

A Voice for the Praying Church

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It is fitting to add my voice to the many voices that will be speaking words of gratitude and congratulations to our Benedictine brothers of Mt. Saviour Monastery this year, 2001. You stand among us as witnesses to God's faithfulness. In Pine City, New York, you have made visible day in and day out for half a century the wisdom of St. Benedict teaching about what it means to live well, whatever one's times and circumstances. While the world has been changing around you these past fifty years, you have shown your friends the wisdom of honoring place, honoring tradition, and honoring commitment to one another as the way to flourish from one generation to the next. Your very existence among us is a contribution of monasticism to the church and to the world, evidenced by the fact that since your early days both church and world have found their way to your home and your chapel. Congratulation! Our thanksgiving gives rise to our prayer for you: by God's mercy may you continue to flourish for uncounted years ahead.

When Prior Martin invited me to be part of this anniversary series, with the sole stipulation that I offer something from my particular interests and expertise, I determined that I should speak about liturgical praying. Praying liturgically has engaged me from my childhood and adolescence in Chicago, long before I had any words to name that interest. I consider myself blessed to have been given the opportunity as a Benedictine to study and to teach in an area for which I have always felt passion. Now, in my post-academic post as prioress of a monastic community of women, I find myself reflecting on old questions in new ways. And so my topic: *A Voice for the Praying Church*. Note that my claim for

the Benedictines is modest: *A Voice* not *The Voice* for the Praying Church.

To pique your interest in the phenomenon of praying, let me begin with stories. I will use a biblical wisdom strategy—"three things and then a fourth." Three brief anecdotes and then a fourth that invite us to think about praying as ordinary, but also mysterious human activity. The first story is found among *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Locate yourself in the fourth century Egyptian desert, where the following was recorded: A brother said to Abba Anthony, "Pray for me." The old man said to him. "I will have not mercy upon you, nor will God have any, if you yourself do not make an effort and if you do not pray to God."

The contemporary American writer Annie Dillard recounts my second story in her book-length essay on the human estate in the cosmos, named *For the Time Being*.¹ Locate yourself in eighteenth century in the company of Eastern European Hasidic Jews. Imagine, if you will, the magic and mystery of a world experienced at all times as diffused with the divine—the world of European Hasidism expressed in the stained glass and paintings of Marc Chagall. As the story goes:

A Hasid was traveling to Miedzyboz to spend the Day of Atonement with the Baal Shem Tov in the prayer house. Nightfall caught him in an open field and forced him, to his distress, to pray alone. After the holiday, "the Baal Shem Tov received him with particular happiness and cordiality. 'Your prayer,' he said, 'lifted up all the prayers which were lying stored in that field.' "

And Dillard then adds, from Psalm 93: "The waters have lifted up their voice; / the waters have lifted up their pounding waves."

The third story brings us to our own times. Mother Irene Dabalus, the Filipino-born superior general of the Tutzing Missionary Benedictines, upon returning recently from a trip to visit her sisters in India, remarked that the Indian people have come to respect the Christian communities among them for their works of charity. But they do not think of Christians, even Benedictine missionaries, as gifted in prayer. To learn to pray even

Indian Christians will often turn to Buddhist and Hindu teachers. When I heard her remark, I remembered a rueful comment made in my presence many years ago by an American Benedictine monk: "It will be said of our times that there were many monastic vocations, but there was no room for them in our monasteries."

The fourth and final anecdote, also from the Hasidic tradition, reports the wonder of God at prayer. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav said that God studies Torah three hours a day. The Talmud notes that God prays, and puts on phylacteries. What does God pray? "May it be my will that my mercy overcome my anger."

I savor these stories, because I have been thinking for a long time about prayer and about the praying Benedictines do. I first met Benedictines at prayer in my undergraduate college days, which began only a short time after the Mt. Saviour community was established. I remember clearly what attracted me to the Benedictine way of life lived by the women who were my college teachers. Over the course of four years we could not help but overhear them chanting the Divine Office in choir, although we never joined them. From a distance, it became evident to me that they knew something about praying, and that I could learn from them. Forty-plus years later, I am still learning. But I am now better able to understand what we Benedictines are up to, and why; and also why what we do is a gift to church and society.

The questions and some answers are summed up in those stories:

Praying is an ordinary human activity, not something for specialists. (*So Anthony.*)

Prayer rises from the whole creation. (*So the Baal Shem Tov.*)

We humans need to look for teachers of prayer. (*So Mother Irene Dabalus*)

God, too, has learned to pray wisely by spending time with Torah. (*So the Hasids*)

Our Situation: Being Human in the Cosmos

Having invited you to the Egyptian desert, to Eastern Europe, to the Philippines, let me transcend the local and particular in order to locate this reflection about Benedictines at prayer within “the big picture.” For it is from within our human condition within the cosmos that we find ourselves being drawn to prayer.

In your imagination pull out the many photos you have seen of our small blue planet earth orbiting within our galaxy. Then locate that galaxy within the expanding universe of countless galaxies. If you have read astrophysicist Brian Swimme and historian of religion Thomas Berry’s book *The Universe Story*, pull to consciousness their presentation of “the big picture.”² Retrieve an awareness of the universe that astronomers and mathematicians try to conceptualize for us in models. Disney World to the contrary, it is decidedly *not* “a small world after all.” When we put ourselves in “the big picture,” we know that during our relatively brief lifetimes, each of us is in on a great ride within an expanding the universe. But we also know, from watching our neighbors close up, that our ride in the cosmos will be a tragic one. We will flourish and then die quickly in the cosmic scheme of things.

Again, I turn to Annie Dillard for the turn of phrase that helps us to locate ourselves as “the human kind” within the big picture. Dillard writes from the viewpoint of a modern Christian living in a scientific age. She says,

Trafficking directly with the divine, as the manna-eating wilderness generation did, and as Jesus did, confers no immunity to death or hazard. You can live as a particle crashing about and colliding in a welter of materials with God, or you can live as a particle crashing about and colliding in a welter of materials without God. But you cannot live outside the welter of colliding materials.”³

We know of what she speaks: AIDS, malaria, shrapnel or bullets, car crashes, explosions, floods, fires, earthquakes, clogged arteries, cancer.

It is hard to keep things in perspective, to keep looking at the cosmic picture of fatal collisions, for a whole range of reasons. Ernest Becker argued some years ago in *The Denial of Death*, that were we humans fully attentive to the conditions of our existence we would lose all human capacity to function sanely.⁴ We would be unable to “get on with life.” What we identify as psychological health in our time, said Becker, requires that we develop strong egos, that we become individual selves with life projects making us worthy of being remembered by posterity. To children we say, “What do you want to do when you grow up?” To adults who have been working for years we say again, “What will you do when you retire?”

But other thinkers—Dillard among them—defy the limits of “common sense,” insisting that we pay attention to our condition of our human condition for the sake of true self-knowledge. Long before the modern scientific era, the psalmist wrote, and we still pray: “No matter how great, / no one sees the truth: / we die like beasts.” And elsewhere in Psalm 49 we pray: “No matter how wealthy, / no matter how many tell you, / ‘My, how well you have done,’ / The rich all join the dead / never to see light again.” Life projects carry us only so far in coming to terms with our place in the divine plan.

We know the story of the great saint Thomas Aquinas, who completed a life project on a grand scale, the kind Becker might have described as the work of a cultural hero. But upon his enlightenment concerning his place in the mystery of human being, Thomas himself devalued the ultimate significance of the great *Summa Theologica*. Ironically, it is most typically in relation to his life project that Aquinas is still remembered and celebrated.

Philosophers in every era try to assess our identity as humans. The contemporary French philosopher Julia Kristeva summarizes our paradoxical human condition in the epigram “I am mortal and I am speaking.” Annie Dillard sums up our place as humans in the cosmic scheme of things. She observes, “An infant is a pucker of the earth’s thin skin; so are we. We arise like budding yeasts and break off; we forget our beginnings.” Another philosopher explains more abstractly how we who are “puckers of the earth that have broken off” are, nevertheless, each of us, a microcosm

of the universe. In each woman and man, in each infant on planet earth is found everything that can be found in the entire cosmos, that is, both spirit and matter. Our distinction: we are that part of the universe of matter come to consciousness and responsibility.

And having come to consciousness, we humans are able to wonder intellectually at a world not of our own making that we take in through our senses. Inevitably we discover, much as we resist the discovery, that we have to die. These are the realities that evoke from us the response we call prayer. We wonder and are grateful for the gift we are and the gifts that have been given to us. But we are left dissatisfied, restless, wanting more, without knowing clearly what it is we want. Put positively, we are impelled toward self-transcendence without knowing what will satisfy, without knowing what the German theologian Karl Rahner called “the whither of our transcendence.” We resist the prospect that “the I that I am” will perish, will be returned to the earth, will vanish and be seen no more. Personally, in dealing with the death of a person significant to me, I return again and again to Edna St. Vincent Millay’s poem “Dirge Without Music.” She opens with her theme: “I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground.” And the last stanza returns to it:

Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.⁵

Faced with death, we choose to live. So it is good news that the story of Jesus, the story of the death of one known as a good man, invites us to believe and to hope.

Divine Incarnation as Revelation in the Cosmos

Modern scientists have recently gotten interested in telling the story of “Spirit in the universe,” the story of the dynamism of continually unfolding universe that started from nothing and gave birth to time billions of years earlier. Pre-scientific creation myths among all the world’s peoples gave local accounts of how things

came to be, and each generation taught the next how to respond to the mystery of existence as they understood it. Notre Dame philosopher John Dunne has proposed that all cultures are organized to respond to that disconcerting truth: humans die. As Dunne put it in *The City of the Gods*, one of his early works, each culture proposes an answer to the perennial human question: "If I must someday die, what can I do to satisfy my desire to live?"⁶

Enter the story of Christ and the church. It is the story of incarnation, the story of the breaking forth of divine spirit into human history in the person Jesus of Nazareth and the outpouring of his Holy Spirit on those who would become the church. We who believe call the person of Jesus God's definitive revelation to our humankind of our place in the cosmic mystery. We have come to believe that if we keep our eye on Jesus and open ourselves to the Holy Spirit of the risen Christ, it will be shown to us how to live well toward death in any and all times, places, and cultures. To keep our eye on Jesus and to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit of the risen Christ, so that we may live and die well, is the vocation of the Christian contemplative. It is thereby the vocation of all the baptized who have put their faith in Christ. As Abba Anthony warned the suppliant brother who had asked Anthony to pray for him: "I will have not mercy upon you, nor will God have any, if you yourself do not make an effort and if you do not pray to God"—if you are not willing to stand before mystery.

And at this point the questions of teachers of prayer are raised. How can I pray unless someone shows me? Who taught that desert brother how to pray? What was his path to the prayer of contemplation? And who has been teaching Christians in every successive generation how to pray? (Why were those seekers of God in India looking for teachers everywhere but among Christians?)

The Hasidic rabbi I referred to earlier in this essay noted that the source for God's prayer is Torah. Why should we not begin there? And what did God learn to pray for, through the faithful study of Torah? If the story is true (and what reason is there to believe the rabbis were mistaken in this reflection?) the God of Israel, who is the God of all nations, learned to pray thus: "May it be my will that my mercy overcome my anger!" Perhaps we too might pray for an abatement of anger in favor of loving

kindness in our dealings with all our humankind. In summary, there are two things we can know. First, the Scriptures are a reliable teacher of prayer. And second, we pray in order to be reshaped so as to share in the heart and mind of God.

The story of monasticism from Anthony onward advances in great measure as a story of seekers of meaning for their lives, young and old, who are willing to make the effort to pray to know the heart of God, and who gather around mentors in schools of prayer. Some arrive, now as in earlier generations, knowing that “Jesus is the answer,” too young or too self-confident to have a clue about the question. No matter. In Benedict’s school of the Lord’s service, serious seekers would learn both the question and the answer. With or without the question clearly formulated—“If I must someday die, what can I do to satisfy my desire to live”—many generations of men and women who came to Benedictine monasteries seeking God learned how to pray and so how to live.

Even before Benedict, monastic seekers of meaning for living learned the Scriptures by heart, and so learned to recognize mercy, compassion, and lovingkindness through stories and songs celebrating its absence as well as its presence in human history. Living with other seekers, they also learned the practices of mercy, compassion, loving kindness—and they learned also about what happens in the absence of mercy, for they lived among human brothers and sisters who were all learning together. As monastic seekers took the biblical songs and stories to heart, they were slowly being transformed by the Spirit of Jesus. The Holy Spirit breathed in them, through those stories and songs lodged in their hearts. By Benedict’s time, traditions of communal monastic prayer had formed, and it is the monastic prayer tradition we call the Divine Office or the Liturgy of the Hours, that we want to speak about now.

Official Claims Concerning the Monastic Liturgy of the Hours

Church documents of the last two centuries have repeated more than once and in a variety of settings the claim that the sole necessary work of monastic communities is prayer. The Dominican

General Timothy Radcliffe recently offered to the Congress of Abbots his observation that Benedictines as an Order in the church have “nothing in particular” to do, except pray. Unfortunately, civil authorities in modern European countries were never fully comfortable with that assertion, and in a variety of ways mandated that monastic communities needed to justify their existence by also “doing something useful”—the utility of prayer in and with Christ not being immediately evident to moderns. The women in the Bavarian community to which we Benedictine sisters at Mount St. Scholastica trace our roots made themselves useful in the nineteenth century by becoming school-teacher-monastics:

The lack of clarity about monastic identity and purpose that resulted from the pressure to be “useful” according to pre-determined cultural criteria had a cumulative negative effect on monastic communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There have been many hyphenated Benedictine monastics in the Western church. Because of the confusion, there has been a decline in the courage of hyphenated Benedictine monastics to believe that the contemplative vocation can stand on its own as a contribution to either church or society. For the most part Western Benedictines have all but succumbed to the value judgments of modern culture about what is useful. Mount Saviour’s foundation story protected it somewhat from that history.

Fortunately, the call to Benedictines to do “nothing in particular” but to pursue a public vocation to contemplative prayer continues to sound. Yet the call carries with it a correlative confusion about the nature of contemplative prayer. Benedict’s Rule provides that monastics say the prayer of the Hours. Yet aspiring contemplatives in today’s Benedictine monasteries wonder. With requirements for hours of choral public prayer and for manual labor, reading, and community living, how can there be time for sitting, centering, breathing, and meditation as paths to contemplative prayer?

In the authoritative *Directory for the Celebration of the Work of God* prepared twenty-five years ago by the Congress of Benedictine Abbots, the abbots expressed no self-doubt, if they had any, about the Liturgy of the Hours as itself the Work of God, the way into the heart of God. Using the theological vocabulary of the Second Vatican Council, the *Directory* calls the

praying of the Liturgy of the Hours the “proper ministry” of a monastic community. And with perhaps a nod to the die-hard utilitarians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they identify the prayer of the Hours as ministry “useful for the building up of the Body of Christ.”⁷ Indeed, paraphrasing their assertion in contemporary economic terms, could we not say that every Benedictine liturgical gathering for the prayer of the Hours is adding value in the divine economy, the cosmic *oeconomia*?

Yet we need better to understand just what is being said about prayer as the proper ministry of Benedictines useful for the Church. How is our choral praying of the Liturgy of the Hours “a proper ministry” for the Body of Christ and the world? How is it even valuable to ourselves? We have to rule out the easy answer: whatever Benedictines are doing when we are engaged in the Work of God, the *Opus Dei*, we are not spiritual mercenaries for busy people. Abba Anthony had already warned sixteen hundred years ago that God expected each of us to make the effort ourselves. Unfortunately, the sense of being spiritual mercenaries has surfaced more than once in monastic history, as when monastic foundations were paid princely sums to pray for the salvation of their benefactors, who were themselves quite commonly engaged in counter-salvific activities.

I have been thinking again why we as twenty-first century Benedictines still commit ourselves to praying in choir as a community and call this choral praying our proper ministry. I am convinced that the ministry of the Benedictine monastery will find its expression in its willingness to be the voice of the praying church. Nevertheless, the final part of my presentation is necessarily dialogic. Any claim we might make from within the world of the Benedictine monastery must be validated by those who are the praying church within the larger human community.

Benedictine Monastics in Choir: A Voice for the Praying Church

My first presumption is that everyone is praying, because the One we seek in our desire to live is already stirring within us. During our daily “crashing and colliding” with the materials of

the universe, Spirit stirs in the whole creation. In the melee on this planet that is our home in the universe, everybody is praying, even when the words spoken sound to human ears like cursing. The psalms have succeeded in teaching us that. St. Paul goes further, assuring us that the Holy Spirit is praying at all times, with sighs too deep for words, helping us in our weakness, interceding for us when we do not know how to pray. Some of us pray aloud in choir as our distinct ministry. However, we will look at the choir only after we see the monastic choir in context.

Ride a public bus or subway during the morning rush hour. Some commuters will have bibles open in their laps; others will sit in self-contained silence, faces masked but full of interior longing or despair or delight and gratitude or perhaps seething with anger at betrayal. Human aspiration and passion, despair and happiness pervade the morning air in rush hour traffic, too. Every person we observe is linked in their interior longing or despair to unseen others in hospitals, in jails, or in the homes they have left behind.

But let's not limit ourselves as we think about the context of the Benedictine monastic choir. Paul and the psalmist and the Hasidic rabbis tell us that the striving of spirit in the world is not limited to our self-conscious humankind. The very fields are full of prayers. Wildflowers and grasses reflect back the glory of the creator. Fields with stagnant ponds and trash wait "with eager longing to be set free from bondage to decay," wait for the redemption of our humankind so that they may obtain the freedom of glory (Romans 8:18-25).

Because our humankind does not know how to pray as we ought, says Paul, the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. At this juncture of unknowing, the church enters in a distinctive way, and the context of the monastic choir is also the church. It is true that *spirit* is active everywhere in the universe. Yet the Holy Spirit of Jesus of Nazareth, the Risen Christ, is being continually poured out. It is this Holy Spirit of Jesus that shapes the community of the baptized, the Body of Christ on earth. The church is a community transcending every culture, yet resident in virtually all living cultures at the start of the twenty-first century. In a parallel expansion, monastic choirs have been forming for the prayer of the Hours everywhere in the southern hemisphere and in Asia.

Why this expansion of monastic choirs? Consider this possibility. The church understands itself to be a priestly people among all the peoples of the earth. But what is this priestly identity? For many generations, Catholics have equated priestly identity with ordination to church office. Yet in a much earlier era peoples and cultures have understood the role of priest as intermediary; in the words of Scripture, the priest is designated to “weep between the porch and the altar” (Joel 2:17). The priest could negotiate this connection, because it had been revealed to the priest who God was and how to approach God, voicing on behalf of others what needs to be voiced. It is within this frame that the whole church has its priestly identity, for it is to the whole church that the mystery of Christ has been disclosed, for the sake of the world. Christians, may be “puckers on the earth’s thin skin,” like all other humans, but we believe that we are also those “puckers” to whom the mystery of the world’s salvation in Christ has been entrusted. In biblical language, we are ambassadors sent to deliver good news to the whole world, and advocates sent by Christ’s Holy Spirit for the world’s well-being.

It is within this frame of its priestly identity conferred at baptism that the church is impelled to “pray always.” Praise and endless glory to God befit the church. But so also does lamentation with Christ for what is wounded and goes unhealed. So also is it fitting that the church plead for mercy for all humankind and intercede for forgiveness or seek consolation for what has been lost.

To underscore my point, let me ask you to return to the people praying on the subways and buses. However much they are filled with pain and longing, gratitude and delight, many if not most are short on language adequate to speak about their deepest desires and regrets. In them and in people like them all over the world, the Holy Spirit is undoubtedly praying, even as they themselves doubt that they know how to pray. Others among the commuters, having been baptized into the Body of Christ and shaped by the faith of the church, have learned how to draw the world’s inarticulate longing, and their own, into focus, identifying every human experience with the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But the morning praying of the commuters, like the morning prayer of much of the world, is inaudible and

invisible. Yet if prayer is to follow the law of Incarnation, both the inarticulate prayer of the human heart and the interior prayer of the Body of Christ stand in need of release into the world of conscious matter. The prayer of Christ needs body and voice—the body and voice of the church in human history.

Embodied human prayer has a living history. Just recently we have seen news reports of millions of Muslims embodying their desire for connection with God in their *hajj* to the Arabian desert. We have heard reports of countless Hindus bathing naked at the confluence of sacred waters at an auspicious time in their festival season. Jewish men wrapped in prayer shawls sway and chant daily at the Western Wall. Buddhists sit.

Embodied Christian prayer, too, has a living history. But Catholics and Christians generally have lost confidence in our most ancient traditions of embodied prayer, among them the Benedictine communal prayer of the Hours. Christians in modern Western cultures, including Catholic Christians, are allowing themselves to be persuaded that embodied communal prayer is antithetical to true “spirituality.” True spirituality is being redefined primarily as a matter of personal interiority, so time spent praying “in” and “with” Christ for the whole of creation does not have much attraction. Ours is world where successful people are those who are able to “make it on their own.”

In this context it is worthwhile to look again at the tradition of embodied prayer that Benedict offered his monastics. Monastics assemble with regularity several times daily. In assembling, they make visible locally their Christian identity as a priestly people. The priesthood they exercise in this audible song of praise, lamentation, and pleading arises from their baptism in the Spirit of Jesus. The morning and evening and midday sacrifices they raise to God are “sacrifice of praises.” In solidarity with the whole of creation, the whole human community, and the whole church occupied and distracted by many other responsibilities, monastic communities are free to assemble regularly because, except for this embodied praying, monastic communities have “nothing in particular” to do.

Like God, if Rabbi Nachman of Braslav had it right, Benedictine monastic communities at prayer stay close to the

sacred text, so that they come to understand more and more clearly themselves what it is that God wants and how they should be approaching God on behalf of the world. Staying close to the biblical Word of God, the shared heart of the monastic community is worked over daily by the Holy Spirit, and individual monastics are invited to put on the mind of Christ themselves, but not without difficulty. As St. Augustine knew, our praying the psalms does not have as its purpose the edification of God, but rather the purpose of directing our human desire toward what God desires. He and many other early monastic teachers of prayer, including Benedict, recognized that praying the daily Office and living from the biblical words being voiced, being heard, and shaping one's heart was a sure path to the formation of the contemplative Christian.

The "Usefulness" of Benedictine Monasteries in the Ministry of Prayer

People everywhere are seeking spiritual formation and spiritual direction. Researchers and general cultural observers agree that our nation is currently caught up in a quest for "spirituality" and a hunger for things "traditional." This is specially the case for young people and young adults who experience themselves as ungrounded in the cosmic colliding that is human existence. They are searching everywhere for roots, for meaning, and for traditions. They often search alone. The parish church and the local congregations fail to touch many of them. They suspect there is something more, and they are on the lookout for guides, mentors, gurus—people who seem to "know." Books, tapes, short workshops available on the open market promise them sure and relatively painless paths to spiritual enlightenment. In their search for spiritual enlightenment they are vulnerable to charlatans and self-promoters, to spiritual "fads" and to religious romanticism, as we all were in our youth.

The Benedictine community at daily prayer, gathered several times daily, voices the traditional prayer of the church, the prayer of the Body of Christ. In our public praying we offer seekers alternative understandings of spiritual discipline and of the prayer

of Christ. So, if the twenty-first century Benedictine community gathered for the Prayer of the Hours is to be a community ministering especially while it is praying, such a community in the United States will have to exercise generous welcome and attentive hospitality to those who wish to join them for prayer. To welcome others is to invite them into the heart of God and the mystery of the divine plan.

Monastic communities at prayer have the freedom to be visibly ecumenical. At the Prayer of the Hours, there is no need to warn Christians of other communions of our separation nor of formal boundaries we must honor, as is the case with our current Catholic eucharistic discipline. The Hours are voiced not only *for* but *with* whatever part of the disunited and divided praying church wishes to join us. This is a prayer that overcomes and transcends the boundaries and barriers which separate Christians.

This is also a communal prayer that affirms the identity of all the baptized as one priestly people. In an era when ecclesiastical rank is known to rankle, and tensions grow up between the ordained and the “merely baptized,” the Prayer of the Hours shows the church to itself as a priestly people joined in the prayer of Christ. All together sound the laments of our humankind; all together sing praise; all together give thanks; all together ask for deliverance, forgiveness, and divine mercy. Hospitality extended to the whole church at the prayer of the Hours can be both evangelical and healing for Christians struggling with their Catholic identity.

Just as ecclesial, Christian, and Catholic identity can be discovered in the praying of the Liturgy of the Hours, so also does this prayer affirm and deepen the monastic identity of those who have publicly promised Benedictine monastic *conversatio*. Let me make two observations here. First, the Hours are communal, and the gathering by the community hour after hour, day by day, year in and year out, is itself a community-forming practice. Community-forming practices in a Benedictine monastery are ascetic disciplines, opportunities for mutual forebearance, for welcoming the mysterious Other, summoning the individual monastic beyond self-satisfaction, deeper into the Paschal Mystery, where new life opens up through dying to self.

Second, the chanting of the biblical word is an induction into the heart of God, where mercy and compassion prevail over anger. Chanting the biblical words faithfully, Benedictines privileged to voice the prayer of the whole Church are invited to understand that the creator of the universe knows and accepts our humankind better than we know and accept ourselves. To come to know this mystery and to believe it is to be a contemplative Christian, a mystic. Gregory the Great tells us that Benedict at the end of his life saw the whole world suffused in light. Gregory tells us that Scholastica knew that the heart of God was loving-kindness and that even the storm and the rain clouds conspired to let love prevail. Thomas Merton, at least for a moment, saw the people of Louisville bathed in radiance.

Benedictine communities within which the mystery of God is heartfelt because it is being heard and received, with however great difficulty or ease, will be places that attract others. Such communities are attractive because they “know something.” However inarticulate monastics are, people seeking “spirituality” will find monastic communities. In the past visitors were often satisfied to have placed themselves, however, uncomprehendingly, in the monastic presence. At present, in our new cultural circumstances I doubt if that is any longer enough. Seekers want and need more from us.

The Catholic people’s identity, ordained and lay, needs to be suffused with the message of divine compassion and loving-kindness. The ministry of prayer already affirmed—that we Benedictines faithfully give voice to the praying church—may be evolving, not by our design but in response to the church’s great need in our time and place. What would it mean for Benedictine monasteries, now located on every continent on the globe, intentionally to commit ourselves to become, in whatever formal or informal ways are appropriate, local schools for prayer? Our world needs places where mercy and compassion and loving-kindness for the world’s suffering are able to be linked directly to the prayer of Christ and the mystery of the divine design. The people of central New York are already blessed that Mount Saviour Monastery ventured onto this path fifty years ago. *Ad multos annos.*

Notes

1. Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being* (New York: Knopf, 1999).
2. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994).
3. Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 118.
4. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973).
5. Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Dirge Without Music," in *The Buck in the Snow and Other Poems* (New York: Harper and Row, 1950).
6. John Dunne, *The City of the Gods* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978).
7. *Directory for the Celebration of the Work of God* (Congress of Benedictine Abbots, 1976), #14.