

Conversations Along the Way

*St. Brigid of Kildare
Methodist-Benedictine Consultation*

Occasional Papers #1

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Conversations Along the Way: Editor's Introduction

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This initial set of “occasional papers” from the St. Brigid of Kildare Methodist-Benedictine Consultation (2003-2004) is intended to provide resources and information for conversations that are already in progress.

Some of these conversations are beginning to unfold in Benedictine precincts as monastic communities take counsel about how to engage the growing number of Protestant (including but not limited to United Methodist) clergy and laity who are forming relationships with Benedictine communities at a time when some of the latter face aging populations and declining numbers of monastic professions.

Other conversations are taking place between denominational leaders in the United Methodist Church who are charged with responsibility of providing pastors and laity with opportunities for spiritual formation at a time when some congregations are experiencing aging populations, declining numbers, and financial constraints.

Still other conversations have begun to take place when Benedictines and United Methodists find themselves in a position to talk with one another in ecumenical contexts where they discover in the midst of the many differences that exist between them, they also are struggling with similar sets of issues.

All of these conversations are taking place at a point in human history in which broader movements within contemporary Christianity are beginning to intersect in unpredictable ways.

Evangelical Protestants and groups of Anabaptist Christians are exploring what some have described as the “new monasticism”¹ while elsewhere monastic communities are talking about the possibilities and limitations of “monasticism beyond the walls.”²

At the same time, monastic oblation appears to be enjoying a renaissance and in the process, monastics and non-monastics alike are beginning to notice that the portrait of what it means to be a monastic oblate is becoming richer as well as more diverse.³

Thanks to efforts of people as varied as Don Collins, Danny Morris, Abbot Timothy Kelly O.S.B., Mary Ewing Stamps, Paul Jones, and Jerry Haas, United Methodists have been part of such conversations for quite a while now.

Indeed, as Fr. Paul Jones makes clear in the history of the Methodist-Benedictine Dialogues that he has written, the gatherings that took place between March 2003 and March 2004 build on conversations that have been going on in different precincts for at least two decades. Some observers are beginning to discover that the conversation may have existed much earlier than we have realized, but in much less explicit ways. Certainly, those scholars who are interested in tracing the emergence of “monastic longings”⁴ in various European and American Protestant communities over the past five centuries have identified some intriguing lines of influence.

Twenty years from now, those of us who are attempting to live within patterns of piety that are recognizably “Methodist” *and* “Benedictine” may discover that there is much more to talk about than we are able to articulate at this juncture. Based on what is already known about the strange, wonderful and conflicted journey of United Methodism, however, we can easily identify reasons to continue the conversations with men and women whose lives are shaped according to the Benedictine pattern of spirituality.

Be that as it may, those of us who are United Methodists are probably not yet in a position to grasp the significance of these conversations in relation to wider movements of the Holy Spirit in the latter part of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century. We are part of a narrative the trajectory of which we are not yet in a position to describe as clearly and coherently as we might like. When the outlines of that narrative begin to emerge with some clarity, historians of monasticism are likely to provide United Methodist leaders, theologians, and historians with helpful clues about the overlapping practices of discipleship that can be analyzed and discussed.

In any event, as the walls of Protestant-Catholic division continue to crumble in the midst of Protestant exploration of monasticism and intra-monastic ferment, conversations between United Methodists and Benedictines are becoming more plausible and necessary. When the eight members of the St. Brigid of Kildare Consultation met with Abbot John Klassen and three members of the senior council of St. John's Abbey on March 12, 2004 during the last of our three gatherings, all present recognized that such gatherings are likely to be more frequent in the years to come than they have been in times past. We trust that the mutual openness displayed in that gathering was as much a response to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our time as much as it is evoked in response to newly recognized problems and issues.

The first essay in this set of "occasional papers" narrates what it is like to embody openness to the movements of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Those of us who have had the privilege of knowing Mary Ewing Stamps in the context of her own monastic journey have learned to appreciate her remarkable trust and receptivity to the whispers of the Holy Spirit. As her reflections about "learning to trust God along the way" make quite clear, it is a profound mistake to attempt to embrace one's calling from God apart from the presence, traditions, and wisdom of living communities of faith.

The second and third papers in this collection provide two complementary perspectives by Benedictine leaders about the ways in which discernment is lived out in the context of monastic community. As our group learned from Abbot Timothy and Sr. Katherine Casper, monastic understandings of "discernment" are oriented by communal patterns that may initially seem disconcerting to United Methodist pilgrims in the way, but once such clarification is offered, these distinctions provide very helpful ways for those of us who are "Wesleyans" to begin appropriating the wisdom of "discretio" and "conversatio" as well as the multilayered relationship that exists between listening and obeying in the context of monastic spirituality.

The final paper in this initial collection attempts to narrate the various journeys that unfolded in relation to the conversations of the Monastic Design Team. As Fr. Paul Jones shows, there is not a single narrative thread to be discerned, but there are ways in which the monastic explorations of Methodists have moved from theoretical conversations to specific forms of spiritual practice. Paul Jones's own vocational journey has taken several unexpected turns, some of which are not easy to reconcile with one another. Yet, Paul has elected to live the mystery of his own monastic vocation while attempting to embrace

the heritages of the Methodist and Catholic traditions. We are very fortunate that Paul Jones was able to take the time to put into print his recollections alongside the various records of the Monastic Design Team's conversations.

Those of us who had the privilege of participating in the St. Brigid of Kildare Consultation will recognize that the documents gathered in this booklet are significant markers in a sequence of intensive conversations that took place over the past year. The four pieces that have been gathered in the first set of "occasional papers" represent the first two gatherings (March 2003 and September 2003). A second set of papers about "Living Rules and Customaries" will be available in September 2004 that will represent the conversations that took place during our third gathering (March 2004). That volume will include a bibliography for persons who would like to explore the issues surrounding the Methodist-Benedictine Dialogue. We also envision the possibility of gathering a third set of narratives by and about United Methodist oblates of Benedictine communities, but we are not sure if we will be able to complete that task or not.

As the "editor" of this collection, I am acutely aware of the fact that none of these materials could be made available to the audiences noted above if it were not for the contributions of the persons who constituted the St. Brigid of Kildare Methodist-Benedictine Consultation. On behalf of The Crossings Project at the University of Indianapolis, I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the contributions of the consultation participants:

Dr. Ron Anderson, Garrett Evangelical Seminary, Evansville, IL
Rev. Dar Berkenpas, U.M. Pastor, Sioux Falls, SD
Dr. Michael G. Cartwright, University of Indianapolis, Indianapolis, IN
Rev. Jerry Haas, Upper Room Ministries, Nashville, TN
Sr. Jennifer Horner, Our Lady of Grace Monastery, Beech Grove, IN
Fr. W. Paul Jones, Hermitage Spiritual Retreat Center
Abbot Timothy Kelly, St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, MN
Dr. Mary E. Stamps, St. Brigid of Kildare Monastery, St. Joseph, MN

All eight persons offered themselves without the prospect of being paid for the time and wisdom that they gave. Without these voluntary offerings, this consultation could not have happened.

In particular, I would like to thank three parties. First, I thank Jerry Haas for the discerning way in which he engaged my initial inquiries as well as the patience that he displayed throughout the process. Second, I want to thank Mary Ewing Stamps, who offered the hospitality of St. Brigid

Monastery to members of our group on three occasions over the past year. Finally, I want to express our gratitude to the Religion Division of Lilly Endowment for agreeing to permit a portion of funds from The Crossings Project at U Indy to be reallocated for this purpose. Because of this generous gift, the staff of the Office of Ecumenical & Interfaith Programs of the University of Indianapolis has had the privilege of creating a partnership with the Upper Room and St. Brigid of Kildare Monastery that sustained the consultations.

Some observers have expressed their surprise that a church-related university like the University of Indianapolis would be the “efficient cause” of such a gathering. I readily grant that the narratives that might connect contemporary recovery of “theological exploration of vocation” in church-related higher education to the centuries-long conversations about monasticism are by no means straightforward. At the same time, I do not believe that it is an accident that as my colleagues and I turned our attention to the challenge of reintegrating spiritual formation into the curriculum of this particular academic community, we found ourselves reengaging the wisdom of monastic traditions in the context of local partnerships with communities like Our Lady of Grace Monastery.

None of us would claim to have exhausted the potential of conjoining “the love of learning and the desire for God”—as Benedictines might describe the task—any more than we would dare to claim to have completed the task that Charles Wesley once described as uniting “the pair so long disjoined, knowledge and vital piety.” Nevertheless, we have embarked on that kind of journey and are discovering the delights and puzzles of conversations with partners “along the way” that we have discovered to be important to us in ways that we could never have predicted beforehand. We do not pretend to fathom the future of such conversations, but we trust that seeds are being sown that will bear fruit in future generations. In the meantime, we thank God for providing the Way in which we find ourselves journeying alongside one another.

Michael G. Cartwright
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Methodist-Benedictine Consultation (2003-2004)

NOTES

- ¹ See for example the “New Monasticism” conference hosted by Rutba House and St. John’s Missionary Baptist in Durham, North Carolina Church in June 2004. This conversation was inspired in part by a book by Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre’s After Virtue* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 68-78.
- ² See for example the session of the American Benedictine Academy from August 2001 where one of the sessions was devoted to a discussion of “Monasticism Beyond the Walls.” See also the monograph by Janet Buchanan entitled “Monks Beyond Monastery Walls: Benedictine Oblation and the Future of Benedictine Spirituality,” Dissertation submitted to the Graduate Theological Foundation in candidacy for the degree of Doctor of Ministry with Spirituality in Ministry Concentration (May 1999). Copies of Buchanan’s dissertation are available from the author who lives in Roseburg, Oregon.
- ³ See the twenty narratives about monastic oblates of the past and present that have been collected in *Benedict in the World: Portraits of Monastic Oblates* edited by Linda Kulzer and Roberta Bondi (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002).
- ⁴ Peter King’s recent history of *Western Monasticism: A History of the Monastic Movement in the Western Church* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1999) includes a chapter (pp. 383-419) that attempts to narrate the history of monasticism in Protestant contexts. King’s narrative offers an analysis of the emergence and re-emergence of particular practices associated with monasticism.

Learning to Trust God Along the Way: My Vocation in Community

Mary Ewing Stamps
St. Brigid of Kildare Monastery

The following remarks about vocation in community arise out of my personal reflections on the experience of helping to establish a Methodist Benedictine monastery. These reflections are neither an analysis of the process nor a prediction about its future. They are merely a few observations about my path thus far.

I. The Calling: Seeking God in the Daily

In pondering best how talk about an endeavor that has ruled most of my adult life, I began to think about the daily log book which I have kept since the time this monastery was in its initial proposal stage four years ago. The entries tend to be quite short, but all together they take up over two hundred and fifty pages. Most of it, like life itself, is very daily stuff, seasoned with occasional moments of the miraculous and of amazingly timely generosity from friends, benefactors and complete strangers. Think of it as if some dedicated Hebrew scribe had kept a daily record of everything that happened to the people between the parting of the Red Sea and their entry into the Promised Land:

“Day 372: Walked five miles through the burning sand, again.”

“Day 4,865: Had manna for breakfast...again.”

“Day 10,713: Moses had a conuption fit and stormed off to the mountains...again.”

Not exactly the stuff of “Headline News.” Reading across the span of the daily log book, however, one can begin to see—as one may see in the Bible—a story of God’s faithful, protection, guidance, sustenance and providential care. Whenever I have the opportunity to speak with groups or individuals about St. Brigid’s and how I came to be here, I always talk about it as a story of divine grace.

A small sample of the past years’ chronology will demonstrate the point:

In 1984, I sent to seminary, knowing only two things: first, that I felt called by my heart and my church to go there; and second, that it probably was not for the purpose of preparing for local church ministry. In 1984, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church passed a resolution to explore monasticism from out of our own context.

In 1987, I went to St. John’s University for a year of monastic studies and “happened” to end up with Timothy Kelly as my spiritual director. (He was then the only non-United Methodist on The Upper Room’s Monastic Design Team, and was the one who told me what my own denomination had been up to behind my back!). In 1987, The Upper Room’s Monastic Design Team came to St. John’s Abbey for the semi-annual exploratory trip.

In 1992, the small ecumenical community of which I had been a member disbanded and it was recommended to me that in order to deepen my monastic experience I spend time with the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. In 1992, the BSPAs began their congregational sojourner program. I was their first applicant and guinea pig.

In 1997, three years after finishing my two years with the BSPAs, I moved back to central Minnesota in order to resume my monastic path. In 1997, St. John’s Abbey acquired a piece of property adjacent to Abbey land and began to consider what use to make of it. I was approached about writing a proposal to use it as a Methodist monastery for women.

Step by step, I can look back at my journey and see a multitude of such “coincidences” along the way. If you ever begin to doubt God’s grace, call me and I will talk you through it!

None of these works of the Spirit would have been accomplished apart from communities and persons of faith who have opened themselves to me along the way. My vocation has arisen out of community and is for the

service of God in community. In order to decipher my own calling, it has been necessary to listen “inside” to God’s heart beating in mine, as well as “outside” to trusted voices who knew something both of monks and of me.

I was introduced to monasticism by persons whose manner of being I admired and whose intelligence, insights, and experience I respected—persons like my teachers Don Saliers, Roberta Bondi (at Emory University) and Timothy Kelly (at St. John’s University). Each of them taught me something of what it meant to follow the Rule of St. Benedict. Each of them affirmed my own sense of calling to a similar life. For my part, the rest was a stepping out in faith and learning to trust God along the way. This *modus operandi* must be the way of every believer, regardless of his or her particular path.

II. The Visioning: Stability Amid Community

With the possible exception of persons who are gifted with infused mystical insights, the visioning process for most of us begins with learning one’s tradition or traditions and practicing the disciplines which have shaped them. In my case, a combination of brain training and lived experience has been key: seminary and doctoral studies in the academic community at Emory University, one year of monastic studies in the academic community at St. John’s University, frequent contact and prayer with established monastic communities, one year in the Bread of God ecumenical monastic community, two years with the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Clyde, Missouri, along with travel to other monastic communities, and remaining involved in United Methodist local church faith communities over the years. Did you catch the one word that is common to all of those experiences? Again, my vocation might never have surfaced—much less been developed—had it not been for the presence of community.

One group that cannot be overlooked in the journey is the Monastic Design Team assembled by The Upper Room in response to a directive from the General Conference of 1984. (See “History” by W. Paul Jones, also in *St. Brigid of Kildare Papers #1*). The story of St. Brigid of Kildare Monastery is a direct descendent of the work that this group did. They laid the groundwork and opened the doors for this monastery. Their mere existence, along with the continuing support of persons at The Upper Room, has given an invaluable degree of credibility to St. Brigid’s, both

within the United Methodist Church and with other Christian traditions. The importance of their early work cannot be overestimated. I personally owe each of their members an immense debt of gratitude. I never allow St. Brigid’s to be called “my” monastery; it flows within the stream that they began nearly twenty years ago.

All that having been said, it has nonetheless been my task to learn to look beyond history and tradition for my path at the same time that I look to them for guidance. One of the tricky things about being the unofficial cartographer for a “new” way, is that one must lay aside expectations— one’s own and those “ought to” suggestions which are given by other persons—while also knowing and respecting the Tradition and using aspects of it which are pertinent to the present situation. Therein lies the rub: how does one discern the wise choice when the way is not plain and the territory is to some degree uncharted? Stability is crucial to growth in maturity for individuals, institutions and communities. But stability is not equal to status quo. I once heard a preacher ask one of the best questions in the history of the world: God does not use our past to predict our future so why should we? It is only when we are ready to lay aside every expectation of who we are and how our lives should go that we will truly be prepared to follow the Spirit wherever it might lead. That sort of stability has a very mobile quality about it.

III. The Establishing: Fidelity to the Monastic Way of Life

The caveat to this radical openness is that one must be able to receive a fresh word and to decipher whether that word comes from personal want or whimsy or from divine inspiration. This ability requires training and it requires context, i.e., community.

Several years ago, before I became aware of this house as a possible setting for the monastery, a friend of mine hosted a dinner party for me. The other guests that evening were three Benedictines from three separate monasteries, two women’s community and one men’s community. My friend gathered these folks together so that I could ask them one question: Would it be better for a new community to arrange for a specified time of novitiate at an established monastic community? Or would it be better to first have their own place and “borrow” a formation director from an established monastic community? These three monks, who had not known

each other prior to that evening, did not hesitate in their unanimous answer: The sense of place is so crucial to Benedictine identity as to be a *sine qua non*. There must be a place.

They went on in extremely short order to come up with a list of three essentials for a Benedictine community in which they were in full agreement: First, there must be a person who is given the vision for a monastic life and who has the tenacity to see it through to establishment. Second, there must be a rule of life to guide relationships within the community. And third, there must be a place in which the members' fidelity to the life and to one another may be bound.

Saint John's Abbey has given use of this house for a short time as a place of beginning for St. Brigid of Kildare Monastery. For this I am grateful. It has enabled the monastery to come to concrete reality. It has given the monastery a location in which its own particular identity has begun to be formed. It offers a space for guests to come on retreat, oblates to gather, and the rhythm of prayers to be prayed.

In this place, a beginning has been made at the effort to incorporate two distinct but wonderfully compatible Christian traditions, namely, Benedictine monasticism and Methodism. It has been said by various scholars, that the Wesley brothers did not intend to establish a denomination apart from the Church of England, but rather, a return to the disciplined religious life (and, like early monasticism, a "purer" form of Christianity?) within the Anglican Communion.

Two comments are in order here regarding my own fidelity to these two ways of life:

1. I have chosen to follow the way of Saint Benedict for much the same reason that I have "chosen" to be a Methodist: because they are both what God gave me. I was raised in Methodist churches and I was first introduced to monasticism by Benedictine oblates. The fact that the two traditions reside well together is divine providence rather than human design.
2. Saint Brigid's is a Methodist and a women's monastery for largely practical reasons. One of the most important ways in which believers maintain their denominational identity is through regular participation in the Sunday assembly. My experience in an ecumenical monastery taught me that it is difficult for a community to share every aspect of its life together and yet for the members to

go their separate ways on Sundays, the peak of the Christian week. (Ecclesiological issues might also legitimately be raised regarding self-enclosed ecumenical communities. For instance, at what point do they become a sect apart? It entails a far-reaching set of questions, not for this discussion.) As to gender considerations, women and men are different in many ways. When a residential community is in its early stages, the wisdom I have received says that the fewer dynamics with which one must deal, the greater one's chance for survival—at least as far as emotional energy is concerned!

IV. The Persisting: Obedience in the Present

In the past four years, I have learned more than I ever cared to know about keeping financial accounts, dealing with lawyers, managing contractors, satisfying the IRS, tending to the needs of a wild variety of guests and repairing lawnmowers. The challenges have stretched me and strengthened me; the joys have inspired me and sustained me.

The challenges are without end: balancing tasks at the monastery (correspondence, chores, hospitality, etc.) with the need to have an income that is adequate for paying bills and also includes health and dental insurance; being able to afford property without a large donor base; what to do with women who want to explore monastic life and yet are ordained; how to strengthen denominational ties while still remaining autonomous; how to remain balanced and sane for the long haul; and so on.

At times it has been difficult to feel like the only zebra in the zoo. There is a definite "in-between-ness" when one stands at the intersection between two traditions. As examples, my Protestant friends don't always "get" the value of saints and feast days, while my Roman Catholic friends tend to take them for granted. My Protestant friends are into hymn singing, extemporaneous prayers and twenty-minute sermons; my Roman Catholic friends are very accustomed to the formality of "high church," whether it be Mass or the Liturgy of the Hours or formulaic table prayers. My friends outside of monasteries understand the multiplicity of errands required by everyday life in a way that my friends inside monasteries tend either to have forgotten or never have had to do: grocery shopping, car maintenance, paying taxes, shoveling snow, taking care of a house, balancing a checkbook, and so on. My friends inside of monasteries

understand a life centered around liturgy in a way that my friends outside the monastery tend not to. It sometimes feels as if I am living a dual life. It is always encouraging for me to connect with persons of either persuasion who “get” these tensions and who themselves struggle with similar ones.

This is an excellent point at which to say that among the many, many joys I have because of my vocation—meeting new folks who are like-spirited, tapping into a wide-reaching movement of the Spirit, and so on—I am especially grateful for my relationship with St. Brigid’s community of oblates. They are an amazing group and one of the greatest joys that have come to me through this endeavor.

In your short time here this weekend, you will be able to tell much about the monastery as it has been developing: The scale is small and the spaces intermingled; the liturgy is “low tech” with very few bells and whistles; the hospitality is participatory (e.g., no dining service discretely working behind the scenes to purchase and cook food and to clean up after us); in fact, there are not many boundaries between resident and guests. It feels much like ordinary home life, with the addition of a prayer rhythm (and the occasional Methodist monastic consultation!). In this way, St. Brigid’s might be a potential model for oblate life.

Roberta Bondi suggested to me, in fact, that perhaps the “purpose” of this monastery is its oblate community. Look at the numbers, she said: fewer and fewer people entering the cloister; more and more people drawn to monastic values and practices. I do not know what all the possible ramifications of this idea might be, but it certainly feels like one of those times when the Holy Spirit is trying to get my attention.

V. St. Brigid of Kildare Monastery: One More Bridge Along the Way

St. Brigid, the patron of this monastery, was said to have been born in the doorway of a house. (Whether her mother was going in or coming out, I do not know.) Her birth legend was a means of highlighting in iconographic form her status as a threshold figure in the religious history of Ireland. Saint Brigid understood what it is to stand between two traditions and to integrate both into a new way of being. She was a bridge between her country’s druidic past and its’ Christian future.

Just so, her namesake—St. Brigid of Kildare Monastery—can be one more bridge along the way to strengthening Methodism’s future in ecumenical encounters, as well as a bridge back to Methodism’s origins as a kind of disciplined religious order within a larger communion. Faithful attention by this community now to the details of the daily will determine its place in the denomination’s vocational history later.

Mary Ewing Stamps
St. Brigid of Kildare Monastery
4 April 2003
IOGD

Old and New: Contributions To Each Other

Abbot Timothy Kelly O.S.B.

Abbot President, Cassinese Congregation of Benedictine Communities
St. John's Abbey

“[The abbot] ought . . . to be learned in divine law, so that he has a treasury of knowledge from which he can bring out what is new and what is old (Matt. 13:52)”—The Rule of St. Benedict 64:9

In this presentation I hope to address two issues and their interrelationship. First, we will look at the Rule of Saint Benedict (hereafter RB) as a document summing up centuries of wisdom, how Saint Benedict absorbed that wisdom and handed it on in his Rule while giving us by example how today young communities can learn from old communities and vice versa. Second, we will discuss how cenobitic life models decision-making and discernment in ways that are specifically based on the notion of *koinonia*.

I. Listening: Monasticism and Tradition

Saint Benedict (480–547) is referred to as the father of western monasticism, a title of honor surely, but one that must be understood in the proper context. The beginnings of Christian monasticism preceded Benedict by centuries, and he himself acknowledged this in Chapter 73 of the Rule. He makes reference to “the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments” as “the truest of guides for human life.” He refers also to “the teachings of the holy Fathers” and says, “what book of the holy catholic Fathers does not resoundingly summon us along the true way to reach the Creator?” He then goes on to refer explicitly to the prior monastic tradition that he has inherited: “Then, besides the Conferences of the Fathers, their Institutes and their Lives, there is also the rule of our holy father Basil.”

Saint Benedict in the Rule has given us his own witness to the value of listening to others, especially listening to the tradition that has been handed on to him as tried and true, in itself a rule and the inspiration for his Rule so that “by observing it in monasteries, we can show that we have some degree of virtue and the beginnings of monastic life” (RB 73:1). Is it any wonder, then, that the first word Benedict addresses to us in his Rule

is Listen? His own example has led the way, very much in accord with his advice to the abbot: “he must point out to them all that is good and holy more by example than by words . . .” (RB 2:12). We might call this “listening with the eyes”. Saint Benedict put it this way: “Listen carefully, my son, to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart” (RB Prologue 1).

Immediately and in the context of listening “with the ear of your heart”, he associates this with obedience and with faithfully putting into practice what we hear. He says, “The labor of obedience will bring you back to him from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience” (RB Prol. 2). The Prologue of the RB is rife with exhortations to listening and it sets the context for what follows.

It is this that gives us the environment for his chapter on obedience (RB 5) where he says, “The first step of humility is unhesitating obedience, which comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all” (RB 5:1-2). The modern ear finds this notion of obedience problematic. It takes me back to my early days of teaching English in the university. One of the basics of instruction was the distinction between the denotation of words and the connotation of words. What a word denotes can differ greatly from the connotation the word has taken on. For instance what in our younger years we might have referred to as a “hot item” is now considered “cool”.

The denotation of the word obedience is “to hear.” Scripturally, hearing could not be separated from doing. The prophets laid the basis of the accusation that seeing some did not see, and hearing they did not listen. So in Benedict’s Rule we cannot separate monastic *conversatio*, or way of life, from listening, obedience and humility. It takes humility to acknowledge that we do not always know better, that obedience is the way to God who

is Truth, and listening with the ear of the heart is our loving welcome to God's loving word.

The connotations that obedience has taken on are not always positive. Endemic to our age is the notion that obedience is a weakness for those who will bow to it and a weapon for those who would enslave with it. It is the obedience of the private to the general, the flunky to the employer, the slave to the master, the Gestapo to the führer. To the post-modern person it seems to kill initiative and freedom—as it leads to slavery. For Benedict it was the return to the love of God. Saint Benedict says, “It is love that impels them to pursue everlasting life; therefore, they are eager to take the narrow road of which the Lord says: Narrow is the road that leads to life (Matt.7:14)” (RB 5:10f).

Again Benedict models for us what this obedience means. He speaks not only of obedience to the abbot but the abbot's obedience to the community. Chapter 3 of the RB is entitled: Summoning the Brothers for Counsel. The abbot is to call the whole community together, explain the item of business and hear the advice of the monks. This includes listening to the young as well. He says, “The reason why we have said all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger” (RB 3:3). That, of course, does not give rise to arrogant pride among the younger, as he makes clear when he continues, “The brothers, for their part, are to express their opinions with all humility, and not presume to defend their own views obstinately” (RB 3:4).

If this is the model of monastic life that Saint Benedict leaves us then it should suggest three things to us. First, that as a witness to prior tradition the RB has much to offer new communities. Second, as an example of listening, monastic communities still listen to the experience of others “who cherish Christ above all.” Third, the younger communities of our day have much to offer traditional communities. Benedict, after all, took the prior Rule of the Master, adopted and adapted it to a new vision of monastic life.

I would like to suggest that the beginnings of a formal interest in monastic life by the United Methodist Church was inaugurated very wisely. From its start in the Wisconsin Annual Conference [in 1983] to its overwhelming approval by the General Conference the next year there was revealed an openness to listening to the lived experience of veterans of monastic and religious life. At the initiative of The Upper Room a consultation was called and met for several days at Saint Benedict's Center in Madison,

Wisconsin. Representatives of monastic communities of the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion, along with men and women of long-established non-monastic religious congregations, joined together with representatives of the United Methodist Church, to listen to one another's experience of this form of dedicated Christian life.

At the consultation in Madison, Wisconsin, we explored the monastic and religious life experience and its possible implications for a monastic expression in the United Methodist Church. At the final summing up, a young United Methodist minister by the name of Stephen Bryant commented to the effect that he was initially frustrated with the experienced monastics and religious because he thought they knew the answers the others were seeking and were withholding them for some reason or other. It was, however, clear to him in the end that a living tradition must be a listening tradition so that traditional principles of stability and way of life can be applied to ever changing conditions in which these principles are to be applied and adapted. In short, it was becoming clear that the establishment of monastic community must be equivalent to the establishment of a wisdom community. Because wisdom is a practical virtue, a wisdom community will take essential principles and discover practical ways of implementing them.

To sum up this part, first it seems to me that ancient monastic wisdom has much to say and teach to those who would seek ways of living the monastic tradition today. Of very great importance is to recognize that this monastic tradition is a living tradition. Secondly, new endeavors in our day to adapt wisely the principles of the living monastic tradition have much to teach traditional monastic communities. These older communities are quite capable of circling the wagons to protect what they are comfortable with. This can stifle growth and silence the Spirit. If such communities would continue to live and to be wisdom communities they must listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. The one who has ears to hear must so listen.

II. Discernment and Discretion In The Rule Of St. Benedict

To understand the meaning of discernment and discretion in the Rule of Benedict we cannot ignore the context that his manner of living the monastic life is linked with the cenobitic or community way of living this life. In RB 1, Saint Benedict says, “First, there are the cenobites, that is to

say, those who belong to a monastery, where they serve under a rule and an abbot” (1:2). After listing and describing three other kinds of monks he concludes the chapter by saying, “Let us . . . proceed to draw up a plan for the strong kind, the cenobites” (RB 1:13).

If words have denotations then we have to understand that the very context of Saint Benedict’s Rule gives connotations to words that are used as well. The Latin of *The Rule of Benedict* cannot be simply translated literally with connotations that we have inherited many centuries later. We try to understand what he meant at his time by the words he used.

To give a clearer meaning of what these words mean I will quote from *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*¹

The Latin word *cernere* means either “to separate” or “to see.” The two meanings come together in the compound *discernere*: “to see deeply in order to separate, distinguish or discern.” One meaning of the cognate noun *discretio* is “a separation or distinction.” Thus in about a.d. 380 the Vulgate used *discretio spirituum* (1 Cor 12:10) to mean discernment of spirits, a gift of the Holy Spirit; and this meaning was repeated by many later writers, including Ignatius of Loyola (Spiritual Exercises, nos. 176, 328). But *discretio* took on a second meaning: moderation, right measure, a disposition for making choices that avoid departure by excess or defect from the proper mean. This sense, too, appears in Cassian, whose Conference 2, “On Discretion,” is about preserving the balance between excessive fervor and laxity (PL 49:523-553; see esp. 521); in Benedict (Rule, chap. 64).

We can see the various ways in which these words are used in the context of *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. There are seven specific examples I would like to give. In them we will see the words used in regard to the abbot, to the monks and to the order of the community. I will give them in the English translation followed in brackets by the Latin.

In relation to the abbot:

2:16 The abbot should avoid all favoritism in the monastery (not distinguish among persons). [*Non ab eo persona in monasterio discernatur.*]

64 :17f . . . he must show forethought and consideration in his orders, and whether the task he assigns concerns God or the world, he should be discerning and moderate, bearing in mind the discretion of holy Jacob, who said: If I drive my flocks too hard, they will all die in a single day (Gen.33:13). [*. . . in ipsis imperiis suis providus et consideratus, et sive*

secundum Deum sive secundum saeculum si topere quam iniungit, discernat et temperet, cogitans discretionem sancti Iacob dicentis: Si greges meos plus in ambulando fecero laborare, morientur cuncti una die.]

64:19 Therefore, drawing on this and other examples of discretion, the mother of virtues, he must so arrange everything that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak nothing to run from. [*Haec ergo aliaque testimonia discretionis matris virtutum sumens, sic omnia temperet ut sit et fortes quod cupiant et infirmi non refugiant.*]

In relation to the monks:

2:21 Only in this are we distinguished in his sight: if we are found better than others in good works and in humility. [*Solummodo in hac parte apud ipsum discernimur, si meliores ab aliis in operibus bonis et humiles inveniamur.*]

70:6f If a brother, without the abbot’s command, assumes any power over those older or, even in regard to boys, flares up and treats them unreasonably, he is to be subjected to the discipline of the rule. After all, it is written: Never do to another what you do not want done to yourself (Tob 4:16). [*Nam in fortiori aetate qui praesumit aliquatenus sine precepto abbatis vel in ipsis infantibus sine discretionem exarserit, disciplinae regulari subiaceat, quia scriptum est: Quod tibi no vis fieri, alio ne feceris.*]

In relation to community rank:

63:1 The monks keep their rank in the monastery according to the date of their entry, the virtue of their lives, and the decision of the abbot. [*Ordines suos in monasterio ita conservent ut conversationis tempus ut vitae meritum discernit utque abbas constituerit.*]

63:5 Absolutely nowhere shall age automatically determine rank. [*. . . et in omnibus omnino locis aetas non discernat ordines nec praeiudicet . . .*]

In all of these uses of *discernment* and *discretion* we find echoes of decision making and acceptable behaviors. We do not find what today we popularly call *discernment process*. There was certainly in the monastic life decisions that had to be made. In some instances these decision processes were dictated by the rule, in others by the abbot or by the monk when discretion especially was called for.

We find implied in the process of responding to the call of God to come to the monastery a decision process the candidate had to go through if he wanted to be a monk. His decision, however tentative it might have been,

would be tested: “Do not grant newcomers to the monastic life an easy entry, but, as the Apostle says, *Test the spirits to see if they are from God* (1 John 4:1).” [RB 58:1-2] Once admitted to the monastery novices are to be placed in the care of a “senior chosen for his skill in winning souls . . . to look after them with careful attention.” [58:6]. His criteria for judging the fitness of the novices: “The concern must be whether the novice truly seeks God and whether he shows eagerness for the Work of God, for obedience and for trials.” [58:7]

Presumably the director of the novices has to discern the fittingness of a novice to remain. The novice also must “discern” his own fittingness as well and is free to stay or depart – that is until he commits himself to the monastic manner of life and the community by his vows. “But he must be well aware that, as the law of the rule establishes, from this day he is no longer free to leave the monastery, nor to shake from his neck the yoke of the rule which, in the course of so prolonged a period of reflection, he was free either to reject or to accept.” [58:15-16]

Part of our understanding of decision-making or discernment in the monastic community is that Saint Benedict legislated *stability* as constitutive of cenobite monastic life. Decisions are made within the community according to the standards and practices of the community. There was no question for Benedict that would counter the notion of obedience. Even if a monk is asked to do what he considers impossible things, he can present his difficulties to the abbot respectfully. But if the abbot persists the monk is to obey. [RB 68]

We have to go back to Chapter 3 of *The Rule of St. Benedict* to understand that discernment in monastic life is a community act. It is the monks coming together with the abbot; it is the abbot knowing what is demanded of him by the *Rule*; it is the monks knowing the expectations of the monk who lives under a rule and an abbot.

We who live in an individualistic environment perhaps find this hard to understand. That may be because we place our own preferences ahead of everything else. In our day no abbot is going to blindly assign a monk but will ask for and receive the input of the monk himself. But the decision will regularly be dependent on how each monk fits into the contextual needs of the whole community. Decision making for the monk is a community project because Benedict’s monks are cenobites who seek God together by belonging to a monastery where they serve under a rule and an abbot.

Conclusion

When Saint Benedict concludes his *Rule* he says, “Are you hastening toward your heavenly home?” (RB 73:8). He assures us this is done with Christ’s help. But this is why he composed the *Rule*. By it he establishes the environment for accomplishing the task of seeking God in the ways outlined in Chapter 58 referred to earlier. Obedience is very important to him because it is the way we listen to God, and we do so in the context of monastic community. This does not mean that this is the only place to listen, of course. At least three times in the *Rule* he remarks on the relationship between the monastery and the wider church.

It is in this context that we then addressed *discernere* and *discretio* in its various manifestations in the Rule. If today we seek to discern and understand obedience to God we will find in Saint Benedict’s doctrine or spirituality what was presented and is to be for the monastic the norm for obedience, listening and discernment. His doctrine cannot be understood except in the context of community. It is not only an individual matter but has direct impact on the life of the community itself. Without a doubt decisions are and should be made that at times do not call for the input of the total community. But the relationship between the monk and the abbot is to be such that decisions will involve the abbot as well as the monk because the community is always impacted by decisions.

The Rule of Saint Benedict is wisdom literature. Wisdom is always a practical virtue. The way that Saint Benedict incarnated his wisdom in many cases fit his place and time, and needs to be adapted to our times and places. The older monastic communities clearly have much to say to newer iterations of community life today. But these newer iterations have much to say to the older communities as well. Perhaps it will be by fostering the tradition of listening with the ears of the heart that both the old and the new will discover what a living God continues to do so that we help each other know how we become better witnesses to God with us as we become better examples of the Body of Christ.

Notes

- ¹ See article on “Discernment” by George E. Ganss, S.J. in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, Minnesota: A Michael Glazier Book, The Liturgical Press: 1993)

Listening and Obedience

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I'd like to begin by setting a horizon for our conversation,¹ and then exploring the landscape of our topic of discussion: listening and obedience.

I. Setting the Horizon for Our Conversation

The horizon I suggest was inspired by a quote found in one of a series of documents by the American Benedictine Prioresses. The series is called *Upon This Tradition*, and the document to which I refer is called "Of All Good Gifts: A Statement on Stewardship." I quote: "Tradition, history and lived experience affirm that the central elements of the cenobite monastic heritage are contemplative vision and community."²

In the presentation that we heard earlier this morning, Abbot Timothy responded to the latter set of concerns—community. I wish to respond to the former: the contemplative vision. I believe that our conversation about "Listening and Obedience" may well be placed within this context.

"To see with the heart of Christ" is perhaps the best definition of contemplative vision."³ Through our baptism and its expression in our monastic profession, we commit ourselves to "put on the mind and heart of Christ" (Phil. 4:2). This is the aim of our fidelity to the monastic way of life. Walking in this way roots us in *ferventissimo amore*, that "ardent love" for God that is alive, dynamic and full of energy.

For the ancient ammas and abbas, contemplation was a way of perceiving the world as grounded in the revelation of God found in Scripture, nature and relationships. For these early seekers of God, contemplation was an attitude of listening awareness that allowed the Word to take root in the heart, the core of the person and transform her or him.⁴ With this horizon in mind, I want to look more closely at the landscape of contemplative vision. What is the relationship between listening awareness, obedience and discernment?

II. Listening Awareness and Obedience

Monastic hearts always beat a little faster as we hear the opening words to the Prologue of the Rule that are foundational to our cherished way of life:

"Listen, child of God, to the guidance of your teacher. Attend to the message you hear and make sure that it pierces to your heart, so you may accept with willing freedom and fulfill by the way you live, the directions that are from your loving Father."⁵

Hearing these words we sit up a little straighter. We pay attention, which as the poet Mary Oliver wrote, "is our endless and proper work". Paying attention to those words, we are perhaps attracted by the phrase: "make sure the message pierces your heart." According to Webster, To "pierce" means "make a way through"; to understand; to move deeply"

Benedict invites us then, to listen in such a way as to let the message make its way through—not just to our head, but to our heart—and allow our being to be deeply moved. Willingness to freely let the Word penetrate our heart moves us to a harmonious, generous, ethical, gospel way of life.

Listening in this way gives meaning to life and leads us to wisdom. Out of that wisdom we are moved to respond. The daily discipline of listening and responding to meaning is what our promise of obedience is all about. Obedience in the full sense is the process of attuning the heart to the fundamental call contained in the complexity of any given situation. The alternative to this kind of listening, as Brother Davis Steindl-Rast writes, in his book *A Listening Heart*, is absurdity. The Latin word *ab-surdus* literally means "absolutely deaf".

When we say that something is absurd, we imply that we are deaf to its meaning. How often do we think in our secret heart that something someone else says, or even words of the Scriptures are "absurd" And think of the times each of us might be deaf to the true meaning behind the

words the Prioress or Abbot, of a community member, a family member, or co-worker. I'm sometimes deaf to the meaning of a "community policy."

The prophet Isaiah challenges us in the words:

You will be ever hearing but never understanding;
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.
For this people's heart has become callused;
they hardly hear with their ears,
and they have closed their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with the eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts
and turn, and I would heal them.
Isaiah 6: 9-10

The opposite of the Latin *ab-surdus* or "absurdity" is *ob-audians*, the root of our English word "obedience", which means "hearing." It is, however, more than simply functional hearing. *Ob-audians* is to listen thoroughly so that we might give the proper response. This essential connection between hearing and response reflects the remarkable fact that ancient Hebrew contains no specific word meaning "to obey". *Shema*, whether translated as "to hear" or "to obey" implies that to hear God, is necessarily, to respond in love and gratitude to the divine initiative. Hearing, then, is never neutral or passive. For Israel to hear is to obey and not to obey is to rebel. ⁶

David Steindl-Rast writes that the goal of obedience is to stand on one's own feet, to thoroughly listen, and to give one's free response to the call of the moment. ⁷ This is the kind of listening obedience we desire to bring to the Word of God, to the Prioress or Abbot, those in our various communities whom we love and those whom we find it difficult to love. We desire to bring this listening obedience to our interdependence with nature and to all the events of life.

We can only come to this kind of listening awareness and response of obedience through the gift of the Holy Spirit that fosters within us a discerning way of life.

III. Discernment

The 5th document of the series entitled Upon This Tradition by the American Benedictine Prioresses is entitled "With A Listening Heart." In the document, we read:

"In writing the *Rule*, Benedict drew from the collective wisdom of the monastic tradition, both the semi-eremitic and cenobitic strands. He chose elements which he discerned were necessary to cenobitic living.

Benedict's contribution to the scriptural and early Church tradition was his emphasis that it is the Holy Spirit at work in the monastic that generates the love of God and of Christ and becomes the mark of humility. In Chapter Five the quality of discernment is ultimately tied to the key monastic virtue, obedience. ⁸

Listening as the obedience integral to Benedictine monastic life begins with the encounter with God in one's personal center. From this personal center we listen long enough and carefully enough to hear the voice calling to us: "Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?" ⁹ When any one of us answers, "I do!", we set ourselves on the way of discernment.

Discernment, as you know, comes from the Latin *discernere* which is to sift through, sort out, and distinguish. The Greek root is *diakrasis*, from which our English word "crisis" is taken.

In the juridic norms of the Federation of St. Benedict, discernment is named as ". . . the process by which one's reflective effort to discover God's purpose becomes manifest through exterior and interior events." ¹⁰ Our model for obedient discernment is Jesus Christ. Doing God's will, following the guidance of the Spirit summarizes Jesus' own life.

Called to put on the mind of Christ, we desire to discern God's will for us. In Chapter 5 of the Rule, Benedict quotes Jesus as saying, "I have come not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me." (John 6:38) ¹¹

A theology of discernment indicates that God's will or God's dream for the world is best described in Ephesians 1: 3-22 and John 3:16

“God’s intention is, it seems, that all human beings live as sisters and brothers in a community of faith, hope and love, united with Jesus Christ as daughters and sons of God our Father and in harmony with the whole created universe”.¹²

We trust the word of God in Ephesians 1: 9 that we can live a discerning way of life because we have been given wisdom through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon us. Furthermore, I Corinthians 12: 4-12; Ephesians 4:7; and Romans 12 assures us that we can believe that the Spirit has given each and every person, insights and understanding that contribute to the building up of the whole Body of Christ, for the good of the whole world and the fulfillment of God’s intention for the world.

We rely on the promise found in Matthew 28:20 and 18:19-20 that God will be with us always through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we can be assured that graced with the gift and presence of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, we can live the ordinary, daily-ness of monastic life in a discerning manner and respond with willing obedience.

Recall three elements of obedience as described by David Steindl-Rast: standing on one’s own feet, thoroughly listening, and giving a free response. These three elements are both required and created by a discerning way of life. Look at each one:

1. Standing on one’s own feet: I would name this the development of an inner freedom. Within our initial formation program we discern whether the novice has an inner locus of control or outer locus of control. If she is not able to develop her inner locus of control based on a sense of herself, and a growing sense of inner freedom we find her obedience may instead be merely compliant behavior. Inner freedom is required in living with discernment and responding in true obedience.

Within each of us are the areas of un-freedom which sometimes block our ability to listen thoroughly to our sisters and brothers in community, to the Prioress or Abbot, and to our own deepest wisdom. Without that inner freedom, obedience may run the risk of being simply self-serving in many and unique ways that the human heart can devise. What might be some of those un-freedoms that keep us from thoroughly listening?

Take just a moment of quiet to consider what that might be for you.

Inner freedom is required for obedience and discernment. Inner freedom is also created as we live our promise of fidelity to the monastic way of life.

2. Listening thoroughly: I think we have already heard why listening is required for discernment. An added dimension I want to touch upon is the listening necessary for self-knowledge. “Know yourself” is an admonition we have heard down through the ages. This self-knowledge is not meant to be a mirror which we hold up to find those tedious imperfections that plague us, making us less perfect than we think we should be. This mirror only leads us to continued self-obsession and shame. The mirror we hold up is Christ, and seeing our dependence and human frailty, we focus on the loving mercy and grace of God. This is humility: true self-knowledge. Benedict wisely suggests at the end of the Rule, that we consult the Institutes of the Fathers, and I would say particularly Cassian.¹³ There one can explore the passion that may be the core of one’s life. After fifty years in monastic life, I am aware how that one issue of mine keeps rising up unbidden in so many areas of my life.

Learning about ourselves and practicing the ways of conversation to redeem this core may be found in exploration of such tools as the Enneagram. Self-knowledge can set us free, from the darkness and delusions that can cause our inability to hear, leaving us deaf to the invitation of God in our lives of obedience.

Self-knowledge is required for a contemplative vision, for obedient listening and a discerning way of life. We are grateful that our practice of lectio can also create within us the gift of self-knowledge.

3. Giving a free response: Certainly Benedict recognizes the value of a free response in Chapter 5 of the Rule as he encourages us to respond gladly and freely quoting the Scripture passage, “God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7). In the practice of discernment, this free response has another dimension. We are to listen carefully to our sisters and brothers in communal discernment and to the invitation of the Prioress or Abbot. In each event we are listening for the invitation of the Spirit to us both individually and for the good of the community.

In communal discernment, as well as in conversation with the Prioress, one adds her or his own wisdom, one's own prayerful, personal discernment of the topic. Benedict suggests this in chapter 68 of the Rule on "The Assignment of Impossible Tasks to A Monk". The brother or sister chooses the appropriate time, and explains patiently what has been individually discerned. This is done without pride, or obstinacy. But then essential to obedient discernment we let our piece of the wisdom go as it becomes part of the larger and continued sifting and sorting. Once there has been a decision, we give our free response with love, trusting in God's help.

This may be the true test of obedience. Can I live with the decision of the community, the Prioress, a community policy freely and with peace? Or will I be deaf? Will I resist the temptation of sabotaging and murmuring that undermine the common good? Or will I accept the decision with willingness and simplicity of heart?

A free response is required for our discerning way of life. As we practice this way, free and whole hearted responses are created and are expressed in our daily lives.

IV. Obedient Discernment as a Way of Life

Discernment is more than a model or process we invoke at some special moment of profound decision making—either personal or communal. Obedient discernment is a way of life. Unless listening with discernment is our way of life, in its everyday ordinariness, we cannot expect to be prepared for those moments in which we are challenged and stretched . . . be it a request of the Prioress or Abbot, a Chapter decision, the common good of the community, or living with our own humanity.

To assist us in supporting a contemplative vision, obedient listening, and a discerning way of life, four practices seem essential:

- 1. Silence and solitude:** We are called to an active silence, preparing us both to listen and to respond
- 2. Lectio:** Experience teaches us that fidelity to lectio brings to our prayer the transforming power of the Word of God. It can show us multiple examples of free, personal responses to God. Slowly and imperceptibly the Word takes flesh in our own lives.¹⁴
- 3. Personal and Communal Prayer:** especially the daily Liturgy of the Hours: The psalms teach us that God can be found in every experience of our lives. Through the psalms we hear the voice of God in human words.¹⁵
- 4. Stability in community:** We know from experience that living in community is fundamental to the practice of obedience and a discerning way of life. Living in solidarity with others is rooted in Trinitarian spirituality. We find our true personhood not in autonomy or self-sufficiency or isolation, but in self-donation. Our Baptism and our monastic profession in the cenobitic way of life, impels our human and spiritual growth to ever more complete communion between persons both divine and human. It is in this communion that we discern God's will for us and learn "to put on the mind and heart of Christ".

The heart and center of these four practices is love. We are encouraged to make our love for Christ and Christ's enduring love for us the most immediate, vibrant and practical reality of our lives. This ardent love calls us to live out our baptism and monastic life in a most daily, ordinary—and therefore, inescapable way—not just for our own sake, but for the sake of the church and the world.

As one grows in the ability to listen with the ear of one's heart, one grows more aware of the deceit, the delusions, and rationalizations of one's own heart. We can allow ourselves to be "pierced" by the truth as the truth works its way into the depths of our being. With simplicity of heart one can recognize the truth of one's self and the truth of another, no matter how beautiful it is.

Let me tell a story that I think exemplifies the fruit of living with a contemplative vision manifested in obedient listening and discernment. This story is adapted from the *Life and Miracles of St. Benedict*, by Gregory the Great. It goes like this: Benedict was tired after a day of dealing with endless committees, recalcitrant monks, visiting royalty, pernicious murmuring and urgent letters from the Bishop. He longed to send a message to his dear Sister, and tell her that he would meet her in their usual place. But, please! No crying with head in hands this time! Unfortunately, it was late, and their visit would have to wait. Benedict climbed to the tower where he had a panoramic view of the countryside. It was very dark, and only the stars gave light. Benedict thought of the changes that had taken place in the church and the world over these last ten year. He observed that some kind of massive shift was taking place, and he wondered just what the future would hold. Recently, the more educated monks among them were calling this . . . what was the word? . . . a "paradigm" shift. Hmmm . . . As he stared unseeing into the night, there suddenly appeared a brilliant shaft of light. He blinked his eyes a couple of times wondering if this was the onset of a headache. But no, he was actually seeing a ray of light in the midst of the dark night. As he looked, he was stunned to see something like the whole world caught up in that single ray of light.¹⁶

What did Benedict see? Did he see the enormous changes that would take place in the Church and the World. Did he see the spread of Benedictine monasticism over Europe? And could he possibly see the New World and the blossoming tree of monastic life not only in the Roman Catholic tradition, but other in monasteries such as St. Brigid of Kildare? What did he see? Was it beautiful? Was it terrible? Did it give him hope for the future?

As we strive to live like Benedict and Scholastica, running the way of obedience, what might we see in the one ray of the sun?

- Would we see members of monastic communities harnessing their individual gifts, strengths and talents for the common good of the community, the church and the world?
- Would we see a moratorium on isolation and independence in favor of essential connectedness?
- Would we see a community not just talking about solidarity and peace, but an actively walking in that path?
- And would we see the variety of ways that the monastic community practiced affective, contemplative kinship with the extended family of the cosmos. Would we see the community reading the world around them as carefully as they read the Scriptures?
- Would we see a communities which have at last a lived theology of sexuality; communities of persons who each revered their blessed embodiment? Would we lay to rest the kind of body-mind dualism that is destructive to the spiritual life?
- Would monastic communities dare to be a prophetic presence networking with others to bring an end to military madness?

My friends, if out of our faithful obedient listening, we would see the world in one ray of the sun, what else would we dream for our own personal good, the good of our communities, and the common good of the created universe?

If today we hear God's voice, let us respond with listening hearts. Thank you for the gift of your listening today!

NOTES

- ¹ [Editor's Note: Sr. Kate Casper graciously agreed to let us publish this detailed outline of her remarks to the second gathering of the St. Brigid of Kildare Consultation in September 2003. With the exception of adding footnotes, the deletion of a few phrases as necessary and inserting the title of the fourth section for the sake of clarity, the text presented here in essay format retains the conversational style in which it was delivered.]
- ² "Upon This Tradition III: Of All Good Gifts—A Statement of Monastic Values in the Lives of American Benedictine Sisters, Norfolk, Nebraska (March 7, 1975), in *Upon This Tradition: Five Statements on Monastic Values in the Lives of American Benedictine Sisters* (Conference of American Benedictine Prioresses, 2001), p. 80
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 81
- ⁴ Wendy Wright, "Contemplation in a Time of War," in *Weavings Magazine*, Vol. 7, No. 4, (Fall 2003).
- ⁵ *Saint Benedict's Rule: A New Translation for Today*, translated by Patrick Barry O.S.B., former Abbot of Ampleforth (Ampleforth Abbey, York: Ampleforth Abbey Press, 1997), 1.
- ⁶ See article on "Discernment" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* edited by Michael Downey (Michael Glazier, 1993).
- ⁷ David Steindl-Rast, *A Listening Heart: The Spirituality of Sacred Sensuousness* revised edition (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 46-47.
- ⁸ "Upon This Tradition, V: With A Listening Heart—A Statement on the Role of Discernment in the Lives of American Benedictine Women, Cullman, Alabama (February 5, 1996)," in *Upon This Tradition Five Statements on Monastic Values in the Lives of American Benedictine Sisters*, 147.
- ⁹ Prologue to *Saint Benedict's Rule*, 15.
- ¹⁰ *Juridic Norms of Federation of St. Benedict, With Hearts Inclined* (July 22, 2000) available from President of Federation of St. Benedict, Sr. Mikhaila Hedican, Saint Bede Monastery, 1190 Priory Rd., P. O. Box 66, Eau Claire, WI 54702.
- ¹¹ *Saint Benedict's Rule* (Barry translation), 17.
- ¹² *Juridic norms of the Federation of St. Benedict*.
- ¹³ [Editor's Note: See Chapter 73 of *Saint Benedict's Rule* (Barry translation), 89.]
- ¹⁴ David Steindl-Rast, *A Listening Heart*, 46-47.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ [Editor's Note: For those not familiar with the collection of stories about the life of St. Benedict, the brief narrative which Sr. Katherine Casper is invoking can be found in *The Life of St. Benedict*, by St. Gregory the Great (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1995), 47.]

Monasticism and United Methodism: The Benedictine—Wesleyan Dialogue A History

FR. W. Paul Jones O.S.C.O.

Our Lady of the Assumption Monastery

There is excellent reason for a Benedictine-Methodist dialogue to be occurring, for the spiritual renewal represented by St. Benedict (and the religious orders who regard him as their founder) coordinate in an amazing way with the spiritual renewal represented by John and Charles Wesley (and the religious groups who regard him as their founder). In fact, a good case can be made that the Wesley Movement functioned much as a monastic order within the Church of England. Thus it was only a matter of time until the idea would occur to create an ecumenical monastic community birthed by the interplay of the Benedictine tradition with the spirituality of United Methodism—for the renewal of Protestantism in general and Methodism in particular.

I. Official Actions of 1984 General Conference of the United Methodist Church

Such an idea began to take formal shape when early in 1983 the Rev. Don Collins, then a campus minister at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, submitted a petition to the 1983 Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church in Wisconsin calling upon the denomination to explore the possibility of establishing an ecumenical monastic community. His hope was that a dialogue could begin with other mainstream denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church, which would eventually lead to a new style monastic community open to both men and women, single and married.

The petition received the support of his Annual Conference in June, 1983, and was sent on to the General Conference of the United Methodist Church for consideration, meeting in April, 1984, at Baltimore. There the petition was passed, calling for the “Establishment of an ecumenical monastic community in cooperation with other mainline Christian Churches.” This petition was a response to “an increasingly widespread interest in the recovery of the tradition of spiritual formation on the part of both lay and ordained member of the Church.” Its purpose was to ground better the outreach programs of the United Methodist Church “in the disciplines of personal and corporate prayer, study of the scriptures, spiritual reading and spiritual formation.” (See Appendix One for the text)

II. Madison Consultation

This petition indicated that the establishment of an ecumenical monastery was to be undertaken by a “special task group or an appropriate agency of the General Church.” Thus, when passed, the project was referred to the General Board of Discipleship for development and implementation, thereupon assigned to The Upper Room as part of the portfolio of Danny Morris, Executive Secretary of Program. This office, working with other interested persons on the staff of the Upper Room, organized a consultation on the theme of “The New Monasticism.” It met in June, 1986 at the St. Benedict Center in Madison, WI. Parker Palmer served as convener, with participants being largely United Methodists, with representatives from several Roman Catholic religious orders. “The New Monasticism” was interpreted as being inclusive (ecumenical, married, single, celibate) consensual, and concerned for communal formation that respects the uniqueness of each person. The following elements informed this event:

- Shared experiences and interests that brought persons to the consultation.
- Determining tasks implied by the resolution.
- Informational questions about monasticism and its essentials.
- Participants' visions for an ecumenical monastery.
- Next steps.

The essentials of monasticism that were identified included: commitment to a place and group; common rule which identifies accountability and governance; economic sharing; conviviality; equality of persons; common worship; silence; simplicity; poverty; common ministry; focus on one thing. As a result of the enthusiasm engendered by this gathering, the General Board of Discipleship, through The Upper Room, accepted responsibility for “establishing an ongoing dialogical process moving toward establishing an ecumenical monastic community.” Indicative was the comment by one United Methodist to the consultants: “We thought you would give us all the answers, but instead you shared your experiences and bid us “bon voyage” on our own adventure with the Holy Spirit.”

III. Anchoritic Proposal

In order to implement this decision, a “Monastic Consultation Team” was named. (See Appendix Two for names). For consideration at that meeting, Paul Jones prepared a paper entitled “Anchoritic and Cenobitic Monasticism: A Proposal.” In it, he encouraged creation of both a residential (*cenobitic*) community and an anchoritic one (for hermits). He described Merton’s idea of a central building (*skete*) with several surrounding hermit cells. The goal would be a life of austerity, solitude, silence, and prayer—centered by such activities as Eucharist, liturgy, prayer, lectio divina, study, work, and spiritual direction. He proposed the possibility of using his own hermitage in southern Missouri as a skete, building several small hermitages around it. This would provide desert experiences of varying length for interested persons. This paper was read at the subsequent Nashville meeting, but never acted upon.

Fifteen years later Paul created a not-for-profit corporation entitled the “Hermitage Spiritual Retreat Center,” with a national board of 15 persons. A building adjacent to his hermitage was purchased and converted into four hermitages. Additional land was purchased so that ten acres are owned along Lake Pomme de Terre, MO, plus four acres of public land. In September, 2003 the Center was opened, and is now available for short-term anchoritic experiences, with Paul serving as resident hermit, offering spiritual direction if requested. (See Appendix Three)]

IV. Nashville Meeting

The Monastic Consultation Team met for the first time in Nashville, June, 1987. The primary result of this retreat was a paper entitled “Features of a Proposed Ecumenical Monastic Community” (See Appendix Four). Key dimensions involved in this proposal were: 1. The community would be counter-cultural (opposing a society of competition, status, ownership, consumerism, racism, sexism, militarism, classism, ageism—being ecologically sensitive and actively non-violent); 2. Structured theologically by the daily office and Eucharist; 3. Characterized by a balanced life of prayer, work, and service; 4. Be related to an existing monastic community so as to be able to share its facilities and training personnel. A Rule of life would be created that included commitment to: praying the psalms, sacramental life, fellowship, guidance, and communal and personal prayer. Guides would be the Wesleyan means of Grace and *The Rule of St. Benedict*, open as well to enrichment by other Christian spiritual traditions. One of the important decisions made was that this experiment would be composed of the following concentric levels of participation, suggestive of the Wesleyan movement:

- Permanent Residency: providing help in discernment of call and in formation.
- Internship: contracted residency of varying lengths.
- Associate Membership: non-residential sharing of the monastic disciplines.
- Learning Experiences: e.g. retreat offerings.
- Outreach: modeling disciplines for the larger church, including research and writing.

V. Trappist Immersion, Ava, Mo.

Although not explicitly stated, after this theoretical model was created, there seemed to be a transition in perspective from planning such a community for others, to shaping it so as to include members of the team itself. Therefore, most of those who participated in subsequent meetings were personally invested in that possibly. The bonding of this group inevitably narrowed the experiment from the original ecumenical focus to a Methodist-Benedictine one. Since most Team members had only minimal participation in monastic life, the next two years involved monastic immersions for the Team. The first experience was a week in the fall of 1987 at Our Lady of the Assumption (Trappist) in Ava, MO, with 12 persons of the team participating. (See Appendix Five) It involved participation in the total monastic life, beginning at 3:15 AM, including sessions with the abbot, prior, a hermit, and a community of women hermits. The group was fascinated and enlightened by the spiritual intensity of this life, but was ready for a contrasting monastic immersion, choosing a Benedictine community.

VI. St. John's Abbey Monastic Immersion

This occurred at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, MN in conjunction with St. Benedict's Convent in St. Joseph, MN., March 10-14, 1988. As a result of this immersion and the Ava one, the Team discerned that they were ready to identify monasteries that would be open to have an ecumenical monastic community relate to them. A list of Benedictine-type monasteries from across the country was assembled, finally determining that 23 sites would satisfy the following requirements:

- Open to the “New Monasticism” and willingness to dialogue with us.
- Possessing an ecumenical spirit so as to welcome a Protestant presence.
- Willing for us to participate in their worship life, especially the daily office.
- Capable of providing resourcing, as in spiritual direction and teaching.
- Able to house 25-35 men and women.
- Aware of sexist issues.
- Contemplative in ethos.
- Presence of a community of the opposite gender nearby.
- Availability of land.
- Work opportunities.

This list of monasteries was divided up so that each site could be visited by at least two members of the Team. The surprising result was that almost every place visited was willing to consider providing space and services for such an ecumenical relationship. (Reports concerning each site are available in the Archives)

With these reports in hand, everything seemed to be in place for the Team to choose a site and begin the experiment. However, the proximity to actual birthing brought the realization of how much the Team members had actually presupposed their own participation. Realism made clear that only one member was ready to make such a commitment. When this became clear, the actual founding of the ecumenical monastery was put on hold. As a result, Paul Jones decided to leave the Team in order to begin the process of becoming a “Family Brother” with the Trappist monastery in Ava. [Some persons have found helpful two books which he has written that describe this pilgrimage. His first serious encounter with Benedictine spirituality gave birth to his *“The Province Beyond the River: The Diary of a Protestant at a Trappist Monastery”* (Paulist Press and Upper Room, 1981). His subsequent pilgrimage into monastic commitment appeared in *“Teaching the Dead Bird to Sing: Living the Hermit Life Without and Within”* (Paraclete, 2002)].

VII. Cullman, Alabama Meeting

The next meeting of the Team was held in Cullman, Alabama, in March of 1989, in relationship to two monastic communities there. The significant step taken was to consider establishing “Dispersed Communities” in several places. This was a way of responding to the hunger for monastic spirituality by those unable to join a residential community. Their purpose was identified as providing an opportunity for persons to experience the monastic tradition and its lifestyle, and to discuss how to appropriate these learnings in their own personal settings. This would likewise encourage others to consider a calling to participate in an eventual residential community. Such dispersed communities would emerge from local initiative. Each group would gather regularly for prayer, discussion, and spiritual disciplines. They would relate with a local monastery in order to be exposed to the richness of that tradition. An annual (possibly semi-annual) national gathering would be held, including members from

each dispersed communities as well as being open to other persons. Both local and national gatherings would be held at a monastery in which the following were possible:

- Participation in the Daily Office.
- Meals with the community.
- Teaching sessions by members of the community.
- Informal times with some of the monks.
- Work according to the practice and schedule of the monastery.

Three additional desires, but not requirements, were these:

- Personal spiritual direction for those desiring it.
- Ecumenical communion after Mass.
- Limited use of the library.

VIII. St. John's Abbey Consultation

In 1990, it was decided to open the possibility of a residential ecumenical monastery to a larger assemblage, intentionally expanding the group beyond its previous United Methodist orientation. Gathering names from various sources, invitations were sent to about 30 persons. The 23 persons who came assumed their own expenses. They came from the Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Mennonite, and Armenian traditions. Sixteen of these had not been involved previously in the explorations. Input included an overview of the work to date, followed by three presentations on monastic life by members of the St. John's community, and a nun from the St. Benedict community, describing their oblate program. Two working groups were established:

1. Development of guidelines for dispersed communities.
2. Planning of those personally interested in establishing a permanent community.

IX. Bread Of God Community Formed

In this latter working group, and in much that followed, Mary Stamps became central. She graduated from seminary in 1984, and immediately began her doctorate in Benedictine and Protestant spirituality, including a year of residency at St. John's in 1987.

This working group, composed of five persons, met April 16-18, 1990 at Penuel Ridge Retreat Center near Nashville (with two additional members of the Design Team helping the facilitation). The time was spent discussing the basic themes of monastic life—such as daily life, spiritual disciplines, and leadership, followed by such practical questions as economics, location, and common goods. The inclusive and ecumenical nature of the community to be established was reaffirmed. Guidelines were drafted by which to invite other interested persons into this working group. A second meeting was held in July, 1990 at the Cedar Valley Retreat Center in West Bend, WI. There a covenant was drafted which entailed a serious commitment to proceed. The third meeting was in November, 1990 at a Franciscan Retreat Center in Little Falls, MN., with a Franciscan facilitator. A vision statement was drafted, surprising the group when it was discovered to parallel significantly the original draft written in Nashville in 1987. June of 1991 was set as the beginning of residency. A fourth meeting occurred at St. John's Abbey in April, 1991. A proposal from the Sisters of St. Benedict was received and their site in Albany, MN. was visited. Their invitation was accepted, with the understanding that this would be a temporary home, and a process would begin immediately to find a permanent location.

In June, 1991, the "Bread of God Community" was officially founded—with four persons (two United Methodists, two Episcopalians) beginning residency with three nuns at a house in Albany, MN related to St. Benedict's Convent. They shared a common life, with three daily prayer offices. Overall responsibilities were divided among four positions: Business Manager, Community Communicator, Formation Director, and Hospitality Director.

In order to provide continuity to the overall process, in May of 1990 Danny Morris sent out a newsletter entitled "Toward an Ecumenical Monastic Community: A Periodic Newsletter." It summarized the stages of discussion and action from the inception in 1984 to the present, and invited interested persons to write.

X. *St. Meinrad Abbey National Gathering*

The second national gathering occurred at St. Meinrad Abbey in St. Meinrad, IN, Sept. 5-8, 1991. It was structured by the monastic day, interspersed with the following input sessions:

- Fr. Timothy Kelly: “Keeping our Vision Clear,” and “Formation of the Bread of God Community and Dispersed Communities.”
- Mary Stamps: “What Brought Me to This Point” supplemented by members of the Bread of God Community.
- Linda Fischer: “Protestant Monasticism in Europe—Looking Toward the 21st Century.”
- Paul Jones: “A Reality Test on Monastic Life”—what constitutes seriousness in this quest.

Commonalities for the Dispersed Communities were formulated, with specifics to be worked out within each community. These included: common daily liturgy for members; active commitment to a local church; service in the world; relationship to a monastic community; relationship to the residential community; structures for accountability; process of discernment; relationship to one’s tradition; study; vows; stewardship; and leadership.

XI. *Bread of God Community Disbands*

One person of the “Bread of God Community” left in December of 1991. By March 1992, it was discerned that “God had given us the light to see that our individual callings now lead us on separate paths.” Although the community had existed for less than a year, it disbanded, but with an awareness that much had been learned—and in that sense was not a failure. While other members went their various ways, Mary Stamps never abandoned the idea, and chose further personal formation through a two year residency at the Benedictine Community in Clyde, MO. A Bread of God learning that she took with her, as it turned out, was the need to simplify variables, such as gender and tradition.

Paul Jones remained committed, in his own way, to the vision. His personal pilgrimage entailed making temporary vows as a Trappist Family Brother in 1989, with permanent vows in 1992. In 1993 he took early retirement from seminary teaching to live a life of alternation between the Trappist community and his hermitage. In 1996, already ordained as a United Methodist, he became ordained as a Roman Catholic priest.

On October 10, 1993, Danny Morris sent out a letter to “Friends of the Ecumenical Monastic Community.” He had previously asked persons to notify him “of your desires and plans for the future.” Only the Alabama Dispersed Community was known to be continuing. As an update, Danny told of Mary’s experience at Clyde, included an article she wrote about the experience. He also updated Paul Jones’ decision for a hermit life. The letter concluded: “This little amount of news does not mean that the former initiative is dead; perhaps we are now in a resting and waiting mode. We do not wish to push ahead of the wind of the Spirit.”

XII. *Conception Abbey Consultation*

In 1994, determined that the idea of an ecumenical residential community should not die, Mary and Paul decided to make another effort. They assembled a list from various sources of over 500 names of those who had somehow expressed interest in the experiment. An extensive questionnaire was prepared and sent out, with a large percentage of returns. (Responses available in the Archives) Over 50 persons responded positively to this question: “Would you be seriously interested in forming a residential Ecumenical Monastic Community?” Encouraged by the number, a three day gathering at Conception Abbey, MO was planned. Twenty persons attended. (See Appendix Six) Excitement elicited by the event led the group to plan a next step—a two week live-in monastic event for July 15-26 at the Benedictine Monastery in Clyde, MO. The purpose was to gather together those who were serious about establishing a residential ecumenical monastery, and by living in proximity they could ascertain their compatibility and feasibility to proceed. The open invitation read: “To persons willing seriously to consider residential monastic life and who are at a point in their life where such a transition is possible.” Space for 12 persons was reserved, and the event was planned. Two weeks before the scheduled event, however, it became clear that no one but Mary was able and/or willing to take this step. The event was canceled, and the effort put to rest.

XIII. Saint Brigid of Kildare Monastery

In late 1999, Mary Stamps asked Saint John's Abbey to lease her a house on 24 acres of monastic land. This request was granted, and she officially established Saint Brigid of Kildare Monastery, a Methodist-Benedictine monastery for United Methodist women. Over the next year, Mary completed her novitiate and professed her life-long monastic vows on February 1, 2001, on the Feast of Saint Brigid. Some of the original design team attended to help bless the event. This monastery is intent on bringing together the resonance between St. Benedict's Rule (emphasizing prayer, hospitality, simplicity, and obedience) and the Methodist spiritual disciplines advocated by John Wesley some 1200 years later (emphasizing regular prayer, service, moderation, and mutual accountability). Central to the monastery's life is an Oblate program, which through its one year novitiate of study and practice has trained over 20 persons to live a life committed to the spirit of the *Rule* and the Wesleyan means of grace. An important feature is a yearly visitation that provides oversight for the monastery. When St. John's Abbey indicated that they would not renew the lease on the property used by St. Brigid Monastery, Mary Stamps purchased a small house in St. Joseph, MN in March, 2004 from which to continue her dream. It seems that the Spirit is leading not so much toward a residential community of vowed monastics as into an oblate outreach not geographically restricted, united in training, common disciplines, electronic contact, newsletter, and yearly retreat.

XIV: The Academy for Spiritual Formation

Paralleling this whole consultation process of Benedictine-United Methodist interaction was the birth of what is called the Two Year Academy for Spiritual Formation. After four years of consultation and planning in which John Magabgab was instrumental in designing the curriculum, in 1983 the first Academy was held at Scarritt College in Nashville. Danny Morris avowedly characterized it as a "Protestant

retreat model strongly influenced by Benedictine monasticism." What is involved is a five-day residential retreat every three months for two years. The strength of the academy is its capacity to create spiritually informed persons. Yet to be fully developed, perhaps, is ongoing training as how to work for church renewal after one has been awakened to the workings of the Spirit. The Academy sessions are structured by the daily office for morning and evening prayer, Eucharist, silence, covenant group supportive accountability; twice daily input, ending with Compline. Between formal sessions there is an emphasis on personal journaling, spiritual reading, physical care, and spiritual direction.

The input curriculum is carefully structured with sixteen specialized courses:

- Year One: Scripture and Spiritual Formation; History of Christian Spirituality; Spirituality of the Hebrew Community; Liturgy and Spirituality; Spirituality of the New Testament; Spiritual Disciplines; Orthodox Spirituality; and Spiritual Friendship.
- Year Two: Protestant Spirituality; Prayer; Roman Catholic Spirituality; Spirituality and Depth Psychology; Cultural Spiritualities; Spiritual Formation in the Local Congregation; Spirituality and One's Own Faith Community; and the Reign of God in the World.

The Advisory Group for the initial academy included: Danny Morris, Morton Kelsey, Tilden Edwards, Flora Slosson Wuellmer, Douglas Steere, E. Glenn Hinson, Don Saliers, Fr. Timothy Kelly, Doris Donnelly, Rueben Job, Maxie Dunnam, John Mogabgab.

To date, over 1,000 persons have completed sixteen two-year academies, and over 5,000 persons have participated in over one hundred five-day academies. Furthermore, there are recurring two-year academies located in each of the five jurisdictions of the United Methodist Church.

XV. Walk to Emmaus

While not an event per se of United Methodist-Benedictine interaction, another movement has emerged that has been helpful in encouraging United Methodist-Roman Catholic cross-fertilization. After several staff persons independently participated in Cursillo weekends, the Program Section of The Upper Room sponsored two such weekends in 1977. Their success was such that in 1978 a person was hired to facilitate such immersion experiences. When the national Cursillo leadership decided that these events could only be offered on a uni-denominational basis, The Upper Room received permission to offer their ecumenical equivalent under the name "Walk to Emmaus." Part of the genius of this approach to evangelism and formation is that once established it trains its own indigenous lay and clergy leadership. The three days involve talks, discussion, and communal experiences of grace. The experience is a natural wedding of Roman Catholic (often Benedictine) spiritual practices and those characteristic of the Wesleyan movement, in a framed intensity characteristic of both monasticism and the Methodist Societies and Classes. The consequence of this movement is that there are presently 364 Emmaus Communities world-wide offering such weekends. Over 600,000 persons in 27 different countries have been involved in 19,000 events, with 32,000 persons participating last year alone.

XVII. Benedictine-methodist Consultation

In December 2001, Michael G. Cartwright (University of Indianapolis) received a Lilly Endowment Grant for "The Crossings Project," a set of eight initiatives centered at that United Methodist-related university that are intended to foster theological exploration of vocation. When this grant was expanded in early 2002 to enable the University of Indianapolis to collaborate with the United Methodist Church, Jerry Haas of The Upper Room (Danny Morris' successor) was invited to co-sponsor several consultations about Methodist-Benedictine cross-fertilization. Jerry himself is an oblate of the Benedictine Perpetual Adoration Community in Clyde, MO. Although not an oblate, Michael has explored Benedictine

spirituality for several years in the context of his relationship to Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove, IN. Michael's interests, in turn, had also led him to initiate the first Youth Academy for Spiritual Formation at the University of Indianapolis in 1999.

In the hope that these new explorations might support Mary Stamps and her monastic community, the project was named the "St. Brigid of Kildare Methodist-Benedictine Consultation." This restoration of dialogue called for a review of the previous work on ecumenical monasticism that had occurred since 1984, which resulted in this present historical document. A planning group met in September, 2002, and named an eight person consultation team, three of whom were part of the previous ecumenical monastery explorations. (See Appendix Seven) The initial meeting was held at Saint Brigid Monastery April 3-5, 2003 (composed of 5 United Methodists, 3 Catholic monks/nuns). Issues discussed included those of "calling" as this occurs through community, oblates, discernment, listening, renewal of the Wesleyan heritage, implications of Methodism as "an evangelical order in the church catholic," the United Methodist General Rules, and possible goals for the consultation.

Cartwright and Haas discerned the following purposes and possible outcomes for these three 3-day retreats:

"We believe that this series of consultations will serve at least four purposes:

1. to provide an opportunity for United Methodist leaders in church and academy to reflect about the ways in which the Benedictine tradition is being drawn upon and/or adapted in the creation of curricula in spiritual formation in church and university contexts;
2. to consider a series of related questions about vocation, ecclesiology, and sacraments that arise for United Methodists as we engage Benedictine communities, and reciprocally, the questions that arise from Benedictine communities as they engage United Methodist clergy and laity who participate in their ministries;
3. to provide an opportunity for United Methodist leaders to reflect about the growing number of clergy and laity becoming 'oblates' and 'associates' of Benedictine communities throughout the U.S.A.; and

4. to provide additional perspectives about Christian vocation for *The Crossings Project*. Among the outcomes that we envision: a) creation of three sets of 'occasional papers'; b) focused planning by the staff of the Upper Room about the kinds of resources that it needs to provide for persons who become interested in the Benedictine "way" through such initiatives as the Upper Room's Academy for Spiritual Formation; c) material for further discussion about Benedictine communities concerning their experiences of having United Methodist and other Protestant persons involved in their oblate programs, possibly leading to a joint presentation at the American Benedictine Academy Meeting in 2004."

The final consultation on March 11-13, 2004 ended with the hope that other related activities might be forthcoming. One possibility mentioned was a consultation on "Protestant Oblates and Benedictine Resourcing." Also mentioned was a possible session with Benedictine oblate leaders to explore ways of working creatively with Protestant oblates.

Epilogue

Near the end of the final St. Brigid Consultation, Mary Stamps and Paul Jones spent a sacred time of sharing. "It has been a long pilgrimage we've had together." "Yes. Did it turn out the way you had envisaged?" "Far from it, but I affirm the way in which the Spirit led us in paths we didn't choose" "Yes. I always thought that someday, somewhere, the two of us would end up together in an Ecumenical Monastery." "Who knows, the dance may not be over yet." "Guess all that really matters is whether or not we have been faithful" "I would like to believe we have been."

APPENDIX ONE

Petition to the General Conference of 1984

SUBJECT: Establishment of an ecumenical monastic community in cooperation with other “mainline” Christian Churches.

WHEREAS, in the past several years there has been an increasingly widespread interest in the recovery of the tradition of spiritual formation on the part of both lay and ordained members of the Church; and

WHEREAS, there is a need in our United Methodist Church to better ground our outreach programs (Christian educational, evangelism, and social concerns) in the disciplines of personal and corporate prayer, study of the scriptures, spiritual reading and spiritual formation;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the General Conference of the United Methodist Church establish and adequately fund a special task group or an appropriate agency of the General Church to work with other Christian Churches toward the establishment of an ecumenical monastic community; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that such a community be open to all interested persons whether lay, ordained, married or single; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that such a community have as its mission, the service of the larger Church through:

1. providing a model and resources for the spiritual formation of all in the Church;
2. entering into cooperation with our seminaries to provide spiritual opportunities for the spiritual formation of ministerial students;
3. serving as a reminder to the whole Church concerning the importance of a spirituality which is both contemplative and active, both pastoral and prophetic.

When this petition was passed and referred to the General Board of Discipleship and assigned to the Program Section of the Upper Room, this “Comment” was added to the resolution by the staff of the Upper Room:

“That this resolution was affirmed by the Wisconsin Annual Conference and passed by the General Conference reflects a hunger within the church for a deeper spirituality, genuine Christian community, and attention to the ‘one thing needed’ (Like 10:42). It recognizes that classical monasticism is already emerging, not only within the Roman Catholic Church, but also with Protestantism. The impetus for the resolution and for the General Board of Discipleship was not to create a new emphasis but to be open to the wind of the spirit and the wave of renewal.”

APPENDIX TWO

Members of the Original “Monastic Consultation Team”

- Janice Grana, World Editor, The Upper Room
- Ezra Earl Jones, General Secretary, Board of Discipleship
- Danny Morris, Executive Secretary of Program, The Upper Room
- Stephen Bryant, The Upper Room Program Staff
- Fr. Timothy Kelly, OSB, St. John’s Abbey, Collegeville, MN
- Judy Smith, The Upper Room Staff
- W. Paul Jones, Saint Paul School of Theology, Kansas City, MO
- Don Collins, Pastor, Church of the Good Hope, Milwaukee, WI
- Horacio Rios, The Upper Room Staff
- Allen Bryan, Koinonia Retreat Center, South Haven, MN

APPENDIX THREE

The Hermitage Spiritual Retreat Center



*"When you pray, go into your room
and shut the door..."*

—Matthew 6:6



*"In the morning...he got up
and went out to a deserted place,
and there he prayed."*

—Mark 1:35



To reserve a hermitage and/or
for more information, call
(417) 852-4601.

The center can also be made available for
a small group, for which meals
can be arranged.

There is no charge
for the use of a hermitage.

This ministry depends on
tax-deductible donations.

Directions

The Hermitage Spiritual Retreat Center is
2 1/2 hours southeast of Kansas City and
1 hour north of Springfield, Missouri. On
Route 64, one mile north of Pittsburg, take
Pomme de Terre Lake Road 64-48 east
(Road 306). At the white "Holiday
Heights" arrow, turn left and follow Road
311 to retreat center entrance.



*The Hermitage Spiritual Retreat Center is a not-
for-profit corporation governed by a board of
directors of many Christian traditions, open to all
persons seeking spiritual renewal.*

Hermitage Spiritual Retreat Center

*on Lake Pomme
de Terre*



HC77, Box 536
Pittsburg, MO 65724
(417) 852-4601

monk15@juno.com

Do you...

- ...desire a place to restore your spirit?
- ...long for closeness to your God?
- ...find God in nature?
- ...yearn for silence and solitude?



The Hermitage Spiritual Retreat center provides Christian hospitality, inviting reverence for God, all people, and the natural environment. Persons of all faith traditions and others sincerely seeking God are welcome.

Our mission is to provide, on a short-term basis, sacred time, space and resources for silence, prayer, solitude, restoration and renewal.



What to Expect

Immersed in the sights and sounds of nature, the setting lends itself to reading, journaling and quiet reflection. It is hoped that retreatants will find peace and spiritual renewal in the solitude — away from the distractions of telephone, radio and television. Spiritual direction is also available upon request.



One needs only to bring personal items and food for meals (or use the nearby restaurant). Towels, bed linens, and fully equipped kitchens are provided.

Retreat Accommodations

Surrounded by fourteen acres of hardwood forest, the rustic retreat center is located on the shore of Lake Pomme de Terre in the Ozark Foothills of south central Missouri.



The retreat center consists of four individual settings (hermitages) — two on each floor — within one building. Each level has two private rooms for sleeping, prayer and reading, as well as a kitchen and bathroom.

A resident Trappist hermit, living in a separate hermitage, provides daily oversight.

APPENDIX FOUR

Features of a Proposed Ecumenical Monastic Community

Design Drafted at the Nashville Meeting:

“The community we envisage will be Christian and ecumenical, focused upon the life of contemplation. The purpose of the community life will be to seek God in Christ and respond with lives of faithfulness. It will be related to an existing monastic community, perpetuating a deep sense of tradition and traditioning. Its mission is its very existence as a Christian alternative to contemporary culture, modeling an inclusive way of life which is not oriented by competition, status, ownership consumerism, racism, sexism, militarism, classism, ageism, etc. Its stand will favor ‘being’ as over against work-drivenness. Its life will be structured theological by the daily office and Eucharist (using inclusive language and offered in forms appropriate to the membership of the community). It will strive to achieve a simple and balanced life of prayer, work and service, focused physically in the symbolic arenas of cell, library, field, refectory and chapel. It will be related to an existing monastic community, thus perpetuating a deep sense of tradition and traditioning.

“It would be blessed and affirmed by the established church as essential to the church’s mission of reconciliation of humanity with God, of humans with each other, and with all of us to the earth. Thus its ecological sensitivity entails the inclusive stance of active non-violence, by which to serve an intercessor on behalf of the world in a balanced passion for prayer and social justice. The economic dimensions of community life will be a matter of continuing reflection, within the framework of the commitment to social justice and the need for alternatives to contemporary culture.

“This covenant community will be disciplined by commitment to a Rule that reflects the church’s collective wisdom. Its calling, then is to draw persons into its life so that they may be bitten by silence, exposed

to alternative lifestyles, intoxicated by the search for God, and opened to living as Divine-human discernment. The community will serve as spiritual director for each person, with intentional focus on relationships within the community, and providing the capability of depending on others’ faithful presence to each person. This monasticism will provide eremitic opportunities for those who desire them.

“There will be concentric levels of participation possible, inviting alternative ways of being related to the monastic community:

1. Permanent Residency: determined through a formative process of mutual discernment of call.
2. Internship: a contracted period of residence for varying lengths of time.
3. Associate Membership: a commitment to disciplines shared with the residential community, but exercised as part of one’s calling in the world; this relationship will include a short period of residency with the permanent community each year.
4. Learning Experiences: participation in one or more retreat experiences, introducing searchers to various dimensions of the monastic life. This might include periods of formation for ministerial students.
5. Outreach: serving as a “sign” to the larger church; modeling the disciplines of monastic spirituality in locals other than the monastery itself; and in research and writing for others from the perspective of monastic spirituality.

“This envisioned Ecumenical Monastic Community would be established physically adjacent to or be programmatically related to a monastery. The monastery would tradition and inform, but not legislate, the Ecumenical Monastic Community. The Rule of the community would emerge from the patterns of discipleship described in the scriptures, such as: worship; searching the scriptures; sacraments; fasting; Christian Communion (Fellowship); Prayer (corporate and individual).”

APPENDIX FIVE

A Pilgrimage to the Ozarks

Allen Bryan

Early September, I was invited, with 11 other men and women as part of the United Methodist Design Team, to spend a week at Assumption Abbey in Ava, Missouri. There, a handful of silent, simple, anonymous, praying monks live in a cloister surrounded by 5,000 acres of wilderness in the hills of the Ozarks. We lived the rule, order, and rhythm of their days and nights.

Much of the rhythm consisted of prayer beginning at 3:15 AM (community prayers are scheduled five times daily in the chapel). Three simple vegetarian meals daily and several hours of work made up the basic agenda.

Work at a monastery is interesting. The object is not have an object! There are no goals, completion of a job deadline, or push for perfection. This kind of attentiveness called for care and excellence without distraction from things past or future I said to Fr. Leon one afternoon: "I sure would like to get this roof on the garage before I leave on Friday!" He smiled, "But isn't it nice to pound nails together on such a day?"

On several occasions we scheduled a break in the silence with the community to share with some of the monks. The Abbot, Fr. Flavian (once Thomas Merton's abbot for a time), spoke to us about Cistercian Spirituality. On another, Fr. Basil Pennington led us in Centering Prayer.

On a hot afternoon a few of us climbed a steep mountain goat-type trail, a mile and a half from the monastery, to have a rare visit with a former Abbot who is now living the hermit's life. The visit was extraordinary. Even the most skeptical and "rational" of us knew we were in the presence of a living saint. Fr. Robert was a long, white-bearded, ancient child of simplicity. He lived in a 12-by-18 foot, single-roomed house with just the very basic necessities: a hard bed, wood stove, desk, about a dozen books, and a little food. We heard no lectures and were shown no techniques to learn about religious life, just a simple man in plain language who wants "nothing else but to grow old loving God." He arises at 1:30 AM each night and begins paying "wakeful attention to God." He said he reads his Bible slowly and "drinks in its messages to him." He eats very little and drinks the water that is caught in a barrel from his roof. He hasn't been sick in the last 45 years, as he can remember. We asked him many questions:

Q: How should we pray?

A: Do it! Nothing works better than doing it.

Q: But what kind of words can we pray best?

A: The Spirit groans within us. Groan if that's what's on your heart. God knows!

Q: What is prayer?

A: Faithful attention to God.

Q: What books would you suggest we read?

A: Try the Bible. It seems to work best.

Q: How can we be more faithful?

A: When it is time to meet with God, be there!

Q: How can we best serve the world?

A: Get a loving awareness of God. The good will be done through you then.

Fr. Robert was an open, frail, and gentle person. About him the atmosphere was charged with integrity. His eyes glistened with "beams of love." We were treated as if we were angels sent to him from heaven! The experience was unforgettable.

APPENDIX SIX

Conception Abbey Consultation

The 20 persons who gathered at Conception Abbey were quite ecumenical—Episcopalians, Anglo-Catholics, Presbyterians, Quakers, United Methodists, and several "citizens of the universe." There was 10 women, 10 men. Almost half were single, divorced, or widowed. The slight majority were married (several without their spouse present). Six were 32-40 years of age, the rest ranging from late 40's to 65. Only Mary Stamps and Paul Jones had extended experience in a monastery, while the others had visited or made retreats. Most persons were in ministry or some form of service, while the others were in widely assorted careers such as physical therapy, administration, and editorial work. We came from coast-to-coast: California to Massachusetts, Wisconsin to Georgia.

Our first evening began with Vespers and dinner with the monks, followed by several hours of getting acquainted. We gave to each person an inventory sheet asking questions such as name, address, marital status, denomination, favorite food, one's Myers-Briggs type, what you will like about me, what about me will require your patience, my favorite religious figure, etc. Then we passed the sheets around the circle, and we got a peek into each other's psyche. Interestingly, everyone in the room was an "N" (intuitive) with no "S's" (sensors) anywhere in sight. These sheets were posted on the wall for the rest of the gathering, and copies were later sent to everyone present. It was a fun idea and was very helpful in jump-starting our short meeting.

Afterwards Paul and Mary gave the group a brief history of the effort to date—offering such information as background and as a conversation starter, rather than a foundation upon which we expected the group to build. We were very clear in saying that this new configuration of persons should feel free either to take what they wanted of the information by way of learnings, or to set it entirely aside. The consensus was that while the group did not see itself as an extension of the previous efforts, there was material there that would be useful in beginning something new, e.g. the contacts made with existing monastic communities. The evening concluded with Compline.

The next morning after Lauds, we began with instruction on the Quaker meeting style of speaking out of silence: i.e., that one speaks from the Spirit's inward movement rather than from an outward compulsion or with a pre-meditated speech in mind; that silence is respected; that one speaks from first person experience; that there is no question and answer or argumentation in response to another person's statement. The topic to be addressed was simple: "How do I experience God's call in my life toward an ecumenical monastic community?" We spent 2-3 hours on this exercise, and then shared our reverent reflections on what we had heard. There were some amazing stories of the Spirit's wonder-working among us. Some people had been toying with the idea for 30-40 years; others had serendipitously packed a bag and come to join us out of a curious sense of resonance that was fairly new to their experience. There were persons who had suffered much in their lives regarding a longing for contemplation and

community. There were others who spoke in terms of the colorful tapestry of experiences that had finally led them to this moment. Some participants were bold in their hopes for the outcome of our discussions; others were less certain and even a bit timid. One or two were there as support to a friend. All had a willingness to be led by God.

At the end of the morning session, it was agreed that we should have a similar listening session in the afternoon, but this time organized around those persons seriously considering participation in a full-time residential community -- in contrast to some sort of affiliation. Our circle of chairs was bisected into two halves, marked off by two candles. Those willing to consider residential life sat on the speaking side of the circle; everyone else sat on the listening (and sometimes questioning) side. Persons were free to relocate themselves during the session. Opportunity was then given to the "speaking" folk to present without interruption their ideal model of community.

Those who spoke generally agreed on a number of elements of community: a place where God is to be sought through contemplation, where social justice and environmental concerns are shared; commitments (depth/type/length) would be various and flexible; the community would grow and shape itself "organically"; the focus would be contemplative rather than apostolic; in-house work would be ideal, but the community might not be able to begin at that point; the community would be ecumenical; there would be common worship and shared meals; the housing might be individual in order to accommodate married couples and those with reservations about cloistered living; denominational ties would be explored and encouraged; the community would need its own space, but possibly in relation to an existing monastery; governance would be consensual.

Beyond that, there was not sufficient agreement on the specifics to make anyone willing to jump into community with others quite yet. Mary suggested that two key elements of monastic life were missing from the pictures thus far: a spiritual leader and a sense of common life. She cautioned against surrendering these key items without understanding the wisdom behind them. For instance, their fear both of a distinct leader and a set discipline for all persons (not a rigid dogma) seemed born of

two things: an understandable concern for the abuse of power, and an unreflective democratic mindset. Mary drew on *The Rule of St. Benedict* to describe a spiritual leader as one identified as most adept at listening to God and whose power is not over the monks in the typical hierarchical way in which we tend to construe power, but as one from among the monks whose authority is based on their belief that that person holds the place of Christ among them. She indicated the importance of common discipline as both training in listening and service to one another. Those who want to become holy must not easily dismiss the means by which holy persons gain their state of sanctification.

That evening, we reflected together on our afternoon discussion, asking if there was enough commonality among us to warrant another gathering. After much talk about thoughts and feelings, we agree that there was indeed cause for further exploration. We decided that those persons who were seriously interested in exploring full-time residential community would participate in a 12-day live-in experience (two weeks minus the weekends at either end because of pastoral commitments).

Our last morning together was spent planning for that event. The gathering closed with Eucharist after lunch.

Mary and Paul left the gathering with a renewed appreciation for how personality affects process. One of us is a strong extrovert, the other a strong introvert. Our preparations for the initial event forced us to give frequent recognition to the yin and yang of our styles, and thus we were able to arrive at win-win solutions for every difference that arose. In the larger group, the personality factor was most evident on the final morning. Those who were “J” (judging) on the Myers-Briggs Inventory had to exercise real patience during Tuesday’s discussions about theory, models, what-ifs, etc. But when it came to the Wednesday morning time to do concrete planning, they were “psyched” and their enthusiasm began to grow. The persons on the “P” (perceiving) side of the scale, however, who

were very relaxed with Tuesday’s conversations, began getting nervous on Wednesday. It was apparent that the “P’s” were feeling pressure. One “P,” experiencing the “J’s” enthusiasm and need to do tangible, quantifiable work, wondered if the Spirit had left the room, producing “fear and anxiety.” At that point, we had to step back and remind ourselves that the Spirit works in diverse ways among diverse people, and one person’s perception of the Spirit’s absence may coincide with another person’s feeling afire with the Spirit. Those moments when everyone experiences the Spirit moving in the same way at the same time are not necessarily the exception to the rule but neither are they the rule without exception. The gathering ended with enthusiasm over what the July Intensive might birth.

In the “Ecumenical Monastery Newsletter” sent out in March, 1996, summarizing the event and inviting persons to register for the July Intensive, persons were invited to indicate what level of involvement they might anticipate if residency was not an option for them. The levels mentioned were those previously identified: permanent resident; internship; secular associates; dispersed communities; retreat experiences and training events.

APPENDIX SEVEN

Members of St. Brigid of Kildare Consultation

- Dr. Ron Anderson, Garrett Evangelical Seminary, Evansville, IL
- Rev. Dar Berkenpas, U.M. Pastor, Sioux Falls, SD
- Dr. Michael G. Cartwright, University of Indianapolis, Indianapolis, IN
- Rev. Jerry Haas, Upper Room Ministries, Nashville, TN
- Sr. Jennifer Horner, Our Lady of Grace Monastery, Beech Grove, IN
- Fr. W. Paul Jones, Hermitage Spiritual Retreat Center
- Abbot Timothy Kelly, St. John’s Abbey, Collegeville, MN
- Dr. Mary Ewing Stamps, St. Brigid of Kildare Monastery, St. Joseph, MN

Afterword

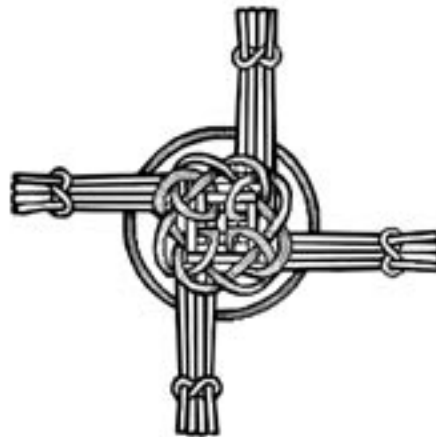
Those of us who are participating in Methodist-Benedictine dialogues at the beginning of the twenty-first century are a little bit like the odd monk described in the first chapter of Walter Miller, Jr.'s novel, *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959). Brother Francis Gerard was a simple man living in disturbing times who happened to find a document associated with the life of a figure that his community came to remember as “Saint Leibowitz.” Like Brother Francis, none of us is in a position to know whether or how some fragment communication from the past will turn out to be significant in the future for struggling pilgrims walking in the Way of Christ. Sometimes all we know how to do is to preserve the “memorabilia” that we discover or take the time to chronicle that someone else asked a question at that time in this place. Later, other pilgrims in the Way will come along and be able to piece together the connections as best they can.

Those of us who have had the opportunity to sift through the records and re-engage the issues of the Monastic Design Team are fortunate that we did not have to piece it all together without access to records or living memories. Some of the participants in the earlier round of conversation were able to bring their memories to the conversation along with several significant documents. Even so, at several points we did find ourselves

puzzled because of the lack of a “paper trail” from the conversations of the past two decades. Precisely for this reason, we resolved to make the perspectives of our consultation available in ways that suit the diffuse audiences that we think may have interest in the conversations that we have reviewed and re-engaged.

We also plan to use the means available to us to make these documents as widely available as possible. As each of the three sets “occasional papers” that we envision putting together are published, copies of these “memorabilia” will be available in a “pdf” format on the webpage of *The Crossings Project* at the University of Indianapolis website link for the Office of Ecumenical & Interfaith Programs. These documents may be reprinted by interested persons for personal use, but those who desire to make multiple copies for use in various settings should contact Michael Cartwright to discuss appropriate arrangements for obtaining multiple copies of one or more of these papers.

Persons interested in obtaining access to the archive of records of the United Methodist Monastic Design Team are invited to contact Jerry Haas, Director of the Academy for Spiritual Formation, Upper Room Ministries, P. O. Box 34004, Nashville, TN 37202-0004.



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