the vivid biographical details of the life of John of the Cross, a man who lived and experienced for himself the spiritual journey of purgation (*The Ascent*), illumination (*Dark Night*), and union with God (*Living Flame*)—or as Muto recasts these traditional terms—formation, reformation, and transformation. She asks the compelling questions that draw us to *The Ascent*: What must we do to ascend Mount Carmel (a metaphor for divine union)? What must we do so as not to get bogged down by the obstacles that arise from within ourselves and from without? With soothing and meditative voice, Muto recites the poem of *The Ascent* and expounds some main themes from St. John's commentary: the journey through twilight, midnight, and daybreak; the active nights of sense and spirit; *todo/nada* (all/nothing); and love's purgation of intellect, memory, and will. She defines the terms that St. John uses in his commentary: obscurity, aridity, creativity, *nada* (nothing), appetites, and inordinate attachments. St. John invites us to let go of all that weighs and preoccupies us, to find our roots in another beyond ourselves, and to acquire the heart of the mystic—a heart made for love according to St. John in his *Spiritual Canticle*.

Examining books three and four of *The Ascent* in tape two, Muto asks: What does it really look like to live in faith, hope, and love? Here she takes St. John's advice by looking toward the

faith witnesses in her own life. She makes personal allusion to her grandmother Elizabeth, for example, who was for her a pillar of pure faith. She explains how her grandmother was a woman who, as St. Paul says, walked by faith and not by sight. Muto advises that we need only to be present to the great "whys" of life, resisting the need to overanalyze them with the mind. For this reason, faith is the theological virtue that purifies the intellect according to St. John. Similarly, hope is the virtue that purifies the memory by creating space for grace to unfold within us, while love is the theological virtue that purifies the will.

In the second half of tape two, Muto discusses the first book of *The Dark Night*: the signs by which to recognize this night, the imperfections of beginners (those who have already progressed in spiritual matters, according to John), and the night of the senses that purify the beginner of the spiritual dimensions of the capital sins.

In tape three, Muto continues with book two of *The Dark Night*: the midnight hour's journey of love. She cautions us not to become afraid when St. John tells us of all the difficulties that the proficient soul may face during this journey. However dark it may be, midnight always gives way to dawn. In this second night, the night of the spirit, God leaves our intellect in darkness, our memory void of the past, and our will in aridity. Muto illustrates this night with the most striking example of her mother who had Alzheimer's and whom she nursed during the last stages of life. She reveals how Alzheimer's unexpectedly released the essence of her

Reviews

mother's soul as it became striped of its faculties. Muto found herself changed the more she sat in her mother's presence. As her mother experienced a loss of words, so Muto's own speech became muted. As her mother progressively lost her memories, so did Muto lose the capacity to share in the past. As her mother became stripped of intellect and will, Muto unwittingly discovered in her mother a gentle, purified, and peaceful soul who taught her much about her own spiritual search.

In tape four, Muto concludes her discussion of *The Dark Night* by discussing the ten rungs of John's mystical, "secret ladder" and elaborates on the mystical garments—the white tunic of faith upon the green coat of hope upon the red toga of charity. Again Muto is adept in bringing John's lofty language into everyday examples from stories of life experiences. She recounts, for instance, her unusual, transforming encounter with Irene, a distraught salesclerk at a hardware store.

Muto devotes the remainder of tape four to John's poem, *The Living Flame of Love*, where God is the active agent and we are the recipients. The soul that was formerly courted by God and betrothed to him now enters into spiritual union or mystical marriage—a substantial transformation in which the "two," God and the soul, are united into "one." Muto admits that modern theology deprives itself greatly whenever it mistakes the language of "spousal theology" as an antique of the past. She

advocates that "spousal mysticism" still has a vital role in modern spiritual dialogue today.

In summary, Susan Muto discusses the most important works of St. John of the Cross in a five hour audio-presentation—a formidable task! While she cannot comment upon every detail and spiritual point that St. John makes in his major works, she succeeds in expounding upon his major themes and shows how his great works interrelate. These tapes would be valuable to those just beginning to read St. John of the Cross because Muto defines the terms that St. John uses and explains his approach. Other parts of her presentation, however, may presume that her hearers have already had some prior exposure to St. John's writings. Another valuable feature is that she takes three occasions to lead her listeners through guided prayer meditations. Muto also enriches her discussion of John of the Cross with allusions to other theological writers, philosophers, saints, and poets: Adrian van Kaam, Evelyn Underhill, Thomas Merton, George Herbert, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, St. Teresa of Avila, Søren Kierkegaard, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and Dante. Her presentation abounds with personal experiences and anecdotes.

Joseph Girouard, OCD, the current Reviews Editor of **spiritual life**, is a religious brother who resides at the Discalced Carmelite monastery in Washington, D.C.

All books listed in the Reviews and Notices sections can be obtained from
Seminary Co-op Bookstore: 1-800-777-1456.

Notices

Spiritual Childhood: The Spirituality of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. By Vernon Johnson. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001. Pp. 230. Paper. \$13.95.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux, now a doctor of the Church, summarized her spirituality in these simple but profound words, “My Little Way is all love.” Her complete and unshakable trust in the love of God our Father was the foundation of her spiritual life, a childlike relationship with our Creator that raised her to the heights of sanctity in only twenty-four years of life. St. Thérèse’s spirituality, her Little Way of spiritual childhood, is one that can be imitated and practiced by all souls, no matter what their state in life. Her spirituality has been recognized by the Church as a special gift from God for ordinary people everywhere to reach heroic sanctity. Msgr. Vernon Johnson, a famous convert and apostle of St. Thérèse, presents in this book a most clear, practical, and yet profound explanation of this “little way”—a way to perfection that changed his life and the lives of countless others. Johnson summarizes the spiritual approach of St. Thérèse in these three words: love, humility, and confidence.

The Spiritual Dimensions of Self-Esteem. By John V. Carlson. New York: Alba House, 2001. Pp. 134. Paper. \$9.95.

How we think about and judge ourselves—our self-esteem—has its foundation in the positive and negative messages we receive from parents, family members, teachers, peers, and various caregivers as we grow up. To

the extent that we take these messages to heart—both the good and the bad—and make them our own determines in no small measure our degree of happiness, the quality of our personal relationships, and the contributions we are able to make to society and the world in which we live. The secular character of our world, with its insistence on the values of independence and self-sufficiency, militates against our making a proper estimation of our true place in the broader scheme of things. When we seem for a time to succeed, we take our gifts for granted and become proud and narcissistic. And when we fall short, we are easily overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and shame. The fact that we are made in the image and likeness of God—who loves us unconditionally with all our faults and imperfections, even to the point of dying on the cross for us—provides us with a solid basis upon which to build a healthy self-esteem. This spiritual dimension of our lives is explored here in depth from both a biblical and a psychological perspective, keeping in mind that growth in self-esteem is a process and not an end in itself—a journey of our spirit led by the Spirit of God and not a destination.

Mary’s Song: Living Her Timeless Prayer. By Catherine Nolan, OP. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2001. Pp. 128. Paper. \$9.95.

Can an ancient prayer be as meaningful today as it was two thousand years ago? *Mary’s Song* answers with an emphatic “Yes.” Offering new insights into the Magnificat—Mary’s

Notices

biblical greeting to her cousin Elizabeth at the time of Elizabeth's pregnancy—the author roots the canticle in contemporary experience. Sr. Mary Catherine Nolan looks at the Magnificat verse by verse, discussing such themes as joy, mercy, regard for the poor, and prayer. With both theological and personal spiritual reflections, Nolan shows the significance that Mary's song can have in our lives today—both in the way we live and in the way we pray. Complete with additional Scripture and thoughts for reflection, as well as a closing prayer for each chapter, this book provides both the encouragement and challenge we need for making Mary's song our own.

At The Wellspring: Jesus and the Samaritan Woman. By Br. John of Taizé. New York: Alba House, 2001. Pp. 93. Paper. \$9.95.

At the heart of the Christian faith, there is neither a philosophy of life nor a system of morality but a person, Jesus of Nazareth—a teacher of wisdom, a prophet, a charismatic leader, a good man, and something of a revolutionary. But he is much more than that. He is the only Son, the one who has a unique relationship with the Mystery at the heart of all existence. He is the tangible expression in the world of the unseen God. His encounter with an unnamed Samaritan woman at a well in the town of Sychar (modern day Nablus) reveals more about God and his “thirst” for a human response to the love he freely gives than is readily apparent in a cursory reading of the text in St. John's Gospel. After a preliminary section that situates the theme of “wells” and “water” in the global

context of the Hebrew Scriptures, the book follows St. John's narrative step by step to the conclusion expressed in the words of the townspeople of Sychar: “We no longer believe on account of what you said. Now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that [Jesus] is truly the savior of the world” (Jn 4:42). Thus, a seemingly chance encounter beside a well in Samaria is shown to be charged with ultimate consequences for the entire world.

Where God Walks: Everyday Encounters with Mystery. By William Breault, SJ. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2001. Pp. 128. Paper. \$9.95.

“It's a mystery,” we say. A common refrain we use to dismiss something we don't understand or find hard to explain. Rather than dismiss such experiences, author William Breault prefers to listen to them, reflect upon them, and then draw us into them. Often, in exploring such mysteries, he finds a metaphor for the presence of God among us. In *Where God Walks*, Breault relates personal experiences that convey a sense of the mystery that is at the heart of life. He explores and interprets personal events that fall outside the realm of cause and effect, encounters that move beyond the veil that prevents us from seeing deeper than our senses allow.

Snow Falling on Snow: Themes from the Spiritual Landscape of Robert J. Wicks. By Robert J. Wicks. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001. Pp. 144. Paper. \$12.95.

This is a “best of Wicks” collection in one handy book. Over the years Wicks has returned again and again to four

Notices

spiritual and psychological anchors that lead to peace and fulfillment. These main anchors of life are experiencing God, being available, having a sense of clarity, and delighting in the ordinary. In exploring these themes, Wicks has created a “spirituality of gentleness.” This present compilation shows how Wick’s thought on each subject has developed and ripened over time.

Classic Catholic Converts. *By Charles P. Connor. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001. Pp. 220. Paper. \$14.95.*

In his new book, Fr. Charles Connor presents testimonials of over twenty-five well-known converts to Catholicism from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is the witness of

brilliant intellectuals, social workers, scientists, authors, film producers, clergy, businessmen, artists, and others who, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, have studied and prayed their way into the Church. Connor writes of their challenges and struggles along the way as they embraced Catholicism, including rejection by loved ones, persecution from strangers, and misunderstanding by peers. But, once they responded to God’s call, they experienced great inner peace, contentment, and joy. The famous converts whose stories are told here include John Henry Newman, Edith Stein, Jacques Maritain, Dorothy Day, G. K. Chesterton, Elizabeth Seton, Karl Stern, and Ronald Knox.

—Regis Jordan, OCD



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INDEX to VOLUME 47 (2001)

AUTHORS

Barnum, Martin J. <i>Jessica Powers's Poetry:</i> <i>A Guide for Spiritual Growth.</i>	8
Culligan, Kevin, Lawrence S. Cunningham, Keith Egan. <i>Upon Reading Lying Awake.</i>	100
Danella, Francis. <i>Francis de Sales: A Contemporary Guide</i> <i>For the Lay Faithful.</i>	135
Dickson, Charles. <i>Spirituality: Returning to the Sacred.</i>	131
Giallanza, Joel. <i>"Believe That God Can Do Far More."</i>	81
Giovanelli, Ken. <i>Lovely, Dark and Deep.</i>	232
Hankle, Dominick D. <i>Spirituality of the Eucharist.</i>	222
Matthews, William R. <i>Augustine: A God-Drunk Man.</i>	35
Matthews, William R. <i>Your Servant Is Listening.</i>	195
Mudore, Constance Faye. <i>Witnessing for Peace:</i> <i>Christians and Nonviolent Interpersonal Communication.</i>	76
McFall, Ellen J. <i>Philosophy of Despair...And Hope.</i>	93
Riga, Peter J. <i>Holiness Today.</i>	45
Rojo, Mercedes. <i>Julian of Norwich:</i> <i>The Spirituality of Abundance.</i>	3
Russell, Kenneth C. <i>Is Thérèse of Lisieux Really a Modern Saint?</i>	151
Sanders, James. <i>A Meditation on Moses.</i>	148
Sellner, Edward. <i>An Inclination of the Heart:</i> <i>Jerome and His Female Friendships.</i>	161
Simsic, Wayne. <i>Reflections on a John of the Cross Retreat.</i>	67
Sullivan, John. <i>Of Arms and the Child: Images of Edith Stein.</i>	41
Stratton, Robin. <i>What It Means to Me To Be a Carmelite.</i>	216
Wild, Robert. <i>The God Who Sees Me.</i>	27
Wiseman, James. <i>The Body in Spiritual Practice:</i> <i>A New Asceticism.</i>	200

TITLES

A Meditation on Moses. <i>James Sanders.</i>	148
An Inclination of the Heart: Jerome and His Female Friendships. <i>Edward Sellner.</i>	161
Augustine: A God-Drunk Man. <i>William R. Matthews.</i>	35
"Believe That God Can Do Far More." <i>Joel Giallanza.</i>	81
Francis de Sales: A Contemporary Guide For the Lay Faithful. <i>Francis Danella.</i>	135
Holiness Today. <i>Peter J. Riga.</i>	45
Is Thérèse of Lisieux Really a Modern Saint? <i>Kenneth C. Russell.</i>	151
Jessica Powers's Poetry: A Guide for Spiritual Growth. <i>Martin J. Barnum.</i>	8
Julian of Norwich: The Spirituality of Abundance. <i>Mercedes Rojo.</i>	3
Lovely, Dark and Deep. <i>Ken Giovanelli.</i>	232

Index to Volume 47 (2001)

Of Arms and the Child: Images of Edith Stein. <i>John Sullivan</i>	41
Philosophy of Despair...And Hope. <i>Ellen J. McFall</i>	93
Reflections on a John of the Cross Retreat. <i>Wayne Simsic</i>	67
Spirituality of the Eucharist. <i>Dominick D. Hankle</i>	222
Spirituality: Returning to the Sacred. <i>Charles Dickson</i>	131
The Body in Spiritual Practice: A New Asceticism. <i>James Wiseman</i>	200
The God Who Sees Me. <i>Robert Wild</i>	27
Upon Reading <i>Lying Awake</i>. <i>Kevin Culligan,</i> <i>Lawrence S. Cunningham, Keith Egan</i>	100
What It Means to Me To Be a Carmelite. <i>Robin Stratton</i>	216
Witnessing for Peace: Christians and Nonviolent Interpersonal Communication. <i>Constance Faye Mudore</i>	76
Your Servant Is Listening. <i>William R. Matthews</i>	195

POEMS

Heaven for Me!... <i>St. Thérèse of Lisieux</i>	159
Prayer. <i>Jessica Powers</i>	112

REVIEWS

Bauerschmidt, Frederick Christian. <i>Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ.</i> (D. M. Caplin)	245
Bush, William. <i>To Quell the Terror: The Mystery of the Vocation of the Sixteen Carmelites of Compiègne Guillotined July 17, 1794.</i> (M. Dodd)	114
Butler, Virginia Marie. <i>Go to Galilee: The Spiritual Geography of the Gospels.</i> (J. Girouard)	182
Campbell, Antony F. <i>God First Loved Us: The Challenge of Accepting Unconditional Love.</i> (J. Girouard)	116
Crysdale, Cynthia S.W. <i>Embracing Travail: Retrieving the Cross Today.</i> (J. A. Wiseman)	54
Cunningham, Lawrence S. <i>Thomas Merton & the Monastic Vision.</i> (R. Schneider) ..	120
Feldman, Christian. <i>Pope John XXIII: A Spiritual Biography.</i> (T.C. Ross)	184
Foley, Marc. <i>The Love That Keeps Us Sane: Living the Little Way of St. Thérèse of Lisieux.</i> (M. Frohlich)	178
Gunn, Robert Jingen. <i>Journeys into Emptiness: Dogen, Merton, Jung and the Quest for Transformation.</i> (A. Haglof)	179
Kavanaugh, Kieran. <i>John of the Cross: Doctor of Light and Love.</i> (S. Muto)	50
Kavanaugh, Kieran, ed. <i>St. Teresa of Avila: The Way of Perfection: A Study Edition.</i> (M. Dodd)	52
Laforest, Ann. <i>Thérèse of Lisieux: The Way to Love.</i> (C. A. Becker)	241
Marchione, Margherita. <i>Pope Pius XII: Architect for Peace.</i> (T. C. Ross)	184
McGinn, Bernard. <i>The Doctors of the Church: Thirty-Three Men and Women Who Shaped Christianity.</i> (O.J. Nira)	118
Muto, Susan. <i>The Way of Saint John of the Cross: A Guide Through the Dark Night of the Soul.</i> (J. Girouard)	247
Robinson, David. <i>The Family Cloister: Benedictine Wisdom for the Home.</i> (J. McCarty) ...	243
Shannon, William H. <i>Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey: Writings on Contemplation.</i> (R. Schneider)	120
Teadale, Wayne. <i>The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions.</i> (J. Girouard)	56

Editorial

TODAY I DROVE BY THE PENTAGON. Every time I drive by and see the huge gash in the side of the building, all the events of that frightful day come flooding back to memory: seeing the smoke arising from the Pentagon as I stood on my rooftop, hearing helicopters and fighter planes overhead, listening to the sirens of emergency vehicles going through the city. Most of us here in Washington were filled with fear about what had happened and what might still take place. We were not sure the attack was over.

What can we do in the face of events that terrorize us and instill fear into our hearts? What can we do with the anger or feelings of helplessness that arise when we try to make sense of or find meaning in such tragedies? Instinctively, I go within, hoping to find not only answers but a place of peace in which I can feel safe and cared for. I hope, that in prayer and quiet, I can start to find meaning in the midst of chaos and destruction. Glimmers of meaning start to appear but are often extinguished when the magnitude of the suffering overwhelms me. I struggle in a twilight zone, moving between understanding and sorrow, between meaning and hopelessness.

Where do we go when we no longer feel secure and when fear permeates our waking and sleeping? As Christians, we go to Christ, to the only one who can offer us a place of peace and security. Our words echo out in song and prayer, proclaiming our trust in the help of Jesus, believing that he will care for us “like a good shepherd.” We pray long and often for strength to find meaning in senseless acts of violence. And after we have prayed and sung, alone or with a community of believers, we may find a bit more peace entering our lives. The peace does not come all at once, as we would like it to, but it comes slowly, often imperceptibly, changing our attitudes and inspiring our actions. Peace is Christ’s gift to us, given to all of us who open our hearts to him.

Inner peace cannot remain fixed on itself, however. We Christians must bring Christ’s peace to others, showing by our actions and words that violence does not abide in our hearts. Most of us will not be directly involved in the choices made by world leaders regarding peace or war, but we can do our best to influence their decisions, praying unceasingly and working tirelessly for peace. When it comes to our own lives, however, we can be messengers of peace, bringing a peace that is rooted in Christ. We can show to all we meet the gentleness and love that come from having our hearts filled with God’s love. Our lives can proclaim the values of the Gospel, and our song can be that of St. Francis:

Make me a channel of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me bring your love.

Where there is injury, your pardon, Lord,

And where there’s doubt, true faith in you.

—Edward O’Donnell, OCD