

Shaping Holy Lives' Conference on Benedictine Spirituality

**God's Workshop
Holy Trinity Wall Street, New York**

Delivered by Rowan Williams on Tuesday, 29 April, 2003

Benedict is, as usual, uncompromisingly prosaic in describing the monastic community as a workshop; it's a place in which we use specific tools – listed with blunt simplicity in chapter 4 of the Rule – which are lent to us by Christ, to be returned on the Last Day, when we receive our wages. It's an imagery that conjures up a landscape in monochrome, a gray sky, a stone wall: the tools worn smooth with long use and skillfully patched up over time, taken from the shelf each morning until finally hung up when weariness and age arrive. The holy life is one in which we learn to handle things, in businesslike and unselfconscious ways, to 'handle' the control of the tongue, the habit of not passing on blame, getting up in the morning and not gossiping. A monastic lifetime is one in which these habits are fitted to our hands. Simone Weil wrote somewhere about how the tool is for the seasoned worker the extension of the hand, not something alien. Benedict's metaphors prompt us to think of a holiness that is like that, an 'extension' of our bodies and our words that we've come not to notice.

In a recent essay on Benedictine Holiness, Professor Henry Mayr-Harting describes it as 'completely undemonstrative, deeply conventual, and lacking any system of expertise' (Holiness, Past and Present, ed. Stephen Barton, London/New York 2003, p.261). Very broadly, that is the picture I want to develop with reference to this early and potent image of the workshop and its tools – though I might, while fully understanding the point about expertise, want to think about what sorts of communicable wisdom it also embodies. At this stage, though, perhaps the most important thing to emphasize is the 'deeply conventual': the holiness envisaged by the Rule is entirely

inseparable from the common life. The tools of the work are bound up with the proximity of other people – and the same other people. As Benedict says the end of chapter 4, the workshop is itself the stability of the community. Or, to pick up our earlier language, it is the unavoidable nearness of these others that becomes an extension of ourselves. One of the things we have to grow into unselfconsciousness about is the steady environment of others.

To put it a bit differently, the promise to live in stability is the most drastic way imaginable of recognizing the otherness of others – just as in marriage. If the other person is there, ultimately, on sufferance or on condition, if there is a time–expiry dimension to our relations with particular others, we put a limit on the amount of otherness we can manage. Beyond a certain point, we reserve the right to say that our terms must prevail after all. Stability or marital fidelity or any seriously covenanted relation to person or community resigns that longstop possibility; which is why it feels so dangerous.

At the very start, then, of thinking about Benedictine holiness, there stands a principle well worth applying to other settings, other relationships – not least the Church itself. How often do we think about the holiness of the Church as bound up with a habitual acceptance of the otherness of others who have made the same commitment? And what does it feel like to imagine holiness as an unselfconscious getting used to others? The presence of the other as tools worn smooth and gray in the hand? The prosaic settleness of some marriages, the ease of an old priest celebrating the Eucharist, the musician's relation to a familiar instrument playing a familiar piece – these belong to the same family of experience as the kind of sanctity that Benedict evokes here; undemonstrative, as Mayr–Harting says, because there is nothing to prove.

The 'tools of good works' listed include the Golden Rule, several of the Ten Commandments and the corporal works of mercy (clothing the naked, visiting the sick, burying the dead, and so on); but the bulk of them have to do with virtues that can be seen as necessary for the maintenance of stability as a context for growth in holiness. It is as though Benedict were asking, 'What does it take to develop people who can live stably together?' He does not begin by commending stability, but by mapping out an environment where the long–term sameness of my company will not breed bitterness,

cynicism and fear of openness with one another. If you have to spend a lifetime with the same people, it is easy to create a carapace of habitual response, which belongs at the surface level, a set of standard reactions, which do not leave you vulnerable. It is the exact opposite of the habitual acceptance of otherness, which we were speaking about a little while back, though it can sometimes dangerously resemble it. With a slightly artificial tidiness, we might see the practices Benedict commends for nurturing the stability of the workshop under three heads. The monk must be transparent; the monk must be a peacemaker; the monk must be accountable. Let's look at these in turn.

Transparency: those who belong to a community such as Benedict describes are required 'not to entertain deceit in their heart' (24 in the list of 'tools'), and, intriguingly, 'not to give false peace (25); to acknowledge their own culpability in any situation of wrong (42-3 – a principle regularly stressed by the Desert Fathers); to be daily mindful of death (47); to deal without delay with evil thoughts, breaking them against the rock of Christ, and to make them known to the spiritual father (50-51 – again a familiar precept in the desert). These and other precepts suggest that one of the basic requirements of the life is honesty. First, honesty about yourself: it is necessary to know how to spot the chains of fantasy (which is exactly what 'thoughts', *logismoi*, meant for the Desert Fathers), to understand how deeply they are rooted in a weak and flawed will, and to make your soul inhospitable to untruth about yourself. Exposure of your fantasies to an experienced elder is an indispensable part of learning the skills of diagnosis here. In the background are the analyses of Evagrius and Cassian, pinpointing what simple boredom can do in a life where ordinary variety of scene and company is missing. The mind becomes obsessed, self-enclosed, incapable of telling sense from nonsense; the reality of the other in its unyielding difference is avoided by retreat into the private world where your own preference rules unrestricted. Hence the stress on making thoughts known: it is a simple way of propping open the door of the psyche, a way of making incarnate the consciousness that God sees us with complete clarity in every situation (49).

To become in this way open to your own scrutiny, through the listening ministry of the trusted brother or sister, is to take the first step towards an

awareness of the brother or sister that is not illusory or comforting. The recommendation against 'false peace', I suspect, belongs in this context: one of the ways in which we can retreat into privacy is the refusal to admit genuine conflict, to seek for a resolution that leaves me feeling secure without ever engaging the roots of difference. If we are to become transparent, we must first confront the uncomfortable fact that we are not naturally and instantly at peace with all. This could of course read like a commendation of the attitude, which declines reconciliation until justice (to me) has been fully done; but I don't think this is what Benedict is thinking of. The recommendation follows two precepts about anger and resentment (22, 23), which, taken together with the warning against false peace, suggests that being wary of facile reconciliation is not about a suspicion of whether the other has adequately made reparation but about whether I have fully acknowledged and dealt with my own resentment. It is a hesitation over my honesty about peace, not the other's acceptability.

One of the most profound books I know on the subject of Christian community is the late Donald Nicholl's wonderful journal of his time as Rector of the Ecumenical Institute at Tantur, between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, *The Testing of Hearts. A Pilgrim's Journal* (London 1989). Here he records a conversation with a visiting Spanish scholar, who observes that many members of the community have come 'with much heavy matter of unforgiveness and resentment lodged inside them from previous experience...it is precisely those who talk most about community-building who block the flow because they are the ones least aware of the matter of unforgiveness that they are carrying around with them, like a lead ball attached to their waists' (p.62). Is this what is meant by 'false peace' – to talk about community building as an alibi for addressing the inner weight of anger and grief? And it isn't irrelevant that Nicholl contrasts the attitude of the Catalan Benedictines who live at the core of the community with that of the more transient scholars, who all come with an agenda that connects to other settings and other communities; the issues are different for those who are not living with stability.

All this gives something of a new edge to the commendation that the monk should be a peacemaker. The precepts are clear enough: there should be no

retaliation (29–32), no malicious gossip (40), no hatred or envy or party spirit (64–67). And the climactic items in the list of tools make the priority of peacemaking very plain indeed:

70. To pray for one's enemies in the love of Christ.

71. To make peace with one's enemy before the sunsets. 72. And never to despair of the mercy of God.

Stability requires this daily discipline of mending; it is the opposite of an atmosphere in which one's place always has to be fought for, where influence and hierarchy are a matter of unceasing struggle. As Professor Mayr–Harting notes, the idea that position in the community depends on seniority of entry (ch.63) may seem banal to us now, but it was a most unusual way of understanding hierarchy in late antiquity. It seems obvious because the Rule has had such a sustained impact on the institutions of our culture. But we need also to note that the same chapter that establishes the principle of seniority insists that specific responsibilities in the community do not depend on age but on the discernment of the abbot and that the order of age should not become a ground for insisting on rights and rank. It is a delicate balance, but one whose goal is evidently to secure an ethos in which open conflict over position or influence is less likely. And while rumor suggests that monastic communities are not completely immune to power struggles, the point is that the Rule provides a structure that will always challenge any assumption that conflict is the 'default position' in common life.

To put this another way, what the Rule outlines is what is to be the 'currency' of the community. All communities need a medium of exchange, a language that assures their members that they are engaged in the same enterprise. It involves common stories and practices, things that you can expect your neighbor to understand without explanation, ways and styles of doing and saying things. Once again, Donald Nicholl has a pertinent story; this time, he is listening to a visiting English priest, who relates the experience of a university mission. Fr Aidan is, naturally, interested in what the currency of the university is, and he spends time trying to pick up what people talk about and how. ' "And eventually", Aidan said, "one day the penny dropped. What did those people exchange with one another when they met? You'd be

surprised – they exchanged grievances. So the currency of that University is grievance””.

Nicholl comments by translating this into the image of the circulation of the blood in a body: what you receive is what you give, what you put into the circulation. ‘If you put in grievance, you will get back grievance’ (p.142). And he refers to an elderly religious in Yorkshire, unobtrusive and to the untutored eye rather idle; but it is he ‘who sets the currency of goodness and kindness circulating through that community’ (143). Without some such input into the ‘circulation’, communities will be at best dry and at worst deadly.

Peacemaking, then, is more than a commitment to reconciling those at odds. On its own, a passion for reconciliation, we have seen, can be a displacement for unresolved angers and resentments. What it may put into circulation is anxiety or censoriousness, certainly a situation of tense untruth when there is pressure to ‘make peace’ at all costs. The peace which the Rule envisages is more like this ‘currency’ we’ve been thinking about, a habit of stable determination to put into the life of the body something other than grudges. And for that to happen, the individual must be growing in the transparency we began with, aware of the temptations of drama, the staging of emotional turbulence in which the unexamined ego is allowed to rampage unchecked.

It’s all quite difficult for us in the twenty-first century. We have been told – rightly – that it is bad to deny and repress emotion; equally rightly, that it is poisonous for us to be passive under injustice. The problem, which half an hour on the street outside will confirm, and five minutes watching ‘reality’ programs on television will reinforce as strongly as you could want, is that we so readily take this reasonable corrective to an atmosphere of unreality and oppression as an excuse for promoting the dramas of the will. The denial of emotion is a terrible thing; what takes time is learning that the positive path is the education of emotion, not its uncritical indulgence, which actually locks us far more firmly in our mutual isolation. Likewise, the denial of rights is a terrible thing; and what takes time to learn is that the opposite of oppression is not a wilderness of litigation and reparation but the nurture of concrete, shared respect. The Rule suggests that if concern with right and reparation fills our horizon, the one thing that we shall not attain is

unselfconsciousness – respect as another of those worn–smooth tools that are simply an extension of the body.

None of this is learned without the stability of the workshop. The community that freely promises to live together before God is one in which both truthfulness and respect are enshrined. I promise that I will not hide from you – and that I will also at times help you not to hide from me or from yourself. I promise that your growth towards the good God wants for you will be a wholly natural and obvious priority for me; and I trust that you have made the same promise. We have a lifetime for this. Without the promise, the temptation is always for the ego's agenda to surface again, out of fear that I shall be abandoned if the truth is known, fear that I have no time or resource to change as it seems as I must. No one is going to run away; and the resources of the community are there on my behalf.

I realize that I am describing the Body of Christ, not just a Benedictine community. But how often do we understand the promises of baptism as bringing us into this sort of group? How often do we think of the Church as a natural place for honesty, where we need not be afraid? Hence the need for these localized, even specialized workshops, which take their place between two dangerous and illusory models of human life together. On the one hand is what some think the Church is (including, historically, quite a lot of those who actually run it...): an institution where control is a major priority, where experts do things that others can't, where orderly common life depends on a faintly magical command structure. On the other hand is the modern and postmodern vision of human sociality: a jostle of plural commitments and hopes, with somewhat arbitrary tribunals limiting the damage of conflict and securing the rights of all to be themselves up to the point where they trespass on the territory of others – so that the other is virtually bound to be seen as the source of frustration. The community of the Rule assumes that the point of authority is not to mediate between fixed clusters of individual interest but to attend to the needs and strengths of each in such a way as to lead them forward harmoniously (as the chapters on the abbot's ministry make plain); and it also assumes that each member of the community regards relation with the others as the material of their own sanctification, so that it is impossible to see the other as necessarily a menace. Neither simply hierarchical (in the

sense of taking for granted an authority whose task is to secure uniformity in accord with a dominant will) nor individualistic, the Rule reminds the Church of how counter-cultural its style of common life might be.

But we have already begun to move into thinking about my third element in Benedictine holiness, accountability. At the simplest level, this is almost identical with the transparency already discussed; but it is made very clear that the exercise of the abbot's rule has to be characterized by accountability. Although what the abbot says must be done, without complaint (ch.5), the abbot is adjured at some length to recall his answerability before God, his call to be the image of Christ in the monastery and to 'leaven' the minds of those under his care, and his duty to ignore apparent claims of status among the monks. His work is seen as, centrally, one of instruction and formation, and Mayr-Harting is absolutely right to see this as grounded in the language of St Paul: authority exists so as to create adult persons in Christ's likeness, and all discipline is directed to this end – with the added emphasis in the Rule of attention to the requirements of different temperaments (ch.27 is the most humanly subtle of the various accounts of this in the text).

The abbot makes distinctions not on the basis of visible difference (rich or poor, slave or free) but on the basis of his discernment of persons. You could say that his accountability is both to God and to the spiritual realities of the people he deals with. And this perhaps fills out the significance of the idea of accountability in the Rule as a whole: we are answerable to the concreteness of the other. Obedience to the abbot is the most obvious form of this, but that obedience itself refers to the life and health of the whole community, since the abbot exercises discipline only in that context, and is ultimately accountable in those terms. In short, everyone in the community that the Rule envisages is responsible both to and for everyone else – in different modes, depending on the different specific responsibilities they hold, but nonetheless sharing a single basic calling in this respect. The workshop is manifestly a collaborative venture with the aim of 'mending vices and preserving love' (Prologue).

So the Rule envisages holiness as a set of habits – like goodness in general, of course, but not reducible to goodness only. The holy person is not simply

the one who keeps the commandments with which the catalogue of tools for good works begins, but one who struggles to live without deceit, their inner life manifest to guides and spiritual parents, who makes peace by addressing the roots of conflict in him or herself, and, under the direction of a skilled superior, attempts to contribute their distinctive gifts in such a way as to sustain a healthy ‘circulation’ in the community. You can see why Benedict is clear about the need for long probation of the intending solitary, and why he is so hard on wanderers, who can never have adequate experience of living with the same people, becoming habituated to charity with these particular, inescapable neighbors (ch.1). Until stability has soaked in, it isn’t much use reading the Desert Fathers or Cassian or Basil: to borrow a notion from Jacob Needleman’s remarkable *Lost Christianity* (New York 1980, esp. pp.117–9, and ch.8 passim), the words of the Fathers are addressed to ‘people who don’t yet exist’. To know even a little of what the great spiritual teachers are saying, you need to have lived through the education of instinct that the Rule outlines. It is just worth noting that there are seventy two ‘tools of good works’ to correspond to the first seventy two chapters of the Rule; it is the seventy third chapter that points forward to the greater challenges of the Fathers. And this suggests that the seventy–two tools are precisely, like the seventy–two chapters, a preparation for hearing what the Fathers have to say, a method by which persons who can hear the questions may come into existence.

The product of the workshop is people who are really there; perhaps it’s as simple as that. What Benedict is interested in producing is people who have the skills to diagnose all inside them that prompts them to escape from themselves in the here and now. Just as much as in the literature of the desert – despite his insistence that he is working on a different and lower level – Benedict regards monastic life as a discipline for being where you are, rather than taking refuge in the infinite smallness of your own fantasies. Hence he can speak, in one of those images that continue to resonate across the centuries, of the expansion of the heart that obedience to the Rule will bring. The life is about realizing great matters in small space: *Cael neuadd fawr/ Rhwng cyfyng furiau* – ‘inhabiting a great hall between narrow walls’. That is the definition of life itself offered by the Welsh poet Waldo Williams in one of his best–known poems, and it is not a bad gloss on the Rule.

But I have already hinted at some of what makes the Rule hard reading these days, and in the last bit of these reflections I want to draw out just a little more on this, so as to suggest where the Rule is salutary reading for us, individually and corporately. The idea fundamental to the Rule (and to practically all serious religious writing) that there are some good things that are utterly inaccessible without the taking of time is probably the greatest brick wall. And it is not just a matter of personal neurosis; given the twenty four-hour pattern of news provision, we are discouraged very strongly from any suspicion that the significance of events might need time to understand. Recently, of course, in the aftermath of the war, those who were doubtful of its wisdom or legitimacy have been urged to retract, since we have, after all, won; it doesn't seem to be easy to convey that until you can see how relations of various kinds are properly mended it might be premature to speak of victory – even of endings. It is rather symptomatic of our urgency in wanting what we these days call closure. But the truth is that serious and deep meanings only emerge as we look and listen, as we accompany a long story in its unfolding – whether we are thinking about the meaning of a life (mine or anyone's) or the meaning of a period in international affairs. Stability is still the key, a staying with that gives us the opportunity ourselves to change as we accompany, and so to understand more fully.

And what we have been thinking about in relation to peacemaking has an uncomfortable pertinence just at the moment. Are we capable, as Western societies, of peace that is not 'false' in Benedict's terms? That is, are we sufficiently alert to the agenda we are bringing to international conflict – resentments, the sense of half-buried impotence that sits alongside the urge to demonstrate the power we do have, the desire to put off examining the unfinished business in our own societies? And, for that matter, there is the falsity that can also afflict would-be peacemakers, who are more concerned with condemning what's wrong than with planning for what might change things, and who derive some comfort from knowing where evil lies (i.e. in someone else, some warmongering monster). What do we do to help our culture discover or recover habits of honesty? Is there a healing of the 'circulation'? 'Peace work', writes Donald Nicholl (p.224), 'demands a far higher degree of self-discipline, spiritual preparation and self-knowledge than we are generally prepared to face.'

And as for accountability – we tend these days to pride ourselves on taking this seriously; we have introduced the notion of audit into most of what we do, and are encouraged to challenge anything that looks like non-accountable exercising of authority. But I suspect that all this is actually rather a long way from what the Rule has in mind. First of all, the accountability of the Rule depends on a clear common understanding of what everyone is answerable to: the judgement of Christ. The Rule has nothing resembling a speculative Christology; but all the lines lead to Christ, the central instance of authority rightly used and attention rightly directed to God and the immediate other. There is no interest at all in the Rule in challenging authority on abstract principle. What there is a clear commitment to listening, as a central and necessary aspect of making decisions, listening even to the most junior (ch. 3); the possibility of explaining difficulties and asking for consideration of special circumstances (ch.68); and the repeated insistence that the abbot is measured by and must measure himself by the standard of Christ's pastoral service, with its focal principle of self-gift for the sake of the life of the other. When abbatial decisions are made, the monk must ultimately obey; but the context remains one in which we are being urged to think not about an audit, in the sense of an assessment of whether the processes in use are delivering the desired results, but about the degree to which the community is genuinely working with a shared focus and common language, in which both discussion and decision are possible.

The Rule is in no way a primitive democratic document, and its appeals to obedience are undoubtedly counter-cultural these days. But what the discomfort arising from this misses is the sense of standing together before Christ, becoming used to Christ's scrutiny together. In this way, we both see ourselves under Christ's judgement and see others under Christ's mercy; and we are urged not to despair of that mercy even for ourselves. Not to despair of mercy is the last of the tools of good works; we could say that the final point of accountability before Christ was that we should have as the extension of our natural bodily being the habit of hope, trust in the possibilities of compassion. And the abbot is in a unique position to put that into circulation.

What the 'audit' culture lacks is usually a positive shared focus. We have a clear sense of what counts as breach of responsibility, and usually a clear (if often artificially clear) account of what effective exercise of responsibility should produce. What we don't often have is the tacit or explicit reference to the shared focus of meaning that allows real mutuality in the life of the group under authority. Challenges belong in the context –yet again – of a stability that guarantees we all know what we are talking about and what we hope for.

So the Rule's sketch of holiness and sanity puts a few questions to us, as Church and culture. It suggests that one of our main problems is that we don't know where to find the stable relations that would allow us room to grow without fear. The Church which ought to embody not only covenant with God but covenant with each other does not always give the feeling of a community where people have unlimited time to grow with each other, nourishing and challenging. We have little incentive to be open with each other if we live in an ecclesial environment where political conflict and various kinds of grievance are the dominant currency. And, believers and unbelievers, we'd like to be peacemakers without the inner work, which alone makes peace something more than a pause in battle. We are bad at finding that elusive balance between corrupt and collusive passivity, which keeps oppression alive and the litigious obsessiveness that continually, asks whether I am being attended to, as I deserve. And no, I don't have a formula for resolving that, I only ask that we find ways of reminding ourselves that there is a problem.

So we'd better have some communities around that embody the stability that is at the heart of all this. 'Each [religious] house is meant to be a model – an 'epiphany' rather – of the condition of mankind reconciled in Christ' wrote Fergus Kerr in an essay around 1970 (p.44 in *Religious Life Today*, John Coventry, Rembert Weakland and others, Tenbury Wells, n.d.). And he goes on to say that this is impossible unless we face the real condition of unreconciledness in and between us; which is why religious houses are not always exactly easy places...But in the terms of these reflections we should have to say that without the stability the work isn't done; the tools don't become extensions of the hand in such a way that the other's reality really and truly ceases to be an intrusion and a threat. How right Benedict was to

say that it is only when community life has done its work that someone should be allowed to take up the solitary life: only when the other is not a problem can solitude be Christ-like – otherwise it is an escape, another drama.

A monochrome picture? Perhaps, but the self-indulgent Technicolor of what are sometimes our preferred styles needs some chastening. The workshop is at the end of the day a solid and tough metaphor for that spirituality which is a lifetime's labor, yet also an expansion of the heart; just as all good physical work is an expansion of the body into its environment, changing even as it brings about change. Holiness is a much-patched cloth, a smooth-worn tool at least as much as it is a blaze of new light; because it must be finally a state we can live with and in, the hand fitted to the wood forgetful of the join.

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Developing Your Relationship with God

Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina

Formation Objective: Begin the discipline of *Lectio Divina* and meditation.

Instructions:

1. Read the article below by Basil Pennington on *Lectio Divina* and how to practice it.
2. Begin the practice and discipline of *Lectio Divina*, once a day, Monday through Saturday. Use the techniques described by Pennington.
3. Suggested times to set aside for *Lectio Divina* are: before or after Morning Prayer, before or after Evening Prayer, or a quiet time in the middle of the day. Allow a minimum of 30 minutes for this work.
4. Focus your *Lectio Divina* on the Psalms, praying over one psalm each day. You may use any source for the psalms: a Bible, a breviary, or the Book of Common Prayer. If a Bible is used, use a modern translation. You may pray the psalms in any order.
5. Make a record of your feelings and insights that you discerned immediately after *Lectio Divina* in your journal. This will help you focus your thoughts and become a resource for you to complete your weekly report.

Lectio Divina

By M. Basil Pennington

Edited by: Abbot Michael-John, CSL

If you translate the word *lectio*, it means, quite simply, "reading." But *lectio* is much more than reading. And, in fact, we can do *lectio* even without having anything in front of us to read. During the first centuries of the Church and long after, most Christians could not read. Even those who could rarely owned a book. Only the wealthiest individuals or institutions, like churches and monasteries, could afford a book. The creation of a book meant the slaughter of a whole flock of sheep and thousands of hours of very specialized work. For centuries *lectio* was much more a matter of hearing the Word of God.

This hearing could take a number of forms. Most commonly, a Christian would hear the Word of God in church, in the proclamation of the Word during the liturgy. The public reading was done in a set tone that would not only tell the hearers the source of the text, whether Gospel, apostolic writing, or patristic commentary, but that would also help the text to become securely lodged in the memory of the hearer.

Besides this hearing in church, those who lived in a community or associated with one could benefit from additional reading in the refectory during the course of meals, in chapter or community meetings, and in the cloister before Compline. Wealthy persons often had a cleric or secretary who would read to them, particularly at meals, but also at other times. Spiritual Fathers and Mothers would also speak the Word to their disciples.

Those who could read and had a text available to them could engage in more personal reading. For the first thousand years of the Church even this personal reading was primarily a hearing of the Word. We smile when we are told that a revered abbot like Peter the Venerable excused himself from his *lectio* because he had laryngitis. But for him and almost all readers of the first millennium (there were a few noted exceptions), reading meant sounding the letters inscribed on the page so that the ear could hear the words and convey them to the mind. The text was not divided into words, sentences, and paragraphs, organized to convey concepts immediately through the eye to the

brain. This organized way of writing came into practice only after the middle of the twelfth century. Rather, there was a row of letters inviting the lips and the tongue to produce particular sounds. It was the *spoken word* that conveyed ideas to the mind. A cloister full of monks during their *lectio*, was aptly spoken of as a community of mumblers.

Certain temperaments are indispensable and enhance our reception, making our listening able to receive the divine communication. These temperaments do not run down like the batteries in our transistor but rather grow in strength like a muscle if they are properly exercised, for like our muscle they are a gift from God, available for development with our cooperation.

Benedict – Chapter 20

Whenever we want to ask some favor of a powerful man, we do it humbly and respectfully, for fear of presumption. How much more important, then, to lay our petitions before the Lord God of all things with the utmost humility and sincere devotion. We must know that God regards our purity of heart and tears of compunction, not our many words.

Faith

First and foremost is the disposition of faith, a firm belief that the Word of God is the Word of God. ***Faith yearns to be fulfilled in the very Word that has called it into being.*** For the full and effective reception of the communication, we believe not only that the Word who is God speaks to us through this inspired Word, but that the Word is truly present in his inspired Word and present to us as he communicates with us through the Word.

Faith enables us to find and hear the Word, one with the Father and the Spirit, in his Word. But as St. Paul told us, ***“Faith comes through hearing.”*** Even as we faithfully hear the Word, the Word renews and strengthens our faith. This is brought about not just by hearing again of the words and deeds of God in salvation history and in the Person of Jesus and in the witness of those who saw and believed. At the deeper level, this actual experience of the Word brings us to that point where we can say with Paul: ***“I know in whom I believe.”***

Humility

An important disposition for the operation of living faith within us is humility, the full acceptance of reality. And the reality is that we very much need and want the divine communication. Humility is the acceptance of our profound ignorance with regard to God as well as to so many other things. *We know what we know, and it is not very much. We know what we do not know, and that is a lot more. And we accept the fact that beyond this there is an infinity that we do not even know we do not know. We know that our mind and our heart, our feeling and our emotions, our body and our soul are all listening, given to us by God, and that this listening can only be filled by the Giver.* We come to our listening hungry and thirsty, filled with longing and need. And God who is mighty does great things for us. He fills the hungry with good things.

Openness

While an insensitivity to this need will make it difficult for us to be faithful in our regular practice of *lectio*, one of the things that can most undermine our actual practice of *lectio* is a subtle or not-so-subtle boredom that seems to say: "I've heard all this before." It is precisely the alert listening for a Real Presence--our openness to all that is possible in this moment--that forestalls this. I am not simply reading a book I have read so often before. I am meeting a Person, a Divine Person, the God who loves me and who has a wondrous plan for me.

Our familiarity does tend to take away the shock that the Bible, especially the Hebrew Bible, should be for Christians. Coming to know the God and Father of infinite love and compassion, patience, and mercy, the Prodigal Father revealed by Jesus Christ, the revelation of God that we find in the early unfolding of salvation history is certainly not what we would expect. At least, not at first thought. It takes a bit of insight to see the God of Love lovingly adapting himself to a very primitive people, meeting them where they are and leading them to take the next small step in faith and trust that can lead to the high moments of friendship and love that do constantly break through. One of the lessons for us to learn here is this way of Divine Love. God made us. He knows the greatest thing he has given us is our freedom, because herein lies

our power to love, the source of our merit and our potential to enter into the communion of Divine Life. He does not want to overwhelm or impair this freedom. So he gently leads us, bit by bit, into the intuitions of Divine Love.

No matter what the words are that we read as communications of his love, or how many times we have encountered them before, there is an opportunity for the love to expand and at the same time fill our listening for the Divine each and every time we meet our God of love in our *lectio*.

Faithfulness

One more essential ingredient for the true experience of *lectio* is a disposition of faithfulness to the practice. Monks and nuns in the Indian tradition wear the kavi, a very simple garment in a bright orange color—what we might call a habit. Its intense color is achieved by dipping a piece of white cotton in yellow dye a thousand times. The monastics wear this color as a reminder of their need to dip again and again into the Divine through meditation in order to attain the transformation they desire. To attain a total open listening for the Divine we need to dip again and again into the divine reading of *lectio divina*.

For our *lectio* to reach its full receptivity is a thing of love. It is the sensitivity of lovers that enables us to perceive more fully what the Divine Lover is seeking to convey to us through his Words of Love. Again, so obviously, we are here in a wondrous spiral. The more our love receives the intuitions of love, the more we get to know the Lover through our *lectio*, the more we love. This is why fidelity to *lectio* makes it ever more delightful—a lover exploring ever more intimately the Beloved. And we not only get to know the love and the Lover more, we get to know ourselves more as we come to see ourselves, as it were, in the eyes of the Beloved.

As powerful as all this is, there is still another whole dimension that takes us far beyond this place, infinitely so. This is the action of Holy Spirit through the gifts. As our spirit enters into a unity of spirit with the Divine Spirit of Love, we are brought into that experience of God that no eye has seen, no ear has heard, an experience that has not even entered into the loftiest concept of the human mind. Ultimately this word *lectio* describes a communication of love – a contemplative experience.

This is certainly much more than "reading." It is *lectio divina*--divine reading: reading the way the Father "reads" the Word within the embrace that is Holy Spirit.

The Listening That We Are

"Why did God make you?" A fairly fundamental question. And yet how often it catches folks by surprise, it's a question they are not aware of having seriously asked themselves, though, of course, they have been living some answer to it. Often enough I get back the catechism answer I myself learned as a boy: "God made me to know, love, and serve him in this world and to be happy with him in the next." Even as a kid I wondered how I could love God and not be happy with him right now. I think this catechism answer has probably sent more people out of the Church than any other. Pie in the sky! Serve here. Be happy there. That certainly is not our God.

God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are and always have been among themselves a total happiness, an unending celebration of life and love. Well, when you are very happy, what do you want to do? You want to share your happiness. And multiply it! But God looked around and there was no one there to share it with. That is why God made you--and me. He wanted to have someone with whom he could share his happiness. Jesus prayed at the Last Supper: Father, I pray that they may share my joy ... and **that their joy may be complete.** This is why God made us

God is so, so far beyond us. But he came to us. The Word was made flesh. Jesus is the most complete expression of the Word in our creation. God is Word. God is communication. And we therefore are essentially a *listening*, a listening for that Word. *To the extent we truly "hear" that Word, receive that Word into our being and into our lives, we participate in the Divine Being, Life, Love, Joy.* Made in the image of God, we have an unlimited, an infinite potential to be like unto him.

Each of us is a certain listening, a certain openness to being, to reality, to communication. Everything that has been a part of our lives since the

moment of our creation has had its role in shaping the listening that we are. Objectively, of itself, the listening that we are is not good or bad, morally speaking. It just is. But *it is good for us to realize that we are a certain, definable listening. It is as though my listening has a certain physical shape to it. As things come across my listening, I get only what falls within the parameters of the listening that I am.*

If I am a very "set" person, very rigid in my ideas and convictions, then that is it. That is all I get, and all I will ever get. On the other hand, if I am very open person, then each thing I encounter in my "listening" has the potential to expand my listening, to push out my boundaries perhaps just a little bit more. Here is where some moral responsibility for the listening that I am does come in. It is important, in truth and in reality, that I realize and accept that I am a certain limited listening. This is humility, for humility is truth.

Indeed, it is painful to realize that in spite of our very best efforts we will still miss so much. Our listening is very limited. But let us look at the positive side. Our *lectio* can and will remain an inexhaustible source of enlightenment, with always more for us to receive no matter how long we have been drinking in this wonderful nectar of life. Old monks and nuns most readily bear witness to this as they lovingly caress their well-worn Bibles and struggle to receive the Word once again through thick glasses or a large magnifying glass. Each word is so precious to them.

In this humility, in this truth, then, I should want my own listening, the listening that I am, to be constantly expanded. And I should want it to be complemented by the listening of others.

One day, when I had gathered my monastic community together for a sharing, I brought in a book. I had made a special cover for the book. The front was red, the spine white, and the back green. I held the book up with the spine toward the center of the community gathering. Then I asked a monk on my left: "What color is this book?" "Red," he said with assurance. Then I asked a monk on my right. With equal assurance he declared: "Green." They were, of course, both right and both wrong. Without a shifting of their positions in the group, neither of them could approach the whole truth, except by accepting the other's "listening" or perception of reality. Together they

could come to a fuller possession of the truth, yet it would still be incomplete without at least a third perspective to include the spine. This is part of the great value of meetings, of dialogue, of sharing Scripture, of shared *lectio*.

Our individual listening then is in part defined by our position in time and place. We do have the privilege of living in the time of the fullness of the Revelation, of living among the People of God to whom that Revelation is delivered. We have the grace of our times of being able to receive easily the Revelation in our own Bible and in other forms of the media. But far more than time and place, *our listening is profoundly influenced by our attitudes, our experiences, our prejudices.*

If I ask: "What is eight divided in two?" the mathematically inclined will answer without hesitation: "Four." However, someone more visually oriented might see an eight divided in the middle horizontally and say: "Two zeros." Or looking at it another way, divided vertically, might say: "Three." It is a matter of perspective, of different ways of seeing. The most basic foolishness we can be dominated by is the foolishness of self-satisfaction. All of life is a coming out of ignorance into the light of fuller understanding. For the Christian, it is getting the Easter perspective ... and not an Easter without Good Friday. Life is stronger than death; good, more powerful than evil.

You bring to the reading of this book a certain listening. Your listening for this book is colored by the listening you have for the idea of *lectio*, your own sense of need, your aspirations.

You would probably have a different listening for me if I were a woman, a lay person, a young man, a very conservative person or a very liberal one, or if I referred to God as "she." And you would be right to consider these individual characteristics, at least to some extent. But other factors might come in to color your listening more for what they are in themselves than for the influence they might have had on my listening. What if I were a black man, or a Jew, or a gay person?

You undoubtedly remember that day when Jesus returned to his hometown and joined the community in the synagogue. He was asked to read. He took up the scroll of Isaiah and read that magnificent Messianic prophecy:

The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom to captives, to give sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the time of the Lord's favor.

Then Jesus quietly proclaimed: "Today this prophecy is fulfilled in your hearing." But these people of Nazareth had a certain listening for this man. He was Mary's boy, the carpenter. They knew all his relatives. Their listening for him was set, and they weren't ready to change. When he pointed out the consequence of this blindness, they could only rage and seek to destroy. We each have a certain listening for Jesus of Nazareth. We have a certain listening for God. We most definitely bring this to our *lectio*—along with all the other parameters of the listening that we are. Jesus, on another occasion, turning again to the prophet Isaiah, challenged his people:

You will listen and listen again and not understand, see and see again and not perceive. For the heart of this nation has grown coarse, their ears are dull of hearing and they have shut their eyes for fear that they should see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their heart and be converted and be healed by me.

We sometimes hang on to the listening that we are, precisely as it is here and now, because we do not want to be converted, we do not want to change our understanding and undertake the consequent changes. *True lectio calls for humility, our knowing that we have a lot to learn, but also for a spirit of repentance, our knowing that our ways have not been all that they should be, and an honest desire to change ... or perhaps, more truly, to be changed by the Word of God.*

From one end to the other, the Scriptures are a love story. They are a Love speaking to his beloved. And we sometimes have every kind of listening for God but that of a lover. To let the Scriptures speak to us in their nakedness can be immensely frightening, for they demand such a love in return. At Caesarea Philippi Jesus asked his chosen twelve another very fundamental question: "Who do you say that I am?" It was a moment when Peter, for once, did not put his foot in his mouth, but shone out in what he had to say: "You

are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Then Jesus clarified what was actually going on: "Blessed are you, Simon bar Jona. Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven."

So it is that another very important factor in our listening, if we are open to it, is the activity of Holy Spirit through the gifts. Jesus had promised that the Spirit, the Paraclete, would teach us all things. The listening that we are, because of who we are, men and women made in the image of God, can be expanded even to embrace the knowledge and experience of God himself.

With humility and gratitude those of us reading this today are consoled by Jesus as surely as he consoled his listeners in Nazareth after quoting Isaiah's lament over his people:

But happy are your eyes because they see and your ears because they hear. I tell you solemnly, many prophets and holy ones longed to see what you see and never saw it, to hear what you hear and never heard it.

In true *lectio*, by the power of the Word of God and of the Spirit, we do see, we do hear the Word and the Spirit expand our listening. Their grace heals us of the binding prejudices, the fears, the selfishness and self-centeredness that would have us cling to our present parameters with the illusionary comfort of their controlled limitations. They give us the freedom to be wide open, the freedom that is rightly ours as the children of God. They lift us above all the limitations of our human reason, enabling us to be a listening not only for those transcendent truths of faith that are beyond the grasp of reason, but also for the very experience of God.

Lectio Divina

Lectio can certainly be a source of faith-building, enlightening the mind as much as any study and motivating the will through powerful impulses of love. But neither of these is primary in *lectio*. ***We come to lectio not so much seeking ideas, concepts, insights, or even motivating graces; we come to lectio seeking God himself and nothing less than God.*** We come seeking the experience of the presence of the living God, to be with him and to allow him to be with us in whatever way he wishes. It is a time for listening: "*Speak,*

Lord, your servant wants to hear." It is an active listening, or interactive, as they might say today. We engage the received Word with who we are today and what is going on in our lives today. But it is listening, giving the Lord the first word and letting that word expand our listening. It is difficult for us, but it is important, extremely important, that in lectio we do not try to contract the Word we receive to the dimensions of our already- held concepts and ideas. Rather, it is necessary to allow those ideas to be blown open, if need be, to give space to the received Word. We do not want to truncate the divine communication to the narrow confines of our presently held concepts. Instead, we want the Word to expand our receptivity, our listening, to allow space for more and more of the divine wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. Lectio is essentially prayer at a deep experiential level.

We Christians share with our Jewish brothers and sisters the immense privilege of being sons and daughters of the Book. In saying this I certainly do not want to deny that God in some way speaks through the sacred writings of other traditions. The wisdom of a Confucius, limited though it is to the rational level, has a truth about it that must be guided by the Truth. The wisdom found in some of the writings of ancient India, albeit mixed at times with some fanciful mythology, must have its source in the divine Wisdom.

Not a few of the truths of our Book are re-echoed, if not actually reproduced, in the pages of the Qur'an. But the fact remains that the Bible is a book wholly inspired by God, who guided the writers, gracefully in accord with their freedom and God-given gifts, to express only what God wanted them to express and all that God wanted them to write in his name. The Bible is a most precious gift of the Lord, given through human minds, hearts, and hands, a special depository of the Revelation-bearing Tradition. It is the divinely inspired Word of God.

So it is, we might say, "natural" for us to go first of all to the Bible to listen to the Word. But it is also true: "Through him all things were made." The whole of the creation bespeaks its Maker. As the Greeks would say, the whole of creation is full of *logoi*, "little words," that give expression to the *Logos*, the Word. I can look upon the form and figure of a person, the wonder of a human body, the beauty of a human face, and know that God became a man

and that God expresses himself in the beauty and nobility of every man and woman and child. I listen to the Word of God crying out in the degradation of the addict huddling in his filthy rags in the doorway of an alley, and my heart cries with the Word. Basking in the serene goodness of friendship, I hear the longings of the Word in my regard. As the inspired poet sang:

The heavens shout forth the glory of God, the vault of heaven proclaims his handiwork. Day tells of it to day, night to night hands on the word. No speech at all, no word, no sound that anyone can hear,

Yet their voice goes out through all the world, their message to the ends of the earth. –Psalm 19

Yes, all that the Word has made and keeps on making bespeaks the Word and is to be heard, if we have but the listening. But still, among all these words, we are gifted with that most precious and direct communication of the inspired Word of God.

We turn to it in particular to hear. In speaking to the bishops of Italy, the Holy Father recently lamented, "There are too many faithful who remain deprived of a vital encounter with sacred Scripture and who fail to nourish their faith with the richness of the Word of God." He then set an example for the other bishops by rising from his sickbed in the first days of Lent to begin personally the distribution of a million Bibles to the people of his diocese.

It is in the Word of God that we can most readily hear the Word of God. It is the Word of God that can most powerfully expand our listening for the Word of God wherever he speaks to us. My confrere, Thomas Merton, expressed this beautifully:

By the reading of the Scripture I am so renewed that all nature seems renewed around me and with me. The sky seems to be a purer, a cooler blue, the trees a deeper green, light is sharper on the outlines of the forest and the hills, and the whole world is charged with the glory of God and I find fire and music in the earth under my feet.

Being Restored to Ourselves

First we must understand the Christian context of meditation. I am using the term meditation in this instance synonymously with such terms as contemplation, contemplative prayer, meditative prayer, and so on. The essential context of meditation is to be found in the fundamental relationship of our lives, the relationship that we have as creatures with God, our Creator. But most of us have to take a preliminary step before we can begin to appreciate the full wonder and glorious mystery of this fundamental relationship. Most of us have to get into touch with ourselves first, to get into a full relationship with ourselves before we can turn openly to our relationship with God. Putting this another way, we can say that we have first to find, expand, and experience our own capacity for peace, for serenity, and for harmony before we can begin to appreciate our God and Father who is the author of all harmony and serenity.

Meditation is the very simple process by which we prepare ourselves, in the first instance, to be at peace with ourselves so that we are capable of appreciating the peace of the Godhead within us. The view of meditation that many people are encouraged to take as a means of relaxation, of retaining inner peacefulness throughout the pressures of modern urban life, is not essentially wrong in itself. But if this is all it is seen as being, the view is very limited because, as we become more and more relaxed in ourselves, and the longer we meditate, the more we become aware that the source of our new-found calm in our daily lives is precisely the life of God within us. The degree of peace we possess is directly proportional to our awareness of this fact of life, a fact of human consciousness, common to every man and every woman in the world. But to realize this fact as a present reality in our lives, we have to decide that we want to be at peace. This is the reason for the psalmist's saying: 'Be still and know that I am God.'

This deep inner peacefulness is in a sense more freely available for us today than it was for the Hebrew poet who wrote that psalm, even if our problems are greater and our pace of life faster than his were; and this is because of the great fact of Jesus.

The great conviction of the New Testament is that Jesus by giving us His Spirit has dramatically transformed the fabric of human consciousness. Our redemption by Jesus Christ has opened up for us levels of consciousness that can be described by St Paul only in terms of a totally new creation. As a result of all that Jesus has accomplished for the humanity into whose being He fully entered, we have been quite literally re-created. In Chapter 5 of Paul's letter to the Romans he writes about what God has accomplished in the person of His Son, Jesus:

Therefore, now that we have been justified through faith, let us continue at peace with God through our Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom we have been allowed to enter the sphere of God's grace, where we now stand. Let us exult in the hope of the divine splendor that is to be ours ... because God's love has flooded our inmost heart through the Holy Spirit He has given us.

Just think about this language for a moment and consider the quite staggering claim it is making. "We have been allowed to enter the sphere of God's grace, where we now stand." "God's love has flooded our inmost heart through the Holy Spirit He has given us." St Paul was no mere theorist. He was a passionate announcer of a real event that he was trying to make all men realize, and his words were urgent indicators of this event as a reality shared by all men. His great conviction is, that *the central reality of our Christian faith is the sending of the Spirit of Jesus; indeed our faith is a living faith precisely because the living Spirit of God dwells within us, giving new life to our mortal bodies.*

The all-important aim in Christian meditation is to allow God's mysterious and silent presence within us to become more and more not only a reality, but the reality in our lives; to let it become that reality which gives meaning, shape and purpose to everything we do, to everything we are.

Meditation is a learning process. It is a process of learning to pay attention, to concentrate, to attend. W. H. Auden made the point well when he said that schools were places that should be teaching the spirit of prayer in a secular context. This they would do, he maintained, by teaching people how to concentrate fully and exclusively on whatever was before them, be it poem,

picture, math problem, or leaf under a microscope, and to concentrate on these for their own sake. By the 'spirit of prayer', he meant selfless attention.

In learning to meditate, then, we must pay attention firstly to ourselves. We must become fully aware of who we are. If we can really apprehend for a moment the truth that we are created by God, we can begin to sense something of our own potentiality. We have a divine origin. God is our Creator. And in the Christian vision we know that God is not only a once-for-all Creator who creates us and then leaves us to ourselves; but He is also equally our loving Father. This is the truth about ourselves that we commemorate, pay full attention to in meditation. It is only because we forget this fundamental truth that we treat ourselves so trivially for so much of the time, our lives slipping through our fingers while we are either too busy or too bored to remember who we are. The reason why we can become so trivial, and why we can find ourselves and our lives so boring, is simply that we do not pay enough attention to our divine origin, our divine redemption by Jesus who has redeemed us from both triviality and boredom. Nor do we pay attention to our own holiness as temples of the Holy Spirit. *Meditation is the process in which we take time to allow ourselves to become aware of our infinite potential in the context of the Christ-event.* As St Paul puts it in Chapter 8 of Romans: 'And those whom He called, He has justified, and to those whom He justified, He has also given His splendor.' In meditation we open ourselves up to this splendor. Put another way, this means **that in meditation we discover both who we are and why we are. In meditation we are not running away from ourselves, we are finding ourselves; we are not rejecting ourselves, we are affirming ourselves.** St Augustine put this very succinctly and very beautifully when he said: 'Man must first be restored to himself that, making in himself as it were a stepping-stone, he may rise thence and be borne up to God.' We know that God is our Creator. We know that Jesus is our Redeemer. We know too that Jesus has sent His Spirit to dwell within us, and we have some sort of idea about our eternal destiny. But the great weakness of most Christians is, that although they know these truths on the level of theological theory, the truths do not really live in their hearts. In other words, these truths that are thought are not realized. We know them as propositions propounded by the Church, by theologians, by preachers from

pulpits, or in magazines, but we have not realized them as the grounding truths of our lives, as the sure basis which gives us conviction and authority.

There is nothing essentially new or modern therefore about the Christian context of meditation. Its aim is to turn to our own nature with total concentration, to experience our own creation first-hand and, above all, to turn to and experience the living Spirit of God dwelling in our hearts. The life of that Spirit within us is indestructible and eternal and, in this sense, the truths that make the Christian context of meditation are always new and permanently modern.

In meditation we do not seek to think about God nor do we seek to think about His Son, Jesus, nor do we seek to think about the Holy Spirit. We are trying rather to do something immeasurably greater. ***By turning aside from everything that is passing, everything that is contingent, we seek not just to think about God, but to be with God, to experience Him as the ground of our being. It is one thing to know that Jesus is the Revelation of the Father, that Jesus is our Way to the Father, but quite another to experience the presence of Jesus within us, to experience the real power of His Spirit within us and, in that experience, to be brought into the presence of His Father and our Father.***

Many people today are finding that they have to face the fact that there is an all-important difference between thinking about these truths of the Christian faith and experiencing them, between believing them on hearsay and believing them from our own personal verification. Experiencing and verifying these truths is not just the work of specialists in prayer. St Paul's inspiring and exultant letters were not written to members of an enclosed religious Order, but to the ordinary butchers and bakers of Rome, Ephesus and Corinth. These are truths that each one of us is called to know for himself, and in meditation we seek to know them.

Lectio in Context

Lectio--we see now that it is a word that has a deep and rich meaning, acquired over centuries of profound Christian experience. But more:

whenever we say the word "*lectio*," we actually imply a whole process or way of spirituality, a journey into God, deep into the inner life of the Trinity.

Let's have a little Latin lesson, for the problem of translation still continues. When we say "*lectio*," we always imply the whole process of *lectio–meditatio–oratio–contemplatio*. All four words can be translated by simply adding an "tion" to them: lection–meditation–oration–contemplation. But in each case there is a problem in such a translation. Certainly much of the richness of the traditional meaning is lost.

Through the earliest days of the Church, distinctions with regard to *lectio* were not readily made, certainly not insisted upon. As we have seen, Abba Isaac gave John Cassian a "word for contemplation." Receiving a word of life, which is the essence of this particular kind of encounter with the Lord, was for the venerated Father nothing less than to enter upon a way to contemplation.

As the transition was taking place, in the middle of the twelfth century, from the patristic to the scholastic era, the ninth Abbot of the Grand Chartreuse produced a remarkable little treatise for his brother. In his *Ladder of Monks*, Guigo II clearly distinguishes these four steps, or degrees, as he calls them. Yet he insists on their inner relation and codependence:

The first degrees are of little or no use without the last, while the last can never, or hardly ever, be won without the first.... Lectio without meditatio is sterile, meditatio without lectio is liable to error, oratio without meditatio is lukewarm, meditatio without oratio is unfruitful, oratio when it is fervent wins contemplatio, but to obtain it without oratio would be rare, even miraculous.

We certainly need all four elements. For the monastic, which have the wonderful gift of holy leisure, the four are usually experienced as an organic whole. They simply sit down with their text in hand or in memory, and meet the Lord there in his Word. How much time they spend on a particular occasion receiving the Word or letting it re-echo in their minds and hearts before they begin to respond can certainly vary. Indeed, it is in a sense a very natural interaction, this receiving and giving, as they sit with their Friend. At

which precise moment they lapse into the deep rest of contemplation depends much on his presence and grace.

Benedict's *Rule for Monasteries*, besides providing for a good bit of community reading, provides simply for periods of *lectio*, spaces for the whole process to be enjoyed. As much as the four elements belong together and are part of a vital relationship, yet given the hectic world that most live in and the lack of that leisurely space at least on a regular basis, it is good to look at each of the elements individually and to take care to provide space for them in one's life.

Lectio

This first element refers to the gathering of the Sacred Text and the plucking of the Word that we will use all day to remember God's message to us.

Meditatio

Meditation is certainly a word that has different meanings. If you ask traditional Catholics about meditation they will probably tell you about one of the methods developed by the various saints after the Protestant Reformation: the method of St. Alphonsus or St. Sulpice, and so on. In these methods, it is a question of taking a scene or a thought from the Scriptures and applying the mind and imagination and memory to it, seeking all the while to break through and come to the experience of the Reality that is behind it. At least that should be the intent. There is the danger of getting caught up in one's own thoughts and ideas, images and insights – a danger that is not absent from *lectio*. Since the false self is made up of what I have and what I do, it makes a play here to do something, to create some brilliant ideas and insights and then to hang on to them. All our thoughts, ideas, and insights, all our creations are in danger of becoming idols. We have to be ready to break them to pieces and pass beyond them to the Reality that they of their nature point to.

If the traditional catholic would usually understand meditation in the sense of an active discursive process, I think very many if not most today think more readily of a more contemplative process when they hear of meditation.

Transcendental Meditation, Zen meditation, and yoga have done much to form the modern understanding of the word. People think of meditation as some kind of process or discipline they can practice to achieve if not absolute transcendence at least some deep quieting of the mind and body and a release of stress.

While Guigo's understanding of meditation comes close to the first, neither of these responds to the understanding and practice of the first millennium of Christian life. In that earlier period, meditation meant that, having received a word of life from one's *lectio* or from a spiritual Father or Mother, we carried that word with us, repeating it, perhaps even on the lips but certainly in the mind, until it formed the heart and called forth the response of prayer.

The Fathers spoke of the mind descending into the heart. The word was to be received not only mentally but also effectively, expanding the listening that we are, opening us to allow the fullness of Reality to come in, to see things as God sees them, forming in us the mind of Christ. Meditation was not so much an active process whereby we worked with what we had received until it fitted into the conceptual frame-work we already had, rather, it was a more receptive process allowing the Word to break open and reform us. It is not a wholly passive process; a certain assimilation on our part is necessary. The Fathers, inspired by the biblical admonition, "Taste and see how good the Lord is," liked to use the image of cattle and other biblically "clean" animals who chew the cud. After gathering through *lectio*, perhaps in the coolness of the morning, through the day we chew upon what we have received, allowing it to be assimilated through the processes of the day. How different would our day be if we took from our *lectio* a word like, "Whatever you do to the least, you do to me," and it kept sounding in our hearts all through the day? As we encounter each person, we hear again, "Whatever you do to the least you do to me"? It is the Christ, no matter what guise he comes in.

All the world remembers with reverence the little nun from Albania. Sitting with Mother Teresa and looking into her deep, deep brown eyes was a transforming experience. For she saw the Christ in you and reflected this back to you, and you had a new sense of yourself. It was the practice in the novitiate in Calcutta for the second-year novices to go out in the morning

with the ambulances to the train station to pick up the abandoned dying who were left there during the night. Mother, when she was home, usually went with them. On this particular day, among those they returned with was a man in a most sad condition. Rats had gnawed at him, maggots had eaten to the bone, he had not long to live. Mother herself claimed the privilege of caring for him. For much of an hour she did all she could to make him comfortable. As she was gently cooling his face, he opened his eyes, said "Thank you," and died. Mother rose, went to his feet, and prostrated herself full length. Later that day she told me, with a radiant smile, I had the privilege this morning of caring for the dying Christ."

The Word, coming to live in us through meditation, transforms our listening. Yes, we see Christ in the least, in everyone. And we know the joy of loving and serving him in each.

Oratio

Almost naturally, this ongoing meditation calls forth again and again a response: thanksgiving, praise, petition, repentance, adoration. How present is God in all and acting through all. The world is shot through and through with the mercy and love of God. Each one is the Christ. We come to constant prayer, to praying without ceasing, praying in all we do.

I almost wish I could take the word "prayer" and throw it out and begin over with some new word. We all have so much baggage around that word. Whenever I hear it, one of the images that comes to my mind is little Sister Floretta, who taught me in the second grade. I can still experience Sister standing over me, saying in no uncertain terms: "When you pray, kneel up straight, fold your hands, close your eyes Even as a second-grader, I thought: This is a funny way to talk to my Father.

Prayer is any and every kind of communication with our God who loves us. If our listening is for God, our whole life is prayer. Meditation is grounded on *lectio*, which is a listening for God in his Word and in his creation. And meditation, the abiding presence of the Word on our lips and in our hearts, in its turn helps to form and expand such listening.

Contemplatio

There is something wonderful about a deep love, the love after the uncontrolled passion is spent. It is the love of just *being with*. This is contemplation.

I have often said that I first learned contemplation the summer I was four years old. That summer I was on the farm with my grandparents. For some reason it was just the three of us at times. After supper I would go out on the porch and sit on the top step. After a bit, Granddad would come out and sit on one end of the porch swing. After a while, Grandma would come (women always do more work than men). And we would usually just sit there in silence. I felt so wonderful! It was only years later that I realized what was happening. This man and woman, who had been together for so many decades, had no need to say anything. It had all been said. They just sat together in love. And that love embraced the little grandson on the top step. He felt good all over as he sat in that love. Now he sits in the love of his heavenly Father.

Contemplation. Etymology is often instructive: "*tion*" bespeaks an abiding state; "con" means "with" – communion, union with; the "*templa*" was the segment of the heavens that the pagan priests of ancient Rome used to watch; by observing the flight of birds through the *templa*, they came to know the will of the gods. In time the *templa* became the *templum* – the temple – the place one went to know the will of the gods and to worship them. What is the temple of the new covenant? We are the temple of the new covenant, the covenant in his Blood, which we celebrate and receive in the Eucharist.

Contemplation: to abide with God within his temple.

The whole process, if we have the space for it, can be present in each and every period of *lectio*. As we listen to the Word (*lectio*), a word, a phrase, a sentence may well strike us, and we let it reverberate within, opening and expanding, forming and shaping (*meditatio*), calling forth varied responses (*oratio*) until finally we simply rest in the Reality to which it all leads (*contemplatio*).

But any particular meeting with the Lord in *lectio* might not be so abundantly blessed, and we will, after listening, have to choose a word to take with us, allowing this word to be present to us as we go on about our daily responsibilities (*meditatio*). This word will, by God's presence and grace, again and again in the course of the day, illumine what we are encountering and call forth a response to the Divine Presence (*oratio*). And there will also be times when we will let everything else go and just sit quietly in Centering Prayer (*contemplatio*). Thus the process is spread out over the course of the day.