

Silence, Solitude, Simplicity

————— *A Hermit's Love Affair with
a Noisy, Crowded, and
Complicated World*

SISTER JEREMY HALL, OSB

*Foreword by
Kathleen Norris*



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Editors' Preface

*T*HE MORE I PRACTICE, THE LUCKIER I GET." Sister Jeremy Hall, OSB, might say about her Benedictine life what Gary Player said about his golf game.

Her book is the fruit of decades of practice, decades that have behind them the millennium and a half that daughters and sons of Saint Benedict and his twin sister Saint Scholastica have practiced seeking God after a monastic manner of life. And it goes back even farther. Sister Jeremy has drunk deep at the wells of wisdom, laced with humor, of those ascetics who flocked to the deserts of Egypt and Syria in the two centuries before Benedict.

But there is nothing musty, cobwebbed, nostalgic in these pages. Sister Jeremy, in her late 80s, is totally alert to the world around her and within us. She is allergic to sentimentality. Because she has spent so much time in silence—she lived as a hermit for twenty years—she is especially attentive to words and how like a chameleon they can be. Her antennae are sensitive to anything phony.

Sister Jeremy, born in 1918, joined Saint Benedict's Monastery in St. Joseph, Minnesota, in 1940. But she had come to the community earlier, in 1936, when she enrolled at the College of Saint Benedict. So Sister Jeremy has been part of this women's monastic community for almost half its one-hundred-fifty-year history, and the publication of this book in 2007 is a fitting accompaniment to Saint Benedict's Monastery's sesquicentennial.

This book is in three parts, which—as Sister Jeremy says about monastic ideals and practices—are all of a piece, woven together but identifiable separately. At first glance, her teaching might appear directed at other monastic persons, but what she knows is something millions of people in recent years have come to understand. The monastic way is not forsaking the world, but for the sake of the world, and Benedictine wisdom is fundamental human wisdom. “We all need God,” she says in her first sentence, and readers of all sorts will find here a warm and practical address to that need.

Part I, “A Benedictine Way to God,” has components and emphases that will be familiar to anyone even slightly acquainted with monastic spirituality; but there is a freshness, a lucidity to Sister Jeremy’s account of Benedictinism that could come only from a long lifetime spent in thoughtful commitment. She never forgets that at the end of the Rule (73:9) Benedict says that even if you have done everything in it, the most you can claim is to have made a good beginning. She recounts not an accomplishment but an attempt, provides not a blueprint of a destination but the itinerary of a journey.

And it is nobody’s journey but hers—which makes it, paradoxically, something from which everyone can learn. “I did” is much more effective teaching than “one might” or “you should.” Even when Sister Jeremy quotes someone else, you know she has made the source her own, the other voice has given expression to her experience.

Part II, “Desert Spirituality,” is the special fruit of Sister Jeremy’s years as a hermit. All that time alone made her an acute interpreter—in current jargon we might call her a channel—for the insights of those ancient folk whose pared-down life stripped veils from their eyes so they saw themselves, the world, and God with unnerving clarity. Silence, solitude, and simplicity—unavoidable in the desert—are keys to authentic speech, true community, and abundant life. The desert, after all, blooms.

Part III, “God’s Questions,” is a demonstration of one of a Benedictine’s most characteristic activities, *lectio divina*, “sacred reading,” a way of meditating on texts, especially the Bible, in which the text burrows into the heart. Sister Jeremy takes us through a series of questions that Scripture poses to us—Where are you? What are you looking for? Who do you

say that I am? Will you turn back and live? Where is your faith? Can you drink this cup? Do you love me?—and shows how a monastic's answers put her, not on a pedestal or behind a wall, but right in the thick of things with all of us.

Now and then in this book you will encounter pages with a lightly shaded background. The words—some of them poems—are reminiscences of Sister Jeremy's early years that she wrote when living as a hermit, from her mid-60s to her mid-80s. She called this brief journal "Grace Notes," and we have included the extracts because we believe that is precisely what they are.

It has been our privilege and honor to edit Sister Jeremy's words, written at different times and for various occasions, but glowing in every sentence with her graceful and witty and hospitable spirit. She is a boon companion, an inspired teacher, a trustworthy guide, a fool for Christ, one of God's great ones. In Sister Jeremy's company you will glimpse, as we have, the Christian life as W. H. Auden said it could be: "You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures."

Patrick Henry
Kathleen Kalinowski, OSB
Stefanie Weisgram, OSB

Foreword

IT IS SAID THAT PILGRIMS VISITING the ancient monasteries of the Egyptian desert could easily pick out the venerable Anthony in a crowd of monks, for this man who was renowned as a hermit literally glowed with hospitality. His life of prayer in solitude had rendered him visibly open and welcoming to others. This mystery of the monastic life—and it is a true mystery, not merely a paradox—is one that we also encounter in the life and work of Sister Jeremy Hall.

I first had the privilege of meeting Sister Jeremy in the fall of 1990, when she was recommended to me as a spiritual confidant. *But she is a hermit*, I thought: would I not be intruding on her quiet life, making a difficult calling even more difficult? Approaching her with some trepidation I was glad to discover that she was genuinely hospitable and one of the best listeners I have ever known. Sister Jeremy epitomizes one archetype of the monastic life, that of the person who may not have any special education, training, or certification in spiritual direction, yet is sought by a broad variety of people seeking wise counsel. Hildegard of Bingen was such a one, advising popes, princes, and peasants alike. If you are familiar with a monastic community you can probably name the person who is regularly consulted by the abbot or prioress as well as the newest postulant, a young mother from the parish, a teenager or two, and even the neighborhood dogs.

If you are not familiar with monastic life, this book will provide an excellent introduction, for monasticism is but one expression of the human

longing for God, and the questions that Sister Jeremy raises about seeking God in both solitude and community are essential ones for anyone, Christian or not, who desires a more balanced and holy life. As a compilation and distillation of years of Jeremy's retreat talks and musings, this volume is replete with gems. Her discovery that gratitude is the flip side of desire, for example, and that neither is sufficient unto itself.

One sign that this book is a fruit of a truly contemplative life is that Sister Jeremy consistently embraces mystery and redefines aspects of human psychology and spirituality in such penetrating and liberating ways. Her insistence that silence reflects a reverence for speech, especially God's word; that humility is properly understood as authenticity; that true prayer unites the mind and heart. If we allow it, this book might seed and plow our souls, helping us to embrace more fully that life to which God is calling us, whatever it may be. We might more readily and effectively, as John Cassian put it in the early fifth century, "work the earth of our hearts."

Another aspect of this book that appeals to me as a Protestant is the richness of scriptural interpretation it offers. It is clear that the biblical word is Sister Jeremy's constant companion and that working its metaphors and narratives into her own story has become as natural for her as breathing. At a time when biblical scholarship is too often left to scholars alone, and the Bible is employed as a bludgeon to denigrate whole classes of people, the refreshment provided in these pages is true nourishment. We are challenged not only to enjoy but to grow.

And when Jeremy reflects on God's questions to biblical characters—Where are you? What are you looking for? Who do you say that I am?—we come to understand that these are questions she has taken to heart as those she must seek to answer for herself, even if it takes a lifetime. And we may wonder if God has asked us these questions as well, but we have responded with a deaf ear.

For those who are tempted to view monastic life as anachronistic or escapist, Sister Jeremy offers the rebuttal of contemplative wisdom, seeing that to live out of compulsions—even that of activism for a good cause—is to acquiesce to violence. We do violence to ourselves and those

around us, she asserts, whenever we work obsessively or seek myriad distractions rather than face up to ourselves. We are meant to be free, but are often afraid to claim that freedom. Sister Jeremy names as essential for spiritual health the gratitude, reverence, and trust that are so often lacking in our world and observes that it is in accepting God's love for us that we begin to restore what we have lost.

At a time when so much meaningless diversion passes for entertainment, we need Sister Jeremy to remind us that our lives do have meaning, and that we were created to find it. I find it inspiring that her focus is ever fixed on the purposes and ends of human activity, the "whys" that keep us seeking after truth. We are fortunate indeed that Sister Jeremy has shared with us her life as a stable searcher and hospitable hermit, a life that in her words has taught her that the desert is for the Promised Land as Lent is for Easter, and death is for more life. It is only silence, she insists, that allows God's word to enter and transform us, only solitude that can foster true community, only simplicity of life that will enrich us beyond anything we can imagine. The wealth of spiritual wisdom on these pages is remarkable, yet mundane. This book, as well as the witness of Sister Jeremy's life as a monastic woman, demonstrates what can happen when an ordinary person honestly seeks to embrace the monastic call to what Jean Leclercq so memorably termed the love of learning and the desire for God.

Kathleen Norris
Ash Wednesday, 2007

Part I

A Benedictine Way to God

Desire: A Homesickness at Home

*W*E ALL NEED GOD. This is a fundamental human reality. We are radically incomplete and broken within; this is how we experience ourselves. Individuals who have sought a monastic life came to the monastery in desire, open to God's attraction, God's power to draw; but this openness to God's attraction is experienced by millions who know little or nothing of monasticism. Desire is the basis of community itself, as well as of each one's own response to God and to one another in community.

Saint Gregory the Great, pope at the end of the sixth century, the first biographer of Saint Benedict, and probably a monk himself, is called "the Doctor of Desire." He speaks in his homilies of holy desire as a yearning for God that is rooted in human nature itself, a basic orientation to God, whose redeemed image we are. It could be called a homing instinct, eliciting what Chesterton called "a homesickness at home." But like all good things, this desire can fade. Can we renew or reawaken it?

Desire is nourished by Scripture. The whole of the Old Testament is permeated by longing—for wisdom, for Jerusalem, for the temple, for

knowledge of the word and the law of God. All these are expressive, ultimately, of a desire for God himself. And they are often couched in terms of hunger and thirst, the basic demands for life itself.

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God. (Psalm 42:2)

For he satisfies the thirsty,
and the hungry he fills with good things. (Psalm 107:9)

Your name and your renown
are the soul's desire.
My soul yearns for you in the night,
my spirit within me earnestly seeks you. (Isaiah 26:8-9)

Jeremiah's desire was a force in him greater than the weariness and anguish that prompted him to try to quench it:

If I say, "I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,"
then within me there is something like a burning fire
shut up in my bones;
I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot. (Jeremiah 20:9)

In the New Testament, Luke's Gospel is bracketed by waiting, the expectancy sustained by desire. It begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth in the temple awaiting the Messiah, and ends with the apostles awaiting the Spirit. This is but a sample; so much of the New Testament is desire for communion—both God's desire and ours. And the New Testament ends with desire:

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come."
And let everyone who hears say, "Come."
And let everyone who is thirsty come.
Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. (Revelation 22:17)

It was this same desire that motivated the early monks of the fourth and fifth century to go to the deserts and the gorges and the summits—even to live atop pillars for decades! And it was desire that brought the

TANAGER

A forest pentecost:
a tanager
tongues with flame
this burgeoning birch—
a burst of life
and pledge of benison.

—*Grace Notes*

neophytes to the abbas and the ammas (spiritual mothers and fathers) of the desert for a word of life. If the monk's problem was complacency, he might get a dramatic word to reignite desire. "Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, 'Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?' Then the old man stood up and stretched out his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, 'If you will, you can become all flame.'"

At roughly the same time as the monks in the desert, Gregory of Nyssa, who deeply affected the spirituality of Eastern monasticism and ultimately that of the West as well, wrote a *Life of Moses* that is studded with desire. Speaking of Moses' desire to see God, Gregory writes: "And the bold request which goes up the mountains of desire asks this: to enjoy the beauty not in mirrors and reflections, but face to face." God's response to Moses: "He would not have shown himself to his servant if the sight were such as to bring the desire of the beholder to an end, since the true sight of God consists in this, that the one who looks up to God never ceases in that desire." Gregory concludes: "This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more." Almost two hundred years later, Gregory's insight received classic expression in the Rule of Saint Benedict.

Saint Benedict's Way to God

Benedict, the father of Western monasticism, makes it clear that monastic life is for people of desire, and that the life is meant to cultivate and deepen desire. In the Prologue (15) he asks with the Psalmist (34:12), "*Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?*" If you are a man or woman of desire and answer "I do!" Benedict says the Lord will direct you. Again in the Prologue he says, "If we wish to dwell in the tent of this kingdom . . ." (22), and "if we wish to reach eternal life . . ." (42).

In chapter 2:35 it is clear that the abbot is himself to be a man of desire, the prioress herself a woman of desire, seeking first the kingdom and trusting that all else will be given. And the leader's role in the community

can be said to be a cultivation of desire, adapting to varied personalities in eliciting a deeply personal response from each (2:23-25). This is made even more explicit in chapter 64:19, in the deservedly beloved words that direct the abbot or prioress so to arrange things that “the strong have something to yearn for and the weak nothing to run from.”

Among the tools of good works for the monk, Benedict includes yearning “for everlasting life with holy desire” (4:46) and the aspiration to be holy (4:62). Obedience, he implies, ought to be out of desire, not fear (5:14). In the chapter on humility he speaks of desiring to attain heaven (7:5), and in the fourth degree of humility he suggests that strength of desire should overcome difficulties and injustices (7:37-39). Benedict’s beautiful phrase in the midst of Lenten austerity strikes a high point in the Rule: to “look forward to holy Easter with joy and spiritual longing” (49:7).

There is much said of desire, not surprisingly, in chapter 58 on receiving new members. Real desire must be demonstrated before applicants are to be accepted. The criteria for acceptance are seeking/desiring God, seeking God’s praise, seeking obedience, seeking the truth of humility—and, by implication, seeking the paschal healing alluded to in the Prologue as the fruit of obedience (58:7; Prologue 2). The applicant who “stands firm” in desire is to be received (58:11-14), and manifests that desire by drawing up the document of self-dedication, putting it on the altar, and singing the *Suscipe* (“Receive me, Lord, as you have promised”), the prayer of desire echoed by the whole community (58:19-22).

All the members of the community are to desire what is best for the rest (72:7), and to desire nothing more than Christ (72:11). The whole of that brief chapter on good zeal is a distillation of desire as it is lived and shared in the community that Benedict envisions.

The final chapter opens further vistas for those hastening along the way of desire. Scripture and the Church Fathers kindle desire as they summon and guide monastics along the way (73:2-5)—even beyond “this little rule that we have written for beginners” (73:8). With desire they can set out for loftier summits with the genuine expectation of reaching them (73:9).

For all this emphasis on desire of the monk, it is important to note that Benedict does not neglect to say that the Lord *desires every individual*—

he seeks us. This, surely, is the ground of the hope, confidence, and trust that are so strong in the Rule.

Desire, then, is a deeply monastic virtue: it is deep in Scripture, in the Desert Fathers and Mothers, and in Benedict. When desire is understood in this way, an otherwise preposterous statement of Father Zosima in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* makes perfect sense, and is an observation, not an outburst of pride: "Monks are not a different sort of person, but only such as all persons on earth ought also to be."

Interlacing of Desire and Gratitude

The elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-24) seems to have known nothing of gratitude. Gratitude is the other side, the accompanying gift, of desire. Jesus made a parable of it in the story of the ten lepers, only one of whom, after they followed Jesus' instructions and were healed, bothered to come back to say thank you (Luke 17:11-19). Scripture is full of gratitude. Those who pray the Psalms daily know the interlacing of desire and petition with remembrance and gratitude. Perhaps this linkage is most frequently and most deeply manifest in Paul. "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6). Neither desire nor gratitude is sufficient or whole in itself; each gives rise to the other, nourishes and intensifies it.

It is this mutual influx of desire and gratitude that sets us actively and persistently and progressively to seek God—initiating and gradually accomplishing the graced return to the Father that preoccupied Benedict. But the search is in the light of faith, which is experienced so often as darkness. There is that awesome sentence in Genesis 15:12 when Abram had prepared the sacrifice of the covenant: "As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him." Gregory of Nyssa says that "the manifestation of God to the great Moses began with light; afterwards God spoke to him in the cloud; next when Moses became more exalted and perfect he saw God in the darkness." Moses learned that whoever desires to behold God sees him in following him, seeing God's back while shadowed by God's hand.

“The contemplation of God’s face,” says Gregory, “is the unending journey accomplished by following directly behind the Word.” And since the desire for this limitless good of seeking the face of God, returning to our Father, is itself limitless, there is no limit to the seeking.

For Job, too, it was a seeking in the darkness of faith:

If I go forward, he is not there;
or backward, I cannot perceive him;
on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;
I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.

But Job doesn’t end there. He adds:

But he knows the way that I take;
when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold. (Job 23:8-10)

There is a modern echo of all this in Mother Teresa’s words: “I know what you feel—terrible longing, with dark emptiness—and yet, he is the one in love with you.”

I do not have to go literally forward and backward, right and left, but rather to set out on an inward journey, to seek God *now* and *here*, within and immediately around me. Fundamentally for the monastic person, this journey is the meaning of stability and conversion and obedience. Among the Desert Fathers, whose seeking was a deliberate staying, an “old man” said: “The cell of the monk is the furnace in Babylon, where the three young men found the Son of God: and it is also the pillar of cloud from which God spoke to Moses” (see Daniel 3; Exodus 24).

This life of seeking in faith, in the cloud and in the darkness, on the night shift, is, says Christian mystic Julian of Norwich, “as good as beholding.” Though our God is a hidden God (Isaiah 45:15), Paul speaks of “the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6)—the Christ who so dominates the mind and heart and Rule of Benedict. And I can seek this face of Christ in his word, his church, his sacraments, the monastic community and all aspects of life within it; in companionship and friendship and love as well as in loneliness; in service and suffering and joy; in everyone I meet and in all creation. But since all these simultaneously conceal and reveal, I must be disposed to see Christ in their depths—and

I become so disposed by desire, expectancy, trust, and an opened heart of gratitude.

How, then, can I open wider and deeper—or reopen—the springs of desire and gratitude and the resultant commitment to seek, which is so fundamental to the gospel and to the Rule by which Benedictine monastics live? How can we, corporately, as community, nurture desire and help sustain in one another the dedication to a genuine seeking? How can we nurture deep and sustained and operative desire in our ministries both within and outside of community? How can we have our desire for God suffuse and transform our administrative responsibilities? How can we share this fundamental dimension of our lives with our guests?

A favorite image of the monastic person in the modern world is as sacrament—an outward and visible sign to others—of desire for God, for God's reign, for the nurturing and extension of God's life and love in the world. It is so easy to have desire eroded, to be diverted or enticed away from that central hunger of our being. We have to keep it *alive*. And how much the church and the world need free men and women of desire, who truly, effectively believe that God seeks *them* in love and desire, and that they will be *found*. Such persons—whether inside or outside the monastery—communicate a constancy of hope, confidence, and joy—not a shallow optimism, but the living fruit of faith. Thus they become, as well, sacraments of thanksgiving and gratitude.