

spiritual life

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*Our cover photo of the lighthouse jutting into
Lake Superior at Duluth, Minnesota can bring to
mind the Light of Christ that shines in our darkness
during turbulent times. (Cleo Photography)*

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Letters to the Editor

“Poets of Carmel” was wonderful, as was “Friendship in the Bible.” The new covers and the larger print also help. These articles provide the Carmelite spiritual direction I need. The summer issue also spoke to me with “‘Desires’: Guidance from St. John of the Cross” and “An Ache for God.” ...Your editorial is always read and appreciated first. God grant you strength and courage to continue to share how important God is to you.

S. McC., Maryland

Editor’s Note: The staff of **spiritual life**, and especially myself, would like to thank Br. Michael Stoegbauer for the nine years he held the position of Promotion Manager for **spiritual life**. Because of his hard work, the number of our subscribers has grown. I am also grateful to him for showing Br. Joseph Girouard, our new Promotion Manager, all the intricacies of this position. We will miss his dedication to **spiritual life**, but we know he will support us with his prayers. Thank you!

*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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Veronica Ward

Failure: An Invitation to Contemplative Living

Before the message there must be vision, before the sermon
the hymn, before the prose the poem. (Amos Wilder)¹

Mea Culpa, Mea culpa, Mea maxima culpa

I have failed. / Shards lie around me, / tiny, sharp and piercing.
No jigsaw puzzle / this to reassemble, / no glue can hold together.
But they are mine / to be gathered, stored, treasured, /
pondered upon and revered.
Held sacred and holy / until they give birth /
to a deep sense of well-being.
I am not a failure.

Veronica Ward

“I have come so that they may have life and have it to the
full.” (Jn 10:10)²

FULLNESS AND FAILURE MAY APPEAR to be opposites, but in life’s rich pattern can one experience fullness without being aware of failure? Until I failed, I took my successes for granted, rarely paused for thought, was busy about many things, and, although prayer was an important part of my life, my understanding

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of it was about to change. It was only when life fell apart that I discovered some of its deeper meanings and found a need to be what I now call “contemplative.” I had received much information about “God,” but I had not met the Holy One. When I did come face to face with my own “burning bush,” it became natural to spend time quietly in God’s presence. Since my life may be the only bible some people read, I hope I can be present to others in a way that points to someone greater than I as being the source of the strength, peace, or faithfulness that I show.

Monika Hellwig describes the contemplative attitude in the following words:

The essence of a contemplative attitude seems to be vulnerability—allowing persons, things and events to be, to happen, allowing them their full resonance in one’s experience, looking at them without blinking, touching them and allowing them to touch us without flinching. It is a matter of engaging in action, allowing it to talk back to us and listening to what is said. It is a constant willingness to be taken by surprise.³

How one reaches this position will vary. For some it may be the gradual growth in prayer described by the great Carmelite saints. However, I know people who have run, walked, spent time with nature, sat zazen, or prayed in many different ways. Whatever one does, it is not to avoid facing reality but in order to find it:

Wholeness does not consist in removing a present source of travail; it demands a complete transformation of the person’s attitude to life, which in turn is an outward sign of a transfigured personality.⁴

We all have struggled with personal failure. Some we can easily chalk up to experience and put behind us. But when we fail in relationships, particularly in marriage, the effect can be “life threatening.” Recovering from this injury to our personhood may take many years. As I have tried to come to terms with the breakdown of my marriage, articulating the experience has taken time. The trite solutions that were offered to me did nothing to assuage my guilt or restore my broken spirit. Instead, they forced me to move toward the center of my being to find there a rock, a solid foundation on which

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to rebuild. I needed to find peace in the midst of chaos and strength to meet unexpected challenges, and to learn to live again under circumstances that were once unbearable. In the early days, a friend asked me if I wanted to be bitter or better. To be better, I turned to prayer, to meditation, and to quietly pondering the situation. From hesitant beginnings has come a way “to be.” Although I write from the perspective of failure in marriage, my observations tell me that those who lose their jobs or fail in other ways can identify with my experience.

Moving into Failure and Not Around It

Western society has a very low tolerance of failure, and the remedies it offers are largely unsatisfactory. The damaged marriage is ended and a new relationship begun as a balm for the dejected spirit, as father or mother for the fatherless and motherless. Only a few seem willing to confront the feelings, the meanings, and the possibilities that come with failure. For myself, coming to terms with failure was only partly a matter of intellectual understanding. Exploring it and touching it in the deepest way has been the very source of restoration. I was offered much advice in an effort to make things better, and, while some of it must have been useful, I now remember very little of it. What has helped me most has been a consistent and patient “sitting with” the situation, without struggling in my mind with ideas but just allowing myself to be in the presence of the Holy One. What began as a short-term goal—to get through the day—has become a way of living in the present, letting go of the past, and leaving the future where it belongs—in the hands of the Holy One.

*The essence of a
contemplative
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Dietmar Mieth says that human beings have three nonphysical needs: the need for successful personal relationships, the need for social recognition, and the need for meaning in life.⁵ The situation of

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wife and mother met all three needs for me. When my marriage broke down, my whole world of reference, my way of meaningful existence, was lost. Society tends to define us by what we “do,” and, although not all our “doing” may collapse at the same time, failure in a major area of life destroys more than that part of it. If “this area” has gone wrong, then maybe everything else is wrong, and I have just not realized it yet. This is not a question of the ego or about self-confidence; it strikes at the very essence of being.

The Existential Nature of Failure

Dietmar Mieth states,

Failure is irreversible. The characteristics of failure are irreversibility and irrevocability. Crises can be surmounted, problems can be solved. But when we speak of failure we mean something that is irrevocable, even if we know that not everything fails with the failure of personal relationships or a failure of social recognition or a failure to find an answer to the question of meaning.⁶

Behind the word “failure” are hidden many emotions that do not yield easily to rational thinking. Feelings of anger, resentment, fear, and rejection are mixed with lethargy and distaste for living, along with so many new things to cope with and so much less time to do it all in. Contrast this with Thomas Merton’s view of contemplation:

Fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being.⁷

The disturbance of my equilibrium was at times so frightening that I knew I had to find other ways to “be” in the situation. I became unafraid to look outside my Catholic Christian tradition for assistance and wished I had found sooner what Thich Nhat Hanh had to say about anger:

The Buddhist attitude is to take care of anger. We don’t suppress it. We don’t run away from it. We just breathe and hold our anger in our arms with utmost tenderness. Becoming angry at your anger only doubles it and makes you suffer more.... The Buddhist practice is to go back to breathing and recognize your anger as anger.⁸

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Each of the emotions that threaten to swamp one in the middle of great pain or suffering is addressed partly by thinking things out, asking advice, and getting help. When the house finally goes quiet at night, however, will one choose to fill it with the noise of TV or radio, or find a way to embrace the silence?

A strong notion of rejection may exist for both the one who is left and the one who does the leaving, for she or he may have felt rejected long before walking out of the door. Rejection within the relationship may be followed by rejection outside it as other people find it too difficult to support one in the throes of failure. This disease may be catching. They may feel torn loyalties, and so the lesser experiences of failure, which like the aftershocks of an earthquake, increase the initial devastation.

For the Catholic facing separation and divorce, the fear may be that the Church and thus the Holy One will also reject one. Although I personally have encountered only compassion, the teaching of the Church that marriage is until death compounded my feeling of failure. I had not lived in the USA for very long. Coming from Ireland where there was no divorce at the time, I kept my situation secret for several months through fear of losing my position in ministry,

Is God Merciful?

Does the Holy One also reject? Jewish and Christian teaching says “No.” David is still favored despite committing murder and adultery; Peter is the foundation of the Church in spite of denying Jesus three times. Reading in Scripture about still being chosen will not be enough to reassure one that he or she is still acceptable. One needs to hear it from another person and from the gentle voice of the Holy One heard in the depths of one’s being.

The wisdom of the Church also offers the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the process of annulment to bring healing to those who have failed. I believe it, however, to be the process of quietly staying attentive to one’s feelings, being honest about them no matter how terrible and destructive they may seem, that ultimately makes the sacrament or annulment healing in actuality.

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If a broken marriage is a failure, then is a successful one simply one that lasts? Brokenness must awaken us to the real needs within marriage. Do the many individual experiences of failure teach the Church something about the need for better marriage preparation and for support along the way? It will be argued that good preparation and support are available but too many people do not find what they want or need in time to prevent disaster. We have not taught people that asking for help is not failure but possibly the beginning of real success. The more aware I have become of the pain involved in failure, the more I feel a need to speak out, to challenge the Church to listen to the pain and help define good marriage and nurture it. What is the nature of marriage as intended by the Holy One? The answers will not come simply from academic exercises but from a deep listening to the Spirit within people's experiences.

From our earliest years we hear "you should" and "you ought," and to these we add "if only." These oft repeated phrases place a burden

Suffering is not good in and of itself, but the contemplative person may put suffering to good use

of guilt on our shoulders that can compound the sense of failure. What the contemplative being brings to bear on the situation is a dose of honesty and reality. Hindsight will not alter things but accepting responsibility for what is mine in the situation—allowing that circumstances played their part and that I

did not fail alone—can help to free me from guilt. At long last I can say that I was the best wife that I could be given the situation and have hope that new relationships need not be subject to the same pitfalls. I may never receive forgiveness from my marriage partner and I may never be aware of the full extent of my responsibility, but I can be content to leave the apportioning of guilt and blame to the realm of mystery. The wisdom of the serenity prayer says,

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,

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The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.

Failure causes us pain and suffering, and we have to deal with it in some way. Western society urges us to get as far away from suffering as possible, while some suggest that we see it as God's testing ground that helps us to become better people. There is ample evidence that not everyone survives the test. Mental breakdown and suicide are common and may be the ultimate failure from which there is no recovery. Suffering is not good in and of itself, but the contemplative person may put suffering to good use. To bear it as a burden that weighs one down or to try to get rid of it by ignoring it or stuffing it inside will cause harm. The alternative is to integrate it and learn to accept it as part of life, neither seeking it nor rejecting it when it occurs. Acceptance of what is happening in a positive way is both a grace and freedom. It doesn't happen quickly; it cannot be acquired by willing it to be so. It is the fruit of quiet time spent in the presence of the Holy One.

“Why” – The Question That Won't Go Away

When one sits on the dung heap of failure, the biggest question faced is “Why?” It will not matter how many times one asks it, nor in how many different ways it is phrased, because ultimately there will be no satisfactory answer that will enable one to pack the failure away in a box and be done with it. Even the partial solutions that help one to come to terms with the situation come more from compassionate listening to one's heart than from repeatedly going over and over the events of the past. If one can lovingly bring the past into focus without assigning blame to oneself or the other, there is hope and possibility of befriending both, for both hurt. In doing this for myself, the goal was merely to survive. However, coming to a place where I can hold the broken pieces reverently and treasure them in gratitude is a more wholesome and holy place to be.

The contemplative is not freed from the path of action. It is the person who develops the capacity to be patient with “what is” who gains the insight to see what needs to be changed and receives the

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courage to work for liberation. After living apart for three years, I filed for divorce because to describe myself as “married” had become a lie. I value marriage as a sacred union and “divorced” at that time was an honest statement about my marriage. In the years since, there has been an ongoing challenge to forgive the difficulties encountered in the process. Also, when children are involved, the relationship with a former spouse is rarely completely severed. Action without contemplation would have been more an angry, vengeful reaction than an attempt to enable both to live with the reality that a spiritual bond had not happened between us.

Conclusion

I am not the person I was. Failure was an invitation to live a more contemplative life. Prayer that reveals God’s love for me and for each person continues to provide the foundation for ministry and for all of my life. What I have learned has become important as I try to share faith with parishioners and catechumens and remain faithful to my vocation to become the clearest image of the Holy One that I can. After all, the name Veronica means “true image.”

Veronica Ward, a British native and the mother of five young adults, has lived and worked in the UK, Ireland, and for the last thirteen years in the USA. She has been involved in adult education and faith sharing for the last twenty years and is currently Pastoral Associate at St. Catherine of Siena Parish in Kansas City, Missouri. She works with others seeking healing after divorce and does some spiritual direction. She earned a Master’s degree in Theology at St. Michael’s College, Colchester, Vermont.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Nathan Mitchell, “Symbols Are Actions, Not Objects: New Directions for an Old Problem,” *Living Worship*, 1977.
2. *The Jerusalem Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).
3. Quoted in Padraic O’Hare, *The Way of Faithfulness* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1993), p. 6.
4. Israel, Martin, *The Pain that Heals* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1981), p. 171.
5. Mieth, Dietmar, “The Ethic of Failure and Beginning Again,” in *Coping with Failure*, ed. Greinacher & Mette (London and Philadelphia: Concilium, SMC Press/Trinity Press International, 1990).
6. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
7. Quoted in Padraic O’Hare, “The Way of Faithfulness,” p. 2.
8. Thich Naht Hanh, “Seeding the Unconscious: New Views on Buddhism and Psychotherapy,” *Common Boundary* (Nov/Dec, 1989), p. 19.

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Luis O. Corpus

Spiritual Direction: A Pathway To Growth

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL DIRECTION and what is it all about? Let me share my experience as the directee, the person being directed and receiving spiritual direction. I am a layman and a baptized Catholic. I received formal Catholic education and instruction, and my parents and family were practicing Catholics. I have received spiritual direction and counseling from priests over a period of twelve years. As I look back over the past years and see my journey in faith, I realize how much my faith has been enriched and how my life has been guided as a result of the spiritual direction I received. The impact of spiritual direction in my life has been tremendous.

The Search

I have often thought that life is a journey and existence is a constant movement: truths to be discovered, mysteries to be experienced, a surge of energy toward a goal, and an expression of passion toward a fulfillment. I am of the belief that in the life of each person there is a grand search to address fundamental matters: Who am I? Why am I here? Where will I go? A search for many things: philosophical, practical, and spiritual. Among the many reference

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points—family, education, society, and experience—faith and the teachings of the Church are a major help. This search is at the core of the freedom in each individual's life.

My own search began when I addressed questions that were accumulating in my mind for many years. There were questions about doctrine, practices, personal living, and about how to pray. More than ten years ago, I asked for an appointment with the author of a book about prayer. I started with the first appointment, continued with a second appointment, and then a third one. Questions led to answers, which led to more questions. One appointment led to another. Suddenly, on hindsight, a whole horizon lay before me—life, faith, and God. A conscious fundamental direction was looming on the horizon: What is God's will in my life? What is God's plan for me? I realized I was at the doorstep of spiritual direction.

The Setting

There are two things I have found to be at work in the experience of spiritual direction. First, there is the gift from God. My hunger to know more about life, creation, people, and faith is a gift received from God. There is then an invitation to greater faith. At one time many years ago, I expressed to a Jesuit priest-professor that I had a yearning to know more about my faith. He looked at me with a straight gaze and said, "Chito, that is grace." Now, many years later, I am thankful for that grace.

This gift, I have come to realize, is in each person created by God. It is God's marvelous gift, an invitation to draw our lives closer to him, and it is for us to decide to respond to that gift.

The second aspect of spiritual direction is the director. Far from being an experience of self-study in the pursuit of truth, spiritual direction requires a partner, a director, who receives the totality of the directee's information—knowledge, experience, emotions, and problems. Spiritual directors are special people. I have had spiritual directors who have been in religious life and are priests, although other people also provide spiritual direction. They live out special vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. They devote years of study

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to philosophy, theology, and, perhaps, specialized studies in particular fields to enhance their pastoral ministries. They live a life of prayer. They have a sense of who God is and what God is doing in the directee's life. They have wisdom in the ways of God. They bring these talents to the directee's situation as they direct the latter's thought processes, influence his or her decisions, and enrich the knowledge of the directee. They play such important roles in leading a hungry, wandering soul to the riches of God's kingdom.

The Practice

Spiritual direction has been practiced by people, including those in religious life, for many years. Thomas Merton, in his books *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* and *The Wisdom of the Desert*, recounts the practice of spiritual direction by the desert fathers. These were individuals who, according to Merton, lived in the desert to seek Christ. In separating themselves from society to live in the desert, they were cut off from formal guidance provided by the bishop. The desert life was solitary, and it was allegedly dangerous because of temptations. To discern the spirit, the desert fathers resorted to seeking advice and guidance from spiritual directors, who, in some ways, took the place of the bishop. Spiritual directors guided the formation of the desert fathers.

In later years, spiritual direction continued to be practiced. Much is written about spirituality and spiritual direction as practiced and lived by the saints. The book *Carmelite Studies 1*, edited by John Sullivan OCD, is a compilation of articles and essays written by various authors about the practice of spiritual direction by noted Carmelites, such as St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila.

In contemporary times, spiritual direction continues to be practiced among lay and religious individuals. Books have been written about it. In *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*, Thomas Merton describes spiritual direction as being a guide toward one's particular vocation in life. It is a process of formation aimed at realizing that vocation: a call to greater union with God. It is a step toward spiritual growth. The search for union with God continues with God's grace among believers today.

Spiritual Direction: A Pathway to Growth

Spiritual direction was practiced in the early Church communities. It was practiced in more recent historical times, and it continues to be practiced today.

The Benefits

As I evaluated the value of the meetings with priests over the years, I recognized three benefits derived from spiritual direction. First, there is a sense of knowing one's destiny in the context of God's plan. There are opportunities, challenges, problems, issues, sufferings, and trials that a person faces in his or her life. There are, as well, fundamental questions of meaning that all human beings face: What is freedom without meaning to fulfill the freedom? What is life without a purpose? To a person of faith, central to all this questioning is the primacy of

*Spiritual direction
has brought me to
the doors of an
enlightened faith*

God's will and plan in the person's life. Faith provides the answer. The richness of Christian tradition and teaching is a database of wisdom. Spiritual direction has led me closer to an appreciation of life, the gift of Jesus Christ, and the meaning of our redemption. It has instilled a sense of his presence in my life and also a sense of his plan in my life.

Second, there is an enlightened faith. I began to see that faith was an experience of intellect and will, of knowledge and love. To will to respond to God's love is an act of the heart, I began to learn. But the heart needs to be solidly grounded, not on fanatical and emotional faith but on prudent and guided faith. My faith began to be enriched as I read and asked about living out the faith and about the Christian dimension in addressing universal experiences of pain, suffering, relationships, and individual struggles of daily life. Spiritual direction has given me a concrete point of convergence between the eternal truths about God and their impact on my life and circumstances here and now. In that sense, spiritual direction has brought me to the doors of an enlightened faith.

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Third, there is an experience of divine love. All this results in love, the ultimate experience. There is a realization of God's love in my life. There is an awe at the grandeur of his love and of his saving act, culminating in his passion, death, and resurrection to restore our relationship with God the Father. My personal response to his love, however, is elusive, for I am nowhere near the ideal of a loving person responding with fervor to God's love. There is so much conversion needed in my heart to provide a genuine love of God and of neighbor. I have sought ways through spiritual direction and counseling to love in response to God's love. Spiritual direction has given me knowledge of myself: my past, my hurts, my pain, my weaknesses, my uniqueness, and my worth. A healing process has addressed obstacles to growth and has strengthened capabilities to respond to God's love and to love more fully.

A Pathway

Eternity with God in the beatific vision is a destiny God offers all of us—a journey to the gates of heaven. My life here on earth is filled with a plethora of principles, philosophies, paradigms, and truths. Faith offers me the truth about myself, about my life, and about my ultimate destiny—eternal life with God. Being free but limited, I need help. I need a pathway to the gates of heaven. And I have found this pathway to be the wisdom, knowledge, and love of a person devoted to serving God as a spiritual director. Spiritual direction has been a pathway provided to me, not to unlock mysteries but to appreciate their richness, not to abandon life but to embrace it, and not to contain the infinite God but to trust in his infinite mercy.

Conclusion

The Jesuit Retreat House in Los Altos, California sits quietly on a hill. From one of its high points, heaven seems physically closer and makes me wonder about the face of God and what lies ahead beyond the horizon of this earthly existence. The search goes on. I ask myself: Has spiritual direction been helpful? I know the answer to that question—I am glad for the spiritual direction I have received. I am

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also thankful for the spiritual directors who have listened to me, touched my heart, and guided me to a greater awareness of God.

Luis O. Corpus lives with his wife in Menlo Park, California (a city within the San Francisco Bay area). He studied at the Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines and received an MBA from the Asian Institute of Management, also in the Philippines. He was in banking for ten years and is currently a self-employed consultant. He and his wife are members of Our Lady of Mercy Parish in Westlake in Daly City. He and his wife were members of the St. Vincent de Paul chapter of a local parish and are regular volunteers of St. Anthony's Foundation, an organization founded by a Franciscan priest, serving the needy and homeless in San Francisco.

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Jesus cries, "Come follow me!"

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Gillian Leslie, OCD

Elizabeth of the Trinity: An Exposition of Her Last Words

WHEN SISTER ELIZABETH OF THE TRINITY came to die, she said a very beautiful thing: “I go to Light, to Love, to Life.” What we need to ask is whether this statement was nothing more than that—merely a beautiful combination of words—or whether it has some specific content to which Elizabeth herself applied her own unique and distinctive meaning.

Life

The word “life” is subject to a variety of definitions. It may, for instance, refer to a purely physical reality: life as opposed to death. It may have a moral element as when we speak of a “good” life or a “bad” life. It may also refer to the spiritual or psychological qualities by which it is characterized in a particular instance: a “full” life or an “empty” life, a life that is meaningful or a life that seems void of meaning. When we look, however, at what Elizabeth meant by life, we have to say that she understood it to be defined in terms of eternity. Life is not only that which she believed to endure beyond the

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boundaries of physical death but also that which participates in the undying existence of God.

From this point of view, Elizabeth's understanding of the concept of life is a very fluid one. It cannot be categorized. Life stretches out ahead of her. She enters in and does not foresee that she will ever plumb its depths or reach its end. Indeed, it has no end. In this respect, she goes against the natural inclinations of human nature with its craving for security and certitude. She takes up life as one might take a leap into the dark, a leap that casts one into a great abyss—God himself is this abyss. This is one of her favorite images.

Mortal life, where Elizabeth is concerned, is characterized by suffering. Her view of life, which could seem so negative and pessimistic to us, is colored by centuries of profound distrust of a life that many felt to be defiled by sinfulness and shame. In Elizabeth's thought, however, the suffering in question is not imposed on humankind by a grieving or wrathful God. It is the preliminary suffering of those who, "having passed through the great tribulation," are now in a position to enjoy the abundance of a life in heaven that they did not know on earth. Suffering, for Elizabeth, is an almost natural condition of earthly existence. More specifically, it was the physical pain she endured during her final illness.

Pain—whether bodily, mental or emotional—was the great crucible into which her soul was cast in order to form it for heaven. Indeed, both physical and mental pain played an increasing part in Elizabeth's experience as death drew near. Its crushing burden profoundly affected her view of life at this time. She even spoke privately to Mother Germaine of her temptation to suicide, the very antithesis of the acceptance of life. Yet, it is into this situation that Elizabeth introduced a novel thought. She does not believe, she says, that suffering will ever lose its place in the life of the Christian, even in the life of eternity. By this she did not mean to suggest that suffering can ever be a part of the experience of the redeemed while they are participating in the state of those who have entered the heavenly kingdom. But while "that suffering passes away,...the experience of having suffered endures for ever." Even in heaven, we cannot forget the suffering that we endured on earth.

Elizabeth, unfortunately, never fully explained what she had in mind. Nevertheless, its theological rationale is not hard to find. It was by way of suffering, accepted as the will of the Father, that Jesus redeemed us. Therefore, it is by traveling the same road of

Elizabeth spoke often of this conformity to Christ, citing the works of her beloved St. Paul

suffering, in whatever form it may take, that a Christian not only enters into the redemption of Christ but even participates in some measure in that redemption. So the memory of having suffered becomes the joy and glory of the redeemed because suffering has made them more like Christ and be-

cause it has enabled them to become coworkers in his saving work. Elizabeth spoke often of this conformity to Christ, citing the works of her “beloved St. Paul.” As she drew closer to death, certain seminal ideas from this apostle seem to have been frequently on her lips: “for me to live is Christ,” “with Christ I am nailed to the cross,” “I die daily.” Such sentiments not only reveal her state of thought at this crucial moment but are a precious indication of how she understood the role of suffering in the life of the believer.

Elizabeth's Carmelite Life

If suffering in its redemptive aspect appears to have been one of the most personally compelling reasons for drawing Elizabeth to Carmel, her actual experience of Carmelite life developed in her a heightened sense of what she believed to be a call to ever deeper interiority. “Interiority” in this context refers to communion with the presence of God within the soul that makes of it an “anticipated heaven” even here on earth. In Carmel, she believed, the life of heaven would already begin. Thus, the life of Carmel is already the threshold of that new life that we shall enjoy in the future. Similarly, the prayer by which Carmel is characterized and which is its vocation leads us, at least potentially, to a knowledge of that future life experienced as God’s complete possession of the soul.

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Elizabeth's mind dwelt often on the theme of that total and habitual conformity to God's will that she described as living in communion with him. To live in communion with God is not only to fulfil God's greatest desire for the human creature, but it is to enter into the exchange of love that marks the interior life of the Blessed Trinity. Nevertheless, such a communion is not to be discovered without a great deal of preliminary asceticism (self-discipline).

In the monastic tradition, the kind of asceticism that is required by this goal has always been sought in the silence and solitude of the cell. In silence and solitude, the monk or nun learns self-knowledge and acquires a taste for and yearning toward the things of God. Here is the tradition into which Elizabeth inserted herself in Carmel. The solitude of the Carmelite cell, as she perceived, is not intended to be merely an escape from the noise and distraction accompanying normal human activity. It is also the place where the yearning soul can apply its powers toward searching for and uniting itself to God.

Elizabeth's Expression of Charity

Elizabeth's concept of Carmelite solitude was deeply marked by the quest for divine union. It is even said that she once refused an older nun who had asked her for help with work because the extra burden would have compromised her loving attention to God. Such a story, which now seems to us almost scandalous—a breach of charity, not to say in act of pride—needs to be seen in context as the response of one who placed ultimate value on this total union with the divine will. At the very least it raises the question as to what true charity really is. For charity is that by which we enter into the communication of love between the three persons of the Blessed Trinity and thus into the very life force of God. Charity, therefore, is seminal in any discussion of what that life of God might mean for the Christian believer.

Ultimately, we have to say that charity is that which expresses in concrete action here on earth what we believe about the inmost nature of God in heaven. What I do manifests what I think, and the way I show my love to others can only take the expression of how I understand the love that God shows to me. This is why our charity

is so often imperfect: not because our intentions are wrong but because our knowledge of God is not rooted in truth. A useful comparison can surely be made here between Elizabeth and Thérèse of Lisieux. It was because Thérèse saw God primarily in terms of merciful love that merciful love became the

*Elizabeth saw
God primarily
in terms of
unifying love*

characteristic of her exercise of love in community. It was because Elizabeth saw God primarily in terms of unifying love that the desire to nourish and draw others to the life-giving communion with him—which she herself enjoyed—became the characteristic of her charity in community. At the same time it would be

a mistake to think that this difference in orientation implies that Elizabeth's interpretation of charity was somehow more idealized and less practical than that of Thérèse.

It is clear from personal testimonies that Elizabeth possessed a remarkable sense of tact and practical application to virtue, which infused her relations to others with charm and genuine concern. It is also clear that, in terms of action and what she actually did, she was not above pushing herself to the limit when it came to becoming the channel of God's love toward those whom she knew, both inside and outside the monastery, and to whom she became a mentor. For in the exercise of charity, all depends on the situation within which it is exercised. Awareness of the existing context is what roots our charity in reality, not conformity to some preconceived idea. Take, for example, Thérèse's reaction to the nun who splashed her with dirty water during the community wash. We have to assume that Thérèse's loving sensitivity to the sister in question informed her that this sister would have been deeply hurt if attention had been drawn to her lack of care. In that particular circumstance, the loving thing to do was to ignore it and to continue quietly with one's work as though nothing were amiss.

Perhaps even, with the kind of generosity so characteristic of Thérèse, it would be possible to go beyond charity alone and seize the opportunity for an act of self-denial for God's sake and for loving

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self-oblation. In any case, the point is that under the same circumstances in a different context, a wholly different reaction might be called for—supposing my sister would have been more hurt by the discovery that I had been acting like the “Little Flower” than she would have been if I had teased her in front of everybody for the liberality of her splashing. In that case true charity would surely have demanded this more simple and spontaneous approach.

If we consider charity somewhat along these lines, we see that Elizabeth was someone who did not need to treat her sisters with quite the same kind of sensitivity with which Thérèse felt that she must treat hers. The Dijon Carmel was already well-founded in those fundamental elements of practical charity, the lack of which makes the Lisieux Carmel appear so uncouth in our eyes. What the Dijon Carmel needed was the drive to push that practical charity to its end in God. We do not have to be Christians to be kind, as the saying goes. What “divinizes” charity, as Elizabeth would say, what makes it truly Christlike is the purpose by which it is governed. And, in the last resort, this purpose is life and the communication of life to others. When, by our loving affirmation of another, we enable them to act in the confidence of being loved, we also enable them to live more fully at a human level. When this principle is activated in the divine sphere, then the life that is thus nourished is also divine.

Light

When it comes to discussing Elizabeth of the Trinity’s concept of God as Light, we are faced with a problem. Light as an image of God poses a difficulty because we already know what light is. Light can be seen and known. We know that it can be seen and known because we know when it is absent. When there is no light, then we become aware of what it is that is lacking and of our dependence on it. The temptation, therefore, is to think of God as the light we know, only more so. If light can be described as “bright” or “clear” or “pure,” then the temptation is to say that the light of God is “brighter,” “clearer,” or “purer.” Of course, this is by no means what the Light that is God means. Light, in the sense intended by theology, is no more than an

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analogy for something else. It is an image, and an inadequate one, for a deeper reality. To talk of God's Light, then, is not to limit God to the level of human comparisons with the light that we know but to talk of a completely different kind of light. Divine Light is not simply quantitatively different from material light; it is qualitatively different too.

Elizabeth made no attempt to define how she understood God's Light. It was not at that level that she had anything particular to contribute to our knowledge. Her understanding, however, is mediated through the many things she has to say, not about what it is but about what it does. For light is not something static, in her view. She does not endorse the classic concept of heaven as a place where God's Light transfixes the ecstatic soul in immovable bliss. For Elizabeth, God's Light is that which penetrates us from within the Godhead and transforms our perception of what we see here and now. It takes the form of an active communication to which we who receive it must actively respond. What I see and how clearly I see it will determine what, in fact, I will do. This means that Elizabeth's concept of light, like that of life, is fundamentally practical. It is mediated, in the first place, through concrete events and situations.

She refers often to "lights" (in the plural), inspired in her by reading the epistles of St. Paul. It is through such "lights" that we are drawn into closer union with the Light itself. Herein is the principle behind her understanding of what it means to be transformed in Christ: Christ, the "radiant image of God's glory," is the reality to which God's Light conforms us. By reading the Scriptures as the Word of God, Christ is revealed to us for our imitation, and the light of eternity is brought more fully into the world.

Light and Darkness

Following St. John of the Cross, Elizabeth often spoke of light in the context of darkness. As with St. John, this "darkness" is a metaphor for the life of faith. The metaphor expresses the truth that not only are light and darkness diametrically opposite to each other but that, paradoxically, without each other they cannot exist. Without the darkness of faith, the Light of God would not shine; in the illu-

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mination bestowed by God's Light, the darkness yields its secrets. Darkness characterizes our life on earth—not in the sense that we are doomed to walk in habitual blindness, far from God and unable to know him—but in terms of our mental perception of how ignorant we really are and how dependent we are on God's Light to illuminate this ignorance. Yet, such a darkness is also "sacred," a place in which to "immerse" oneself. The path that it surrounds leads inevitably to the Bridegroom, the Master, and "the light that surrounds him will envelop me also," Elizabeth wrote. Thus darkness in itself and light in itself, as symbols of the soul's state, are not what is important. What is important is the transforming work that they are allowed to accomplish.

St. John of the Cross's language of light and darkness is primarily used in an ascetic context: darkness gives way to light as the soul that travels the way of self-denial experiences gradual illumination. We may surely assume that Elizabeth both knew and accepted St. John's approach. However, she does not advert to it very much, and the reason would seem to lie in the explanation that follows. Elizabeth saw that faith, although it is darkness to the soul in terms of felt experience, is nevertheless, in itself, light. It is the "beautiful light of faith." And it is light because it participates in the light of eternity, just as life was said to participate in the qualities bestowed on it by eternity or as love can also be said to be characterized by eternal love. The divine Light of which Elizabeth speaks and to which she felt so intimately drawn is the light that is the "inheritance of the saints." It is that light that illuminates the blessed and gives them a share in the glory of God. It is, therefore, that which belongs to the state of heaven rather than to the state of earth. So great was the pull of heaven on Elizabeth's heart that to think of light under any other terms seems not to have played any great role in her spirituality.

Mary as Mirror of Light

God radiates light, transforming the soul and simultaneously purifying it. But the soul that is purified and transformed in this way also becomes a mediator of the light. It can be described as "pure."

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Elizabeth was fond of drawing attention to the living witness of this process and its result in the Blessed Virgin. “There is one,” she wrote, “who is so pure, so luminous, that she seemed to be the Light itself.” Her favorite title for this aspect of Mary was *Speculum Justitiae*: Mirror of Justice. Mary is the one among all human creatures who most adequately reflects, as in a mirror, the light of truth and love that belongs to the inmost nature of God. She can do this because she is so simple; that is, there is nothing within her to inhibit the work of God in her soul or prevent its mediation to others.

There is nothing, in other words, to block the illuminating stream of divine Light. “She seems to reproduce on earth,” said Elizabeth, “the life which is that of the divine Being, the simple Being.” For simplicity is, in fact, a divine quality. Only what is simple can become a channel of light to the world. In God nothing hinders the perpetual outflow of light that makes of us his image. In Mary nothing hindered the reception of that light. Simplicity here does not, of course, refer to a mental deficiency but to an attitude of complete and trusting openness to receive all that God has to give. It is because Mary can be described as simple that she can also be described as profound, as one who is in touch with her deepest self, rooted in God. Mary thus becomes the prototype of what Elizabeth herself desired to be.

In a remarkable passage in the long meditation written for her friend Françoise de Sourdon, Elizabeth wrote,

It seems to me that I am like a mother bending attentively over her favorite child. I raise my eyes and look at God and then I lower them on to you, exposing you to the rays of his love.

This is a wholly Marian attitude. Emptied of self, the person can become one through whom God’s love can pour out, radiating the illumination that only such love can bring. It is an attitude of motherhood as a nurturing of life, watchful and caring, concerned only for the best interests of the one it loves. In the same text Elizabeth also wrote, “If by chance, in the radiance of His Light, I see you leave that sole occupation (of love), I will come very quickly to call you to order.” In the things of God there can be no compromise. Everything must be given to God; everything must be sanctified.

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Christological View

To say that the soul who is wholly open to God's Light is wholly Marian is to say, in effect, that it takes its place among all the saints, of whom Mary is the best example and the prototype. Assimilation to the Light of God is that which leads us to a participation in the state of the saints in light. The elect are those who are "wholly bathed in the great light of God." Even here below, Elizabeth says, "There are some who belong to... 'this generation pure as light' ...because He radiates in them the beauty of His perfections." This is an awe-inspiring thought. Already, here and now, she seems to be saying, the barrier between heaven and earth, the sanctified and the being sanctified, is being broken down. The mediator of this work is, of course, Christ himself. Perhaps nowhere else in her writings is Elizabeth so profoundly Christological as in this discussion of what it means to reflect the glory of God in heaven. Here she uses St. John's image of the Lamb. The Lamb, who is the sole light of the heavenly city, is also, by analogy, the only light of the soul. The two states, that of the blessed and that of those still on the way, here correspond with each other. And as Christ reflects the glory of the Father, so they reflect the glory of Christ.

But what is this glory? Instinctively Elizabeth turns to the passion of Jesus for her answer. The Lamb is essentially one who appears "as it were slain." Elizabeth wrote,

Before contemplating with uncovered face the glory of the Lord, they have shared in the annihilation of His Christ, before being transformed from brightness to brightness in the image of the Divine Being, they have been conformed to the image of the Word Incarnate, the One crucified by love.

It is this sharing in the passion of Christ that enables the soul on earth to share the glory of the saints in light. Elizabeth's own life bore testimony to her identification with this truth. Her last illness and dying became for her the means of sharing in that crucifixion of Jesus and thus the gateway to the heavenly life of which she spoke. She too was to be "annihilated," crushed by sickness and pain. In this experience, however, she recognized the antechamber to heaven: "I think I will soon be going [to] the bosom of Light and Love," and

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“Sometimes I think He is going to come and take me, to carry me off to where he is in dazzling Light.”

Her conviction’s impact on us depends on her already reaching out in heart and mind to the destiny for which she felt her present suffering was preparing her. That destiny, by contrast with the spiritual and mental darkness imposed by her present affliction, was to be wholly light—darkness’s companion and its reverse. The Light of God thus symbolizes that which the soul anticipates in hope, a hope that Elizabeth expressed in the moving cry, “What will it be...in God’s great Light, the first meeting with divine beauty?”

Love

Of the three divine attributes under discussion, love has been left until last because it is the most misunderstood. It is misunderstood because, as Elizabeth perceived, love is only too frequently equated with a certain feeling. When, for instance, she wrote that love is what draws God to the creature, she hastened to add, “Not a sensible love but the love that is ‘strong as death.’” It is, as she wrote elsewhere, a love that is “pure and disinterested,” not “seeking itself in the sweetness of this love.” “Love of God,” she wrote to Françoise de Sourdon, “must be so strong that it extinguishes all our self-love.” To focus attention on the feeling dimensions of love would be to draw too close to self-love rather than to love of God.

Unlike Thérèse of Lisieux, Elizabeth rarely alluded to feeling states in what she said and wrote. The phrase “I feel” was not a part of her vocabulary. Yet, this is not to say that love has no feeling or that feelings have no part to play in our experience of love. Indirectly, Elizabeth’s own life bore witness to this fact. Not only did she continue to maintain in Carmel the friendships she had formed outside, but her deeply affective relationship with her mother never ceased to play a large role in her life. Someone who could write to a younger friend, “I love you as a mother loves her child,” can hardly be accused of lacking in the kind of emotion that such a relationship implies.

Nevertheless, if love cannot be divorced from feelings, it is not, however, dependent on them. “It matters little to the soul,” Elizabeth

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wrote, “whether it feels God or not, whether He sends it joy or suffering; it believes in his love.” Love, in other words, is essentially the exercise of faith. It is shown by what we do rather than by what we think or feel or say. When Elizabeth identified this active expression of faith with the fulfillment of the will of God, she did not have in mind mere obedience to that will but a surrender infused by the passion of total dedication. Where obedience is transformed by such passion, love is made manifest. The passion of love is proved, paradoxically, less in those circumstances when the soul may feel a sense of exaltation and confidence than when it acts according to its faith in God’s love for it, in spite of its feelings or lack of feelings.

Image of Furnace

Elizabeth of the Trinity’s favorite image for love was that of the furnace. It is one of the very few images that she habitually employed. Unlike Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Thérèse of Lisieux, Elizabeth’s writings lack the abundant imagery that characterizes the works of the former. Indeed she seems, in a certain sense, to have had more of an intellectual and theological than an imaginative type of mind. This particular image, then, would seem to be worth taking seriously precisely because its occurrence is so exceptional. In one sense it is unoriginal: she would have come across it in any number of devotional books of the period. But the fact that it had struck her to the extent of becoming a part of her language about love suggests that the natural content of the word itself must have seemed to her particularly appropriate as an expression of love’s nature. Like the image of the abyss that is, arguably, the only other major image that Elizabeth consistently used, the image of the furnace refers primarily not to our love but to the love of God.

If God is the “consuming fire” mentioned in the Letter to the Hebrews, then love is the material of that fire. This is the love that burns and consumes the dross of the soul’s faults and imperfections and prepares it for that loving union with God that is its desire and goal. There is, she said, a “Furnace of love” burning within us—the Holy Spirit in person—who, as the bond of love uniting the Blessed

Trinity, incorporates us into that love and into the Trinity's loving relationship. The furnace, then, is what symbolizes love under the double aspect of that which consumes and that which burns: of the purification and passion already mentioned.

To talk about the meaning of love, however, it is not sufficient to describe it. Even love could be said to have no meaning if it did not have a specific purpose. The exercise of loving has to be understood in terms of the end to which it is directed, otherwise one might well be tempted to ask, "Why bother?" If it is granted that love in its active form demands both self-sacrifice and effort, then it must be provided with a motivation both greater and stronger than the degree of effort involved. This Elizabeth defines as "union." The object of

*The object of loving
is to become united
with the God who
is Love*

loving is to become united with the God who is Love. This language of union with God is, again, one that Elizabeth of the Trinity inherited from a long spiritual tradition and one she does not seem to have fundamentally questioned. It is only indirectly, therefore, that we can tease out what she meant by it. In this

context, she spoke about "centering" the soul on God, about "entering" deeply into him, and about participation in the love that God is.

In symbolic language she even spoke of the soul in this context as God's "bridal chamber," the meeting place where love is consummated in the most intimate form known to the human creature. The impression given by her use of these terms is one of intense application, of those who are wholly focused upon handing themselves over to the beloved one. It is, she wrote, "to collect all one's powers in order to employ them in the one work of love." Silence is needed for such a purpose: silence, not only in the sense of a lack of speech but in the sense of a profound stillness within the mind and heart. Silence is unitive because it is the concrete expression of the intense application required and because the soul whose "powers" (as Elizabeth called them) are thus focused is thereby rendered wholly attentive, alert, and surrendered.

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Surrender and Adoration

Love is, in fact, about surrender and is expressed through surrender: surrender, that is to say, to God in Christ. By “surrender” in this context, Elizabeth means the yielding of the will to God’s will. “Let us lovingly eat this bread of the will of God,” she wrote in her retreat notebook of August 1906, three months before she died. Even if that will seems “crucifying,” yet, by embracing it “in strength and serenity with the divine Crucified,” it will become the means of making us more like the one we love. Jesus, the Word Incarnate, is also “the one crucified by love.”

In this compact phrase Elizabeth expressed love’s essential paradox: the will of God for us can lead to suffering and yet still be recognized as intended by God’s love in the sense that

those who march on the way of sorrows are those “whom He foreknew and predestined to be conformed to the image of His divine Son.”

It was a perception that she applied to her own suffering as disease ate away at her body and that caused her to exclaim, “I wonder how the soul that has sounded the depths of love that the Heart of God has for it could be anything but joyful in every suffering and sorrow?” Those who recognize the hand of love behind all that happens and who yield themselves entirely to it are those who, in every circumstance, are souls of profound adoration. For it is adoration that, in Elizabeth of the Trinity’s thought, is the supreme manifestation of the loving soul. Adoration, she wrote, is “the ecstasy of love.” It is “love overcome by the beauty, the strength, the immense grandeur of the Object loved.” Adoration is what loving surrender to God’s will looks like when it is carried to the point of total self-forgetfulness.

The last important text that Elizabeth was to write has been published under the title by which its main theme is most nearly expressed: *Let Yourself Be Loved*. Written to Mother Germaine as a final testament, the idea that God asks nothing more of us than to allow him to love us is repeated throughout with all the insistence of profound conviction. This is Elizabeth’s last word about love: “Let yourself be loved,” to which she added Jesus’ words to Peter, “more

than these.” The blending of ideas that, strictly speaking, depends on an inaccurate interpretation of what Jesus actually said, seems to summarize her entire thought on the subject at the summit of her earthly existence. On the one hand it expresses the sheer gratuitousness of God’s love; on the other, the fact that God can only pour out his love on individuals, not collectives.

Addressing herself specifically to Mother Germaine, Elizabeth nevertheless speaks the truth about every soul. Each one of us is

*To let oneself
be loved is the
greatest act
of faith*

uniquely loved, divinely chosen. Each one of us is called to let the outpoured love of God for us become the dominant reality of our lives. It is love, testified Elizabeth, that effects the healing, transforming work brought by Christ’s redemption. “Love,” she wrote, “can rebuild what you have destroyed.” It is “an unchanging and creative love, a free love which transforms as it pleases Him.” To let oneself be loved is what praise of God’s glory looks like when carried into act. It is the most perfect act of faith. By remaining in communion with his love, we prove that, no matter what afflictions may assail us, we believe that the power of God’s love is at work in it all.

So deeply convinced was Elizabeth at this point of her life in the truth of her convictions about the love of God that the text *Let Yourself Be Loved* is expressed in the astonishing language of mystical priesthood. Mother Germaine, who had hitherto exercised the priesthood of offering Elizabeth to God as a victim of suffering, would in turn, she said, experience the priestly action of her “child” from heaven. Or again, actually identifying herself this time with the host of the Mass, Elizabeth made the extraordinary claim that from heaven she would live in Germaine’s soul, would live in communion with her before the throne of God. Germaine, she said, had been “consecrated to me from eternity” so that she might share Elizabeth’s vision and her vocation, “that you might participate in it and...may live the life of the blessed.”

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Such language, raising, as it does, many questions, cannot be adequately dealt with here. But insofar as Elizabeth is trying to express a fundamental truth about the nature of God's love, we see her struggling to put into words the whole meaning of our vocation as Christians. To let oneself be loved is the greatest act of faith and homage that one can show the Father of Jesus, for it is to receive all that he has to offer and thus to become "the Praise of Glory of the Holy Trinity."

Conclusion

It is tempting when reflecting on Elizabeth of the Trinity's last words to give the final place to love. In this we are undoubtedly, if unconsciously, influenced by St. Thérèse for whom "love" was indeed the last word. However, in Elizabeth's case this was not so. "I go to Light, to Love, to Life" is what she actually said. And so we must reexamine our expectations and ask what this particular order of words may mean. We can do this because it should be evident that when a person is on the brink of death, they do not reflect on the potential theological implications of what they are about to say. Rather, whatever they say will be the spontaneous result of such thoughts and ideas, beliefs and hopes as they have been nourished throughout life. Elizabeth surely spoke at that moment out of the rich plenitude of a heart that had been formed since childhood to direct everything to God, to see everything in God.

That the last words spoken by Elizabeth of the Trinity should be overtly Trinitarian can only seem fitting and are a revelation of how profoundly inserted into this mystery she had become. Perhaps it is too simplistic to suggest that the three concepts she used correspond to each of the three divine persons so that we can identify Light with the Spirit, Love with the Son, and Life with the Father. God is not to be so neatly divided, however, and the whole Godhead is to be found in each of these realities. But what we can do is to look at the movement within Elizabeth's words toward their end.

The last word of all is Life, and by giving to Life all the weight of this concluding position, we perceive that it is, indeed, the ultimate

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reality. "I came that they might have life," prayed Jesus, and "because I live they also will live." Elizabeth believed that she would join the blessed in heavenly life and that from there she would continue to intervene in the lives of those she loved. If it had not been so, her death would have had no meaning. If God gives us Light, it is so that we may see the way that leads to him and participate in the outpouring of his glory. If we know Love, it is because we have come to know Love incarnate in the person of the Son and have become like him even here on earth. But neither of these graces stands on its own. They are incomplete if they do not lead to that Life which is both Light and Love and the complete realization of all that God holds in store for us.

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Carmelite Resources

Carmelite Seminar: The 15th Annual Summer Seminar on Carmelite Spirituality by the Carmelite Forum will take place on June 22–28, 2003 at Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, Ind. The theme will be "Contemplative Prayer in a Time of Crisis." For a brochure, contact: Center for Spirituality, Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, IN 46556. Tel: 574-284-4636. E-mail: manuszak@saintmarys.edu.

D. M. Flynn

Songs of the Sages

SOME SING OF THE GLORY OF GOD; others convey condemnation and castigation. Many express thanksgiving for God's blessings, yet the majority bewail the troubles and tribulations of life. Scores of our favorite hymns derive from this set of lyrics although we know nothing of their original melodies. Three thousand years old, the psalms are prized prayers for contemporary Jews and Christians alike.

Although the Psalter is the mainstay of the Divine Office and a component of many other Christian worship services, it may be an often undervalued source of spiritual wisdom and pragmatic guidance. The twenty-first century seems to be dawning upon an age of intense hunger for relevant religious experiences that speak to modern day life, problems, and situations. Self-help books and advice columns are almost a national obsession. Do the psalms offer any real value to our "been there, done that" society? Let us consider three classifications of psalms in an attempt to answer that question.

Background

The word "psalm" derives from the Greek word *psalmoi*, meaning "song sung to stringed instruments." The Book of Psalms, or Psalter,

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contains one hundred and fifty poems or lyrics and is unique in that it is the sole biblical book without chapters. Instead, the psalms are grouped into five books, most likely in imitation of the Torah, with a doxology or hymn of praise separating each division. The Hebrew title given to the entire collection, *Seper Tehellim*, means “songs of praise.”

The psalmists—an assortment of mostly unknown or anonymous authors—composed lyrics that reflected their personal experiences, the joys and sorrows of their daily lives. Their prayerful hymns were composed, adapted, and collected over a period of perhaps six hundred years. The Songs of Praise served as the Temple hymnal. As such, the first Jewish Christians sang them during their worship services as well.

Biblical scholars have attempted to classify the psalms by categories such as praise, lament, curse, and wisdom. Each of these genres may be further subdivided into psalms of an individual or psalms of the community. More than a few psalms resist such classification, however, or at least, overlap two or more types. Consequently, there is no universal list of psalms by genre.

Praise Psalms

Psalm 100 is a communal hymn of praise. The ancient Israelites sang this short and unpretentious processional song at the entrance to the Temple gate before the thanksgiving offering. We might think of this poem as two short hymns joined together: part one acknowledges that Yahweh alone is God, and part two exalts God for his beneficence:

Shout joyfully to the LORD, all you lands;
worship the LORD with cries of gladness;
come before him with joyful song.
Know that the LORD is God,
our maker to whom we belong,
whose people we are, God’s well-tended flock. (vv. 1–2)

The psalm begins with an invitation. Our psalmist exhorts us—indeed, almost commands us—to praise God. Notice, however, that mere praise is insufficient. The poet instructs us to pay tribute

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cheerfully, willingly, insisting upon internal devotion as well as external piety. How often do we “go through the motions” of worship while our minds are otherwise occupied?

The writer follows this invitation with a *ki* clause. The word *ki* is a transliteration of the Hebrew word meaning “because.” Hence, our minstrel states several reasons for worship. While providing grounds for praise, the poet skillfully bids us to reflect on God’s identity: Who is God? What is his place in my life? What is my relationship with him? Psalm 100 calls us to contemplate these questions that have neither simple nor static answers.

The structure of the second mini-hymn is similar to the first. Our author reiterates the opening invitation followed by a *ki* clause. In a few verses, the writer has condensed the creed of Judaism into six fundamental statements: Yahweh is God, God is our creator, we are his people, God is good, his love is everlasting, and his constancy endures from age to age. Thus, Psalm 100 offers us not only articles of faith but also a profile of God. Psalm 100 invites us to reflect on the nature of God: he is loving, benevolent, and trustworthy. We might think of these qualities as virtues to imitate in our daily lives. This psalm also encourages us to develop an attitude of gratitude for the abundant gifts that God showers upon us.

This psalm also encourages us to develop an attitude of gratitude

If Psalm 100 derives its motivation to exalt God from Israel’s historical experiences, Psalm 150 glorifies God because of the wonders of creation. This communal hymn is the doxology for Book 5 of the Psalter and the final poem in a sequence (Psalm 146–150) that marks the conclusion of the entire collection. Psalm 150 begins with “Alleluia,” a transliteration of the Hebrew phrase, *Halle-lu-yah*, meaning, “praise to Yah[weh].” Curiously, the Psalter is the only book of the Hebrew Bible in which this phrase appears. The older English translations were rendered “Praise ye the Lord,” a clear indication that the command to praise was addressed to the entire worshipping assembly.

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In characteristic style, the poet follows the opening summons with a *ki* section: “Give praise for his mighty deeds, praise him for his great majesty” (v. 2). The author does not provide a list here, perhaps relying on our own abilities to see God’s wonders for ourselves. Psalm 150 bids us to slow down and observe the sunrise that begins each day, the plants and vegetation that delight our senses and nourish our bodies, the sunset that ushers in the night sky filled with stars. In short, this hymn calls us to experience God’s created wonders firsthand.

The lyricist then calls for the praise of God with music, listing not all but many of the musical instruments known to the ancient Israelites. Imagine the sound of the cantor chanting the names of the instruments as a cue to the musicians to play their part in a magnificent crescendo to the climatic final verse: “Let everything that has breath give praise to the LORD. Alleluia” (v. 6).

Psalm 150 asks us to consider four essential questions. Where should we praise the Lord?—wherever we may be. Why should we praise him?—because he provides us with graces and blessings too numerous to count. How shall we offer praise?—with everything we have and with all the skills we possess. Who should offer praise?—every living creature is to sing the glory of God.

The psalms of praise offer us support and guidance in the midst of our twenty-first century lives. They remind us that we encounter God wherever we are, whatever our vocation. In his book, *Downtown Monks*, Father Albert Holtz stresses that

God is present everywhere, and that life is a seamless whole, with no divisions between sacred and earthly.... Going to work, shopping, changing diapers, balancing the checkbook, chatting with your spouse: all of these are sacred activities that lead us along our path to God. (p. 64)

The Jews believe the primary purpose of prayer is to thank God for his countless blessings. The psalms of praise encourage us to raise our voices and join with all creation to bless the Lord in the midst of our humble daily activities.

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Lament and Imprecatory Psalms

As noted, the Hebrew title of the Psalter is “Songs of Praise.” Despite the appellation, however, the psalms of lament constitute the largest category, comprising approximately one third of the Book of Psalms. On the other hand, all of the lament psalms—with one notable exception—conclude on a note of praise and thanksgiving.

Psalm 88 is the lament of a gravely ill and decidedly despondent individual. Plagued with a debilitating and degenerative disorder from childhood, our minstrel now faces death, alone: “Because of you my friends shun me; you make me loathsome to them” (v. 9). To the ancient Israelites, illness was a punishment from God. Thus, friends may well have ostracized the poet whom they viewed as a sinner. We might examine our own attitudes toward people who are gravely or chronically ill.

The melancholic mood of Psalm 88 is most striking in its final line: “Because of you companions shun me; my only friend is darkness” (v. 19). This is the sole lament in the Psalter that does not end with thanksgiving for God’s intervention. Still, the bard is not without hope since the ode begins, “LORD, my God, I call out by day; at night I cry aloud in your presence. Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry” (vv. 2–3). Despite illness, loneliness, and the approach of death, the poet prays to God for respite, a sure sign that faith lurks behind forlornness.

Psalm 88 encourages us to bring our concerns to God who loves us and listens to our cries, our laughter, our fears, and our hopes. There is no thought, no problem, nor idea that we can not share with God. In *They Speak By Silences*, a Carthusian monk writes,

When our heart is torn and continues to be so, we must give it to Him as it is. Later, when peace returns, we will give it to Him at peace. What He wants is for us to give ourselves to Him as we are. (p. 123)

A subdivision of the psalms of lament is the imprecatory psalms. The modern reader may be aghast to find cursing in Scripture. Still, the psalms are Hebrew poetry that expresses the cultural and individual mindset of the ancients. As such, the psalms employ vivid and colorful language as well as rich and dramatic imagery.

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Psalm 69 is a prime example of a poem that overlaps two categories: lament and imprecation. Its basic structure is that of a lament by an individual falsely accused of theft. Our author is clearly frustrated and uses poetic idioms to express strong emotions: “More numerous than the hairs of my head are those who hate me without cause” (v. 5a). Such exaggeration comes easily when we feel defeated. We wallow in self-pity, convinced that no one understands.

Quickly, however, the poet’s wailing slides into condemnation and the baffled bard offers God a list of proposed punishments for the unjust accusers:

Make their own table a snare for them,
a trap for their friends.
Make their eyes grow so dim that they cannot see;
keep their backs ever feeble.
Strike them from the book of the living;
do not count them among the just! (vv. 23–24; 29)

Undoubtedly, such sentiments are contrary to our Christian ideals: Jesus taught us to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors. Nevertheless, in the minds of the ancient Israelites, to curse one’s enemies meant to deliver them to God for destruction. The psalmist happily presents God with suitable chastisements for the enemy, but never entertains the thought of acting on them. Rather, the inspired writer trusts in the God of justice to carry out the proper sentence at the proper time.

Indeed, our lyricist is so convinced of God’s intervention and assistance that the spew of vile invectives suddenly yields to jubilant praise and thanksgiving. False accusations, illness, and mockery cannot prevent our minstrel from bidding all creation to join in this hymn: “Let the heavens and earth sing praise, the seas and whatever moves in them!” (v. 35).

The aggressive language of Psalm 88 speaks volumes to our society. In our increasingly violent age, too many people seem willing to pick up a gun to erase their enemies. Obviously, there is no single or straightforward solution to this problem. Nevertheless, Psalm 88 provides families, parishes, and other groups with a catalyst to consider and discuss alternatives to brutal behaviors.

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The psalms of lament and the psalms of imprecation present us with sensible direction for our modern lives. They remind us to leave vengeance to God alone. These prayers represent a cathartic venting of anger rather than a request for permission or opportunity to retaliate against one's foes. Further, these poems invite us to glorify God no matter how bleak our situation may seem. We noted that the authors of the praise psalms exhort us to honor God every minute of every day. The composers of the psalms of lament and imprecation remind us to offer our troubles and tribulations as well, and to trust in divine providence.

Wisdom Psalms

We have observed that scholars have attempted to classify the psalms according to their content, and more than a few poems resist such classification. Perhaps one of the more controversial categories is that of the wisdom psalms. While the criteria for this grouping are somewhat vague, they generally include a preoccupation with the problem of retribution, a contrast between the just and the wicked, and pragmatic guidance on proper conduct. These psalms may also include such literary devices as the phrase, "happy the one who..." and the use of an acrostic format.

The word acrostic derives from two Greek words: *akros*, meaning "extreme," and *stikhos*, "line of verse." Thus, an acrostic is a poem in which the first letter of each line forms a word or a phrase. Biblical acrostics are alphabetic: each line begins with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Acrostics may have been a mnemonic device. They may also have symbolized that the author explored the topic from beginning to end.

Psalms 119 is the longest psalm in the Psalter and runs an incredible one hundred and seventy-six verses, divided into twenty-two strophes of eight verses each. It is an alphabetic acrostic; sadly, this facet of the poem is lost in translation. It is also a wisdom psalm because each line sings of the glory of the law of God that "gives understanding to the simple" (v. 130b):

Happy those whose way is blameless,
who walk by the teaching of the LORD.

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Happy those who observe God's decrees,
who seek the LORD with all their heart (vv. 1–2).

After opening with a typical literary device as cited above, the writer states that the word of God is the only subject worth pursuing. The poet had studied the precepts of God as set forth in the Hebrew Bible. Without a doubt, this student knew the statues yet prayed for something more than mere knowledge.

Our wise disciple has grasped an important insight. We may study the structure of Hebrew poetry or the psalms or the law of God until we feel we have a thorough education in the subject matter. Nevertheless, to know is not to comprehend. Thus, our writer prays for discernment in order to make sound moral and ethical judgments.

We know that the kingdom of God is one of love, justice, and peace. Yet, how can we love that someone who hurt us so deeply? Is it just to patronize the store with the best prices when we are aware that exploited laborers manufacture much of its merchandise? How can we relate peacefully with a combative coworker? There are no clearcut answers to such complex questions. Psalm 119 suggests that we immerse ourselves in the word of God and pray for prudence in applying it. Then, with practice and experience, God's word can give viable direction to our daily lives.

And the Survey Says

We have briefly examined a few illustrative psalms of praise, lament, imprecation, and wisdom, and have considered how each psalm might relate to our present experiences. Still, the question remains: Do the psalms offer any real value to our “been there, done that” society?

The psalmists propose advice and counsel that are as pertinent today as they were when they penned their words, because they write of the human condition that is fundamentally unchanged. The ancient authors experienced the emotions we know so well: love, hate, indifference, anger, pride, pain, and failure. Like us, they also sought God in the midst of their day-to-day struggles. In his book, *Love on the Mountain*, Robert Hale writes,

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But whatever the emotion, the Psalmist knows that God is there and God is all. To relate to God wherever we are and however we are, is true psalmody, true liturgy. (p. 158)

Perchance this is the true treasure of the psalms: they present a God-centered guide to coping with whatever life offers.

The psalms of praise lead us to see God all around us, to become more aware of God's created beauty, and to be thankful for our countless blessings. The psalms of lament and imprecation counsel us to bring all our concerns to God, to leave vengeance to God alone, and to trust in divine providence. The wisdom psalms direct us toward the word of God as the truest guide to ethical decisions in the midst of a chaotic world.

U. S. Catholic conducted a survey in the first months of 2000 that asked readers to name their favorite book of the Bible. The book of choice: Psalms. Perhaps the songs of the sages are worth singing after all.

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Dorothy Day and Julian of Norwich: God's Friends and Neighbors

AT FIRST GLANCE THE TEXTS AND THE WOMEN of the texts have little in common. But when love is the final answer, these women of diverse experiences are drawn into the same person “whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.”¹ Dorothy Day’s autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, and *The Book of Showings* by Julian of Norwich only show differences on the surface. These women lived lives of varied, mutually exclusive experiences, with seemingly little to connect them, yet somehow love crossed the boundaries. The differences between two centuries, two continents, two cultures, two religious experiences, and two women comprise a beautiful fabric, divinely woven. This is the fabric of the experience of God’s love. God’s labor and God the laborer give birth to the true disciple.

Fifteen years after her mystical experience of Christ’s passionate love for creation and for each creature in particular (13 May 1373), Julian records what she heard from God. She writes this down in chapter 86 of the long text of *Showings*: “What, wouldst thou know

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thy Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well. Love was his meaning."² Dorothy Day—of twentieth century America, of a family of newspaper people from Brooklyn, lover of Forster, mother of Tamar Teresa—concludes her discourse on the long loneliness, the profound and terrible experience of our search for God and God's search for us with these words: "We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community."³ How can a valid connection begin to be made between Julian's and Dorothy Day's experiences of God? Where is the common ground? The question is an invitation to explore three experiences and relate them to a fourth. The topics under discussion include: Julian's experience of the passion of Christ, the hazelnut episode of chapter 5 of the long text of *Showings*, the parable of the lord and the servant in chapter 51 of Julian's text, and the meaning of the term "long loneliness" as used by Dorothy Day. Julian longed for the God who surprised her by leading her to her neighbor; Dorothy longed for the neighbor who surprised her by being God.

Julian: Initiator and Lover

Julian of Norwich was a medieval woman who was an initiator. She took the initiative in asking God for an experience of Christ's passion, for bodily sickness, and for three wounds. She recorded these experiences in two accounts, one called "short," the other "long." Julian's initiative also led her to seek residence in a dwelling attached to a church in the town of Norwich in East Anglia during England's high Middle Ages. We know that Julian was still alive in 1416. She would spend the latter part of her life as an anchoress attached to this church and would spend most days in prayer and give some spiritual direction. This initiative-taking, medieval woman knew and spoke Latin, lived in an atmosphere heavily influenced by Dominican and Augustinian theology, and set the jewel of women's contributions to the life of the medieval Church and its theology in a not-to-be ignored slant of light.⁴

Julian's motivation for requesting the sight and experience of Christ's passion is the motivation of the lover:

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I would I had been, that time, with Magdalene and with the others that were Christ's lovers, that I might have seen, bodily, the passion that Our Lord suffered for me—that I might have suffered with him as did those others that loved him"⁵

Julian's focus is on the wounds of Christ, and it is, indeed, the wounds from the crown of thorns on Christ's head that is the subject of Julian's first revelation, described in the fourth chapter of the long text of *Showings*. This revelation is Trinitarian, Marian, and takes on the aroma of medieval courtesy. Julian sees the passion of Christ in the blood flowing from Christ's head as meant for herself and for

God makes the insignificant and unknown to be known and loved

all believers; there is solidarity. Julian experiences Christ as connected to the Father and the Spirit; there is "keeping," "loving," "joy," and "bliss."⁶ Julian is consoled in her experience by Mary, mother of the Lord; Julian finds acceptance. God's courtesy is seen in his being lowered to humanity through Mary, for the sake of other creatures.

God is good enough to share with Julian the "wisdom and truth" of Mary's soul. Though the first of all believers, Mary "marvelled, with great reverence, that he willed to be born of her that was a simple creature of his making."⁷

The portrayal of God in terms of medieval "courtesie" follows an old code of knighthood prominent in English literature since 1066. The French *courtesie* means more than romantic love or *amor cortois*. Courtesie means placing oneself between the evils of the world and the suffering individual. Hence, the Christ who reaches out to Julian is not just a lover—he suffers for her and for the world—Christ bleeds. Julian, receiving her revelation of love, uses the language of "courtesy" to explain her experience of God's *agape*, God's selfless love.

More than that, Julian theologizes on the community of God, the Trinity, in terms made understandable as *amicitia* (friendship). Julian speaks of the Trinity as "our everlasting lover." Julian is taken by this lover's approachability:

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For I was truly astounded by the wonder and the marvel [of the Trinity] that he who is so reverend and dreadful should be so homely.⁸

If Julian is an initiator, she will come to this God frequently, while remaining at all times truly courteous and demur. As an educated woman of her times, Julian's spiritual posture tells readers of the times in which she and they live. For Julian, God is the grand and gracious troubadour, living in a Trinity of hospitality, passion, and creativity.

The Hazelnut & The Lord and the Servant

In Julian's economy of prayer, nothing created is important and nothing is more important to God than creation. Julian reveals this lesson in the fifth chapter of *Showings*, the hazelnut episode. The hazelnut is all creation resting in the hands of the Creator, resting in the love of the Creator. The seeming insignificance of the object (a filbert) intensifies Julian's experience of God's love. God makes the insignificant and unknown to be known and loved. This is Julian's experience of a gracious God who steps out of "otherness" into creation, into Word and world made flesh. For Julian, the issue is not the object but the one ennobling the object: "Our good Lord shewed that it is the greatest pleasure to him that a simple soul come to him nakedly, plainly, and homely."⁹

Of all the experiences of God in prayer portrayed in Julian's long text of *Showings*, none is more striking and well-known than the parable of the lord and the servant. The strength of this parable lies in Julian's portrayal of "the long loneliness" of the servant in the ditch "[whose] good will and great desire were the only cause of his falling."¹⁰ The servant's real suffering is that he is no longer able to see his Lord whom he loves. The depth of the servant's anguish is surpassed only by the depth of the Lord's beholding the servant in tenderness and love.¹¹

This is Julian's reality check. She knows that she cannot be caught up with her Lord in the air even as an anchoress. This side of Paradise has its barbs and wires, even in fourteenth-century England.

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Julian learns from this parable, however, that what is perceived as evil, in the finite mind, may be looked upon as love-yet-to-be in the divine:

This man was hurt in his powers, and made full feeble; and he was stunned in his understanding, in that he was turned from the beholding of his Lord. But his will was preserved in God's sight; for his will I saw our Lord commend and approve.¹²

Julian embraced Christ's passion as she embraced a lover; Julian felt God's familiar, Trinitarian embrace in her vision of the hazelnut; Julian learned of God's eternal vote of confidence in the parable of the lord and the servant.

Dorothy Day: "The Long Loneliness"

The only thing Dorothy Day ever said that in any way touched on the life of Julian of Norwich was to call herself a "sybaritic ancho-rite."¹³ Dorothy chose these words to describe her life on Staten Is-

*I was lonely,
deadly lonely*

land, New York, with Forster, her companion and the father of their child, Tamar Teresa. This was a time of Dorothy's desiring, perhaps for the first time consciously as an adult, a relationship with God. She wanted this more for Tamar than for herself. It was a critical moment in her life. Dorothy was about to become a mother after arguing the very point of family, justice, and responsibility with God in many and varied ways.

Dorothy was open to her movement into this new life-role: "I was tied down because I was going to have a baby.... I rejoiced in it."¹⁴ The father of the child taught Dorothy a new way of loving life: "His ardent love of creation brought me to the Creator of all things."¹⁵ Like Julian's hazelnut, Dorothy's pregnancy is a lesson living within her:

Along the beach I found it appropriate to say the *Te Deum*. When I worked about the house, I found myself addressing the Blessed Virgin and turning toward her statue.¹⁶

The dilemma Dorothy faces is that she must let go of an earthly love to embrace a heavenly one. The poignancy of this is reflected in

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Dorothy's love for Forster who refused any religious affiliation for himself or his child:

Because I was grateful for love, I was grateful for life, and living with Forster made me appreciate it and even reverence it still more...[yet] his extreme individualism made him feel that he of all men should not be a father.¹⁷

As Julian's bodily sickness was followed by serenity and peace, so Dorothy's prayers for faith ease the loneliness of the days following Tamar's birth in March 1927 and her baptism at the church of Our Lady Help of Christians in the Tottenville neighborhood of Staten Island:

A woman does not want to be alone at such a time... Becoming a Catholic would mean facing life alone.... Forster would have nothing to do with religion or with me if I embraced it...[and] for the most part I felt a great stillness.... With this time came the need to worship and adore.¹⁸

Following her own conditional baptism in the summer of 1928, Dorothy was left alone with Tamar Teresa. Now motivated by grace, she reached out into the long loneliness of others:

I was lonely, deadly lonely.... Young and old, even in the busiest years of our lives, we women especially are the victims of the long loneliness. Men may go away and become desert Fathers, but there are no desert mothers. Even the anchoresses led rather sociable lives, with bookbinding and spiritual counseling, even if they did have to stay in one place.¹⁹

Prompted by this long, spiritual loneliness, Dorothy asked to share in the passion of Christ by writing about the plight of the poor and most abandoned. Her guide through that mystical labyrinth was the noble French peasant, Peter Maurin.

The Catholic Worker

Dorothy's "book of showings" became known as *The Catholic Worker*. The choice of the title for the newspaper tells much about Dorothy's desire to embrace the suffering Christ among her own people:

Catholics were the poor, and most of them had little ambition or hope of bettering their condition to the extent of achieving own-

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ership of home or business, or further education for their children. They accepted things as they were with humility and looked for a better life to come. They thought, in other words, that God meant it to be so.²⁰

A former De La Salle Christian Brother, Peter Maurin saw himself as the light of Dorothy's life primarily in the way he would educate her Catholic intellect. Dorothy reflects on her education:

The nearest he came to being critical of me was to tell me that my education lacked Catholic background. He began to give it to me by talking about the history of the Church, by going even further back into time and speaking of the prophets of Israel as well as the Fathers of the Church. His friends were Jews, Protestants, agnostics, as well as Catholics, and he found a common ground with all in what he termed the Thomistic doctrine of the common good.²¹

Peter Maurin was, so to speak, God's courteous gesture, pointing Dorothy Day in the direction of her "even Christian" and beyond. With Peter as the mastermind, Dorothy offered the people of America's large cities a wholesome, close-to-nature lifestyle in the farming areas of New York and Pennsylvania. Dorothy Day contemplated God from the perspective of the breadlines of the 1930s and from the perspective of those who contemplated the world and its creator from inside the jail cell. Peter didn't always agree with Dorothy's methods, but he was with her every step of that long loneliness.

Dorothy saw the face of Christ on the worker without work, the family without family, and the neighbor without a friend. She saw the Depression in America as humans and human institutions failing one another. She perceived this depression as God's depression, as God's loneliness for humans to love one another. Perhaps without knowing it, Dorothy utters the most contemplative words of her search for God:

We were just sitting there talking when Peter Maurin came in. We were just sitting there talking when lines of people began to form, saying "We need bread." ...We were just sitting there talking and someone said, "Let's all go live on a farm." ...It all happened while we sat there talking, and it is still going on.²²

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Just to sit and talk was enough for Julian—she talked to God in a neighborly way. Just to sit and talk was enough for God—God spoke to Dorothy in a neighborly way, sending her to fetch his dear ditched servants.

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1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, 1948), p. 225.
2. Julian of Norwich, *The Revelations of Divine Love of Julian of Norwich: Long Text*, trans. James Walsh, SJ (New York: Harper, 1961), p. 209.
3. Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952), p. 286.
4. Edmund College and James Walsh, eds., "Introduction," *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1978), pp. 43–45.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 133–134.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
13. *The Long Loneliness*, p. 133.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 137, 139.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 157–158.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 285–186.



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



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Simply Bonaventure: An Introduction to His Life, Thought, and Writings. By Iliia Delio, OSF. New City Press: 202 Cardinal Road, Hyde Park, NY 12538, 2001. Pp. 208. Paper. \$14.95.

This book is an attempt to provide a way into the thought, world, and spirituality of St. Bonaventure for those who are not familiar with his style or with the style of medieval theology generally. In fact, it is a presentation that can easily reach far beyond that readership and can be of remarkable significance even for people who are well acquainted with the work of the Seraphic Doctor. Delio works with the conviction that, even though Bonaventure was first of all a medieval thinker, his work has distinctive significance for many contemporary Christians in the search for a deeper sense of spirituality and meaning in their lives.

The core of the book is an introduction to the life, thought, and writings of Bonaventure. The account of his life begins with his arrival in Paris as a student and moves through his entrance into the Franciscan order, his work as a scholar at Paris, and his final years of work as Minister General of a religious order that was being torn apart by external forces as well as by forces internal to the order itself. Despite the many years of his work as Minister General and all the traveling which that involved, Bonaventure never lost his profound sense of the spiritual life and was able to produce some outstanding works on spirituality that supplement the more academic writings of his early career. The presentation

of this biographical material makes use of the best research available at the present time.

Concerning Bonaventure's thought, a chapter is given to each of the major themes of his systematic theology and spirituality. This begins with a treatment of the mystery of the Trinity that highlights the distinctive characteristics of Bonaventure's style and its sources in the theological tradition. Delio also draws out the dynamic relation between the Trinitarian mystery, creation, and Christology as found in Bonaventure's work. While avoiding a highly technical style in her presentation, she succeeds in opening the reader to a rich depth of insight.

The treatment of the incarnation and the mystery of Christ reveals not only an understanding of the medieval world of Bonaventure but also a certain resonance with a number of modern questions emerging out of contemporary cosmology and historical thought patterns. Anyone aware of contemporary scientific questions about those functions that tradition has associated with the spiritual soul will find the discussion of Bonaventure's approach to matter and spirit of great interest, particularly when it is viewed in relation to the mystery of matter as it emerges from contemporary science.

Other important themes are Bonaventure's understanding of the spiritual journey and the meaning of contemplation in the spiritual life. The treatment of Bonaventure's theological themes is brought to a conclusion with one of his own distinctive terms: reduction. With this word Bonaventure

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attempts to show how all things must eventually lead back to God from whom they have come. This is the specific concern of a very brief work of Bonaventure called *De reductione artium ad theologiam*. There he shows how all the arts and sciences as then known can be drawn into a rich form of Christian humanism that might stand yet today as a programmatic vision of Christian education and spirituality. And so it appears in Delio's development.

To make the presentation more practical for teaching, each chapter dealing with a particular theme is followed by a number of study questions that can be of great help when the book is used as a pedagogical tool. The section on Bonaventure's writings includes brief but well-chosen excerpts from a wide range of his works, thus providing useful examples of his literary style. The book closes with a rich bibliography and a glossary of terms that are significant aids in coming to a deeper understanding of Bonaventure's writings. Delio has shown herself to be remarkably adept at taking a very complex author and opening his vision of reality with unusual accuracy. She has succeeded in presenting the richness of Bonaventure in a way that is truly accessible to a wide public. The book reflects the best insights into his work available at the present time and will be a precious tool for introducing people into the complexity of the medieval world and specifically into the work of Bonaventure. Delio has made an outstanding contribution to the literature dealing with the thought and spirituality of medieval Christianity.

Zachary Hayes, OFM, is Professor of Systematic Theology at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. He is trained in medieval philosophy and theology, with a specialization in the work of St. Bonaventure.

Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God. By Jack Miles. Random House (Alfred Knopf): 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036, 2001. Pp. 352. Hardcover. \$26.95.

As he did so successfully in his earlier Pulitzer-prize winning book, *God: A Biography*, Jack Miles again breaks open the casing that has often locked the Bible in a crusty coating of dogmatic interpretation, reserved for scriptural exegetes and Sunday morning theologians. His great feat is to reimagine the wonderful and mysterious stories of the Bible, and here most specifically the New Testament, but less as theology and more as poetry. No small shift occurs when the stories of God, his people, and the incarnate Christ mingle, clash, contradict, and finally resolve key differences as a literary action. As he shifted God into a literary figure in *Biography*, so here does he reveal the dilemma God creates for himself and its final resolution in becoming enfleshed and sacrificing himself so that Paradise might be retrieved.

I want to admit at the outset that I am unfazed by whether I believe Miles's argument or not, as persuasive as it is. What I admire in his work is the shifting lenses by which we can each discern anew the way that "God as a divine self-consciousness" comes

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to expression in the incarnation. Miles's approach is mythic, even mytho-poetic. As he says, "Myths uncover, make conscious, and give voice to mystery, paradox, suffering and longing" (p. 17). Miles's argument, for me, is less relevant to his study than the interpretive handle that he has given his readers to see the poetics of the story of God's transformation from the Old to New Testaments.

The book, both scholarly and erudite, as well as imaginative and playful, is divided into four parts and an epilogue: 1. The Messiah, Ironically; 2. A Prophet Against the Promise; 3. The Lord of Blasphemy; 4. The Lamb of God; Epilogue: On Writing the Lives of God. There follows then two ornate and involved appendices, both of which are crucial for understanding the author's methodology. My own suggestion to readers is to read the epilogue first. It frames the entire narrative argument and helps the reader grasp the heuristic approach that Miles employs.

Essentially, Miles's argument from the beginning is that God's speaking in the Old Testament reveals an unawareness of himself that, as his awareness matures into the New Testament, becomes more complex and mysterious. The God of the Old Testament seems fixed in punishment, violence, favoritism, and ostracism. Miles asks, "Is God too weak to keep his covenant with Israel? Is his way out through Christ's admonitions to love friend and enemy the same?" God then becomes a human being to resolve his dilemma. Is Christ then the crisis of God becoming mortal to espouse universal love? Such is the nature of the crisis.

Through his entire exploration of the above questions, Miles weaves the skeins of Old Testament stories with New Testament revelations to show with persuasive examples the fulfillment of the former through the narratives of the latter. In the process, he entertains the difference between seeing the New Testament as historical reality versus literary creation. Affirming that there is no single or correct way to read the New Testament, Miles nonetheless believes that "when the divinity of Christ the Lord is embraced as a literary opportunity rather than resisted as a theological imposition, the protagonist of this work can seem illumined from within" (p. 250).

Christ, as the Incarnated God, makes something actual in himself that would perhaps have remained potential. The paradox implicit in the Christian mystery, for me, is that Christ as God's humanness completes Yahweh of the Old Testament. Ours is the Kingdom of Heaven, Miles suggests, because he became one of us. Christ as God is slain by his enemies, but in his becoming one of us, all are now blessed, not just a few chosen elites. I find this realization to be the crux of God's crisis, resolved nonetheless in Christ's birth and crucifixion.

God's shifting identity occurs here in the death of the lamb of God in which Christ is both the priest of his own execution as well as its victim. In that sacrificial act, God's covenant shifts from violence and envy to kindness and generosity. God becomes human to live out this new regime, Miles writes, and he dies without resistance. As Paschal Lamb, Christ in his blood-shedding

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“will save mortals from the curse of mortality itself” (p. 210). God has given human form to the crisis in his life. In his becoming human and his undergoing suffering, “human hope and divine honor are redeemed together at a single transcendent stroke” (p. 224). In his death, God revisioned and revived the Old Testament and the Psalms. His action also reveals, for Miles, the comic epic quality of Christianity, for it ends in a gala wedding in which “the Lamb’s intended is the human race itself” (p. 242).

Provocative, disturbing at times, and utterly refreshing is his argument. I salute Miles for what he has done to and for the Bible—opened it up as a work of imaginative literature through which we can glimpse, as through a glass clearly, God’s theophany in the lives of mortals. For this breakthrough I am grateful to his scholarship and his vision.

Dennis Patrick Slattery, Ph.D., is Core Faculty in the Mythological Studies and Depth Psychology programs at Pacifica Graduate Institute. He is the author of over 200 articles and has just completed *When the World is Too Much With Us: A Monastic Pilgrimage*.

Spirituality@Work: 10 Ways to Balance Your Life On-The-Job. By Gregory F. A. Pierce. Loyola Press: 3441 North Ashland Avenue, Chicago, IL 60657, 2001. Pp. 168. Hardcover. \$17.95.

All of us hunger for meaning in our lives. We long for the ability to integrate our faith and worship into our everyday activities. But can we really find God while changing dirty diapers?

Is it possible to connect with God in the midst of chaotic calendars? How can we look at our belligerent boss and see the image of God?

Spirituality@Work addresses our need to assimilate our faith into our work by providing guidelines to begin the journey and by giving encouragement to follow one’s own path: “This book is an exploration of the spirituality of work. It is an attempt to investigate whether and how the reality that we call ‘God’ can be ‘accessed’ in the midst of the hustle and bustle of our daily lives” (p. xiv).

Gregory Pierce is well qualified to explore the topic. As a husband and father, writer and editor, businessman and volunteer, little league coach and wearer of many other hats, he shares the struggles of his readers. With chapters such as “A Spirituality for the Piety Impaired,” “Deciding What is ‘Enough’—and Sticking to It,” and “Balancing Work, Personal, Family, Church, and Community Responsibilities,” the reader is assured that this is a realistic and readable book.

The author’s basic premise is that contemplative spirituality is simply impractical for the average working adult. Pierce contends that if one can find God only by flight from the world, then most of us will never achieve union with God. About ten years ago, however, he began to explore the possibility that one could indeed experience the presence of God through one’s daily work. That awareness gave rise to an online discussion group, and eventually, to this book.

In the introductory chapter, “A Spirituality for the Piety Impaired,” Mr. Pierce notes, *The spirituality of work*

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that interests me is one that comes out of the work itself, one that allows us to get in touch with the God who is always present in our workplaces, whether "bidden or not bidden." This kind of spirituality has little to do with piety and much more to do with our becoming aware of the intrinsically spiritual nature of the work we are doing and then acting on that awareness. Authentic spirituality—at least in the Judeo-Christian tradition—is as much about making hard choices in our daily lives, about working with others to make the world a better place, and about loving our neighbor and even our enemy as it is about worship and prayer. (p. xiv)

Mr. Pierce's style is conversational and his presentation is methodical. He begins by defining terms: "The spirituality of work is a disciplined attempt to align ourselves and our environment with God and to incarnate God's spirit in the world through all the effort (paid and unpaid) we exert to make the world a better place, a little closer to the way God would have things" (p. 18). His concept of work is broad, encompassing not only those in the corporate world but also homemakers, volunteers, and retirees.

"How Can Work Be Spiritual?" is the question raised in chapter 2. "How much we connect to our work in a spiritual sense is determined by how we answer five major questions," beginning with "What is the meaning of our work?" (p. 22). The list continues with five criteria for developing the disciplines of the spirituality of work.

Chapter 9, "Deciding What Is 'Enough'—and Sticking to It," ad-

resses the battle cry of the third millennium: "I'm so busy, I have no time!" The author notes, "We will never have enough time until we decide what is enough time to be spending on the various activities of our lives. The disciplines of the spirituality of work can help us to do that, and they can help us carry out our decisions" (p. 110). Chapter 10, "Balancing Work, Personal, Family, Church, and Community Responsibilities," builds on this concept: "One practice that might help us balance our responsibilities is the simple act of saying 'no.' Many of us get ourselves in trouble just because of our inability to say this little word often enough" (p. 119).

Each of the twelve chapters begins with a quote from a luminary such as Margaret Mead and William Tyndale. The chapters are subdivided and laced with quotations, set in visually appealing boxes, from participants in "Faith and Work in Cyberspace," a free online discussion group that the author maintains. Each chapter concludes with a section called "Practicing the Discipline," which gives concrete suggestions for implementing the discipline discussed. The book ends with an invitation from the author to join him in continuing the discussion.

The epigraphs that open each chapter are not referenced, and quotations within the chapters are not numbered, thus making it difficult to match the endnotes with a particular text. Perhaps this is a personal pet peeve. Still, it is a glaring inconsistency in a book that devotes an entire chapter to giving thanks and congratulations in the workplace.

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The reader who seeks an instant spirituality would be wise to search elsewhere. This book does not provide a shortcut to divine warm fuzzies. Instead, Pierce escorts his readers as they travel toward God who is always nearer than we sometimes imagine. While the author provides specific disciplines for becoming more aware of the Divine Presence, he recognizes that each pilgrimage is personal. Therefore, he encourages readers to modify the disciplines to individual circumstances.

Still, discipline—but especially self-discipline—requires responsibility and commitment. That said, readers who long for a closer union with God in the midst of daily endeavors will find Pierce and friends to be competent and compassionate companions for their journeys.

D. M. Flynn is a classical musician and a freelance writer who served for over twenty years as a liturgist, church musician, and music educator.

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Finding Faith: Life Changing Encounters with Christ. By Sharon Gallagher. Berkeley, Cal.: PageMill Press, 2001. Pp. 169. Paper. \$13.95.

As the media portray it, modern Americans live their lives as though God were not a part of the picture. Yet according to polls, two out of five Americans attend church weekly and even more profess belief in a personal God. In *Finding Faith: Life Changing Encounters with Christ*, Sharon Gallagher describes the “conversion experience” stories of twentieth-century people who in ways, both expected and unexpected, have come to faith. Gallagher interviewed and researched forty-eight individuals from all walks of life—from suburban nominal Christians, to drug addicts and alcoholics—from people who had never thought much about faith, to those who had already been down many alternate paths.

Many of these stories are “celebrity conversions”: Charles Colson’s famous transformation from “a man incapable of humanitarian thoughts” to founder and leader of Prison Fellowship; Johnny Cash’s struggle with amphetamines, and his spiritual rescue in a Tennessee cave; Anne Lamott’s peculiar tale of being stalked by Jesus; and Robert Cole’s change of perspective brought about by one of his patients, a little girl who spoke to him of her faith. Other stories highlight both low and high moments in life that cause people to reconsider Christianity: an injured child, abandonment by a lover or spouse, a mystical experience, a key insight. For some people, conversion was a gradual process; for others, it was

a dramatic turnaround that amazed themselves and those who knew them.

A Daring Promise: A Spirituality of Christian Marriage. By Richard R. Gaillardetz. New York: Crossroad, 2002. Pp. 143. Paper. \$16.95.

In his latest book, *A Daring Promise: A Spirituality of Christian Marriage*, theologian Richard Gaillardetz offers insightful reflections on why marriage is so difficult in today’s society and suggests ways in which Christians can maintain their marriages by drawing on their faith. In this unique book, Gaillardetz draws on official Catholic Church teaching, his training as a theologian, and his experience in a lasting marriage (with four children). Most Catholic books on marriage either take a therapeutic approach to marriage, or they treat marriage in romantic and lofty spiritual terms far removed from ordinary experience. Gaillardetz’s book offers a refreshing alternative to these approaches.

Gaillardetz’s main message for couples is that to marry today is to make a daring promise, a perilous vow. Marriage sets a couple on a spiritual journey that promises romance and intimacy but also involves moments of fear, loneliness, and regret. Arguments, the demands of work and children, the Hollywood myth of finding “Mr. or Ms. Right,” and even the very familiarity that comes with married life can put the strongest marriage in jeopardy. Gaillardetz invites couples to celebrate the wonderful experiences of romance and intimacy with one another, but also to recognize that moments

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of loneliness and emptiness are equally a part of the fabric of married life.

Earthen Vessels: The Practice of Personal Prayer According to the Church Fathers. By Gabriel Bunge, OSB. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002. Pp. 222. Paper. \$14.95.

The Fathers of the Church, deeply rooted in the Scriptures, have left us a rich treasure as an inheritance, not only of texts but also of manners, forms, and gestures of prayer. Today, Western Christianity in a special way needs to rediscover the intimate union that must exist—in prayer just as in any aspect of Christian life—between theory and practice. One learns how to pray by praying, and the whole of our being is called to participate in this work: the mind, the heart, the body, and the senses. In his book, Gabriel Bunge, a hermit with great spiritual discernment and profound knowledge of the desert fathers, presents the important unity between what one believes and what one expresses in the practice of prayer—a fascinating rediscovery of the valuable treasure contained in the teachings of the Church Fathers on the practice of personal prayer.

Full-Time Christians: The Real Challenge From Vatican II. By William Droel. Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 2002. Pp. 119. Paper. \$10.95.

Are we Christians only when we are in church, when we pray, or when we specifically do good works? William Droel here posits a spirituality that is integral to the message of Vatican II, showing that it is in our everyday lives

as Christians that the Gospel message of Christ is fully realized. While Droel acknowledges the ministerial work that lay people do within the Church as lectors, pastoral councilors, catechists, and the like, he believes that it is in the day-to-day interactions with our families, friends, community, and business associates that the essential nature of ministry truly comes to light. He examines a spirituality of work through the lens of home, workplace, and neighborhood and states that the Gospel message of Christ must be evident in our activity within each of these areas. Droel's book challenges the reader with thoughtful analysis, cogent criticism, and insightful suggestions for adapting to a lifestyle fully focused on a Gospel way of life.

Sermon in a Sentence: A Treasury of Quotes on the Spiritual Life from St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Edited by John McClernon. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002. Pp. 121. Hardcover. \$11.95.

Wouldn't you look forward to spending a few minutes with St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the best known and loved of all modern saints? The life and message of this great saint and doctor of the Church has blessed millions of Catholics around the globe. Her simple, direct, and sure way to holiness has helped many gain a better understanding of the spiritual life and a deeper union with Christ. This treasury of quotes, arranged by the major virtues of the Christian life represented in the rosary, has been designed to bring the inspiration of her words to the reader in a format that is as simple and direct as her own "Little Way."

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Reclaim The Fire: A Parish Guide To Evangelization. By Martin Pable. Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 2002. Pp. 192. Paper. \$12.95.

For those concerned about their parish, both presently and in the future, this book is helpful. Well known are the statistics on the Church's dwindling numbers; now there's a solution. Fr. Martin Pable takes a good long look at the Church and confidently offers a powerful and exciting expression of our possibilities. Many Catholics, Pable says, have learned doctrine and participated in sacraments but have not been evangelized: they have not been taught to know Jesus Christ in a real way. This book recaptures the heart, the soul, and the mission of the Church, and, in so doing, feeds the fire that the Spirit lit when the Church began. Pable outlines a way to reverse discouraging trends and bring people back to the faith. He shows scriptural grounds for evangelization and then explains its history and tradition. He shows the importance of bringing the good news to both active Catholics and the unchurched. He looks to our present culture and shows how the Church can be a light to the nations. And he demonstrates how every parish can spread the Gospel message with enthusiasm.

Primer on Prayer: Ignite the Fire Within. By Fr. Thomas Dubay. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002. Pp. 188. Paper. \$12.95.

Fr. Thomas Dubay, a renowned teacher and writer on prayer and the spiritual life, presents a simple, pro-

found, and practical book on the most important of all human activities: communion with God. Dubay's book is written for adults and teenagers who want to know God and to practice a serious prayer life, but it does not presuppose that they need or have a theological background. It takes up many questions rarely answered adequately in the classroom or from the pulpit, often not mentioned at all. Some of the topics include the following: why pray, why vocal prayer is important and yet should be limited, what contemplation is and is not, praying with Scripture, family prayer, prayer in a busy life, pitfalls and problems. All of these subjects and more are clearly and concisely explained for people of faith today.

Seeing with Our Souls: Monastic Wisdom for Every Day. By Joan Chittister, OSB. Franklin, Wis.: Sheed & Ward, 2002. Pp. 128. Paper. \$14.95.

What qualities of the soul must be cultivated by each of us if we are to become a positive presence in a changing world? This is the question that Joan Chittister addresses in her latest book. Rooted in the ancient tradition of *lectio divina*, *Seeing with Our Souls* highlights a key Bible passage for each of twelve qualities of the soul and offers brief reflections that speak to the core of one's spiritual practice. Each reflection asks us to identify the political, spiritual, economic, and cultural choices we make and to assess our aspirations for the future.

—Regis Jordan, OCD



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