

The Contribution of Monastic Life to the Church and World

JEREMY DRISCOLL

From *The Dialogues* of St. Gregory we know the little there is to know of the life of St. Benedict. St. Gregory tells us how, shortly before his death, St. Benedict had a magnificent vision in which he contemplated the whole world as contained within a single ray of light. Think about this image. St. Benedict was grasping the meaning of the whole world within something larger than itself. He was understanding it within the light of Christ, and his whole monastic life had been a preparation for this contemplative grasp. Let this serve as an image of what I wish to focus on; namely, the vision of Church and world that monastic life makes possible. It is in a particular kind of vision of the Church and the world that monastic life can make its particular contribution.

I will return to this image shortly. But first let me indicate how I wish to talk about the theme assigned to me, the contribution of monastic life to Church and world. On the occasion of the anniversary of a founding of a monastery, the tendency is to speak of history, and I will do so: What has the contribution been? But I would like to do so especially with a view toward the present and future: What can the contribution be now and in the future?

The monk is a “type” (or archetype) in the technical sense of the term. All societies, be they ecclesial or ssecular, have their types: the tiller of the soil, the hunter, the warrior, politician, poet, sage, king, queen, monk, and so on. To speak about the monastic contribution to Church and world, I want to begin here and not simply with a Benedictine focus. The Benedictine special something—whatever it is—is best understood when it avoids being too focused on itself. So, the first question becomes what has been

and what can be the contribution to the Church and world of the monk as a type?

We in the West say "monastic" and are inclined to think immediately of St. Benedict, but we need to be aware that he comes as a sort of culmination and turning point in a movement that was several centuries in development before him. One of the areas of primitive pre-Benedictine monasticism that is particularly useful to examine is its relationship to ancient philosophy. The monastic movement took much from the spirit of Greek philosophy, just as the whole Christian Church did. It could do so because this philosophy was profoundly religious and spiritual. It was a being in love with wisdom, a conversion toward wisdom, to which one dedicated one's whole life. Pierre Hadot describes ancient philosophy as "spiritual exercises," exercises whose purpose was to teach those who love wisdom how to live, how to dialogue, how to die, and how to read.¹ Philosophy for the ancients was not a body of abstract ideas to toy with. It was mainly about a way of living that enabled one to think right thoughts, thus to arrive at truth.

The fourth-century Christian monasticism of the Egyptian, Palestinian, and Syrian deserts was an asceticism that replaced martyrdom at the time of the imperial Church in the first half of the fourth century. But through the Cappadocians (Basil and the two Gregorys) and then Evagrius Ponticus, the asceticism of the desert came to be understood as moving within a trajectory similar to and directly related to Greek philosophy conceived as a spiritual exercise. Thus Christian asceticism receives a refined focus: asceticism as a way of living that enabled the Christian to think right thoughts, thus to arrive at the truth that is in Christ Jesus. The Christian scriptures became for the desert monks the main text around how to live, how to dialogue, how to die, and how to read. Thus, the desert monks, who dedicated their entire lives to this "philosophical" search, bequeathed to the whole Church a tremendous patrimony of slowly acquired spiritual wisdom based on the scriptures, but much refined by the precision of thought that Greek philosophy promoted. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity, as articulated in the debates surrounding the Council of Constantinople in 381, also owes much to the Greek

philosophical tradition. And so toward the end of the fourth century, monasticism became an actual spiritual workshop where one learned how to live, how to dialogue, how to die, and how to read the mystery of the Holy Trinity in all of life.

It is within this most swift and powerful of rivers that the sixth-century monasticism of St. Benedict is to be located. In a way that is most admirable for its practicality, St. Benedict arranged a way of life suited to people of his time, less immediately sensitive to the Greek philosophical patrimony, that enabled them to continue this search for divine wisdom. We are not here today to speak of the specific doctrines that are found in the Holy Rule. Specific doctrines aside, the contribution of the Holy Rule to Church and world is felt already in the whole way of life that Benedict organizes. He arranges the monk's day in such a way that it is saturated by the sacred scriptures, in the divine office, in *lectio divina*, in the pervasive silence that is designed to let his world sink down ever more deeply. Benedict's monks were also learning (1) how to live, (2) how to dialogue, (3) how to die, and (4) how to read the mystery of the Holy Trinity in all of life.

Let us return to St. Benedict's vision. Think again about this image of a world contained in a ray of light. In effect it shows us a wonderful paradox of the Christian life. By virtue of the Christian's participation in the resurrection of Christ, the heart of the Christian becomes in a very real sense larger than the world. Before Christ and the divine life that he brought to earth, we can say, rather naturally, that the world is a macrocosm within which each human being is its microcosm. The world is big, and each of us is small, each a small world. But in Christ, nothing less than the very being of God is placed in the human heart. In this way, then, each believing person becomes the macrocosm and the world its microcosm. This is what is signified in the vision of Benedict. The whole world can be seen in a single glance in Christ. It is beautiful and stunning and something to be loved, but in Christ my heart becomes bigger than the world and contains it. This is the monk-as-type in that technical sense in which I wish to use the term. The monk is meant to behold the world in a single contemplative glance and to contain it within something larger,

something larger that paradoxically lies within. As C.S. Lewis reveals in his children's story, *The Nannia Chronicles*, the inside is bigger than the outside. And although a type must live the reality of his calling, the type embodies a truth that is valid for the whole society. Others too can learn the monk's vision. When this happens, it can be called the monastic contribution.

It is in this perspective that we can understand the contribution of the monastic practice of *lectio divina*, the prayerful reading of Scripture. Reading the scriptures is, among other things, about reading the world, seeking to uncover its deepest meaning. And one discovers through the sacred texts that the heart of the reader is made ever larger, such that it in fact becomes larger than the whole world; for the heart of the reader becomes the temple of Trinitarian love. *Lectio divina* was conducted in the monastic centuries with the *Canticle of Canticles* as the centerpiece of the whole effort. Every word was referred to Christ as to a bridegroom and understood to be potentially "a kiss from his mouth" (*Canticles* 1:2), and every desire to understand the text was nothing less than the bride, the soul, seeking her lover wherever he roams. Thus, what makes the heart large enough to contain the whole world is love itself, my love for Christ and my astonishment, like the bride of the *Canticle*, that he finds me beautiful. It is to this that we can refer the words at the end of the Prologue of St. Benedict's Rule: "As we advance in this way of life and in faith our hearts enlarge and we run the path of the commandments of God filled with the inexpressible sweetness of love" (Prologue 49).

The monk as a type is a very broad category and history shows us many versions. But this is not because the category is vague. This is individual freedom that the search for God both demands and brings about. In fact, what we admire in the great monastics from the past or in contemporary examples is the attainment of inner freedom that their lives demonstrate. The real monk is the one who is free to do whatever God calls him to do, and no institutional forms can ultimately pin this grace down. More often than not, the monk will live in a monastery and take up the obligations of community life and work, but there are monks who abandon even this and live entirely alone or wander

from place to place. In some rare cases the freedom is so radical that Church and society no longer can officially identify the monk as such. Anonymous, as it were, this absolutely free monk lives an intimate rapport with God in complete secrecy. Or in a different direction, a monk may take up the ministries of preaching, teaching, or even social work. But what identifies the monk in this and distinguishes him from others who practice the same profession is the witness to a radical freedom that corresponds to divine transcendence. The monk must somehow be seen to belong to God alone.

Nonetheless, we should not speak for long of the monk as type without coming to grips with the distinguishing characteristics of the Christian monk. What I have said about the monk thus far could apply for the most part to the monastic phenomenon of many religions. Among other things, this explains the tremendous potential for interreligious dialogue in monastic settings. Yet leaving that fruitful possibility aside for the moment—and preparing a solid foundation for it—I would like to indicate the specifically Christian features of the monastic phenomenon.

Facing the question theologically, as opposed to examining the practical use of these texts, the heart of the matter can be expressed thus: the Christian monk has a special calling to witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Of course, every Christian is called to be a witness to this, but each in a particular way. The monk is called to this witnessing as one summoned beyond all signs, as one whose entire way of life offers clues to a reality that is infinitely transcendent, as one who wrestles at ever greater depth with the terrifying and joyful paradox that the risen Lord is met precisely in the experience of his absence to all merely carnal modes of detecting him. As St. Paul once exclaimed, “If once we knew Christ according to the flesh, we no longer know him in this way” (2 Corinthians 5:16).

But let me try to be more concrete in speaking of what is not concrete in any ordinary sense of the term. I would propose to you the image of Mary Magdalene at the tomb on Easter morning as one image that can give us some sense of this particular monastic witness. (It should be obvious here, from the very example I take, which is not exclusively monastic, that if I am

speaking of the monk as a Christian type, then what I say applies to all Christians; and the monk exists simply to provide the service of being a particularly clear instance of it.)

Part of the raw material that slowly and painfully is stitched together to form the type of the Christian monk is the struggle through a lifetime to face, however it may come, the paradox of the presence of Christ precisely through his absence. This presence-in-absence continually deepens as the years pass. It is like a grid pulled down through the particular life story of each monk in his particular monastery, with its own unfolding history through the days and years; and this grid slowly molds the type of one whose whole being begins to bear the shape of presence-in-absence. In this precise way the monk becomes witness to the Resurrection. But if it is a paradox that is continually deepened, then this means that the monk is made to live an ever greater sense of absence of his Lord; and precisely in this way does he come to know the unexpected joy and wonder of his presence.

The gospel scene of the Magdalene at the tomb helps us to gauge the theological significance of this archetypal struggle. The risen Lord, who is not in the tomb, will nonetheless manifest himself there. It is a manifestation that unfolds in stages. First two angels appear there in dazzling robes. Their very presence is an eloquent, though wordless, discourse. They make visible the glory of his absence, a glory that issues indirectly from the tomb itself precisely because it is empty. In the angels the one who has disappeared from there is present in an inexpressible way. Holy is the place of his absence! Holy, the monastery; holy, the monk's heart—the place of his absence! "He is not here!"

In the next stage of manifestation the Lord himself appears, but the vision is veiled, and he is unrecognized. Yet it is he, the glorious Lord but mistaken for a gardener. But therein lies a lesson for the monk, and so for the Church, in every age, repeated in other resurrection appearances and anticipated in the teaching of Jesus: as risen Lord he is present and goes along with us in our ordinary time, making his way along the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), being hungry and naked or fed and clothed in the least of his brothers and sisters (Matthew 25:31-46), or standing there as a gardener (John 20:15).

The final stage is unveiled vision. He is recognized then as the Good Shepherd, who knows his sheep and calls them each by name (John 10:3), he calls her name, "Mary" (John 20:16). In that instant something deep within her shifts utterly. Weeping is exchanged for sheer joy, and the tomb becomes the place of the manifestation of the Living One. All this is expressed in his name pronounced by one who loves him: "Jesus! Rabboni!" (John 20:16). Here again we have an archetypal description of a monk: one who unexpectedly hears his name uttered by Christ in the depths of his being, one who utters in response the name of Jesus from those same depths.

Nonetheless, this unveiled vision takes place mysteriously in what is also an act of withdrawal—"Do not cling to me" (John 20:17)—and in the assignment of a mission: "Go and tell my brothers" (John 20:17). The freedom of the Resurrection tolerates no confining, no assurances based on what can be isolated in a particular and only here and now, a visible something, a tangible something. For he is ascending to his Father (John 20:17), that is, he is filling the universe in all its parts (Ephesians 4:10). He is Lord everywhere and in every time, saying "do not cling to me, then, in this one place and in this one time." Rather, the Lord turns Mary's attention from his "localized self" to his brothers in a mission, just as he vanished immediately upon recognition by the two disciples on the road to Emmaus so that they too could hurry out and announce the message (Luke 24:31-33). The angels who ask, "Why are you looking for him here in a tomb?" will also ask on the day of Ascension, "Why are you looking up to the sky?" (Compare Luke 24:5 with Acts 1:11). Everywhere the Lord and his angel messengers are urging us toward the mission of announcing that he is risen. This is the "going to Galilee" of which the risen Lord speaks in another Gospel, that is, the going everywhere, away from this tomb. "Tell them to go to Galilee, and they will see me there" (Matthew 28:10). Not in a tomb, not in the heavens, not clinging to me here, but in the mission of announcing this Good News.

According to an ancient sensitivity cultivated in monastic life, in the monastery there are angels present, who without words help the monks to take the measure of their place; namely, that

“he is not here,” that is, he is not in this world of death, not here as a corpse that we might view, not here as someone to whom we may cling. And yet he is here in his own sovereign way, here but unrecognized in the gardener sitting next to you. Not clinging to him, not placing one’s fingers in his hands and side as did Thomas, but seeing only the empty tomb that is this whole carnal world, monks are meant to put their trust in the Lord’s words: “Blessed are those who do not see and yet believe” (John 20:29).

All that I have suggested here about what the Magdalene shows us of monastic life can be played again, briefly, in the key of St. Benedict’s vision. The monk is one who slowly learns that there is nothing in this world to which he may cling, that virtually every thing, every person, every experience will continue to whisper to him what the angels said to Mary: “He is not here. Why do you search for the Living One among the dead?” (Luke 24:5). Obedient to this experience, even while being deeply disappointed and sometimes pushed to a desperate and tearful searching, the monk may suddenly, in some completely unaccountable way, meet the Lord for whom he searches. Yet wherever the monk meets him, there is simultaneously the Lord’s act of withdrawal. Thus, though he is surely met in some particular here and now, he may not be clung to there. As he withdraws, he draws the monk along with him, such that eventually the monk looks back at the whole world and sees it all in the light of the one who is ever drawing him beyond it. Every bit of the world at that point becomes precious to the monk, not as the goal of his ultimate search but as the treasured particular something in terms of which he has come to know—and without which terms he would never know—that “He is not here, he is risen.” The whole world is contained within this larger light, light that is nothing less than “Christ filling the universe in all its parts” (Ephesians 4:10).

If there is a monastic contribution to the Church and world, it is to put the world in its perspective, to put it in its place, as it were; to point to the beyond-this-world, and yet to do so in such a way that every particular piece of the transcended world is suffused with the resurrection light that gives it its meaning and preserves it from death and disappearance. What ultimately preserves the world—that is, saves it—is precisely the fact that

every piece of it shall have once been the particular place in terms of which the final message can be continually uttered: "He is not here, he is risen."

Well and good. Even beautiful, perhaps. Yet possibly I have gotten too quickly beyond this world to provide something tangible and fruitful with my reflections. So, we return to the here and now of the monastery and monastic practices. I have tried to come quickly and honestly to the real heart of the monastic matter, to its inner essence. With what I have suggested we can revisit some familiar monastic practices and experiences.

Let us begin with what guests experience at a monastery, for here we must surely be close to at least the raw material of whatever may be the monastic contribution to what lies beyond it. Guests are drawn to monasteries because, to put it in terms of the title assigned to these reflections, there is something that the monastery can contribute to them, be they believers (Church) or not (world). But what is it? What draws them? What do they receive? Whatever it is, I think that, in the reflections I have developed thus far, I have already indicated the secret of how it comes about. But let us try now to be a little more empirical, less theoretical.

Guests through the centuries have often told monastics what they experience at their monasteries. Despite the difference of epochs and places and styles and sizes of monasteries, this testimony tends to fall into the same pattern, suggesting that there really is a particular "something" that monasteries commonly impart. There is a monastic smell to things, generally (and thankfully) a sweet odor that is probably best described with the simple expression "monastic peace." There is a silence and calm about the place that has been drawn out by the long years of steady, stable practice of monastic life in this particular here. The tradition of monastic architecture contributes much to this. A monastery is often a model of what is meant to be the peaceful interchange and loving dialogue between human beings and the little piece of the earth they are privileged to inhabit, a place they share with other living creatures, and with the plants, the rocks, and the trees. The weather and the seasons and the years pass over them all; they survive it together, enjoy it together.

Participating in or assisting at the chanting of the Hours of the Divine Office holds a special attraction for guests. Perhaps especially those offices of the very early morning or of the depths of the night give to guests a sense that they have discovered a singular secret whose power quietly pulses beneath the surface of the world's activities and perhaps also somehow holds it in place.

These are just two examples—the sense of place and the chanting of the Hours—that can indicate the kind of dialogue in which a monastic contribution might be offered to Church and world. There are ancient wisdoms carried in these and other practices which, if attended to, can be useful and challenging to others—individuals and society at large. Yet even here the dominating paradox of presence and absence is not far from any explanation or understanding of how and why this all works. For example, it can often be the case that guests may experience a tremendous, tangible grace—monastic peace, if you will—in assisting at the chants, while that very day and those very hours of chanting may have been particularly trying for the monastic community itself. What seems an absence for the monks is tangible presence for the guests. You may be sure that if a monastery has been in a place for a long time and has faithfully persevered in the round of prayers that its rule of life requires, then this paradox has repeated itself many times. You may be sure also of finding this same paradox lived also by any individual monk who has persevered longer than the novitiate.

This paradox extends as well to the example of the monastery as a place. Wherever a monastery imparts a tangible sense of the divine presence precisely in terms of the beautiful interchange between human beings and all the natural features of this particular site, then once again, behind it lies the asceticism of the work and struggle that brought it about, hours and years in which many who contributed felt very little of what others feel now.

I am not at all suggesting that monks are always suffering and guests are always enjoying the fruit. My point goes past such an obviously mistaken simplification. I am trying to understand where the "fruit" comes from, fruit that I am calling the monastic contribution. My suggestion is that if there has been fruit and if there is to be fruit in the future, we must understand where it

comes from and what produces it. Fruit comes from hoeing, pruning, watering, waiting, wondering, and worrying if something might not destroy it as it is coming to maturity. Fruit comes from its absence, slowly emerging from it with unaccountable beauty.

In these reflections I am slowly circling around and articulating good old-fashioned monastic doctrines that Benedict's monasticism provides a way of actually living out. These doctrines form a pattern; they give a concrete shape to the monastic life. It is what Benedict calls in the Prologue of the *Holy Rule*, "sharing by patience in the sufferings of Christ in the monastery until death so that one may share also in the glory of his kingdom" (50). Such doctrines are the very center of the content of sacred scripture, whose center is Christ, whose center in his Paschal Mystery. It is no accident then that monastic life has been sustained through the centuries by the practice of *lectio divina*, the prayerful reading of the Scripture. St. Benedict's daily schedule provides for several hours of each monk's day to be passed in this slow, meditative pondering of the sacred text, not to mention the several hours more in choir, where the chants are primarily composed also of scriptural texts. It is in this sustained encounter with the Word of God that the monk is slowly led by the Spirit ever more deeply into the paradox of presence-in-absence. By the Scripture he is instructed in all its ins and outs.

The Dialogues of St. Gregory provide us with yet another image of St. Benedict that can serve as a representative summary of how the monastic practice of reading might also be a contribution to Church and world. The scene that Gregory describes begins with St. Benedict seated quietly at the door of his monastery, absorbed in reading (II, 31).² Suddenly, crashing unexpectedly into the peace of the scene, there comes riding up on a horse a rough-mannered and haughty barbarian, shoving before him a poor peasant, who is bound with ropes. The peasant owes the barbarian money and has claimed that his goods are deposited in the safekeeping of Benedict's monastery. Without any introduction or any attempt at graciousness, the barbarian shouts at Benedict, "Get up! Get up! No tricks, just get me this scum's money, which he says you have."³

What follows is important for our understanding of the power of the practice of *lectio*. I would call it an quintessential monastic

moment. It is, if you will, the monastic contribution to the world, here represented in one of its unhappier aspects by the barbarian. We are told that, in response to the barbarian's rude and abrupt command, St. Benedict calmly raised his eyes from his reading and looked for a moment at the barbarian. Slowly his gaze turned toward the poor peasant, noting how cruelly he was bound. Here too the task of monastic reading is represented: the monk, looking up from Scripture, fixes his gaze on the suffering of the world. In that moment in which Benedict's eyes fall on the suffering man—let us call it the moment in which the light of Scripture penetrates the darkness of human suffering and injustice—a tremendous wonder is worked. The knots in the ropes that bound the man suddenly unravel, and he stands there completely free. He, of course, was not displeased; and the barbarian was terribly impressed. This latter threw himself at St. Benedict's feet, asking for his prayers. Benedict effortlessly returned to his reading, ordering several of the monks to prepare some refreshment for the barbarian. As he was about to depart, Benedict simply took the occasion to tell him not to treat others so cruelly. So, how to state the monastic contribution? In the midst of the massive inhumanity we direct toward one another, to stay calmly anchored in the Word of God and to let its power set us free.

If we speak at too much length of the great example of the monastic saints or of the features of the monk as type, we may tend perhaps to say only good things about monks, which, of course, is unrealistic. No real monk considers himself a saint or a worthy representation of the type. The monk's disappointment and dissatisfaction with himself is an essential dimension of the monastic experience, and here too there are even possibilities for a contribution to others.

One of the surprises for the new monk is that as he makes progress in the life, he will be made to learn to regard himself more and more as a sinner. This becomes a kind of crisis; for after all, one has come to the monastery to leave sin behind and to advance toward the good. Yet after a while, one wonders if this noble project is really possible. In fact, it is not possible if it is conceived too simplistically. The life relentlessly forces the monk to abandon simplistic conceptions. A story from the desert fathers

illustrates in a representative way how this necessary crisis is provoked. A brother asked Abba Poemen, "How can I think of myself as less good than a murderer?" It is a fair question, I think. Murder is an appalling sin. Can a well-behaved monk sincerely regard himself as worse than a murderer? Listen to Abba Poemen's unsettling response: "When a monk sees a man committing a murder, he should say, 'He has only committed this one sin, but I commit murder every day.'"⁴

A tremendous amount of monastic wisdom is packed into Poemen's pithy response. At first glance, it may seem that Poemen is simply requiring only a sort of pious play-acting. Murder every day? Who commits murder every day? The desert fathers knew that their unexpected formulations would rattle their disciples; they were designed precisely to do so. They also hid within their teachings scriptural treasures that could be discovered by the disciple who pondered the abba's word and tried to take it seriously. Working with Poemen's words here, the meditating mind sooner or later finds its way to the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has recalled the commandment, "Thou shall not kill; whoever kills will be liable to judgment"; and then he immediately adds his "but." "But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment . . . and whoever says, 'You fool' to him will be liable to fiery Gehenna" (Matthew 5:27-28). Against this new standard of obeying the commandments that Jesus establishes, no monk measures up very well; for sin is in the human heart and not merely in an exterior disobedience to commandments. The monk's heart is made of the same stuff as every other human heart. For that reason he may never regard himself, as the publican did, as "not like the rest of humanity" (Luke 18:11). By the same token, the struggle against sin that is waged in the monk's heart can take on archetypal significance.

In fact, the monk is called to a limitless empathy with the human condition. He must see himself as standing in complete solidarity with his wayward race, and this not by some act of condescension but simply in virtue of the truth of things. The mistake that the questioner of Poemen made was to have posed a comparison between himself and others. What the monk comes to

realize with a sort of terrifying clarity, in his prayer and in his whole living of the monastic life, is that one cannot stand before God and point to others saying, "They are worse than me." It may well be true, but it is never relevant. Standing before God, every person is unique; each has received gifts, talents, a time, a place, a country, a culture. But there is something terribly wrong in the world; we are terribly affected by sin. And when anyone stands under the light of God's truth, that one can only cry out, as did the tax collector, "O God, be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13).

No one comes naturally to the uttering of such a prayer. Increasing the depth of conviction of oneself as a sinner is a real struggle. If I call the monk's struggle with this "archetypal," then I mean to imply that his vocation requires more than other vocations that he explore this experience to its very depths. This is not an exploration that he undertakes for himself alone, even if by its very nature it is concentrated there. The monk who pursues this way, conscious of his solidarity with the whole human condition, is able in some representative way to repent also for those who feel no need to repent; likewise he is able to receive forgiveness also for those who have not even asked for pardon. But there is more. For joy unexpectedly emerges from the darkest and most sinful depths of the human condition. Why? How? Precisely because this is the place to which the Lord himself descended when he emptied himself of glory and became sin for our sake (cf. Philippians 2:6; 2 Corinthians 5:21), and it is precisely from this place to where in death he stands in complete solidarity with us in our waywardness, that the mystery of his resurrection begins to emerge. Oh, the sheer gratuity of this joy! Infinite, divine love flooding suddenly into the heart that sees with deadly accuracy all its capacity for sin. Each monk's heart becomes the place of that dramatic combat of which the Easter sequence sings: *Mors et vita duello conflixere mirando, dux vitae mortuus regnat vivus*. "Death and life are gripped in a tremendous duel; the leader of life, having died, reigns alive."

We have come full circle. Presence and absence. The monk sees himself as sinner and so suffers the absence of God, and precisely there is God's presence unexpectedly known. But this is

no private or solitary experience, even if it is intensely personal. For the monk is gazing on the whole world in the midst of his combat, and he suddenly sees the whole world caught up in a single ray of light. That light is nothing less than Christ himself. That light is the same light that unaccountably began to shine in his own darkness. It is the joy for which he never could have hoped when he was in sorrow. The light that embraces the monk is embracing the whole world. This is all grace. The monk has contributed nothing to bringing it about. But if somehow monastic life could keep the Church and world focused on this hope, then that perhaps would be a contribution.

For fifty years monastic life has been lived on this piece of the plane, Mount Saviour. We honor the monks of this community, living and dead; and we thank them for their contribution. In the secret story of all their struggles, the Church and the whole world is caught up in the light of its Savior.

Notes

1. Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 2nd edition (Paris, 1987), 14-74.

2. St. Gregory, *Dialogues*, II, 31. In what follows, I am inspired in part by Benoit Standaert, *Les trois colonnes du monde, carnet de route pour le pelerin du XXI siecle* (Paris: Desclee, 1987).

3. I am paraphrasing loosely, but I think thus to have captured the feel of the text.

4. *Poemen* 97. See Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998).