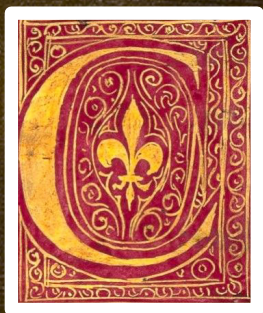


VOL.1 | ISSUE 1



OLLOQUIUM

A CISTERCIAN E-JOURNAL

20
25

Prayer

COLLOQUIUM

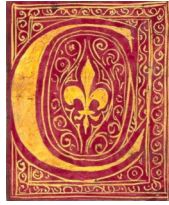
A CISTERCIAN E-JOURNAL

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ISSUE 1



2025

COLLOQUIUM

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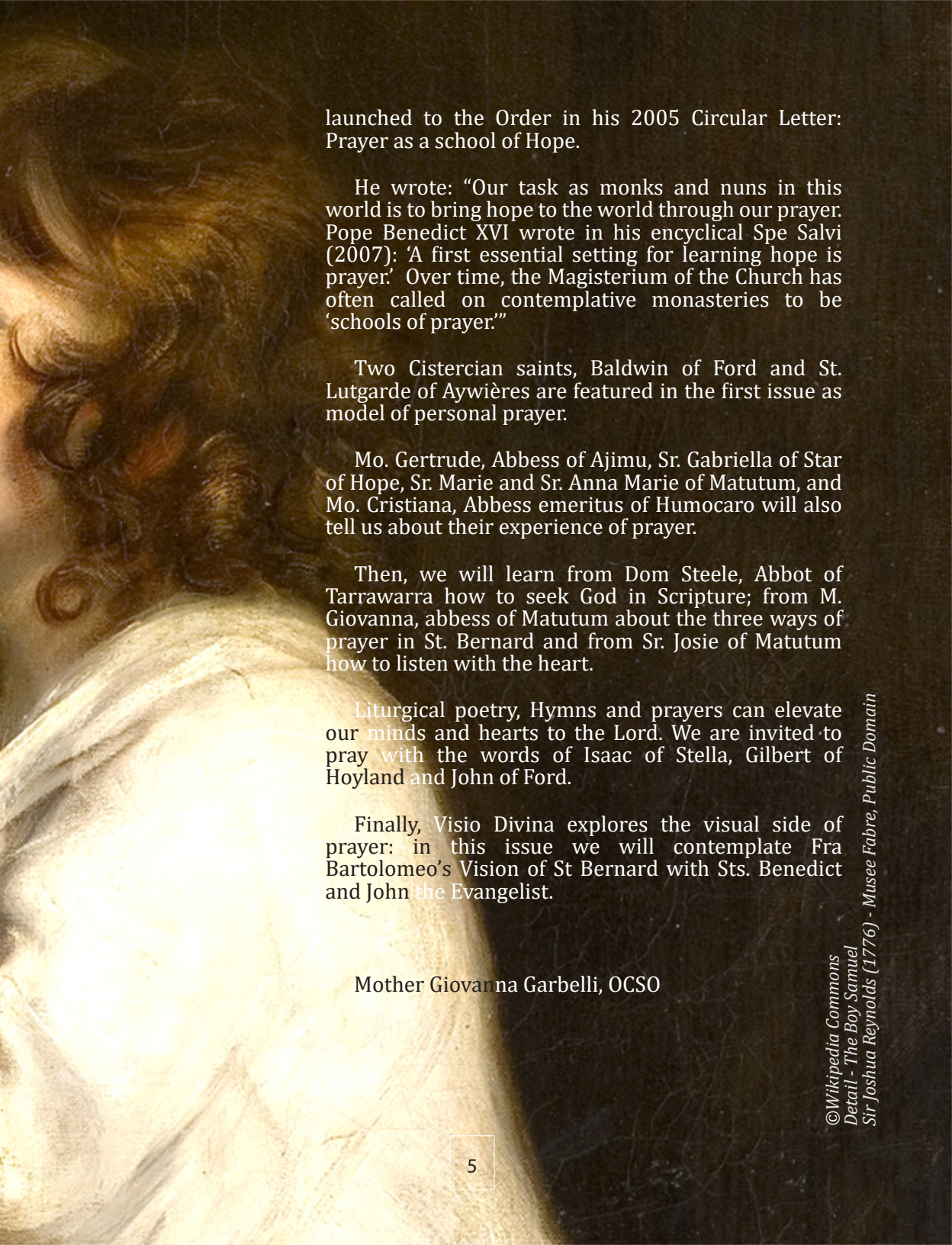
Prayer as a School of Hope

The idea for a Cistercian journal to connect our Asian communities emerged during a meeting between some sisters from the Abbey of Our Lady of Matutum and M. Eleanor Campion, a member of the Abbot General's Council, during her July 2024 visit. Dom Elias Dietz (Gethsemani) suggested "*Colloquium*" as the name of the journal. As in the Middle Ages, exchanges between abbeys (colloquia) maintained the vitality of the charism, we hope that this journal will be a means of exchanging ideas and contributions to sustain a unified vision and foster friendship.

Therefore, the journal's primary purpose is to share experiences and reflections that will inspire our members to embody more and more the beauty of the Cistercian charism. The journal will also feature a "formation" section with longer articles on the chosen themes.

The first two headings' "Charism" and "Experience" allow the colloquial character to come to the fore, and the last "Visio Divina" to crown the theme with beauty.

We chose the theme of prayer for our inaugural issue because of the challenge that Dom Bernardus



launched to the Order in his 2005 Circular Letter: Prayer as a school of Hope.

He wrote: “Our task as monks and nuns in this world is to bring hope to the world through our prayer. Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his encyclical *Spe Salvi* (2007): ‘A first essential setting for learning hope is prayer.’ Over time, the Magisterium of the Church has often called on contemplative monasteries to be ‘schools of prayer.’”

Two Cistercian saints, Baldwin of Ford and St. Lutgarde of Aywières are featured in the first issue as model of personal prayer.

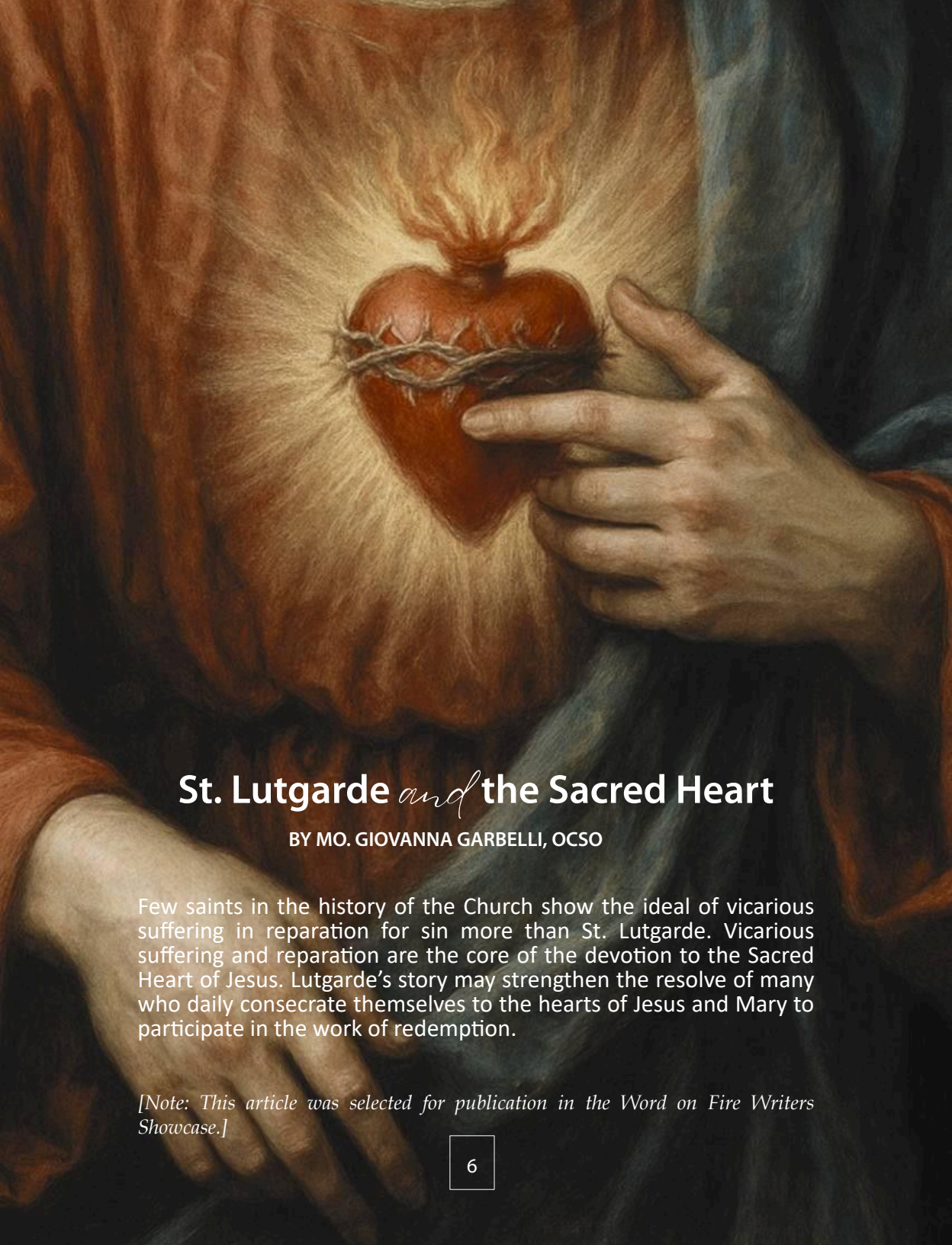
Mo. Gertrude, Abbess of Ajimu, Sr. Gabriella of Star of Hope, Sr. Marie and Sr. Anna Marie of Matutum, and Mo. Cristiana, Abbess emeritus of Humocaró will also tell us about their experience of prayer.

Then, we will learn from Dom Steele, Abbot of Tarrawarra how to seek God in Scripture; from M. Giovanna, abbess of Matutum about the three ways of prayer in St. Bernard and from Sr. Josie of Matutum how to listen with the heart.

Liturgical poetry, Hymns and prayers can elevate our minds and hearts to the Lord. We are invited to pray with the words of Isaac of Stella, Gilbert of Hoyland and John of Ford.

Finally, *Visio Divina* explores the visual side of prayer: in this issue we will contemplate Fra Bartolomeo's *Vision of St Bernard* with Sts. Benedict and John the Evangelist.

Mother Giovanna Garbelli, OCSO



St. Lutgarde *and* the Sacred Heart

BY MO. GIOVANNA GARBELLI, OCSO

Few saints in the history of the Church show the ideal of vicarious suffering in reparation for sin more than St. Lutgarde. Vicarious suffering and reparation are the core of the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Lutgarde's story may strengthen the resolve of many who daily consecrate themselves to the hearts of Jesus and Mary to participate in the work of redemption.

[Note: This article was selected for publication in the Word on Fire Writers Showcase.]

St. Lutgarde has been a companion along my journey of intimacy with the Lord. She can teach everyone that devotion to the Sacred Heart requires an unrestrained gift of oneself to the will of Christ. Lutgarde is also an icon of the spiritual marriage as union of the wills—nothing sentimental, but a complete surrender to the will of the Beloved, preferred above everything else. Indeed, I owe my understanding of St. Bernard of Clairvaux's mystical theology to the discovery of *The Life of St. Lutgarde* by Thomas of Cantimpré, translated and commented on by Thomas Merton.

Four hundred years before St. Margaret Mary prayed and suffered for the institution of the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart, St.

Lutgarde's mystical life began with a vision of the pierced heart of the Lord. It ended with her mystical espousal with the Incarnate Word by an exchange of hearts with him.

St. Lutgarde was a contemporary of St. Francis of Assisi, and she too had received a wound in her heart which can be classed as stigmata. While well

known to her contemporaries, she has been forgotten probably because sources about her are in Latin, but thanks to Thomas Merton's translation, she can again inspire many to participate in the Lord's work of redemption by offering him their daily sacrifices.

A well-to-do businessman, Lutgarde's father wanted a good marriage for her because she was beautiful in soul and

face. Her mother, however, managed to put the twelve-year-old girl under the protection of the Benedictine nuns of St. Catherine's at St. Trond. When she turned eighteen years old, she had her first vision of Christ. Being just an oblate, she used to spend long intervals in the parlor with a young man who was in love with her.

St. Lutgarde can teach everyone that devotion to the Sacred Heart requires an unrestrained gift of oneself to the will of Christ. She is also an icon of the spiritual marriage as union of the wills.

One day, Christ suddenly appeared, blazing before her astonished eyes. He revealed the spear wound in his side and said to her, "Seek no more the pleasure of this unbecoming affection: behold, here, forever, what you should love, and how you should love: here in this wound I promise you the most pure of delights." Struck with terror and

love, she dismissed her suitor with these words: "I belong to another lover."

Yet, she had to pass through another trial before she was resolved to a life of hiddenness and penance. Another friend, a soldier who had long been pursuing her, tried to kidnap her during one of her visits to her biological sister. She escaped by running to the woods. When she returned to the convent, the news had spread, and crowds gathered to see her. Lutgarde had to suffer the shame of being suspected of impurity. Her thoughts turned to Christ and to the shame he had suffered for men. Once again safe in the convent, she imposed on herself a voluntary rule of enclosure and solitude to give herself entirely to God. Furthermore, she transferred to a monastery of more strict observance and became a Cistercian nun at Aywières.

Soon afterward, Lutgarde experienced in a vision the spiritual marriage, as Jesus allowed her to exchange her heart with his. Jesus had just asked her to give him her heart and she replied, "Take it, dear Lord. But take it in such a way that Thy Heart's love may be so mingled and united with my own heart that I may possess my heart in Thee, and may it ever remain there secure in Thy protection."

Lutgarde was the first saint to whom Jesus showed his heart. Even though I cannot aspire to the same grace, this vision shows how much Jesus desires collaboration in the work of salvation. Lutgarde's sufferings and prayers for the salvation of sinners encouraged my commitment to the redemption of the world. We need people dedicated to prayer and sacrifice in this era of warfare against the mystery of iniquity. We need Lutgarde's intercession.

Lutgarde was at the disposal of Jesus' plan. The Blessed Virgin asked her to fast for the salvation of the Albigensian heretics and for sinners. She fasted on a piece of bread and a glass of weak ale for three periods of seven years.

Few saints in the history of the Church show the ideal of vicarious suffering in reparation for sin more than St. Lutgarde. Vicarious suffering and reparation are the core of the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Lutgarde's story may strengthen the resolve of many who daily consecrate themselves to the hearts of Jesus and Mary to participate in the work of redemption. She was called to heaven on June 16, 1246. How fitting that her feast day is in mid-June when the whole Church devotes herself to the Sacred Heart.



Wikipedia Commons
Christ appearing to St. Lutgarde
Gaspar de Crayer (1584-1669)



Mo. Giovanna Garbelli is the Abbess of Our Lady of Mt. Matutum Abbey, Philippines. She is a member of the St. Francis de Sales & St. Hildegard of Bingen Writing Groups of the Word on Fire Institute.

Biographical information is from Thomas Merton's *What Are These Wounds?: The Life of a Cistercian Mystic Saint*.

BALDWIN OF FORD:

On Hesitation *in* Prayer

BY SR. BENEDICTA RODAS, OCSO

Have you ever found yourself hesitating in prayer or unsure if your words matter or if the Lord is listening? This tension is the focus of Baldwin of Ford's "On Hesitation on Prayer" from his book, *The Commendation of Faith*. Hesitation in prayer stems from hesitation in faith. He writes, "The reason for hesitation in faith is because we put too little trust in God and too much in ourselves."¹

Baldwin of Ford presents a paradox central to the monastic journey: the interplay of human frailty and divine fidelity. He highlights the vulnerability of prayer—the "confusion of uncertainty and

ignorance"²—wherein even the righteous feel adrift, unsure if heard or what to ask. An example of this is found in St. Paul: "...a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'" (2 Corinthians 12:7–8) Here we see how Paul's prayer for himself is unanswered. "The righteous are sometimes ignorant of what it is proper to ask," as Paul clarifies. "We do not know what we ought to pray for." (Romans 8:26–27) Jesus echoes this to the sons of Zebedee: "You do not

know what you are asking.”(Matthew 20:22)

Baldwin of Ford observes that even when we rightly “ask from God wisdom, charity, humility, patience, peace of mind...we still do not know whether what we seek is the right thing for us to have or for him to give.”⁵ We remain limited in understanding. Paul exemplifies this tension when he wrestles with uncertainty over whether to pray for earthly life or heavenly gain. He writes, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). This is not faith’s failure but a recognition of creaturely limitations, a surrender surpassing eloquence. “Even though they trust resolutely in the mercy of God, they still tremble because of their frailty.”⁶

This speaks to the core of the monastic vocation: the certainty of weakness. Standing before God, stripped of illusions—aware of flawed motives, the poverty of our righteousness, and our fragility—is humility, not despair. This humility,

as St. Benedict’s Rule emphasizes, urges daily confession of evil deeds (RB 4),⁷ not to dwell in guilt but to escape self-reliance.

However, Baldwin does not leave us trembling. He addresses the paradox animating monastic prayer: hope and fear’s coexistence. “When they pray,

they are placed between hope and fear: how, then, do they ask in faith without hesitation?”⁸ Baldwin’s resolution is simple yet radical: “They do not hesitate in that faith which in all things and through all things, they do not doubt to be true.”⁹ This is not blind certainty but fiducia—trust rooted in God’s unchanging character, not feelings or outcomes.

Baldwin of Ford addresses the paradox animating monastic prayer: hope and fear’s coexistence. “When they pray, they are placed between hope and fear: how, then, do they ask in faith without hesitation?”

For us, this is embodied in stability’s rhythms: rising for Vigils, chanting the Psalms, and the moments of prayer before work. Offering our hearts in silence as we pray, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me,” perfectly embodies this union of frailty and trust, doubt and surrender. Our charism expresses this explicitly: “Our lives are wholly directed to experiencing the living God. Ready to

receive the Holy Spirit's gift of uninterrupted prayer, this search animates our whole day."¹⁰ This search animates us not to solve the problem but to live each day the incarnational mystery of Christ in our daily lives.

Yet we are unaware of His presence in our daily lives because of "so much activity, so much movement, so much useless talk, so much superficial and needless stimulation."¹¹ Are we truly seeking God? If so, we have the hope and possibility of finding Him. It calls us to stability of heart—anchoring us whether in the choir, scriptorium, garden, bakery, refectory, or wherever we are. When unsure what to ask, we join Christ in Gethsemane: "Your will be done" (Matthew 26:39). Hesitating between hope and fear, we walk with the disciples to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35), the stranger beside us being the answer to our unspoken longings, like children trusting a Father who knows our needs.

"But one is also permitted to fear and doubt devoutly,"¹² as illustrated by two profoundly contrasting biblical pleas. "Someone who doubts focuses a great deal of attention either on the power of God or on his will."¹³ The desperate father who cries, "If you can do anything, help us and have mercy on

us" (Mark 9:22), and the leper who said, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean" (Matthew 8:2), demonstrate this. "The leper doubted his will, not his power...[and] received the assurance of his will, the grace of a cure."¹⁴ "But he who doubted his power and said, 'if you can,' straightaway heard this: 'if you can believe, all things are possible for the one who believes'" (Mark 9:23). Baldwin frames these accounts as mirrors of the human condition: doubt that questions God's plan can coexist with faith, but doubt that questions His omnipotence endangers the covenant of trust. "But to hesitate through distrusting the promises of God is not in any way permitted."¹⁵

Monastic life is familiar with this tension. The Divine Office voices both unshakable hope and doubt. Baldwin's "devout doubting" mirrors the Psalms, showing doubt as faith's refining fire. Such questioning does not reject God's goodness but refines our understanding, as in Job's confession: "I have dealt with great things that I do not understand" (Job 42:3). This doubt safeguards against pride, anchoring us in humility. "It is not undevout simply to be ignorant of these things, and thus simply to doubt what God hides by not revealing it."¹⁶ Doubting what God has not revealed is not weak faith but humble acceptance of our limited perspective. This is monastic

CHARISM

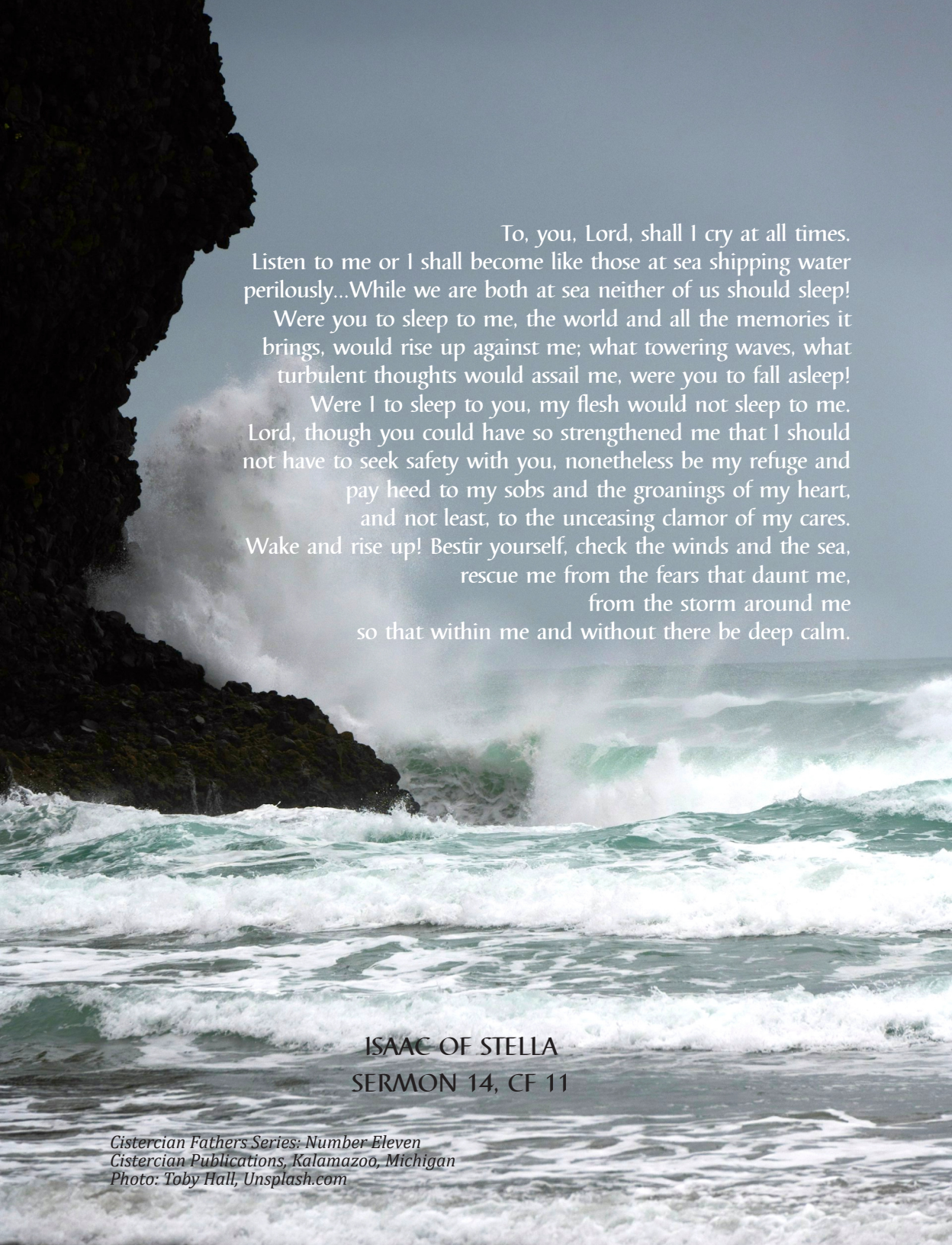
stabilitas: remaining rooted even in obscurity, trusting that “I shall know fully, as I am fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

In our prayer, we chant the Psalms with both conviction and vulnerability, weaving lament and praise into a hymn of trust. To trust is to surrender everything into the hands of God, who knows what is best for us.

Notes:

1. Baldwin of Ford, *The Commendation of Faith*, trans. David N. Bell (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2000), introduction, 20.
2. *Ibid*, chap. 11, par. 9, 68.
3. *Ibid*, chap. 11, par. 2, 64.
4. *Ibid*, chap. 11, par. 4, 65.
5. *Ibid*, chap. 11, par. 8, 67.
6. *Ibid*, chap. 11, par. 9, 68.
7. Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1981), chap. 4.
8. Baldwin of Ford, *Commendation of Faith*, chap. 11, par. 9, 68.
9. *Ibid*.
10. *Declaration on Cistercian Life* (General Chapter of the Cistercian Order, 1969), par. 5.
11. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, ed. Patrick Hart (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews & McMeel, 1977), 171.
12. Baldwin of Ford, *Commendation of Faith*, chap. 11, par. 11, 69.
13. *Ibid*.
14. *Ibid*, chap. 11, par. 12, 70.
15. *Ibid*, chap. 11, par. 11, 69.
16. *Ibid*, chap. 11, par. 11, 69.

Sr. Benedicta Rodas is a solemn-professed member of Our Lady of Mt. Matutum Abbey, Philippines. This is a revised version of a paper presented for the Abbey's Cistercian Week 2025.



To, you, Lord, shall I cry at all times.
Listen to me or I shall become like those at sea shipping water
perilously...While we are both at sea neither of us should sleep!
Were you to sleep to me, the world and all the memories it
brings, would rise up against me; what towering waves, what
turbulent thoughts would assail me, were you to fall asleep!
Were I to sleep to you, my flesh would not sleep to me.
Lord, though you could have so strengthened me that I should
not have to seek safety with you, nonetheless be my refuge and
pay heed to my sobs and the groanings of my heart,
and not least, to the unceasing clamor of my cares.
Wake and rise up! Bestir yourself, check the winds and the sea,
rescue me from the fears that daunt me,
from the storm around me
so that within me and without there be deep calm.

ISAAC OF STELLA
SERMON 14, CF 11

INTERCESSION



Josephbrickey.com
One Before God
Joseph Brickey

MOSES: The Prophet as Intercessor

*Moses said to Joshua, "Choose for us some men and go out to battle against Amalek.
Tomorrow I'll stand on top of the hill, holding God's staff".
Joshua did as Moses told him to fight Amalek,
while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill.
When Moses raised his hand, Israel prevailed; but when he let it fall, Amalek prevailed.
For Moses felt his hands weighing, and they took a stone, and laid it under him, and
he sat there, while Aaron and Hur, one on one side and the other on the other, held up his hands.
His hands remained steady until the setting of the sun.
(Exodus 17:9-12)*

The monastery, a city set upon a hill, resembles Moses in its commitment to intercession. *In persona ecclesiae* – I find my truest stance as a consecrated person, standing before God for all, "offering to God a sacrifice of praise and making intercession for the whole world." (OCSO Cst. 19) In the interior and exterior 'desert' of my monastic life is distilled that prayer and intercession which brings me to evangelical proximity with the world, witnessing to a deeper communion possible through the exchange of spiritual goods and graces.

Receiving numerous prayer requests, especially for the healing of the sick, unity within families, and various needs for the ongoing great battle of life is very moving for me as a consecrated person. They express a profound hope in the power of prayer. Hope in God still prevails, and we are allied to that hope. This does not redound to any personal merit, but because our monastic consecration fastens us to God's staff.

With Aaron and Hur supporting his hands, *His hands remained steady until the setting of the sun*. A monastic community is to be a prophetic herald of this image of communion. In Christ, it is possible to live together bearing one another's burden 'until the setting of the sun', persevering until the sunset of our life in placing our gifts at the service of the one Church, that '*may he bring us all together to everlasting life*'—perhaps, the only true eternal life, is this 'all together'—this is the ultimate victory of intercession.

Sr. Anna Marie Ando is a solemn-professed member of Our Lady of Mt. Matutum Abbey, Philippines. This paper was submitted to a Biblical Hermeneutics of Consecrated Life course of the e-studium of the Dicastery for Consecrated Life.

God *is* never slow.

BY MO. GERTRUDE IKEBE, OCSO

As her superior, I was helping a postulant discern her vocation, as she struggled with the decision of whether to continue her monastic life. I recognized her impatience and desire for instant decisions, both of which are common in secular life today, as well as her frustration at not being able to make her own decisions freely. Having lived with my own innate ambition, stubbornness, recklessness, impatience, and clumsiness for more than half a century, I have come to

understand how difficult it is to manage these impulses in this unique way of life. However, I wanted to convey to her the importance of trusting in God's timing and provision, a lesson I had learned through my own trials and tribulations. One day, I came across this video on YouTube.

God is never slow
<https://youtube.com/shorts/RlazRF11U7o>

The words of Jesus echo in my ears.

"Amen, I say to you, a son cannot do anything on his own, but only what he sees his father doing; for what he does, his son will do also." (John 5:19)

It naturally links to a personal experience. When I was at primary and secondary school, perhaps due to my unique sensitivity, I struggled to fit in and often refused to go. In the mornings, I would linger at home even after it was time to leave. Seeing this, my father would often drive me to the school gate. I would sit quietly in the passenger seat, resigned to my fate, like a cat caught by the scruff of its neck. On the way, I would shrink into myself in silence, feeling gloomy, while also blankly taking in my surroundings: the sound of the key turning in the ignition; the engine starting in response; the steady rhythm and intervals of the engine noise caused by my father's left hand shifting gears; the subtle changes in gravity as the speed varied; and the timing of when he slowly shifted down and applied the brakes as the light turned yellow. Years later, after entering a monastery, I was ordered

to obtain a driving license. Then I noticed something: whether accelerating or decelerating, I knew the exact timing of the gear changes that the instructor was meticulously instructing me on from the passenger seat, even before he said them. The engine sound, gears, accelerator, brakes, and gravitational force were all connected, forming a single rhythm. This living 'knack' was already there in my body, which has nothing to do with my own efforts.

Prayer, I believe, is to remain as a human being originally created, with "emptiness", or Vacare Deo, as the vessel that receives God. This lies beneath the thick layers of our own will, or natural unconscious impulse to control God and make Him obey us. Incidentally, with only a slight difference in spelling, we have a Japanese word 'baka', a derogatory meaning 'idiot', seemingly a corrupted form of the Sanskrit word 'moha', referring to 'ignorance'. Recognizing one's own ignorance before God, humbling oneself and entrusting oneself to God with a heart at ease in His

Prayer
is to remain as
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presence — this is what I always turn into a pun. It is a reminder to myself not to be pushy or stick my nose into everything, trying to do everything on my own, and missing something important and messing things up. Prayer is first and foremost about accepting oneself as a useless servant and opening up to God with attentiveness and mindfulness.

St. Benedict says:

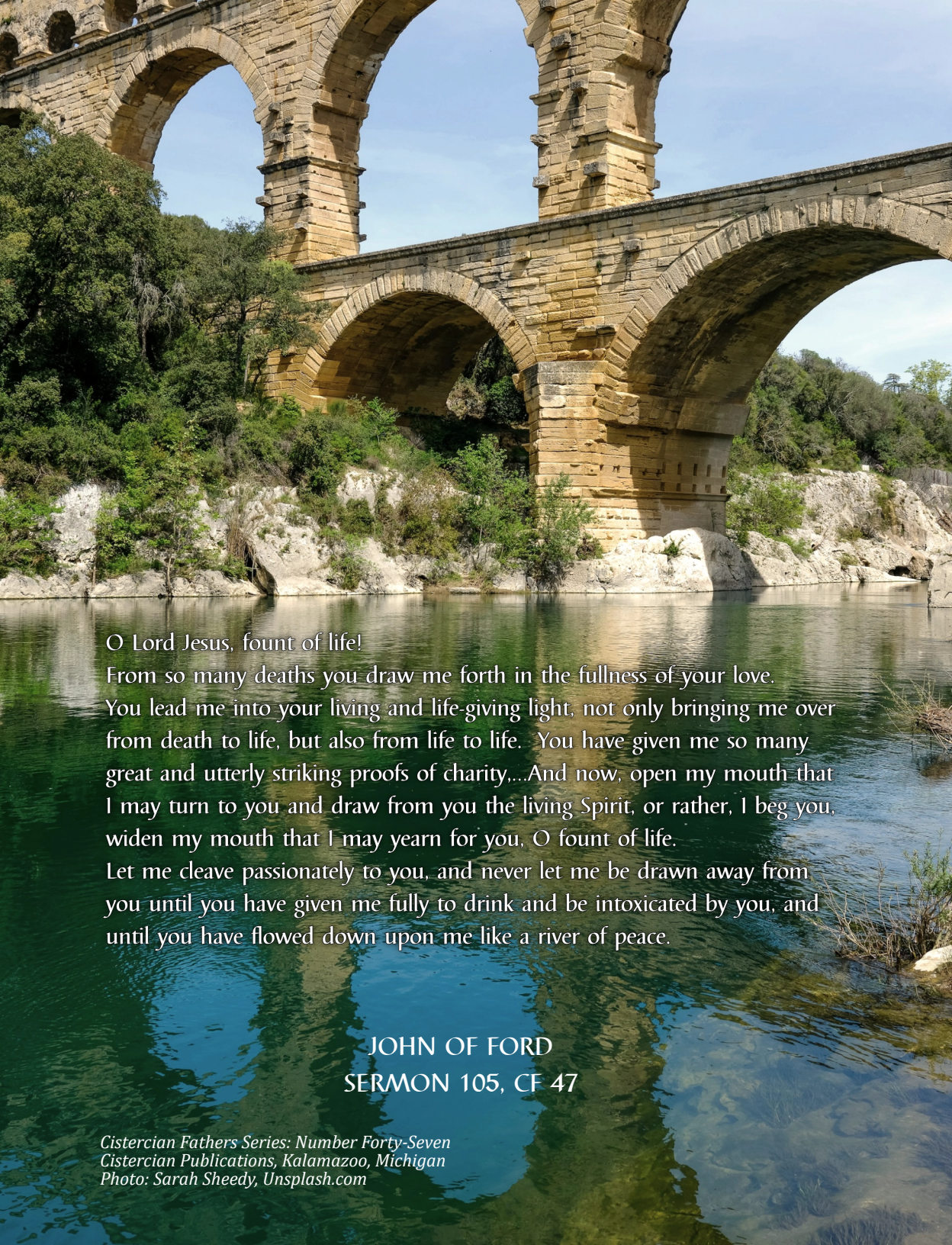
"First of all, every time you begin a good work, you must pray to him most earnestly to bring it to perfection. In his goodness, he has already counted us as his sons, and therefore we should never grieve him by our evil actions." (R.B. Preface 4)

Personally, I set myself this goal for Lent this year. As I was consciously putting it into practice, I realized how far I was from "first of all, every time, pray earnestly." It is frightening that the majority of "good deeds" appear to be actions I can perform independently, without the need for divine intervention. Trusting God fully with His timing and having faith that He will make things happen can be hard. At least I realised to

some extent that prayer probably aims for this: for God to become the living context of my life; for everything I do to be done in relation to God; and for me to become my true self in this way.

Coincidentally, I was asked to write this article around that time. I decided to base it on the video I mentioned earlier, but unfortunately, I failed to bookmark it on YouTube or save it to my computer, where I thought I had downloaded it. I was at a loss. So I prayed to the Virgin Mary; if this is truly what the Lord wants me to write about, let me find the video again at the perfect time when I should write it. Then, three months later, I happened to find it in my video files. This allowed me to complete the document within just three days. As the title of the video says, God is indeed never slow. Interestingly, even cynically enough, the moment I found the video was the very next day after the postulant I mentioned earlier left us, having endured a painful discernment process. 'Lord, this is your right timing, isn't it?' With a bittersweet feeling, I look at the finalised document.

Mo. Gertrude Ikebe is the Abbess of Our Lady of Ajimu Abbey in Kyushu, Japan.



O Lord Jesus, fount of life!

From so many deaths you draw me forth in the fullness of your love.

You lead me into your living and life-giving light, not only bringing me over from death to life, but also from life to life. You have given me so many great and utterly striking proofs of charity,...And now, open my mouth that I may turn to you and draw from you the living Spirit, or rather, I beg you, widen my mouth that I may yearn for you, O fount of life.

Let me cleave passionately to you, and never let me be drawn away from you until you have given me fully to drink and be intoxicated by you, and until you have flowed down upon me like a river of peace.

JOHN OF FORD
SERMON 105, CF 47

*Cistercian Fathers Series: Number Forty-Seven
Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, Michigan
Photo: Sarah Sheedy, Unsplash.com*

What is PRAYER *for you?*

By SR. GABRIELLA LIE, OCSO

To share my reflection or insight about “what is prayer for me?” let me tell just a little background concerning prayer in my Christian life.

Up to now, I am still learning and deepening “what is prayer for me?” In my opinion and awareness, prayer is having contact with God, a personal dialogue with God, in whatever form that accompanies it. I realize that my journey of prayer is gradually evolving to align with the order of the Creed.

In this context, let me use the Creed as a “barometer” of the journey of my prayer.

Before I was baptized as a Catholic at the age of 16, I learned from my parents to connect with God as the “Creator” through a family prayer we held every year on the eighth day after the celebration of the Chinese New Year.

Then, after being baptized, I began to recognize Jesus and the practice of Jesus’ prayer. Since then, I sensed that this Jesus would surely introduce me to who the God we worshipped every year together as a family was.

I also learned about Mary and how to pray the Rosary, and I learned some Marian songs as well.



Many years later, after joining the monastery as a Cistercian nun, I gained a deeper understanding of the meaning and the richness of prayer. Our life of prayer is a kind of assiduous prayer, and there are at least two distinct ways of expressing it.

First, through our Liturgical Prayer, we do it seven times a day.

The second way is by personal prayer through the practice of our Lectio Divina (prayerful reading through Scriptures), silent prayer, and some devotional prayers.

Lastly, I would like to share that what impresses me about prayer is that, as a Cistercian nun, I have the privilege of offering "a sacrifice of praise" for the local and universal Church through our hidden apostolic mission in the heart of the Church.

**"In offering our life to God,
we need not turn aside
from the normal activities of life,
because it is just in these activities that
the prayer takes place."**

(Romano Guardini in "The Art of Praying")

Sr. Gabriella Lie is one of the foundresses
of Our Lady of Star of Hope, Macau.

Photo courtesy of: Our Lady of Star of Hope

CHARISM

ARCH
MICHAEL.



Praying *an* Icon

BY SR. MARIE RAFAEL, OCSO



Who can fail to be awestruck when one encounters Beauty through Icon writing?

One can be silent, contemplate, and allow Beauty to speak, possess, and transform us to the depths. That was my experience—an encounter with Beauty through the beauty of an Icon. I was privileged to participate in an Icon Retreat Workshop of the *Prosopon* School of Iconography. The *Prosopon* School emphasizes an anthropological approach, which involves finding the image within by ascending through 22 steps towards ourselves. This process helps us understand ourselves, become

more aware of our calling to be living icons and bearers of Christ's light.

How can one depict what is beyond depiction? Sacred subjects that belong to the heavenly realm raise the question: are unworthy hands capable of such a task? Before we begin to write an icon, our hands are anointed with holy oil. Writing an Icon is a sacred endeavor. Understanding the deeper meaning of Icon writing and its theology, I felt unworthy, humbled, yet grateful for such an honor.

As I gazed on the white *gesso* before me, with pencil in hand, I also embarked on my inner journey. The

EXPERIENCE



process of writing the icon became a spiritual pilgrimage, a journey inward to confront my own limitations and surrender to the divine mystery. ***Through the slow, deliberate strokes of the brush, I discovered a path to contemplation, a way to embody the Cistercian ideals of humility, obedience, and mystical union.***

As I painstakingly applied the gold leaf, I am reminded of the words of St. Bernard, "The beauty of the soul consists in its conformity to God." The gold, symbolizing divine light, transformed the icon, infusing it with a sense of transcendence.

The process of gilding, uniting clay with gold, proved to be the most challenging aspect of writing the icon. ***This intricate process mirrored the Cistercian journey of integrating the earthly and heavenly, the human and divine.***

As I started to paint the face of the archangel Michael, I was struck by the importance of capturing the eyes, which are the windows to the soul. The eyes of St. Michael seemed to gaze beyond the ordinary, reflecting a profound longing for God's presence. This reminded me of the psalmist's plea, "It is your face, Lord,



PRAYING AN ICON



that I seek; hide not your face"
(Psalm 27:8-9).

As I sit before the finished icon of St. Michael, I enter a sacred space where prayer and contemplation converge. The archangel's gaze invites me to behold the beauty of God's presence, to surrender my fears and doubts, and to trust in the divine protection that surrounds me.

With St. Michael as my guide, I pray for the courage to embody the values of the Kingdom – humility, patience, obedience, and love. I ask for the protection of the archangel Michael that I may navigate life's challenges with faith and trust.

The icon of St. Michael is a window to the divine, a testament to the

transformative power of collaboration with the Holy Spirit, of which the breathing on the clay signifies. ***The experience of writing the icon taught me that true artistry lies not in mastery, but in surrender – surrender to the tradition, to the community, and to the divine presence that whispers guidance in the silence of the heart.***

May this icon be a reminder of my own call to radiate God's beauty and light in the world.



Sr. Marie Rafael is the Prioress of Our Lady of Mt. Matutum Abbey, Philippines.





I will love you,
Good Jesus, whom I
cannot love without
your help and cannot
love as you deserve.
May my endeavors be
directed to you
without reserve and
may they not be
diverted and distracted
by any other affection.
May I be wholly
carried to you by my
desires, Good God.
Draw me to yourself
that I may require no
stimulus of fear and
that perfect charity
may banish any
recourse to fear.

GILBERT OF HOYLAND
SERMON 19, CF 20

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Photo: Tre Fontane, Blessed Sacrament Chapel
By: Sr. Anna Marie, Matutum*

PRAYING THE HOURS



*When our heart prays,
it breathes.*

It sings its waiting
for the light of dawn.

It sings at midday,
resonant with heat and fatigue.

It sings in the evening, when a longing arises
to flourish eternally
in the bosom of the Father.

It sings at nightfall, calling for true rest and
abandoning itself, in the Salve Regina,
to the Mother of Heaven.



On Prayer

BY MO. CRISTIANA PICCARDO, OCSO

Vigils

In the book "Lord, Teach us to Pray," Dom André Louf says that he found this prayer in the Syrian liturgy for a monk's funeral: "During the watches of the night, his eyelids bore the heavy sleep of the world. May the Light without sunset now shine in his eyes."

Dom André brings forth two parallel themes: loneliness and wakefulness. Solitude puts man in a different relationship with the world; it changes his relationship with things. Whoever enters solitude has the impression of no

longer having roots on earth, of being a stranger, in exile, a pilgrim, outside the world of others, and on the march toward the unknown as its fruit. He speaks of the experience of the desert in terms of "dereliction, frustration," etc. But, he also says that we must not escape this reality, but allow ourselves to be macerated by it to the end, so that the desert can flourish. The fruit of the desert is emptiness, the abyss of one's own destitution, the only experience that can put us before God.

God is the great "absentee" in this experience of loneliness precisely because, through this, God helps us overcome the all-too-human patterns we make of Him. When

spiritual teachers talk about the alternation of dryness and fervor, they do not at all deny that dryness is also needed. It is precisely the experience of God in His transcendence, while fervor brings us closer to Jesus in His humanity.

Loneliness induces man to wait and makes him experience his own death. Psalm 62 also speaks of a "parched land, parched, without water." Through loneliness, man becomes the beggar of God's tenderness. The man who is an outstretched hand toward salvation does not weep, does not complain, but lives in silence and obedience, with all his being reaching out to God. This enables him to find his deepest essence: the name which the Lord alone knows and of which Revelation speaks.

Isaac the Syrian, speaking to some spiritual fathers, said, "Do not allow anyone to undertake the smallest monastic asceticism if he has not first experienced for a long time the trial of solitude. One must first become a beggar of God."

The same thing applies to vigils. Vigils is an unusual way of experiencing the natural alternation of days and nights. In fact, each day and night allows us to take a step forward in time, bringing us closer to the return of Christ and the coming of his Kingdom. In Revelation, Jesus is called "He who

was, who is, and who is to come" (Rev. 1:4; 1:8; 4:8; ...). This implies the past, the present, and the future. But when we use the future for Him, we do not say, "who will come," but "who is coming," because His future is already present. St. Mark reminds us: we do not know when this hour will come, but it will certainly also coincide with the hour of the supreme trial. Vigils cannot be explained without prayer; without it, it would be meaningless. In the monastic tradition, vigils is oriented toward the expectation of Christ's return, which must find us with an alert heart. Indeed, the monk's vigil fits into the alternation of days and nights as a sacrament of Jesus' coming, as a foretaste of what time will bestow in its fullness.

After Christ, even time takes on another meaning. Night is a sign of His absence, and Day, the coming of the Light, of His own coming. Indeed, it is no accident that our churches are oriented toward the east to receive the light of the rising sun. He who abides in the vigil abides in the unfolding of time originally and hastens the coming of the Lord. He is situated on the boundaries between time and eternity. For the one who watches, Jesus has already come, but he still awaits Jesus' eternal return.

Watching, says Dom André, is one of the most precious things to find the path back to one's heart (in us there is a "deep" heart where we never get

to; only by allowing ourselves to be caught up in the waiting of the night do we return to our secret heart, the source of the truth of our being).

The monk who keeps watch briefly finds himself in the arms of Jesus, as Isaac the Syrian says, and becomes like angels, referred to as "watchers" in his Semitic language. And again, "the heart that struggles in the vigil will receive the eye of a cherubim and will contemplate Heaven uninterrupted."

We are fortunate because our religious life allows us to physically experience what the soul experiences: the dimension of waiting for the Light, for His coming.

This allows us to penetrate intimately into the very rhythm of the cosmos, into the depths of matter, revealing the mystery that animates it.

Prayer and Mission

What we are asked to live is the return to our God. And the way to live out this return is to "watch and pray." Cardinal Pironio says that a renewed community commits itself to continuous prayer. Today's generations are dominated by the search for interiority, the hunger for contemplation, the desire for God. This great tension, of which perhaps the man of today is not fully aware,

is nevertheless not an evasion from history, or of one's mission and service to one's brothers and sisters.

Prayer is the way to realize more authentically the dimension of our mission in our lives. Prayer is really a historical commitment: only truly contemplative men and women are able to speak a new word with their lives every day. Only men and women of prayer discover God's passage in history; only they know how to read the signs of the times in a perspective of salvation. This is the fruit of prayer that helps us embrace this time given to us, happy to be born today, grateful for this moment in history, happy with our personal history. Prayer generates gratitude for the story we are given. Ingratitude alters prayer and violates the given moment. Entering one's story is the condition for listening to God's steps. We must remember the great facts - not the feelings that have come upon us - the great facts of God in our lives. For the persons who enter into their own story, it is impossible not to hear and recognize the step of God, the incarnation of God in the texture of their own flesh. It is they who enter into their own story and remain there until the end who are building today, who are building the Church.

Prayer is the penetration of the mystery of man in the light of the Incarnate Word, the Incarnation as the only dimension of relationship.

When prayer penetrates this dimension, for me, the other is indeed ontologically Christ. Only prayer can penetrate into this immense smile that is hope and trust. Prayer helps us to read the signs of the times, the events in radical hope in a perspective of salvation: *Levate capita vestra* (cf. Lk 21:28).

Prayer and Prophetic Proclamation of the Salvation

To pray is to discover God's step in history, in our history.

To pray is to penetrate the mystery of man in the light of the Incarnation.

To pray is to read the signs of the times in a perspective of salvation.

Those who truly pray are then a prophetic proclamation of salvation, of Easter. Communities that pray, that is, that live a daily experience of Jesus' Resurrection, are a prophecy of hope, of joy.

Cardinal Pironio says: "I cannot imagine a religious who is not happy." And he quotes St. Paul to the Romans: "Let your love be without pretense. Be joyful in hope, constant in tribulation, persevering in prayer" (cf. Rom 12:9-12).

Joy of those who love, of those who are troubled, of those who pray. Joy of those who love. What does that

mean? Love is always a positive gesture. The only real sadness of man is his selfishness. Therefore, it is a gift of self to the Kingdom, that is, to the Church, it is a total gift of self to the Word, that is, to the mission: "Let it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). Love, then, is not possessiveness, not self-assertion; love is dispossession. Love is to build peace at any price (which is not quiet living, but *veritatem facientes in caritate* (cf. Eph. 4:15), to build up Easter. Some may say, "I don't feel love in me, only bitterness, disgust, weariness". Holy pedagogy of the Church that makes love a fact and not a feeling! To love is to make the positive gesture of the encounter with patience every day: our gift to the incarnate Church. Love is to give oneself to the Word: the Word spoken to me in the liturgy, the Word spoken to me today by the community, by the superiors, by life. Love is listening translated into obedience. Those who love, that is, the poor, the meek, the dispossessed, the pure in heart, who live in the presence of God and are nourished by contemplation and the Cross, these, says Pironio, already possess the Kingdom and taste joy. "Watchman, Watchman, what time of the night?" (cf. Is 21:11).

Behold, if religious life is this radical gift of self to the Kingdom, lived in the depth of contemplative silence and in the fruitfulness of the cross, it

is always, therefore, a prophecy and a communication of joy.

Like the Gospel, it is the good news, an invitation to joy: "I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people: for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:10-11).

But what then does not work if we are this prophecy?

The pessimism and sadness of the disciples of Emmaus: "We hoped that He would be the deliverer of Israel..." (cf. Lk 24:21); the discontentment with today and what Jesus offers us today: "Fear the Lord who passes by," that is, do not flee from the grace of this day, but faithfully and openly welcome it in the concrete gesture of the encounter given to you today.

There is a sense of emptiness in us, "We have lost the Lord"; "They have taken Him away and we do not know where they have put Him..." (cf. Jn. 20:2).

Sadness may be in our hearts because of something else we would have liked: it is not the good that God has in mind for us.

But which Lord were we looking for? A poor, crucified, humiliated Christ and Son of the Father, or were we looking in broken cisterns

for something to replace the crucified Christ, seeking paths of death and darkness, false paths of personal fulfillment, or grabbing comfortable accommodations, thus losing the clear, simple, and transparent joy of the child who let himself be made through his daily obedience?

What, then, does joyful prophecy presuppose?

Two essential things:

The certainty of God's faithfulness:

"The God who called us is faithful; he will fulfill his promise" (cf. 1 Thess 5:24);

"He has called you to share in the glory of Christ Jesus our Lord!" (cf. 2 Thess 2:14);

"How can a mother forget her little child?" (cf. Is 49:15);

"If your sins were as scarlet..." (Is 1:18).

The awareness of one's identity:

If we do not know who we are, if we lose the sense of our vocation and of what we came here to seek, we will also lose the irreplaceable joy of our sonship. One's identity can be lost, either by never surrendering in faith to the Church, or by continuing to project our restlessness and pessimism, always trying to change what is.

Mo. Cristiano Piccardo was Abbess of Vitorchiano from (1964 - 1988) and Titular Prioress of Humocarò (1991-2002). She celebrated her 100th birthday last September 25, 2025.

Let my heart *listen*.

Unfortunately, we live in a world where value no longer comes from listening, but only from having 'the last word.' There is an unbounded desire to be heard, a desire that will always accompany us, but remain unsated.

BY SR. JOSIE TUPAS, OCSO

God calls us first, and our adequate response to His summons is faith, that is, "the obedience of faith". To obey, from the Latin *ob-audire*, means to "hear or listen to". St. Benedict begins his Holy Rule with the word "listen." By this, he indicates that listening is the starting point of the itinerary towards true happiness. Our lives, when they finally do speak, are a response emerging from our best comprehension of the voice heard, the voice of God.

Today, at their very heart, the gravest crises afflicting the world stem precisely from the inability to listen to one another. Unfortunately, we

live in a world where value no longer comes from listening, but only from having 'the last word.' There is an unbounded desire to be heard, a desire that will always accompany us, but remain unsated.

Physical deafness or being hard of hearing can badly affect everyone. Not understanding what is said and asking repeatedly to have things repeated can be exasperating. Living with a deaf or partially deaf person can be a challenging condition that makes life difficult.

If this is how it is with physical deafness, how pitiable spiritual deafness must be! All too frequently,

we willfully become partially deaf; that is, we hear only what we choose to hear! How many loving parents struggle with their children who are hard of hearing or listening?

Examples abound. Many young people today are not able to listen because of their automatic self-defense, which blocks their hearing and blinds them completely to the truth. Changing the scenario, a mother may approach in this manner: 'By the way, Sonny, how would you like a vacation in Switzerland this summer?' Lo and behold, everybody witnessed a 'miracle'. Everything Mama said, which seemed to go unheard, is suddenly heard with the utmost clarity when preceded by the idea of a glamorous trip! In short, one factor sums up the issue: we automatically hear and respond to what is subjectively satisfying at hand!

In interrelationships, the best communicators are the good listeners. It is an indication of maturity and balance, of being mindful and present to those who need our attention. But to listen, I must renounce other voices. To obey the voice of God, I must know what it is that He wants and asks of me, and above all else, I should know how to respond the way He wants me to. First and foremost, I need to

acknowledge that Someone is there, calling, waiting for my response.

Besides the sloth of disobedience getting in the way of listening to the voice of the Lord, there are other pretexts or beating around the bush. If I desire to enter into dialogue with God, then I must stop running, shut up long enough to listen, and let God crack open my heart, in the most unexpected places. Then I will discover the point for my conversion, the nooks and crannies in my heart that need to be touched by His saving Grace. I can look up and cry: "What is man that You should care for him, mortal man that You keep him in?", or reconsider the constant invitation of St. Benedict: Seeking his workman in a multitude of people, the Lord calls out to him and lifts his voice again: Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?

Every choice, every moment of our lives, is like the seed sown in eternity. Like a lover wooing his beloved, God is always stirring up desire in the heart that belongs to Him. Sometimes we experience it profoundly, extraordinarily; other times simply, obscurely, sweetly. Through many obstacles and struggles to our listening, our desire for God abides, grows, and bears fruit. Elsewise, the heart numbs in

dissipation, in distraction with lesser desires, so that prayer becomes perfunctory, rather than time spent in sowing and reaping fruits of eternal grace. Desire expands as the heart is capable of listening with surrender.

The third week of Lent this year is blessed with the joyful visit of the Abbot General Dom Bernardus to our community. His arrival just in time for the Laetare Sunday Mass seemed to have anticipated the Paschal Feast. By the end of his stay, he left us something to ponder over, insights and hopes that inspire, challenge, and elucidate towards the heart of our formation.

"We may be poor sinners, but remember that everyone who enters this place receives that gift of prayer. This charism is something the Lord has given to each of us. We can't create the Cistercian charism; it's the Lord who bestows it upon us, and it's up to us to make it tangible.

When we look at prayer, we have the Divine Office, but that's not enough.

In many communities, you see a fervent devotion to the Divine Office and its celebration, but outside of that, you don't feel a genuine experience of prayer. So, it's only a liturgical community; they can celebrate the liturgy for hours, but as soon as the Divine Office ends, they feel like they've accomplished their work. That's not what prayer means in our Cistercian life. Prayer is always connected to the entire day; our entire day is prayer. Our lectio is also

at the service of our prayer. We strive to connect all these aspects, lest we become merely a liturgical community or just a working community. That's also a Trappist sin. Certainly, we must work, but the Divine Office sometimes becomes a place

for sleep and rest".

In an age as individualistic, grasping, and controlling as ours, where the ego has become the paramount criterion for happiness, monastic life poses a significant challenge! How to live our commitment with greater coherence and consistency? How to live entirely immersed in the reality

"We may be poor sinners but remember that everyone who enters this monastery receives the gift of prayer. We can't create the Cistercian charism; it's the Lord who bestows it upon us. "

- Dom Bernardus

with Christ that He may be our living confession, each intake of our breath, and surrender to Him would be the expression of everything in our life? A house built on sand is easily blown away by the wind. There is peace nonetheless in faithful obedience to the Rock of God's Word.

With the childlike simplicity, "Speak Lord for your servant is listening" is a manner of response. Scripture mentions that revelation and visions were uncommon in those times. But God calls the boy Samuel in his sleep; He wakes him up. God's visitations are often like that, a peaceful, gentle, and slow revealing of His presence over time, and unforeseen. God waits until the door of our heart opens to receive Him. By his experience, St. Bernard would describe the signs of the Lord's visit:

"It is from some slight improvement in my behavior that I experience his gentle goodness. It is from the reformation and renewal of the spirit of my mind, that is, of my deepest humanity, that I perceive his beauty and attractiveness. Happy are they in whom dwells the one by whom they live; happy they who live for him and are moved by him!"

From the service of prayer, sacrifice, and suffering, a greater awareness of

God's presence can blossom. We may forget God, hide ourselves from His face, and run after other gods; yet unweariedly He calls us back to our heart, within which we meet Him in silence. His faithful love always comes first before our response, but He wants us to take our part more earnestly, sometimes to fall, learn from them, and grow mature in loving.

The experience of God is given for the benefit of the whole body; it is not only an exclusive encounter between two persons, but always implies an all-encompassing presence of and with others. As members of the one Head, our actions affect each other, though indirectly and discreetly. Before dawn, Jesus went off alone by himself to pray. His actions did affect everyone in the house when they discovered he was gone, and the very fact that Christ would be moving on to hand himself over to suffer, to die, and rise again would direct and change the entire course of history.

In my youth, I remember my older friend suggesting that I start off to pray Samuel's "Speak Lord for your servant listens". I imagined my name being called by the Lord. Repeatedly, I responded with "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." It was like getting into my inner world that somehow takes me out of this world, a momentary experience of being



God calls the boy
Samuel in his sleep;
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©Wikipedia Commons
Detail - The Boy Samuel
Sir Joshua Reynolds (1776) - Musée Fabre, Public Domain

liberated from the distractions and tensions of the day. But later, instead of "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening," prayer shifted into "Listen Lord, for your servant is speaking". Listening dwindled, and for a long time, I relinquished myself to monologue.

'Listen carefully, my son,' Benedict bids his children in the Prologue of his Rule. 'The voice of the Lord calling us' is a feature that defines our whole life, forever calling us to something new, to something greater and beyond. Psalm 94's verse, which we sing at Vigils, "If today you hear his voice harden not your hearts," should seep into our bones, day in, day out, to our audible range and vision.

Mother Teresa was once asked, "What do you say when you pray?" She replied, "Nothing, I just listen." "Well then, what does God say to you?" "Nothing much. He just listens," she added. So simply, the Saints meet God within their reach. Where God is, there they find the supreme source from which the fragrant flowers of charity are diffused all around them. Mark the Saint's disposition. Mother Teresa said she is just doing what she thinks God wants her to do. Isn't that our calling?

Besides the various forms of prayer we practice, these moments help us

to get into the proper frame of mind, to experience how the love of Christ forms us to become His very love for all humanity, that emanates from the heart of the Father by the Spirit. Listening to God in prayer is to enter into some kind of 'divine comedy', as little children who simply join in and enjoy the play.

Monastic life is an exodus that begins and continues in conversion; not merely a 'turn-about' once and for all, but an ongoing Via Crucis to Via Lucis—a constant falling and rising. This is the common path, and no other. What the air is to our body, so is our living with Jesus, who is the love of the Father; therefore, prayer will always have that aspect of attachment to the Vine, as the lifeblood circulating throughout all the organs of the one body. It is that breath of the Spirit which not only fans the lungs and purifies the stream of life, but at the bidding wafts our hearts for our brothers and sisters. Everything was there before; yet how transfigured by love.

Prayer is love on the wings of desire. Love is a prayer that bears the fruits of sacrifice, of service, which is joyful and gratuitous. With her sixth and seventh Mode of Love, Beatrice of Nazareth reveals such mystical experience, her identification and union with the Bridegroom: Love recreates the soul. For "wherever

love reigns, there is more to it than work or suffering. And the soul thinks all things small, and love makes everything light to do or leave undone, to endure and to suffer... Love wounds, devours, consumes, drowns, absorbs, holds; but also adorns, draws upwards, and unites. "It is a blessed passion, a sharp torment and a prolonged malaise: a death that kills, and a life that dies."

Evangelization draws its strength from the interior life radiating from our deepest transcendent desire, the energy flowing from the Cross that gives life to the Church and makes her fruitful, the being of God that draws the entire world to Himself.

Nourished by the Eucharist, a prayerful life nurtures the sense of our vocation, the filial or spousal belonging to the mystical body of Christ. It renews in us our baptismal vows, our "*Fiat voluntas tua*" in imitation of Christ. From the moment we hear and rise after the signal waking us up for Vigils until retirement after Compline, we renew our promise. To pray is not so much a matter of finding our song to play but more like finding our instrument within a symphony, in the praying "we" of the Church, empathizing with the cry and hope of the world.

The Church is the place where humanity must rediscover its unity and salvation. The Church is "the world reconciled." She is that bark which "in the full sail of the Lord's cross, by the breath of the Holy Spirit, navigates safely in this world."

Everything in the bible teaches us what prayer is, like the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, the poor widow's offering in the treasury that draws Jesus' attention, or those of the hungry and thirsty heart that move the Father to multiply the bread and the fish for the crowd gathered to listen to His Son. To pray is to remember precisely our smallness and God's greatness, and to believe in the continued, effective power of God's word to create something out of nothing.

The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; his asking arises from the depths of God's desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him.

The new generations need to see communities where one truly prays, where the Lord is truly the King and Master of the house, and where a

prayer life is witnessed in genuine fraternal charity. One of the biblical figures who reminds me of the proper gesture in prayer, in the role of a mediator or intercessor, is Queen Esther. She stands before the King on behalf of her people, in place of them. This is our missionary call; this is prayer, like Mary. "It is important to remember this always", says Pope Benedict XVI, "the ascent to God occurs precisely in the descent of humble service, in the descent of love, for love is God's essence, and is thus the power that truly purifies man and enables him to perceive God and to see him".

The Cistercian charism is indispensable as a spiritual way that leads us to God. In the School of Love, our forefathers unfold and transmit to us a viable path that brings us to the truest purpose of our lives. A true encounter with God cannot help but open our hearts to others. By listening with the ears of our heart, we can ascend upwards or go downwards in humble love. Indeed, a heart set on fire with the charity of Christ praises God endlessly. John of Ford summed it all up in his twelfth Sermon on the Song of Songs.

"The purity of prayer and the sweetness of love earnestly seek

mutual support and make a reciprocal agreement as to what each is worth. Before pure prayer can be uttered, it must of necessity be forestalled by the spirit of charity, for this it is that utters it, that sets the incense burning, that directs its smoke. Likewise, before charity can be a living flame, sweet-scented and worthy of the heavenly altars, there must of necessity be the incense of prayer. The more abundant the charity, the more frequent the prayer, the more powerful its effect, the more perfect its purity, the more delightful its sweetness".

LORD God, help us to enter more fully into the design You have for each one of us.

Consecrate us to You, to belong to You more and more, to love everyone more and more, those who are near and far.

Open our prayer to the dimensions of the world,

not closing it to the request for help with our problems, but remembering our neighbor before You, learning the beauty of interceding for others.

Grant us the gift of visible unity among all Your children,

ever ready to answer anyone who asks us to account for the hope that is in us.

Amen.

Sr. Josie Tupas is the formator of the juniorate of Our Lady of Mt. Matutum Abbey,

ST. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX'S

Three ways to Prayer

BY MO. GIOVANNA GARBELLI, OCSO

In the writings of St. Bernard, especially his Liturgical Sermons and those on the Song of Songs, we see many common themes and particularly three most outstanding ways to monastic prayer:

1. The sacramental-liturgical way, which includes Lectio Divina, because the reading of the Word cannot be separated from the sacrament.
2. The Wisdom way, the experience and knowledge of the union with God, which involves our affectivity.
3. The Marian way, because Mary carries the Word-sacrament in her womb.

These three modes interlock, and there is no clear line of demarcation between them. However, their distinction is useful for describing our experience of prayer.

However, the Marian character of the (monastic) prayer is particularly prominent because the three subjects of the prayerful activity, Mary, the Church, and the soul, can be interchanged in relation to God depicted in terms of the love that unites a bride to her bridegroom.

Mary is the only creature privileged with the perfect union with God, and, therefore, she is the model both for the Church and the soul that wants to attain that union. She is the seat of

wisdom. Her heart continually remembers and keeps the Word of God not as something external, but as the living presence that determines all her feelings and actions. She is moved by the Word, who dwells in her as in a temple. Her heart continually praises the Lord, magnifying only him.

We are consoled by the visits of the Word coming and going. Mary is the Word's permanent dwelling place: her faith strengthens our faith, and her love is strong as death.

From her, we learn how to love God with an unrestrained trust.

On the other hand, she is the sign of the sacrament, because she carries in her womb the word made flesh, that word that eventually will be distributed as bread from heaven to us, that our souls may also be temples of the Lord.

Her relationship with the Holy Spirit makes her the seat of wisdom, or better, the seat of all the gifts that the Holy Spirit bestows.

No one has a deeper experience of the love of God, and therefore, we look at Mary as the royal road to Christ.

We can also say that love sums up the monastic experience of prayer. Yet the word 'love' is so misused in our contemporary language that we

should understand again what St. Bernard intends by love.

'Holy love is the only subject treated in this Song. We must remember that love reveals itself, not by words or phrases, but by action and experience. It is Love, which speaks here, and if anyone wishes to understand it, let him first love. Otherwise, it would be folly to read this song of love, because it is impossible for a cold heart to grasp the meaning of language so inflamed.'

Bernard always appeals to his experience. He is blessed by the visits of the Word: these visits set his heart in a state of continual Advent. It is these personal encounters with God that changed his whole life.

Monastic prayer, therefore, also has an Advent character, which renders it even more Marian, because it is the experience of the Lord's personal presence in his visits.

"Those who have not yet enjoyed such an experience should ardently desire it.

We do not hesitate boldly to proclaim that every soul, if it is vigilant and careful in the practice of all the virtues, can arrive at this holy repose and enjoy the embraces of the Bridegroom."



Seeking God in Scripture:

AN INTRODUCTION TO LECTIO DIVINA

- A Postscript*

BY DOM STEELE HARTMANN, OCSO

God's dream for humanity is basically given for us in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, 'in the beginning' of the Bible: "Let us make humankind in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves." (Genesis 1:1, 26) We are to be God's Image on earth. Thus do we seek to know God (Rule of St Benedict 58:7), for we need to encounter him to know who we are to be — much as Jesus knew himself as 'Son' because he knew God as 'Father'. This dream of God was finally and fully disclosed to us in the coming of Jesus; in him we see God's dream finally and fully translated into human form: he is what we are meant to be. An encounter with God

may be a difficult, even rare, thing (John 1:18), but Jesus is one whom we can encounter (Matthew 28:20), he being one like us in all things; in him we can see what God is like, and so know what we must do to be like him, that is, to be like God. (John 1:18) Our quest, then, is for an encounter with Jesus.

St John speaks of Jesus as the Word: "In the beginning was the Word; the Word was with God and the Word was God." And a little later: "The Word was made flesh and lived among us." (John 1:1, 14) In the story of the Disciples on the Road to Emmaus, we are told that the Risen Jesus, 'starting with Moses and going through all the Prophets,

explained to them the passages throughout the Scriptures that were about himself.' (Luke 24:27) The words of Scripture, then, all speak of the 'Word that was with God and the Word that was God.' So, we can understand Jesus' criticism of those of his day: "You study the Scriptures, believing in them you have eternal life; now these same Scriptures testify to me, and yet you refuse to come to me for life!" (John 5:39) We need to come to him, to encounter him in and through Scripture, and so we seek him there. Earlier St John had told us: "To all who did accept him, he gave power to become Children of God." (John 1:12) This is why we come to him, for this is what we are to be: 'heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ.' (Romans 8:17) In coming to Jesus, in studying God's Word to us in him, lies our best chance of becoming who we are to be: one like him in all things. This is why we do Lectio.

But here I wish to dwell on the role I see for the community in our Lectio, and of our need for it. Benedict starts off his Rule with the words, "Listen, my son." (Rule of St Benedict Prologue 1:1) Here before I put my foot in it, I need to say something about the term, 'son.' I think it is better to approach it as a technical term, rather than as a term for a male offspring. In the Roman times that Jesus lived under, a son was

expected to do his father's will; this is what a 'son' was. So, an adopted son could be the equal of a natural son by doing his 'father's' will. The doing of the father's will is what defines a son, more so than matters of paternity. So, in the Parable of The Man Who Had Two Sons (Matthew 21:28ff), the man asks both to go and work in his vineyard. One says he will but does not go, while the other says he won't but then thinks better of it and goes. Jesus' question to his hearers, "Which of the two did the will of his father?" could have been put as: "Which of the two showed himself to be his father's son?" So, it's not so much a matter of paternity (for both are sons, in the ordinary sense of that word), but more a matter of doing the father's will. We see this notion about what it is to be a son operative in Jesus' conversation some Jews, when he says to them, "But you, you put into action the lessons learnt from your father. ... The devil is your father, and you prefer to do what your father wants." (John 8:38, 44) By their actions they show who their father is. So, by 'son' I mean only 'one who does his father's will,' but it needs also to hang onto something of the relationship between them ... to distinguish a 'son' from a 'slave,' and which Jesus picks up on when he says, "The slave's place in the household is not assured, but the son's place is assured." (John 8:35) In doing the Father's will, we are not just called to slave for him; to be a



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‘son’ is more than that. (C.f.: Luke 15:29, 31; John 15:14-15) We are all called to be ‘son,’ to do the Father’s will — whether we are male or female (John 8:35) — so that in what we do, we can say with Jesus: “To have seen me is to have seen the Father.” (John 14:9) And of course, something similar could be said of the term, ‘Father’: the One whom we obey is our ‘Father.’ Perhaps ‘friend’ and ‘friendship’ may be terms we could better use instead to describe the relationship — much after Jesus’ words: “You are my friends, if you do

what I command you. I shall not call you servants anymore, because a servant doesn’t know his master’s business; I call you friends because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father.” (John 15:14-15) So, as a different way of putting it: a friend, knowing what his friend is doing, sets about helping him do it. Our call is to friendship with God, to be God’s friend.

So, to go back to where I left off: Benedict starts off his Rule with the words, “Listen, my son.” (Rule of St

Benedict Prologue 1:1) The word, 'listen,' in Latin means 'hear and obey.' Through the word, 'listen,' Benedict is inviting us to be his 'son.' For it is in our hearing and obeying that we show ourselves to be 'son.' So, he says to us, "This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it and faithfully put it into practice." (Rule of St Benedict Prologue 1:1) This is what a 'son' does, this is how we be 'son.' In our Lectio, we endeavour to hear and obey God's Word ... to welcome it and faithfully put it into practice; this is how we are to become/show ourselves to be God's 'son' — much after the Prologue in John's Gospel. It begins: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God;' a little later adds: 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.' (John 1:1, 14) In a sense, this is what we are trying to do in our Lectio: through our listening to God's Word, through our hearing and obeying it, we let God's Word become flesh in our flesh ... in what we do we incarnate the Word, so to speak, doing being a bodily thing.

God's Word to us, however, is not always clear — it's a bit like the Indian word, 'Om/Aum,' that primal word that is at the root of all that is; in it is contained every other other word. In a sense, it is a good image for that Word that in the beginning

was with God and is God. But what does it mean? (C.f.: Genesis 1:3ff) To obey this Word, we need first to try and understand it, that we might put it into practice. (C.f.: Genesis 1:26) We apprehend it as best we can in the context of all that is, and especially in the person of Jesus. (Romans 1:20) But we cannot just arbitrarily decide for ourselves what it means, for we do often misunderstand God's Word, and it is liable to get caught up in my will/what I want. To gain clarity in what I hear, I seek feedback from those others who are trying to do the same as I am, from those who have gathered with me in The Lord's name and thus with him in our midst, that is, from those with whom I live. For they, too, are listening to God's Word and trying to put it into practice. The clarity I seek comes from rubbing the Word I hear with/against the Word I see in the gathering, for essentially it is the same Word, a Word that reveals the God who is our Father, the author of all we do, the God whose Word we hear and obey. (John 1:1; 8:38) We each are trying to do the same thing. Our living together is really a conversation about the Word, and the Word I hear is my contribution to that conversation (and more in what I do than in what I say), and which also forms part of my feedback to those others with whom I gather in their search for clarity. Now, in our being together can be heard The Word that collectively we obey in our living

together; our living together, what we do together, proclaims this Word, to ourselves as much as to others, and reveals the God who is Our Father, the God who is in our midst. It is this Word that I rub together with the Word I hear, my doing against our doing, seeking to find a harmony — and in some senses, the Word I hear is not greater than the Word in our gathering though it is the same Word. (John 14:28)

The seeking of this harmony is why I take counsel, why I seek feedback. If what I do causes disharmony, such that we are no longer able to gather, I can be sure that I have not listened properly, have not understood well enough what I hear to put it into practice. For in the resulting disharmony and dispersal, our God will have become the

God-who-is-not-with-us. (C.f.: Genesis 11:7-8) Our harmonious living together is our witness to the world, our proclamation of the Word-who-is-with-us, the God-in-our-midst. This is why Jesus prayed: "Father, may they be one in us, ... with me in them and you in me may they be so completely one that the world will realise that it was you who sent me."

Our obedience to God's Word is not so much about subservience, but more about testimony and revelation. I obey what I hear in a communal context, such that together we manifest The Word we hear, the Word-made-flesh-in-our-midst.

(John 17:21-23) For the Word we hear is a prophetic Word, a Word that needs to be proclaimed — but 'more by example than by words' (Rule of St Benedict 2:12), more in what we do than in what we say, more in how we live together. Our obedience to God's Word is not so much about subservience, but more about testimony and revelation. I obey what I hear in a communal context, such that together — in our living

together, in our communal contemplation of the Word together in common (C.f.: OCSO Constitutions Statute 21.A) — we manifest The Word we hear, the Word-made-flesh-in-our-midst. And in this way do we become 'children of God', in this way is God's Word to us fulfilled: "Let us make humankind in our own image, in our

own likeness." This is our mission, our apostolate, our carrying on of the work Jesus was sent to do. (John 20:21) It is a work that is born of, and can only be done through, our contemplation together of God's Word to us in Jesus. So our OCSO Constitutions urges us to fidelity to our monastic way of life, and which it notes is 'closely related to zeal for the

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Kingdom of God and for the salvation of the whole human race. It is contemplative life itself that is our way of participating in the mission of Christ.' (Constitution 31)

In this understanding of what we are trying to do, we can begin to understand Jesus' word to us: "As I have loved you, you also must love one another." (John 13:34) In what Jesus did, his loving us, he revealed the God who loves us so much. (John 3:16) In receiving the Word he got from his Father (John 14:24), we are called to love just as greatly to likewise reveal God's great love for humankind. Perhaps it is that Love is the Word that was with God in the beginning, and the Word that was God, and is the meaning of God's Word to us: But what does love mean? And what does it mean to love? ... and, to love much? In praying the Scriptures and through our life together, we will come to understand what it is, so understand how we might love God in our neighbour with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength.' (Mark

12:30-31) And through this we will keep the whole of God's Word to us (Galatians 5:14), and God's Word will have become flesh in our flesh, which is



what we set out to do in our Lectio. (C.f.: Matthew 22:40) Now, we cannot just love; we must love someone. So, we can and will only come to understand God's Word to us in the context of life lived together, in our loving each other. And it is only there that we will come to really know the God who is love, the God in whose image we are made, and so come to understand what we must do to be ourselves. And to this we must be obedient; this we must do.

Dom Steele Hartmann is the Abbot of Tarrawara Abbey in Yarra Glen, Melbourne, Australia. * This is a postscript to his book, *Seeking God in Scripture*.

VISIO DIVINA

FRA BARTOLOMEO: The Apparition of the Virgin Mary to St. Bernard





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Apparizione della Vergine a san Bernardo
Fra Bartolomeo - Uffizi Gallery

Baccio della Porta was born in Prato in 1472 and became a renowned painter in Cosimo Rosselli's Florentine school. Inspired by the teachings of Savonarola, who was preaching at San Marco in Florence at the time, Baccio abandoned his career and possessions in 1500 to become a Dominican friar. Having become Friar Bartolomeo, he thought he would never pick up a paintbrush again. However, his superior believed that the Gospel should be both preached and illustrated. In 1504, he asked Bartolomeo to take charge of the monastery workshop. That year, he began working on *The Vision of St. Bernard* for the family chapel of Bernardo Bianco in the Badia Fiorentina, which he finished in 1507.



The subdued colors of this oil painting lend the scene a special, mystical aura. This effect is enhanced by the use of chiaroscuro and the figures' extreme composure, which invite contemplation and prayer.

St. Bernard is depicted kneeling and ready to receive Baby Jesus from the Virgin Mary. The Virgin, majestically carried from left to right on a flotilla of angels, halts before St. Bernard but does not

look at him. She is absorbed in contemplation of the Child, who gently turns to the saint and raises his little fingers in blessing.

Thus, Fra Bartolomeo captured the essence of Bernardine theology in the movement of the three faces: the contemplation of the Incarnate Word, who 'abbreviated' himself by taking on flesh so that we might fix our eyes on him without being annihilated by his light.



The sculptural elegance of the bodies and drapery, which impressed and influenced Raphael, conveys respect for the human body, created in God's

image and destined to become the temple of the Word.

Fra Bartolomeo is known to have burned the sketches of naked bodies he had drawn before entering the convent, moved by the fiery words of Fra Savonarola. The drapery conveys the dignity of the resurrection of the body, which, in paradise, will be clothed in white garments. Is not the cowl of St. Bernard a foreshadowing of this investiture of light?

St. John the Evangelist and St. Benedict appear to be standing behind St. Bernard, as if approving of his wisdom, theology, and monastic reform. They seem to say, echoing Caesarius of Heisterbach, "The Gospel had come to life again" (*Diagolus miraculorum* I.6).



Yes, the Gospel has come to life again, not only in Saint Bernard, but also in St. Francis, receiving the stigmata, as seen in the background, almost behind the head of John the Evangelist. The Gospel has also come to life in St. Dominic, who is depicted meeting St. Francis further up.

Fra Bartolomeo seems to tell us that the Incarnation, about which St. Bernard wrote so well as to receive the blessing of the Divine Child, is not an event of the past. Rather, it is present in history, from St. John the Apostle to St. Benedict, St. Bernard, St. Francis, and St. Dominic. It should become the content of prayer and gratitude throughout the centuries.

Was Fra Bartolomeo's painting *The Apparition of the Virgin* inspired by San Bernard's youthful vision of the Nativity of the Lord?

Was Fra Bartolomeo familiar with William of St. Thierry's writings on this event? "Then it happened that the child Jesus revealed himself in his Holy Nativity to the little boy, awakening in him the beginnings of divine contemplation and increasing his tender faith. Jesus appeared to him like the spouse coming forth from his chamber" (*VP* II.4).

Although we cannot know for certain, St. Bernard in Bartolomeo's painting seems to embody that memory.

We, too, are invited to dwell on the memory of the Incarnation—that "Dulcis Memoria" that is the focus of our constant prayers.

BY MO. GIOVANNA GARBELLI, OCSO

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