

Monastic Contributions to Church and World: An Oblate's Reflection

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I have come to these reflections deeply aware that I am one who has grown up here at Mount Saviour Monastery over the past thirty-three years. I was eighteen years old and a freshman in college when I made my first retreat here. My reflection is as an oblate of this community which means, among other things, that I desire to live the rest of my life in relationship to Mount Saviour.

As I was preparing this paper I realized anew what I have known for years, namely, that I love this place and this community of monks. I also know that I am deeply loved by this community. What an extraordinary gift in my life! How could I ever find the words to give full expression to these bonds of love and to the gratitude that I experience? "How can I repay the Lord for his goodness to me? I will take up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord" (Psalm 116:12).

How could I respond to the love of God made real for me through my experiences here? The response that has made the most sense to me is to live my life as a disciple of Jesus according to the way of St. Benedict as I have received it and experienced here at Mount Saviour. I desire to live my life as an oblate of this community. In the most ordinary and sometimes in the most extraordinary of ways, I have been formed and reformed here. I have received the grace to fulfill the vocation that God has given to me in a special way through this monastic community.

No one is ever an oblate alone, apart from a community. One is always an oblate of a particular monastery just as the monk is always a monk of a particular Benedictine monastery. We go to God together and God comes to us through the community. So

I am an oblate of this particular place and this particular community, one who belongs to this community and place, at this particular time in history. The Word is made flesh here and now. The paschal mystery is lived and celebrated in this place as it has been for fifty years. For fifty years the monks of Mount Saviour have borne witness by how they live together to the presence and activity of God in our midst. This monastic community is a sacrament of the presence of God in the world. It helps to make visible for all of us that which so often invisible.

As a community, the monks of Mount Saviour give witness to the church and world through the celebration of the Eucharist and of the liturgy of the hours, a common life, and through hospitality to the presence and activity of God in our midst. This is never an easy task, since the Absolute Mystery whom we call God is always an elusive presence. In times of major cultural disruption and upheaval like our own it is even more difficult. In our time what so many appear to experience is not the presence of God but God's profound absence, or indifference to our plight. What an extraordinary vocation and ministry in the life of the Church and for the world it is to live our lives with such a witness in our midst. By seeking God according to the *Rule of St. Benedict*, the monks fulfill a ministry in the church of profound significance and worth. Their seemingly "hidden" vocation has profound social and pastoral implications.

In this paper I will reflect on three themes: the presence and activity of God; our awareness of such presence and activity; the character of monastic witness in today's world.

The Presence and Activity of God

St. Benedict reminds us that we are always in the presence of God, a theme that is constantly illustrated throughout the Scriptures. As the psalmist cries out: "O Lord, you search me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I stand" (Psalm 139:2). We live our lives in the midst of God in whom we live and move and have our being.

Yet this abiding presence of God is an elusive presence and we can experience that elusiveness as absence. In Psalm 42 we pray:

As the deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God. My being thirsts for God, the living God. When can I go and see the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night, as they ask daily, "Where is your God?" Those times I recall as I pour out my soul. When I went in procession with the crowd, I went with them to the house of God. Amid loud cries of thanksgiving, with the multitude keeping festival. Why are you downcast, my soul; why do you groan within me? Wait for God, whom I shall praise again, my savior and my God. My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you from the land of the Jordan and Hermon, from the land of Mount Mizar. Here deep calls to deep in the roar of your torrents. All your waves and breakers sweep over me. At dawn may the LORD bestow faithful love that I may sing praise through the night, praise to the God of my life. I say to God, "My rock, why do you forget me? Why must I go about mourning with the enemy oppressing me?" It shatters my bones, when my adversaries reproach me. They say to me daily: "Where is your God?" Why are you downcast, my soul, why do you groan within me? Wait for God, whom I shall praise again, my savior and my God.

The experience of the psalmist is the experience of every one of us who has sought to enter more deeply into the mystery of God. The Mighty One who does great things for us is also present in so many ways that we miss that presence more often than not.

Where is God active? How is God active in our lives? Is there any guidance from the Scriptures to assist us in understanding the presence and activity of God in our midst? Let me suggest Exodus 3:1-14 as a possible point of departure. We have here described Israel's fundamental experience of God. The experience of God is that of One who is immanent, transparent, and transcendent. The One who is immanent reveals His desire to be responsive to the affliction of the Hebrew people and to act on their behalf. But God commits to freeing the slaves by working through others. God is committed to the liberation of the oppressed and chooses to act

through others. God is transparent in His actions on behalf of the people. The revelation of God in Moses' encounter with the burning bush also reveals that God is transcendent, beyond the grasp and control of the people. God remains the fundamental and incomprehensible Mystery in the midst of the people.

The Christian community's encounter with God both radically incorporates Israel's fundamental experience and opens us to a deeper and fuller revelation of the Incomprehensible Mystery whom we call God. The disciples of Jesus also came to know God as immanent, transparent, and transcendent. However, this revelation of God invites us into the reality of the Trinitarian Love which is beyond our wildest imaginations of who God is.

The Crucified One whom these first Christians came to know as the Risen One was the Anointed One of God. He is one like us in all things. Jesus was truly human, yet a human who so pushed the dimensions of what it meant to be human—one who was so receptive to the reality of God—that God was indeed incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God is immanent in our midst.

Yet the Christian community's experience of God's presence and activity also invited the disciples of Jesus to acknowledge that the Spirit of God was the first gift of the Paschal Mystery. They recognized with the experience of the Pentecost that this Holy Spirit not only dwelt in their hearts and in the life of the community but is also the One who breaths where he wills, moving and shaping the whole direction of history, indeed all of creation. Thus they also experienced God working through them, in their midst, beyond their community as the transparent One.

Yet the immanence of God and the transparency of God did not exhaust their experience of God. God was also always gracious mystery in their midst. Abba! My dear own Father! Gracious, loving, abiding, yet fundamentally beyond their grasp and control. Thus God was also experienced as ever-mysterious, always beyond, even while in our midst. He is the One in whose presence we must take off our shoes and be silent, listening in awe and wonder, in praise and thanksgiving.

For all of the images and metaphors and symbols that the community used to express their experience of God's presence and

activity, there emerged one that was the least insufficient. It is from St. John: God is love. God is *agape*, love unconditional, total and forever giving. God is *agape*. The Father gives himself completely to the Son and the Son gives Himself back completely to the Father. Their unconditional love for each other is the Holy Spirit. The eternal communion that is God's inner life is *agape*. The eternal presence and activity of God is love, love made visible in Jesus Christ, finally and most fully on the cross. The immanent, transcendent, and transparent One in our midst is present and active as love. The Word that God speaks is love, the action that God does in the world is love, and the being in whom we live and move and have our being is love. God who is ever-mysterious and beyond our comprehension; always calling life out of death; always calling good out of evil; always inviting us to live in that love and to be that love to one another. God is always laboring to bring creation to its fulfillment in love, so that God may be all in all.

The Human Condition: Our Blindness Regarding God's Presence and Activity

Among the truths about our existence as human beings that the Scriptures teach us is that we are often blind to the presence and activity of God in our lives. Not only are we blind to that Presence we are also often indifferent and prefer other gods. Yet immersed as we are in this reality, we miss it, we forget it, we tend to live as though it was otherwise. We are blind and often uninterested in the saving presence and activity of God in our midst.

In addition to what the Scriptures tell us we are also faced with factors within our contemporary American culture that plunge us even more deeply into unawareness of the presence and the activity of God.

Let me identify several. First, we live in a world undergoing a profound transformation. Our times are one of those epoch-making moments in history, like the emergence of agriculture or the Industrial Revolution. The scientific-technological revolution, of which we are in the midst, has presented us with changes so

profound that most of us do not even begin to comprehend them. However, we know in our hearts—in those quiet moments of reflection—that there is a fundamental shift occurring in humanity's self-understanding. Epoch-making moments like this provide the human community with the opportunity to make a quantum leap in its evolution. However, this shift has also caused us to experience a fundamental dislocation, a hermeneutical dysfunction. For many of us the old language to explain life does not work anymore. We have yet to create a new language to explain our experience. The old metaphors are no longer adequate, and we are in search of new ones as part of our quest to understand our place in the universe. Being in the midst of birthpangs is not easy.

Second, in addition to this profound and often baffling sense of change, there is the emergence of what has been called an excessive individualism in American society. We live in a society that cherishes the right of people to choose for themselves. We take it as axiomatic, as one of the uncritically accepted assumptions of our world, that each of us should choose his or her own pattern of life or lifestyle. This sense of the self as individual was won in no small part by our freeing ourselves from older moral horizons. In the past, people saw themselves as part of something larger. In some cases, this was a cosmic order, a "Great Chain of Being." In such an order human beings figured in their appropriate place along with the archangels, cherubim, and seraphim, and other angels as well as other earthly creatures. This hierarchy was reflected in the hierarchies of human society. Many people were often locked into a given place, a role or a station in life that was properly theirs and from which it was virtually impossible to imagine deviating.

In his important work, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Charles Taylor writes that the older moral horizons,

gave meaning to the world and to the activities of social life. The things that surround us were not just potential raw materials or instruments for our projects, but they had the significance given them by their place in the chain of being. The eagle was not just another bird, but king of

the whole domain of animal life. By the same token, the rituals and norms of society had more than merely instrumental significance. The discrediting of these orders has been called the “disenchantment” of the world. With it, things lost some of their magic.

This loss of purpose was linked to a narrowing. People lost the broader vision because they focused on their individual lives. Many seem too often to have lost the sense of being part of a larger whole and of finding our identity in communion with one another.¹

The third factor that keeps us from an awareness of the presence of God is the triumph of instrumental reason in American society. By “instrumental reason” I mean that kind of rationality we draw on when we calculate the most economical application of means to a given end. The measure of success for us is maximum efficiency, the best cost-output ratio. Let me quote Taylor once again:

No doubt sweeping away the old orders has immensely widened the scope of instrumental reason. Once society no longer has a sacred structure, once social arrangements and modes of action are no longer grounded in the order of things or the will of God, they are in a sense up for grabs. They can be redesigned with their consequences for the happiness and well-being of individuals as our goal. The yardstick that henceforth applies is that of instrumental reason. Similarly, once the creatures that surround us lose the significance that accrued to their place in the chain of being, they are open to being treated as raw materials or instruments for our projects.²

Fourth, in today’s America we have not only pushed God to the side, we have forgotten about God’s cherished ones, the poor and the needy. We live in a world in which millions of children are hungry and hundreds of thousands of them die of malnutrition. This occurs in a world that has the capacity to feed all of its children. We can. We just haven’t. Today in the United States one

out of every five children lives in poverty. The poor and the needy have become the forgotten people of our society, blamed more often than not for their condition.

Fifth, what results from much of what I have suggested above is the loss of a sense of the meaning and purpose of life. In the face of rampant instrumental reason and excessive individualism, there is an eclipse of concern about our end or goal as human beings. Abraham Heschel pointed this out in his book *Who Is Man?*

One of the most frightening prospects we must face is that this earth may be populated by a race of beings which though belonging to the race of homo sapiens according to biology will be devoid of the qualities by which man is spiritually distinguished from the rest of organic creatures. To be human, we must know what being human means, how to acquire it, how to preserve it.³

E.F. Schumacher described an awareness of our loss of purpose this way:

After all, everything we do and talk about should be orientated to, and derived from, an answer to the question, "Why are we here in the world anyhow?" We are not using the facilities the Creator has put at our disposal for the purpose of attaining our end. We don't even think about what our end is. We're using things only because they're there. Our engineers and scientists produce something more we could use, so we must use it. We do things because it's possible to do them. We're a society that's rich in means and poor in purpose.

These elements within our culture foster a kind of communal blindness. Human beings are made for communion with God and with one another. We are not isolated egos but beings who find life in relationships with God, with other human beings, with the earth and the universe. Our challenge is to bring people back to this fundamental truth about our human existence. We are blind, and we need sight. We have been invited to the feast but have lost

interest. We need once again to rediscover the source of the invitation planted in the very soil of our being. In so doing, we will recapture the passion for the goal of our existence, and we will have a compass for human action in the world.

This is why the monastic witness that this community, and many others like it, give each day is so critically important. By living the life that they faithfully live each day, they offer others a map for the journey of living. Let me suggest some signposts on the journey that they witness to each day.

First, in a society increasingly obsessed with consumerism and materialism, the Gospel lived here according to the *Rule of St. Benedict* teaches that to be human is of infinite worth and value not because of what one possesses but because each person is an image of God. Every human being is a spiritual creature. From the opening pages of Genesis, we learn that human beings were given life when they received the breath of the Lord. The breath of the Lord gives life by dwelling in us. God is the life-giving presence and as such God lives in us. We are capable of possessing the presence of God and even more of knowing God. As spiritual creatures, we are listeners to God's word in history. But there is more to our identity than this. There is in the depths of my being—of your being—the in-dwelling presence of the Holy Trinity. Each of us is an image of God because of the original presence of God in the depths of our heart. This necessarily challenges us to ask, "Who is this God in whose image we are made?"

The second signpost on the road is the affirmation of the principle of the common good. Such a principle affirms creative activity as more important than profit, people more important than things; and it seeks patterns of work that liberate and enhance the human spirit. It is a rich concept in the Catholic tradition and one that needs to be further understood and developed. It is imperative that we experiment with forms of community to give expression to this principle of the common good.

The third signpost on the Christian journey is that human beings are made for communion with God and with one another in the company of the saints. The goal is not the isolated existence of my ego over and against yours, but communion. We are made

for communion with God. As Christians, we know that this God is the Father who loves us and calls each one of us by name through His Son in the Holy Spirit. The Incomprehensible Mystery whom we call God is the Triune One who is love and who calls us to communion with Himself and with one another. This communion comes about through love—the love made visible to us in Jesus of Nazareth. This communion which is the goal of our existence is already a reality. It is the original fact of our existence, the forgotten fact but nevertheless the fact of our existence. For us to be obedient is to live life according to this fact of our existence, and is the root of the call to holiness and wholeness. The call of Micah to act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with our God is a call to live out this communion. This is my truest self.

When I reach out to the other person, to God, in love, fidelity, and commitment, I become more myself than I was before. The simple yet essential law of our being is that we find ourselves only by giving ourselves away. “Unless the grain of wheat dies,” “Love one another as I have loved you,” and “Though he was in the form of God, he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself” are all insights from Scripture that call us to selfless giving.

The fourth signpost for Christians has two dimensions that are intrinsically connected: remembering the past and radical openness to the future. Our journey to human fulfillment requires that we remember and celebrate the past and also affirm and embody the future toward which we are traveling.

Remembering and dreaming are critical human activities. This is especially true when they are shared in story. This is why the liturgy of the hours and especially the Eucharist are so important to Christians on their journey. The monks' gathering day in and day out for the celebration of the Divine Office and the Eucharist bears witness to this truth. We are a sacramental people who celebrate what God has done and what God is doing.

The fifth signpost is the acceptance of our finitude and creatureliness. In the presence of God, we celebrate our dependence and interdependence. We are nothing without God. But because we have been called into life by the Incomprehensible Mystery, we know ourselves as an integral part of creation who

have a special responsibility to bring all of creation to God. In the face of death, we affirm the goodness of life and that with death life is changed, not ended, indeed it is brought to its fullness.

The Character of Monastic Witness

If what I have said thus far is true, then it is clear that monastic witness to the presence and activity of God in our midst is critical. In a world that so easily forgets God, the monastic witness calls us back to the truth about God and about ourselves.

Let me conclude by reflecting on how this witness is made manifest. Like all things Benedictine it becomes apparent in the simple and ordinary things that are done each and every day, which in itself points to a profound truth about God's salvific presence and activity in our midst. This monastic witness is prophetic, contemplative, compassionate, and communal.

Prophetic

Since the Church lives in a society that is essentially drawing its values from a source other than the Judeo-Christian tradition, monastic communities by the way they live embody the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible and Jesus of Nazareth.

The biblical prophet is one who is called by God to be immersed deeply in the Word of God as it is contained in Scripture and is also deeply attentive to the Word of God present in history, in the contemporary world. The biblical prophet is one who listens deeply to dialogue of the Word of God embodied in the tradition of God's people with the Word that God is speaking in the signs of the times. She or he is called upon to speak a word from God that emerges from this great dialogue. Such a prophetic person can assist his or her community in understanding better who it is and what it is called to do. The community's sense of mission in its current historical context emerges as it attends to the task of fidelity to its original call as well as to the present call of the Lord that is heard in contemporary circumstances and events.

Contemplative

Since we live in a society that has lost its way and is, in many ways, without hope about its future, leaders of monastics are called to be contemplatives in the midst of their own busy lives. As Christians, we are invited to discover deep within our hearts the voice of the Spirit of God and attend to the task of listening to what the Spirit has to say. From this important spiritual discipline will emerge the ability to see the world in a different way, to attend to how the Holy Spirit is leading the world toward its fulfillment in the Kingdom of God. It is a basic conviction of the Christian proclamation that the Spirit of God is active in the daily events of our world and is leading it to a new creation. Monastics have the task of discerning the first lines of the revelation of the new world behind the veil of everyday life. Monastics, as contemplative critics, have the task to remind their fellow travelers and pilgrims about the beauty of each human being and of God's creation.

At a fundamental level, it is not our task to go around anxiously trying to redeem people, to save ourselves or the world. We have been redeemed once and for all by God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Monastics are called in a special way to help us affirm this good news, and to make visible in daily events the fact that behind the brokenness and pain seen in the tangible things of life, there is something great to be seen: The face of Him in whose image we are shaped. As contemplatives, monastics are immersed in the vision of the new creation that God intends for His creation. Our vision of the fulfillment of human life is rooted in the concrete reality of the resurrection of the One who was crucified and raised from the dead. Through the daily discipline of contemplative prayer, we are developing the sensibility to see the small mustard seed and to trust that "when it has grown, it is the biggest shrub of all and becomes the tree so that the birds of the air come and shelter in its branches" (Mark 4:32).

Compassionate

The monastic gives witness to the saving presence of God by being compassionate, to embodying in his or her life the com-

passion of God that was incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus not only said, "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate," but he was also the concrete embodiment of this divine compassion in our world. Jesus' response to people in need—the sick, the blind, the lepers, the hungry, the ignorant, the widows, indeed all those who suffer—flowed from the divine compassion which led God to become one of us. Of the many stories in the Gospels showing Jesus' compassion, I am very fond of the one at the end of the first chapter of Mark's Gospel: a leper came running up to Jesus and said, "Master, if you want to, you can cure me." This statement of faith is responded to by Jesus with the words, "Of course, I want to. Be healed." "Of course, I want to?" Jesus is moved with deep compassion.

Twelve times in the Gospels we find a beautiful reference that is attributed only to Jesus and his Father. The expression is "to be moved with compassion." The Greek verb *splangchnizomai* reveals just how deep this goes. The *splangchna* are the entrails of the body. We would say the "guts." They are the place where our most intimate and powerful emotions are located. When the Gospels speak about Jesus being moved with compassion, they mean that he is being moved from the depths of his being. This is nothing superficial or passing. Rather it comes from the depths, from the most intimate and vulnerable part of his being. It is related to the Hebrew word for compassion, *Rachamim*, which refers to the womb of Yahweh. It is there in the womb of Yahweh that divine tenderness and gentleness have their source. When Jesus was moved with compassion, what was revealed was the inexhaustible, unfathomable tenderness of God.

When Jesus saw the crowd harassed and dejected like sheep without a shepherd, he felt with them from the center of his being (Matthew 9:36). When he saw the deaf, the paralyzed, the blind being brought to him from all directions, he willingly opened his heart to them and entered into their pain and suffering. So it was with the widow of Naim, who was burying her son, or the rich man whose daughter was dying. He identified himself with the suffering one. He stood in their shoes and was willing to suffer with them. He was compassionate. Jesus freely and fully enters into our pain and suffering so as to liberate us.

This is what we mean when we say that Jesus reveals God's solidarity with us. In and through Jesus Christ, we know that God is our God, a God who has experienced our brokenness, who in the words of St. Paul "became sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:31-36) suggests to us what this compassion is all about. Each of us is familiar with the details of the story from our childhood days. As you recall, all three passersby—the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan—"see" the victim who is lying by the side of the road. He is stripped of his possessions, including his clothing, and is thus without any visible sign of nationality or social status. The priest and the Levite only "see" the injured man, whereas the Samaritan "sees and has compassion." Compassion is the vehicle for moving beyond just seeing the victims of injustice and violence in our society. Compassion invites us to enter their world with mercy and care. It is a call to stand in solidarity with those who are suffering.

Compassion enables us to enter into the world of other human beings who are in need and to share deeply in their sufferings. But it does not stop there. Because compassion is a divine quality, it challenges us not only to enter into the world of the needy but to leave it in such a way that we have played our part in giving our neighbors freedom. The Samaritan of our parable not only took care of the injured person, he also brought him to an inn, paid the innkeeper the equivalent of two days' wages, and entered into a contract to pay the other bills the injured man might incur. Since the injured man had been deprived of all his resources, he could have been enslaved until his debt was paid to the innkeeper (Matthew 18:23-35). The Samaritan ensured his freedom and independence.

God asks nothing less of us than that we become the compassion of God in the world today, that we carry on the mission of Jesus in today's world.

Communal: Companions With One Another

Since we live in a society where so many of us experience our existence as isolated from others, as bereft of solidarity and

intimacy, I believe that another critical characteristic of the monastic witness is that she or he be a companion, inviting others to be companions to one another on the journey of life. To be a companion means to be willing to break bread with the other and to affirm a fundamental solidarity with any human being who is genuinely seeking to live life humanly.

The Gospel of Mark presents the story of Jesus' calling of the apostles this way: "So they came to him and he appointed twelve; they were to be his *companions* and to be sent out to preach, with power to cast out devils" (Mark 3:13-14). First, they were called to be his companions and companions to one another. Then they were sent out to preach and to cast out demons.

A fundamental task for us as leaders is to bring people together, breaking down the walls that separate us; inviting others to the common table where our story is shared, our hope celebrated, and our isolation overcome.

Our companionship is to be rooted in genuine love for the other, a love in which God is present. There is an old rabbinic story that captures this truth:

Time before time, when the world was young, two brothers shared a field and a mill, each night dividing evenly the grain they had ground together during the day. One brother lived alone; the other had a wife and a large family. Now the single brother thought to himself one day, "It isn't really fair that we divide the grain evenly. I have only myself to care for, but my brother has his children to feed." So each night he secretly took some of his grain to his brother's granary to make sure that he was never without.

But the married brother said to himself one day, "It isn't really fair that we divide the grain evenly, because I have children to provide for me in my old age, but my brother has no one. What will he do when he is old?" So every night he secretly took some of *his* grain to his brother's granary. As a result, both of them always found their supply of grain mysteriously replenished each morning.

Then one night they met each other halfway between their two houses, suddenly realized what had been happening, and embraced each other in love. The story is that God witnessed their meeting and proclaimed, "This is a holy place—a place of love—and here it is that my temple shall be built." And so it was. The holy place, where God is made known to people, is the place where human beings discover each other in love.

Notes

1. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 3.
2. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 6.
3. Abraham Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 12.