

Two Conferences on Monastic Prayer

By Flavian Burns, OCSO

In May 1979, Fr. Flavian Burns, who was then living as a hermit at Gethsemani, was asked by the current novice master to present a series of four conferences on monastic prayer to the novices. The conferences were recorded, though the tape of the first two conferences has apparently been lost. What follows is a lightly edited transcription of the second pair of conferences, presented on May 14 and 16, 1979. Special thanks to Br. Patrick Hart for locating and making available the recording of these conferences, which are published here for the first time.

Last week we were speaking of monastic prayer from a two-fold aspect of the ideal of being men of prayer and praying always, praying from the depths of our heart, and of having this prayer flow from experience of the truth about ourselves, the experience of our need of God's mercy and help, which acts as a kind of stimulant and lends authenticity to our prayer life. Today I'd like to try to continue the same train of thought and place it into a broader context of our fundamental call from God to be a person sharing in His own divine life. As Merton says in his book *The New Man*, "When we speak of life in Christ, according to the phrase of St. Paul, 'It is now no longer I that live but Christ who lives in me,' we are speaking not of self-alienation but of the discovery of our true selves." So this is another aspect of knowing and experiencing the truth about ourselves. The nothingness which we are apart from God is touched by God's creative call and this call of God, which obviously *is* God, remains in us as our deepest center, so that the experience of ourselves is not a completely negative experience, as we were describing last week. We are going to find if we stay with the experience of nothingness, we are going to find the treasure, the pearl of great price, the one thing that makes this whole business of life and living meaningful, and obviously it's going to be God Himself.

You may or may not be familiar with Karl Rahner's way of explaining the term "our supernatural end." He makes the point that this so-called end is not sort of a distant target towards which we have been projected by the almighty *fiat*, but rather that this finality is in us and is itself the most basic and inner source of all our motives and desire. The whole tendency of our nature is begotten by this finality, that God has destined us for and which is in us, moving us toward itself, so that the end is not only the end it is also the beginning, and really the stuff of that which lies between beginning and end, so that what we are doing in a life of prayer, or in a life of coming to a monastery and seeking God, or any of these things, these phrases that we use, has to be seen in this context of where we are coming from and where we are going and what this constitutes.

The basic thing that it constitutes is a relationship, and as long as we are thinking of our relationship to God as sort of a subjectivity toward some object or as ourself towards the great Other, or even some other, then we are in danger of putting obstacles in the way of the call to perfect union, and even though these are only intellectual obstacles they can become other kinds of obstacles because we will misread the wisdom of the spiritual masters and not act in a way that is comparable to letting the Holy Spirit lead us. The mystery of the Holy Trinity – we hear that sometimes said and just dismiss it as a pious phrase perhaps – but the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the relationship

of the Father and the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit, is what we are called to be part of and our proper relationship to God and all our ways of conceiving it and acting upon it are to be modeled, so to speak, on that relationship of the Father and the Son in the Spirit. It's because, as the scripture phrase has it, we are created in His image and likeness.

Now to get some idea of the person as a relation and of situating this person, which is ourselves, in the context of this theological and metaphysical finality, does take a bit of intellectual effort, and I'm going to have a very difficult time here trying to say what I want to say clearly and unambiguously, without writing it all out. But it's worth the effort if you can break through with a few simple things that can free you, free your mind and heart to follow and enter deeply into the spiritual heritage that we have. I have found in my experience with people, and even in my own personal experience in the monastery, that you can expose everybody that comes here to the scriptures, to the mysteries of the faith, to the liturgy; they can read the Fathers and can read all the spiritual masters, but without this kind of basic insight, all of this reading becomes kind of a pious practice or a pious way of dealing with a world of its own, kind of a self-enclosed world, within which we become comfortable. We can talk to other people who are in this world, but it doesn't break through, it doesn't break us through to the mystery itself. It makes to me all the difference in the world between knowing these things through having read them and living them, knowing them by experience, and it's important that we can get through to the experience.

Now, don't take my rendition as what you have to come up with – mine might be more complex than you need to, but I'm a complicated person so I had to find a way to make this my own. I really do believe that each person has to come to terms with these realities of faith and create their own kind of mental synthesis, within which they can receive everything else that comes. You can't simply have an influx of ideas and thoughts and emotions and feelings without some synthesizing factor; otherwise you go mad, if you're lucky, and drive other people mad if you're in a position to do so!

But the Trinitarian context and the notion of ourselves as relational beings is one of the keys that I have found to understanding the mystical terminology, because there's no way that you can enter into what the mystics are talking about as long as you're dealing with what Fr. Louis calls in one of his books the cartesian ego, this complete and isolated, completely autonomous self. The only one who can experience this self is that self; every other thing that that self experiences outside of itself is experienced as by some objective norm. It's other, whereas what God is calling us to is to the knowledge of Him. The only knowledge that He wants us to have of Him that is really worthy of Him and of the way He has made us is that we will know Him subjectively, so that there has to be this kind of entering into Him and "becoming" Him to give us this proper knowledge of Him, the same knowledge, as Jesus points out in the Gospel over and over again, the same knowledge that he has of the Father. That's what he's come to share with us, to give us.

I think here is the context within which we would have to address ourselves to relating to Jesus Christ, because we are called to enter this Trinitarian act which is God from the point of the Son, as adopted sons, as we use that expression. There is only one Son – we still say it in the liturgy and the creed: "your only Son" – we used to say "your only begotten Son," to distinguish from us who are not begotten but adopted. But there's good reason for using the terminology "only Son" and realizing that our participation in the Trinity is through our union with that Son and the incarnation of the Word or of the Son in taking upon himself the human nature. The whole mystery of that

salvation act that is contained in Jesus of Nazareth is instrumental to this process. He didn't come here to become a man; he came here to get men, mankind, to make them God, so that the end of the Incarnation isn't that God finally caught up with us and incorporated us somehow into His life by becoming man. The process is not finished yet, so that this whole bridal motif in the Christian mystical tradition is based on this kind of insight, I believe, that God has called creation into being – the whole parable of getting a bride for his sons so that we are as creation as the bride of Christ. That's one way of relating, how to relate to Jesus Christ. We are trying to become one with him and we know the sacramental thing about marriage which Paul talks about, that this is two in one flesh in a symbol of the Church, and Christ the sacrament of that. Well this is the reality of it, that we become one spirit with Christ. I think the mystical body motif, if you want to call it that, is another way of doing it, a little different angle, so that you're not bound to any one thing. The point is that you come to identification with Christ, as this verse that they all like from St. Paul, "It is no longer I, it is Christ who is acting in us." We relate to the Father as the Son.

Then our union with him and all of this comes about, obviously, through the gift of the Spirit, because God is one. They use the expression triunity: it's not like three peas in a pod or something like that, that you have these three persons and then they're all united in this one pod. That's why I use the expression from William of St. Thierry. I don't know where he might have gotten it but it corresponds well to the language of the New Testament, of the relationship of the Father and the Son not in the unity of the nature but in the unity of the Holy Spirit, so that there's nothing in God but the persons. That's what God is, what's going on between those persons, and that's what we're called to enter into, and our relationship therefore to Christ the Incarnate Word has to follow the way he has it set up.

The other day I was talking about the Jesus Prayer and the formula of saying "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God" as being preferable to my mind than saying, "My Jesus," because the danger is that we would have a Jesus who is made in our image and likeness, rather than letting him make us into his image and likeness, which we don't really know yet. We have to let this transformation take place. In St. John of the Cross you know that the thing that he's trying to lead his students to is what he calls transforming union. It's not simply a union with God. It's a union with God that's going to transform us. If we cling, if we have some sort of an intellectual block, or make a certain kind of an idol, and cling to that, then the Holy Spirit Himself can't break that down, and we're not going to let Him bring us to where he could bring us if we had this kind of flexibility or some idea that we are dealing with an unknown.

I feel that if you read the Gospels honestly, and over and over again, you have to admit that you're confronted with a Jesus Christ that's really not too easy to understand. There's an incomprehensibility even in what he's talking about. What's he getting at? We can pin one thing down and he right away turns around and says something different. The thing that helped me most in reading the Gospel was exposure to these zen masters with their dialogues between the master and the disciple, and this constant confusion of the disciple when he's trying to pin the master down on something. Then when you go back and read the Gospel and you see the disciples trying to pin Jesus down and how he eludes that, he won't be pinned down, because the truth that he's trying to lead us into through our faith in him and our following of him is the ineffable truth. There's only one way to go as St. John of the Cross says: if you want to go to something that you don't know you have to be willing to go by a way that you don't know.

I find that the piety approach to relationship with Jesus is okay as long as you don't make it into something more than a means, a pious practice. A lot of the heresies in the spiritual life have come from taking probably good advice given to one person in a particular circumstance and then making a theology of that – like John of the Cross: he's got very good advice but if you were to take his practical advice and make a theology of it, or a metaphysics of it, you'd have heresies. We've had these heresies in the Church, the Pelagian heresy, the Manichaeian heresy, Jansenism, Quietism, all these different modes of trying to pin down the unpinnable. It's done by people sometimes through ignorance, but very often through a pride even, because they want to have a certain command of the reality. For example, we might have an ambition to be a spiritual master. We were talking before about learning our profession, becoming professional men of prayer and all that. That's all right if you mean by that, let's be serious about this, let's work at this, but you've got to remember what Jesus says is, there's only one master in this business. We'll never be in a position to be masters.

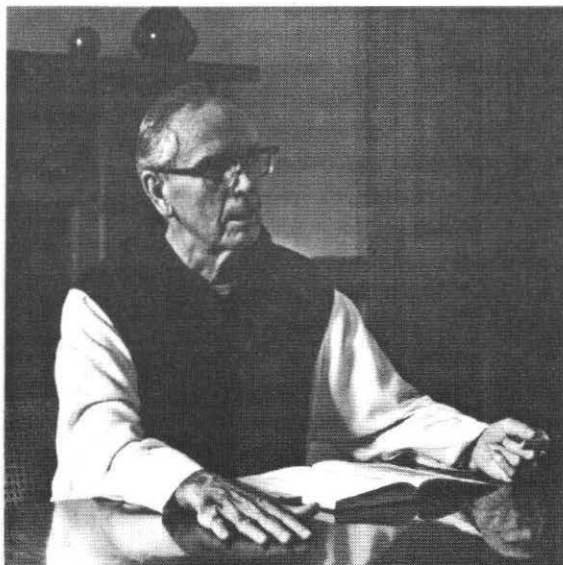
I can remember one time I was in the hermitage, some years back now. I was saying the rosary, walking up and down there. It was a dark day, too dark to read the psalms, and I was saying the joyful mysteries. The way I do it, I just say these *Aves* slowly and let my mind wander about the mystery, preferably, but anything that comes in I kind of try to get that included. But I was going through these mysteries, of the Annunciation and the Visitation, and usually when I say the rosary, after years of the liturgy here, the mystery – all those texts and even the songs and things like that that you associate with these particular feasts or these mysteries – comes back to mind. So I got to the fourth joyful mystery, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, and I was thinking a lot of that liturgy and the song that we would sing in the procession that day, light – the *lumen gentium* – whatever it is, how Christ is the light, and that was the motif. You have the candles and all. Christ is the light, and by the time I got to the end of it when you say the *Gloria* and some little personal prayers, I was praying for that, praying to be enlightened. I wanted to be “in the know,” really know what's going on here, to really get this life. I walked up and down for a while, praying this prayer from the heart, and then I started the fifth joyful mystery, and it came almost like an answer to the previous prayer, because right away I was confronted with this fifth joyful mystery where Jesus is staying behind and Mary and Joseph are looking for him, and at the end of it, it says, “and they did not understand what he was saying to them.” He asked them why they were looking for him and they did not understand what he was saying to them. I thought, well if that's the case with Joseph and Mary there's little chance that I'm going to be the one that's going to be in the know. It reminded me that we're not in this business to be in the know. We're called to live by faith, to put our faith in this man.

We had it not so long ago in the readings of the Gospel there that Jesus is talking to the Jews and some of them are giving him a hard time and finally he got his point across or touched some people and they said to him, “Master, what can we do to do the works of God?” Jesus' answer was, “Believe in him whom He has sent.” If you go through the Gospels you'll find that this is the bottom line all the time. You've got to commit yourself to him, so I have found that if I can submit in my daily life to Christ and let him do the work of transformation, then I believe the relational part, which is sometimes pious, sometimes explicit, sometimes zip – zero – nothing – emptiness, where you are confronted with the fact that you're dealing with an unknown person, so that we take our comfort not in *our* knowledge of Christ but in *his* knowledge of us. This is what we've got to base our relationship with Christ on, that he knows us better than we know ourselves, that he can lead us

better than we can lead ourselves, that he is the Savior, he is the one that can save us. God the Father has given us His only begotten Son and the Son in turn has given us the Spirit – the Father and the Son have given us the Spirit, so that the idea of the Holy Spirit which we'll be coming up to now in Pentecost – we have to let that Spirit transform us into the Bride of Christ. We can't do that on our own, and how it's going to be done is Providence.

We don't know how it will be, but if we concentrate on the thing that we do know, which is ourself, this is where I think we can avoid a lot of illusions, because, for example, we talk about the experience of God. Some people call that the end to which we're ordering our monastic life, to have this experience of God. I remember speaking to a man and we were talking about this idea of the experience of God and in the context of the statement he was making he corrected himself in mid-sentence, so to speak. He was saying, "we in our experience of God – I mean, in our experience of our relationship to God," and then he went on. I reminded him of it later and he didn't make anything to do, but it struck me as a very good statement, a much more exact statement, to say that we experience our relationship to God, than that we experience God, because there are a lot of people like John of the Cross who will say, and make good sense about it, that if you've experienced it there's one thing you can be sure of, it's not God, because God transcends our experience.

When we are asked by, say, a young person who's honestly seeking something, have we experienced God, we want to be able to give him an honest answer. Now we may really think we have experienced God, but how do we know, how do we know that's not an illusion? We had this lady ask us once at a regional meeting, a sociologist: she said, "How do you know when you're relating to Jesus that the one you're relating to is not just a projection of your own self in some manner or form?" We don't, and more than likely it is. But there is a sense in which "my Jesus" is right. There's a Jesus or there's an aspect of the Word, let's say, that is uniquely mine, that I am called to. I don't know what that is. I will know that at the end, and so in that sense you could say it, but most of the people who are using that expression, I think, are projecting something – which is legitimate



to a certain extent, as long as you don't take it more seriously than it is, more than it's an act of piety. You can imagine things in any way you like; any way that serves you is okay. But eventually in the spiritual life these things don't last, they don't hold up, they've got to go – all the business of dark nights and things like that. Whereas Jesus Christ, who is revealed to us in the New Testament, who is the Son of the Father and who has taught us to relate to God as Father and who has promised us the Spirit, this is the basic bottom rock of faith. This is something we can have some surety about by faith, just that we believe it.

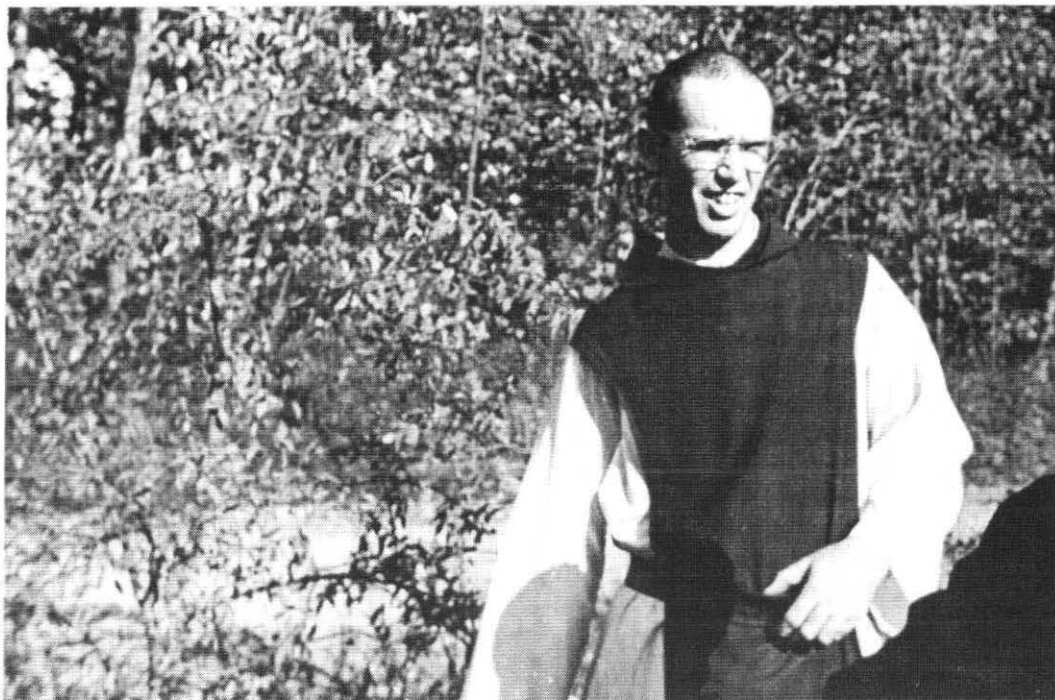
How do we know that what we believe is true or false? We don't. We believe it is, and we're willing to base our life on that

belief, and that's the best we have in this life, but it's enough. It's a good thing, a gift from God, so that we're dealing with a notion of self that isn't self-introspection, because the self that we are dealing with is at God's personal call, which is God, so that we're seeking God within, as St. Augustine says. We're not looking for Him outside of ourselves, we're looking for Him as He is speaking to us in His personal call to us. Then we know that He is doing this to others and we know also that what happens to us in daily life in His Providence is all that: "Whatever you do to the least you do to me."

Now that's not terribly clear and I didn't really go into the business of person as relation, but there are two places where you find something on that if you are interested. One is in a little book called *The Prayers of Kierkegaard*. The second part of that book is a little summary of Kierkegaard's spiritual teaching. It's the best book on Kierkegaard I've ever seen, and he has a very good insight and expression of the person as relation. Another one is this Dan Walsh that we have had here and been exposed to. But there you'd have to get a little more exposure than just a little book because it's a very complex teaching. There are people around – you'll probably run into it if you persevere with Brother Anthony, because he got the insight, but the idea of person as relation rather than as some thing substantial is very helpful. To relate that to God and to ourselves can make a lot of what people are saying about spirituality simpler and clearer. That's why I say that even though it takes a little intellectual effort for a while to break through this thing it's something worth meditating on and studying a bit so that you can try to get this breakthrough.

Over and above all the intellectual effort and exposure, what you need most is practice, doing it. I came across this thing that I did back in 1969 and I'd like to just read it to you. It's a lot of good quotes here and it makes a good point related to all the stuff we've been saying. "In an article entitled 'Is the Contemplative Life Finished?' Fr. Louis quotes and comments on a statement made by Fr. Sebastian Moore. The statement reads as follows: 'The effect of being continually exposed to the truth which is doing no good is distressing to the soul,' and Fr. Louis' comment on it is, 'We better face the situation of frustrating alienation in the religious life, this feeling that we are constantly exposed to an immense truth which is coming through but which is not getting to us because we are not responding to it on levels on which we can respond. We are attempting to respond on impossible levels. We force ourselves to confront an impossibly great truth to which we attempt to measure up with an impossible response. This is a highly destructive situation and when a person lives under this day after day the whole thing gets to be incomparably sick, people saying over and over again what these great values are, etc. etc. and nobody experiencing them at all.'" Now when I read that, that struck home to me because I think this is again one of the reasons that we run into this frustrating experience and why people lose heart after a while or take up other occupations in monasteries rather than the mystical life or prayer or let this transformation take place, is because they really don't know how to respond.

There's no way anybody can get up and give you in a lecture how are we going to respond because this is something that's individually done. The best thing you can do is submit yourself to a director. That's why spiritual direction is really a pretty important factor in the life of prayer. I don't mean just going in and telling somebody your troubles every week or something like that but really submitting your experience. I found the opportunity to be able to do that with not only Fr. Louis for a couple years but with others in my life. One of the key things, and again it's not something that you can get attached to – these guys go, they pass away and you're on your own then – but you have



to learn how to use the wisdom that is given to us in the Church's traditions. We have to be able to enter into this ourselves and then be able to speak of it from where we're at. That's what I've been trying to say in these last three talks, that I was going to speak of what I know. There may be a lot of things that I don't know, but these things that I'm speaking of so far, I know that they are there to do, they can be done, they are being done, not only by myself but people I know that are doing them. You can see the transformation taking place over the years in people who die here and things like that.

What is going to happen on the intellectual level I don't know. There seems to be an improvement even there, where you had a very sophisticated metaphysics in Aquinas or something like that which then became kind of caricaturized, handed down in textbooks, and became, as Father said, everybody had it all bottled. I'm sure St. Thomas wouldn't have recognized it. But you run into people like, as I say, we had Walsh here and then the bottle was just burst. All of a sudden you're aware of what all these things that you've been hearing mean, and like we speak of God in the terminology of the scholastics as *ipsum esse* [being itself], so the whole idea of God not being a thing, not being some thing, isn't something new on the horizon. This has been the official teaching of the Church for centuries, but who keeps this insight of being in their religious practice, in their prayer life, and to realize that God is love? God isn't loving – He is an act of love. This is what we are, what we are going to be. As St. John says, "We don't know what we're going to be," but the point is the process that we're in now is a becoming. We're entering really into being, into this "to be." This is why the whole problem of or fear of pantheism and things like that come from this kind of basic misunderstanding of all these categories – how can you mix this category with that category.

Just read the Gospels, read St. Paul. Those gentlemen don't seem to be worried about mixing these things up. They're there in their original pristine statements. So often we make false oppositions and then we don't know what to do with them. We have these problems that we've created ourselves and the people who live these things learn it. I've talked to people who haven't studied philosophy but who have had these experiences, not extraordinary experiences, just ordinary religious experiences, and when they read the Gospels they have this kind of insight into it. Often they don't know how to express it but it's very encouraging to me. Some of the brothers had no philosophy; they'd go and they'd listen to Dan Walsh, they'd understand what he was talking about, whereas some of the fathers have had philosophy and were busy fighting with him about his explanation of things! Well in the light of that, next time I may try to improve on this a little bit but I'm going to try to concentrate on practical means of entering in to this. That's what I did in this part where I was just quoting from, trying to get away from just hearing about all these wonderful things and not doing them, so I'm going to try to give you things that I've found helpful, some practical methods of entering into a life of prayer, where you're at, the level you're at, and let it draw you rather than you try to climb the stairs.

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I don't know if you're familiar with the talk I gave at Bellarmine on the anniversary of Fr. Louis's death. It's going to be published in *Cistercian Studies*. But it's on "The Consciousness of God and His Purpose in the Life and Writings of Thomas Merton." One of the quotes that I have here is from Fr. Louis's novel *My Argument with the Gestapo*. He wrote it before he entered the monastery and then it was only published after his death. He said, "If you want to identify me, ask me not where I live or what I like to eat or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I think I'm living for, in detail, and ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for. Between these two answers you can determine the identity of any person. The better answer he has the more of a person he is." Now that's not entirely unambiguous. But the paper is on the whole idea of the purpose of God, finding the purpose of God in our life and becoming conscious of that. It corresponds to this notion of the person as finality. It might be interesting if you were interested in the person and it brings in a lot about prayer.

This man's name is Thomas M. Tomaszek and he writes in *Analecta Cisterciensia* on William of St. Thierry and he has this passage which I thought was very moving: "To be uneasy in this regard about our own self means to be uncertain of one's own center, to be an enigma to one's self, to be a wearisome and laborious question, but in addition it also signals the need for transcendence. It is the existential self which grasps its identity as a metaphysical question and thus encounters selfhood. The questioner is not only the questioned but the very question itself." I really think that's the case. That's the situation of being in process. God has the answers but we have the questions, and in our life of prayer we're constantly seeking, we're always seeking the answer. It's a living process, so it's not something that happens just in our mind. It corresponds very well to the desert father tradition where the basic question wasn't: how are things? how do things work? but: what shall I do? The disciple went to the master and asked him, what should I do, here and now? Dig in the ditch or something like that – that's what you did. You'll notice the same thing in the zen masters: they refuse to answer these speculative questions. It's always, here, do this. What is zen? Look, the

tree is growing. People say they're just giving them a nonsensical answer, but it's not a nonsensical answer. That's a good answer – that tree is growing! It's the truth! You can say something true, and it's better to say something true like that than to say something false about things you don't know anything about, which is very often the case with speculation, because we don't know the whole truth of that.

I've said what I sincerely believe can be useful and helpful to you but only on the condition that you put it into practice, because there's nothing like doing it to really making you know it. You've got to know by experience or else this will just be an interesting set of talks – hopefully – but will pass by and won't really be fruitful. I find that one of the most frustrating things about being in the speaking role. I remember giving the homily at the funeral of Dan Walsh and it's kind of hard to say something in a brief sermon, three minutes, four minutes, five minutes, so I made the point that we were burying this man and everybody that comes into our life has a word from God for us. I challenged the audience to ask themselves while I was speaking and during the mass and the funeral what was the word that this man brought into our lives, into your life. Well when the Mass was all over and the funeral was all over and it was time for coffee breaks and things like that, everybody was saying what a nice homily it was, but you have this frustrating realization that they didn't actually do what you asked them to do, that you just entertained them. If we do that in the monastery then we're just contributing to empty talk, and we really don't need that in the monastery.

I remember that at one time we used to have a lot more talks in chapter than we do now, by different priests besides just the abbot, recollection day talks, sermons. There was some special talk that Fr. Louis was asked to give in chapter, and I know from my personal contact with him that he didn't feel as comfortable in chapter as he did in a smaller scholastic group where he could be less formal, let his hair down, use slang and things like that. So when he got up to speak in chapter I knew he wasn't comfortable, but then he started out by putting his paper down and looking out at the community, and he said, "Every time I get up in this chapter it comes back to me very strongly that I have no right to get up here unless I have something to say which is better than silence." That stuck with me, that before we speak we should have something better than silence. In this life you'll find out that it's not all that easy to come up with something better than silence! Silence is a very precious thing and a fruitful thing in the monastic life and certainly a key means to practicing the prayer life in the monastic life.

The system I have for practical means of prayer is based on the old railroad signs: "stop, look and listen" – and you had better do that! You hear every year of somebody getting killed around here by a train hitting their car. You wonder how that could happen. So this idea of stopping, looking, and listening as a system of practicing prayer I found was a good way to summarize some good aspects of the practice of prayer – not as erudite as St. Bernard's three degrees of truth or anything!

But the first thing is to stop, and for a lot of us that's the hardest thing. Before we look and listen we would be well advised to stop the motion, the movement, the things that we're doing. Now time is not essential to prayer, and not even to monastic prayer, but freedom from compulsive activity is, and as a consequence giving prayer a lot of time is usually an important beginning and discipline. We're not going to taste and see unless we make this effort at stopping the other things. There has to be a little bit of a room there. We have to create something by our stoppage.

The cloistered life, for example, as distinct from other forms of religious life, is meant to be sort of a withdrawal, a drawing back from other activities, and that's presumably why we come to a

life like this rather than to go to some other religious life. There's kind of a painful irony in coming apart from the world to a desert place, and then outdoing the outsiders in active living! We create our own pace in here, which is not corresponding to the whole point of withdrawal in the first place, and again this is pretty much up to each individual member of the monastic community to make his contribution in this matter. Obviously for yourselves as newcomers it takes a certain amount of time to fit into the system or what's here and find your own rhythm and settle into the whole thing. I'm not suggesting you fight the thing that's here because that's just another kind of useless activity. The best of all things to fight is our own personal compulsions, and by using the time at our disposal with an eye to communion with God rather than looking for something to do with our time that makes some sense to us, like, well, we learn something today, we read something today, we produced



Jean Leclercq, OSB and Fr. Flavian
Photo by Thomas Merton

something today. We have, I think, an American bias – maybe other people have it as well.

Silence is supposed to lead us away from that into a kind of a solitude, and the solitude is a very helpful means to get us to the self-knowledge that we were speaking about and experiencing our relationship with God, or to God, because as long as we are living off our relationships to other people we are living with relative selves. We are who we are, usually, to somebody else. If I'm sitting in a room giving a talk to Karl Rahner and Hans Küng and Von Balthasar and Guardini and all those theologians you people heard about in chapter the other day, my self-image, even my true self-image, would be different than if I were in the same room giving the same talk to a group of boy scouts. If I didn't have a different self-image there would probably be something wrong with me, because it's relative to different people: to boys I'm a grown man, to laypeople I'm a priest, whereas to fellow priests, or to people who know more about most things than I do – they're there listening to me to find out what the *hoi polloi* are thinking about their theology! So we adapt to other people, and this isn't false. It's true but it's not our deepest self, it's not the deepest level of our being and it's not going to lead us to that necessarily. God Himself can be met at other than the deepest levels, and we have plenty of time and place for that in our day-to-day living in community, but when we are free to do so we should try to enter into the deepest level and be alone with God in His most intimate word to us and try to touch this most intimate self.

Now you're all fairly mature people; you're not youngsters, and so you know that in a man's life there is a need for intimacy. This is something we can't simply dismiss and do without, and this not only for a religious life or a spiritual life but even to be fully human, even to make it. Now a man outside will have his work which will engage a lot of different faculties and challenge him, maybe his career, and that takes up a good part of his day and it satisfies his needs. But he has to have that wife to come home to, to satisfy another aspect of his nature and needs, and not simply gross sexual needs but a need for intimacy, a need for a different part of his nature. Now here in the monastery we have plenty of the things that can take care of our ambitions and desires and things like that – we can make our mark, we can leave our mark on the buildings, put up this wall, do that, all these “masculine” things can be done pretty much. But we need to satisfy the other part of us too, and we don't have a wife to come home to, so if we don't find our intimacy in an intimate prayer life, over and above the liturgy and the community prayer life, then we're going to be in trouble, because you will look for that intimacy somewhere else or will be less than human and not very good examples of what the religious life produces. Now how this intimacy will formulate itself is different with different people – they have different temperaments and even different particular graces, so we were talking a little bit the other day about personal intimacy with Jesus, for example, or with Mary or with some saint or other, and I believe that all of that is legitimate forms of piety, and if they suit you, you can use it. Since it's intimate and private, no one else even has to know about it. But it's not the only path and it isn't really something that should be clung to. In fact clinging to anything is a no-no in this business, because what we are destined for and what we are really made for and what we are going to come to, we come to best by letting go.

I remember reading a joke in the *NCR* some time back, maybe over a year now. This man was driving on a mountainous road in his convertible and he drove off, missed one of the turns, and the car went plunging down into the canyon below. He just managed to grab hold of one of these shrub oaks that was sticking out of the side of the mountain. He's hanging there by one hand and he's yelling out, “Help! Help!” and all he gets back is his own echo: “Help! Help!” “Is anybody there to help

me?" "Is anybody there to help me?" So finally he says, "God, are you there? Can you help me?" God answers him and says, "Yes, I'm here and I can help you." He says, "Well hurry, my arm is giving out." So God says to him, "Do you believe in me?" and he says, "Yes, I believe in you." So God says, "Well, if you believe in me, let go of the tree." There's a long pause, then the man says, "Can anybody else help me?" And what's good about the joke is the accuracy of it, because this is precisely very often what God is asking us to do, to let go of the one thing that we think our life depends on. It's very often a pious practice, or some particular way of doing a thing or relating to God. So of the stop, look, and listening, it's pretty obvious that once we do stop and give ourselves some time for this intimate part of ourselves to take place then we're in a better position to look and listen.



Fr. Jean Leclercq and Fr. Flavian
Photo by Thomas Merton

Now listening is a little more easy to see.

You can always hear things if you stop and create this silence in some manner or other. We spoke already about the first word in St. Benedict's *Rule* being "*ausculta*" – "listen." We spoke before about prayer as listening, rather than just as talking. We are a religion of the Word; as Christians we're hearers of the Word, as Rahner uses the term, so that listening to God and His Word is part and parcel of our basic religion and certainly of our monastic setup. The whole idea of having the Word of God read to us in church, or even singing it, are just different ways of making it present to our hearing, to our ability to hear. People giving sermons and talks – all they do is take the same word and shake it up in some different mixture so that you can hear it again. Every year going through the same liturgical feasts, we have probably all had that experience – you get some new insight, a new aspect of the Word comes through to you.

The Word of God is the answer to the questions, but very often the questions aren't there. When we don't have the questions at that period of our life then the answer isn't much good until you get the question. I remember when we grew up we memorized the catechism, the Baltimore Catechism – all these questions and answers, and I've heard it knocked – that these kids don't understand what

they memorize, which is probably true. But I can remember in my own growing-up experience, where the question of why did God make me – when that question finally came to me in the beginning of adolescence, the question was elicited by something: what is life all about? The answer was there in my brain somewhere, stashed away, and it came and I analyzed that answer and found it fairly satisfactory.

So there are different ways of using our silence, for hearing and especially trying to listen to the Spirit. Jesus said the Spirit will be given to us and “He will teach you all things and recall things that I have said to you.” There is this docility to the Spirit. We’re not alone, we’re not left orphans in this world by Christ, and our best contact with Jesus Christ is the Holy Spirit who has been given to us for that purpose. And then of course faith comes by hearing, and we spoke a little bit about how important our faith in God’s mercy is, that if we want to have this faith deepened and enriched then we must be constantly hearing at deeper and deeper levels, letting the Word penetrate right to the core of our being. Practice helps: the more you do certain things, or take certain technical training – for example a psychiatrist, when you sit down and talk to a psychiatrist the psychiatrist listens to you, what you’re saying, and by reason of his training, and perhaps some special insight but mostly through his training, he learns to hear what’s going on in your unconscious, just from the things you’re saying consciously, because of his training. And a musician, of course – we all live somewhat with musicians. They can hear things that don’t bother us: wrong notes and wrong pitches, but their training and the delicacy of their ears attuned to these different things can be acquired.

Now it seems to me that this is part of being professional contemplatives: we should really be men who are responsive to the Spirit, that we can hear the Spirit, recognize the Spirit when we hear it, and be able to respond to it, and it’s pretty much the same with looking. You’ve all probably done these tests – I remember a man gave me a little card at a gas station one time – it was just a nonsensical sentence actually, didn’t make any particular sense, but the question was, at then end, “How many f’s are there in this sentence?” and so I was driving down the highway eighty miles an hour counting the number of f’s in the sentence – wasn’t the best way to do it – at least that’s my excuse for not getting them all – but I think I counted eight and there were at least twelve, so I missed four. So when I got to my destination, which was a convent of nuns, I gave it to four people at the table, and one only saw four, the other saw six, only one person saw twelve. The little trick in the thing was there are a lot of “of’s” in the sentence and you tended to skip those f’s in the “of’s”: “of this,” “of that” – but it shows that we don’t always see what’s there. They train children in school: they say, well look at this picture, now what do you see? How many things are there? People have different perceptions and training there too. You go walking with somebody who knows all the different trees, can see all these different things, they can spot them right away; or a paleontologist – when they find a stone, just by looking at it they can tell you, that goes back to such and such a time; they all look the same to me, without that training.

In our training what we want to be able to see is God’s action in people, in the events that happen, in the Providence. Look at the way the people who wrote the Bible, how sensitive they were to human events and how they saw in all these human events God. It sounds like they could see God doing all these things but if you read the demythologized histories of Israel you realize there were no special phenomena, for the most part, that these people saw, but that it was their faith. They were seeing the hand of God doing these things because of their faith in God’s all-intervening action in their lives. We should be able to do that, and then of course that should lead us through these differ-

ent processes that we have been talking about to that purity of heart which will give us the ultimate seeing that we're here for, the contemplation of God, which is the real looking. But I think the key to it all is the stopping, and one of the most efficacious forms of stopping is the practice of silence and quietude. This is available to us pretty much as much as we want it.

Some people make a distinction, perhaps with some good reasons, psychologically good reasons, between solitude and loneliness, like solitude's a good thing and loneliness is a bad thing. But I personally think that that's a little misleading, because if you want to profit from solitude I think you have to be willing to suffer loneliness. In loneliness and in this lack of support from other people, or understanding from other people, you're forced down to this deeper level where you can find that person who is understanding. You find it only by faith. But I like solitude so much that I'm living where I'm living, which is one way to do it. If you've been leading a very active monastic life by whatever quirk of Providence then it seemed to me important to find the solitude in some shape or form. I do believe that we can have it in our ordinary life here, unless you get trapped into some sort of office, or where you have to talk to other people all the time. But for the most part, my first years here were where I learned to appreciate solitude, before my ordination to the priesthood, the first ten years here. It was a big crowded place. There were over 200 people here and we didn't have much speaking in those days. You experienced a good deal of solitude, and that solitude came to you not always in the pleasant solitude of walking through the woods and enjoying the silence and listening to the birds, but a form of loneliness. Your heart was looking for somebody to talk to or to be with or whatever, and you didn't find it, or when you did speak, like to the father master or the abbot, it wasn't understood, or they weren't interested for the most part. A lot of people even in marriage have this solitude, because the husband is not interested in what the wife has to say and the wife is not interested in what the husband has to say, so even though they may be talking and trying to communicate gradually it gets through to them that nobody's interested in this, except me. So you have that loneliness. Even in Christ's life, he was a real lonely person, except for the Father – he had the Father. Mary I'm sure, as good as she was, didn't understand him, what he was up to, what he was doing.

We must try to enter into this kind of communion with this and find the kind of thing that's there and my experience is that it is what is there that is the best thing you can have in this life. It's absolutely reliable, it's always there, it's the most comforting thing. Now there are dark nights, but unless you lose the faith completely, even in the dark nights you can have the comfort of this assurance, this basic thing that we long for in our life. This loneliness which you experience until you find this level will lead you there and then you'll find you'll never be lonely again, because you'll have this companion that's completely dependable, completely interested in whatever you're interested in, and you can get into what He's interested in. This is why I find the theme of God's purpose, what is God up to, what's going on in the world, what does He think of Egypt and Israel and people starving in India and all this stuff, what does he think about UFOs, and other planets, and other worlds. What was his point in doing this?

Another thing that fits in well with all this is the fact that we mentioned before, is patience. Guardini has a chapter on the patience of God in one of his books, which I find fascinating, because we're practically the first generation of human beings on this planet to have a better idea of what was involved in the creative processes to make this earth and to make it habitable and the billions of years that it took. I've been reading this book we have in the library about an 80-billion year cycle

from beginning to end, and we're about 16 billion into it, and you think, why did God take all that time to do this thing? Why didn't He just snap his finger and say "be" which He could seemingly just as easily have done – it's the patience of God, and we don't know the whole plan. We have the divine plan revealed to us in Christ.

For real practical measures, the best thing I can say is you're going to do a lot of things, you're going to read, but the one thing that nobody's going to force you to do is to use your cell or the woods or whatever and be alone and be silent when you can and stick with it even if it causes loneliness. I remember I used to tell this to people when I was abbot. I'd tell them to go for long walks in the woods, spend a whole afternoon there and do that for a week, every day of the week, and then come back and we'll talk about it, what you experienced. Well some of them never came back, and some who did come back said, "That's not for me, Father Flavian; that may be for you." But you really have to do this thing and stay with it for, sometimes, years.

It's been a pleasure to be here, and it will be a pleasure to get back to the hermitage. I hope that what I have said is some use to you and if ever I can be of any personal help on a one-to-one basis with any of you, you know where I am, and you know how to get there.