I am happy to be here and grateful and moved. Coming here always feels like coming home. Father Martin asked me to give this talk over a year ago, and I’ve been thinking on and off about it for several months. In the meantime, the events of September 11 occurred, and that puts us before a terrible dilemma.

I thought I would talk about simplicity when I heard about an interview which Peter Jennings did after September 11 with some of the students of Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan. He was asking them what their impressions were and how these events had affected them, and these youngsters were saying, “My life will never be the same. What I thought was important was to get ahead, to make good grades, to get into the best college, be a success at a great business, and make lots of money. Now that doesn’t really matter. It can all be lost in one minute, one second. What matters is life, what you do in life. Every day has to have meaning, helping others, making life better, however you can do that.” I sincerely hope that such an attitude will be one of the enduring results of these terrible events.

We have also been told that one cannot just stay with these things, you have to get on with it. I believe that an important part of “getting on with it” is to try to cut to the essential, back to what we might call simplicity. We find very often that limiting situations make faith either grow or diminish. They test us and they can make us simpler. We can hope that what we are going through in the country will lead us in the proper direction.

Simplicity is at the heart of the matter and leads us to what is essential in our lives. We are here partly because we are celebrating the fifty years of Mount Saviour Monastic
Community, and to quote Raymond Panikkar, "Simplicity is the root of monastic spirituality." In his book, *Blessed Simplicity*, he also asserts that the monk is the archetype of the human. In other words, what would be good for the monk, or what would be typical of the monastic life, would also be good for all of us.

What the monastic life does is to highlight what the rest of us are looking for and hoping for. Recalling Father Damasus’s intentions, simplicity was one of the most important principles of the foundation of Mount Saviour. Simplicity was a principle of reform that Father Damasus saw for the Benedictine life. He insisted, for example, on one class of brother in the monastery. Now that is not so extraordinary, but at the time in which he insisted upon it, it was quite revolutionary. He said that priests would be ordained for the service of the community and worked all his life so that worship would be accessible. He emphasized the contemplative life and believed it would be best, at least for this community, not to have an institutional apostolate, and to be occupied rather with the things of the spirit, the *ora et labora* of the Benedictine life.

There are other expressions of Father Damasus’s insistence upon simplicity which are at the root of monastic life. He was seeking an uncluttered life, essential life which would be concentrated on God and on Jesus. And it is true for those of us who are not brothers to say that is what we come here for. We breathe it in, this simplicity and this centeredness; we breathe it in with relief, joy, and gratitude. We feel that after “turning and turning,” as the Quaker hymn goes, when we have arrived here we have “come down right.”

As far as the Sisters of St. Mary are concerned, our founder was a Cistercian who left his monastery during the French Revolution and its repercussions in Belgium. The Cistercian ideal is simplicity, and that carried over then into the foundation of our community. The biblical word which summarized our spirit is from Chronicles: “In the simplicity of my heart, full of joy, I have offered all to God” (29:17). If you ask a Sister of St. Mary anywhere in the world what she thinks is characteristic of the Sisters of St. Mary, she will say “simplicity,” or at least that we are trying to be simple. And so there is an immediate resonance
with the spirit of this community and why we have always felt so much at home and nourished by what is lived here.

But what about simplicity? Almost immediately and paradoxically, one comes to the awareness that simplicity is complex, but not complicated. Simplicity has a many-layered richness of reality, or a many-splendored truth. The more one thinks about it and concentrates on it, the further and further one is led in seeing how much is comprehended by simplicity. The few remarks that I am going to make are intended to invite you to think more about it.

In 1948 the Cistercian General Chapter commissioned and approved a document on simplicity. This little book is called *The Spirit of Simplicity: The Characteristic of the Cistercian Order*, and providentially the document arrived at Gethsemane in French. The monastery didn’t have many people who could translate, and they gave it to the young Thomas Merton to do the work. When he had translated it, he was a bit dismayed and he felt that the fathers of the chapter had perhaps over-emphasized what was external about simplicity. So he wrote an almost equally long commentary, which is also in the book, anonymously. In this commentary he emphasizes the interior, the internal aspects of simplicity.

There we have one very important pointer: simplicity has to be both external and interior. It has to do with our music, with our clothing, with our food, with all the aspects of our lifestyle, including architecture. This is a constant theme. It has to do, as the Quakers say, with eliminating “cumber” from our lives, those things which weigh us down. After twelve years in Europe, I came back to the U.S. and I admit to being thoroughly ashamed of my cumber. The external expression of simplicity is important and it should not be minimized. It is a part of a whole life, and we must look at it.

To that we must join what we would speak about as interior simplicity.

In a book comprised of the papers from a symposium given by Raymond Panikkar in 1982 on “Blessed Simplicity,” he explains his “sutras,” teachings for a disciple who cherishes simplicity. Some of them are more evident than others. His first
sutra is to allow for "the breakthrough of the primordial aspiration." He means that some place inside of us we long to be simple. More important and evident is the "primacy of being over doing and having." It is more important to be, and more important who we are, than what we have and even what we do. A symposium was held at Mount Saviour in 1992 entitled "Word out of Silence." The word that comes out of silence must be a word that won't hurt, and a true word that builds up.

How do we move forward toward a greater simplicity? The monastic practices invite us to stand daily under the Word of God. Such an invitation asks us to bring all that we are and have, and the whole world and its history under the Word of God in order to allow ourselves to be sifted and winnowed, refined and defined, by the power of the Word. There is the monastic practice of the lectio divina, and in the church, the daily Mass readings. We bring everything into that light and find there a unity, a coming together, a possibility of escaping from a dissipation.

Another of the important ways to simplicity is the experience and practice of silence. Most of us who don't live in the monastery know so little of silence. So much of the talk or the sound in life that we hear is gibberish. Most of us can recognize that place where futile discussions between me and myself go round and round and fill the space of creativity and of growth, the silence where God can be heard. We need so badly to find silence, exterior and interior. In silence, God surely works mysterious wonders.

Another way to simplicity is the practice of "being present where you are." One of Father Damasus's friends and collaborators was Douglas Steere, the Quaker, who has a booklet on being present where you are. Certainly one of the ways to simplicity is to seek to practice being all there, to avoid being divided and distracted, not to be in a drowse of preoccupation about unimportant things. We can be in the same room, we can be in the same life, if you like, and still really not be together, and not have that unity. But simplicity demands a willingness to be vulnerable enough to be influenced by and even to be changed by others. This is what takes place on the deepest levels of love and of friendship, and out of the long loneliness of life, there is a possibility of some luminous moments of profound communion,
of truly coming into the presence of the other. There is a simplicity, a unity, that is possible, instead of that separateness, or even conflictual kinds of relationships that we often experience.

Simplicity also has much to do with the capacity for attention. George Washington Carver said, "To see God, look at anything closely." Dag Hammarskjold said, "In the point of rest at the center of our being, we encounter a world where all things are at rest in the same way. Then a tree becomes a mystery, a cloud a revelation, each man a cosmos of whose riches we can only catch glimpses." The life of simplicity opens to us a book in which we never get beyond the first syllable. The capacity for attention is not easily acquired. When we are capable of being attentive, then immediately that sense of separation from others, and from ourselves, and even from our whole world passes. And then we have that wonderful experience that all that is, is one, and that we are united with it. We sense our harmony with the music of the spheres. Perhaps all of our newly emphasized ecological sense ought to be rooted in that kind of simplicity.

Our contemporary challenge, living in simplicity, is not new. It is a problem from time immemorial: the challenge of multiplicity. We need not look far to realize how we are surrounded and immersed in multiplicity. If we consider only the media, and the effect that the media has upon us, or the prevailing philosophies, we find that we are assaulted by a plague of multiplicity and dualism.

How shall we be healed toward greater simplicity and unity? An earlier asceticism would put the accent on elimination and separation from the world. Aspects of that asceticism are certainly valid. However, today's challenge is to find integration. There is a need to cultivate a truly catholic attitude, the attitude that says—"not only, but also." Not only work, but also leisure. Not only heaven, but also earth. Not only woman, but also man. Not only soul, but also body, and so on, in an effort to overcome the dualism that is deeply ingrained in many of us.

The gospel speaks to this question in the story of Martha and Mary, and it is probably not surprising to find that St. Bernard commented again and again on that scripture passage on the question of integration of action and contemplation, doing and listening.
To arrive at simplicity is surely a lifetime’s work. One progresses and then realizes that there is a whole lot more to do. While realizing and accepting that fact, it is also terribly important that we realize that we already have a gift, a call, a promise of unity within us. We need to think often of the shema Israel: “Listen, O, Israel. The Lord your God is one.” And our faith reminds us that each of us is created in the image and the likeness of God. And this unity, which is of the nature of God, is already within us, desiring to be fully realized.

This week I was reading about the death of Isaac Stern, the great violinist. Yo-Yo Ma, Itzhak Perlman, and Michael Wiles, the head of Lincoln Center, were talking about Stern and how he saved Carnegie Hall. Wiles said that the impact Stern had on Carnegie Hall was so immense that he would be a part of everything they do forever. Perlman seconded the thought. “He is leaving a huge void for us,” he said. “It’s like there will be nobody to take his place, not as a violinist—there are other great violinists—but as a whole personality and force.” Father Damasus was like that for me and I think for many other people who knew him. I believe that the unity and simplicity of his personality, and of his being as a human, and as a monk, had been bought at a high price. Once acquired, it certainly engendered an incomparable joy and grace and blessing for those people who met him.

Agape was the core of Father Damasus’s teaching and of the monastic ideal, and consequently of the human ideal. Eventually, throughout a lifetime, we should arrive progressively at being the recipient and the mediator of the very agape of God. Our faith teaches us that the Spirit is at work in us, and that our hope is not in vain, to arrive finally at a love without defect or limit, a total, absolute, unconditional love.

Thinking of what is happening in our world, the search for simplicity, the search for the absolute of God, beckons us to find ourselves in the deepest caverns of our own hearts. And there, instead of the implacable hatred of terrorists, we would be able to pose an act of simple, undiluted, undivided love. Doing that would have consequences in terms of the unity of our world, of our being, and of all that is.
Mount Saviour Monastery

A Photographic Record

Trimming the vines around the first Chapel, St. Peter's House, 1951.
Original altar and first oratory in St. Peter's the former Hofbauer House), 1951.

The Hofbauer House and present St. Peter's, 1951.
Paul Schretlen and Michael O’Boyle received as postulants, March 4, 1952.

Fr. Placid, Dr. Thomas Boler, Jr., and Fr. Joseph inspecting a cow, 1955.
Our Lady Queen of Peace, August 1956.

Incensing the altar during Eucharistic celebration, 1956.
Monks inspecting one-half of the herd in Spring 1957.

Men dining at noon for the main meal in the monastery refectory in 1958. Men and women guests ate separately.

Sisters of St. Mary of Namur baling the hay, 1970.

Fr. Damasus’s funeral, June 30, 1971.
"Word Out of Silence" symposium, August 1972.

Arrival of sheep, May 9, 1981.

Mount Saviour's foundation, the Montreal Priory, 1981.
Fall festival.

Oblates Tom Lorenzo, Paul Masolini, Veronica Devlin, Basil Shanahan, and Vince Tolve, with Fr. Martin, October 1986.
Brother Victor with Rhoda Cicotti and her daughter Eliza, tending the lambs in 1986.
A sailboat outing at Lake Keuka in 1991, with Brothers Pierre, Gabriel, and Seraphim, Fathers Martin and James, and Anthony Ciotti.

Summer Program students, 1991.
Monks from Western Priory, Vermont, visiting with the Community of Mount Saviour in 1994.

The Genesee Valley Orchestra and Chorus, directed by Sister Virginia Hogan, SSJ, performing at the Clemens Center with monks from Mount Saviour for the monastery's fiftieth anniversary celebration, May 6, 2001.