Don't Trust the Abbot

Musings from the Monastery

Abbot Jerome Kodell

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For Sister Mary Agnes, Cleo, and Anna

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Introduction

One day when I was working in the library at Subiaco Abbey's mission monastery in Belize, Central America, a little girl came in looking for a book. I was happy to see the interest in reading and stood up to help her. I asked her what kind of book she would like. "A big one," she said. "I need something to stand on."

This little book, I'm afraid, will not be much use in trying to reach the top shelf, but I've found that small books are more likely to be read than large ones, even though they may not be nearly as important. Small books don't look so scary, and you can carry them around in a pack or purse. And the size of the book doesn't determine the size of the topic.

This book is about a number of different topics but they all deal with one main subject, our life with God and our search for God, whether individually or with others. It is a collection of my articles from Subiaco Abbey's newsletter, *The Abbey Message*, spanning the time that I have been abbot, 1989–2008.

As is customary in most monasteries, each issue of the newsletter contains some kind of communication from the superior sharing news or expressing the spirituality and vision of the community. At the time of my election, *The Abbey Message* appeared six times a year, but in 1994 it became the quarterly it remains today. By now I have written nearly eighty articles in the newsletter as abbot.

Over these nineteen years, some articles have aroused a response while others have barely been noticed. There was an especially strong interest in three articles on prayer published in consecutive

issues in 1996 and 1997, and as a result that series was developed into a booklet, *Twelve Keys to Prayer*, published by Liturgical Press in 1999.

I didn't have any plans for wider circulation of the other newsletter articles until I began to receive requests from three readers in Texas, who eventually put a great deal of time and effort into retrieving the articles from past issues and suggesting various plans about selecting, organizing, and publishing. Their interest and their generous work on my behalf got my attention and I began to work with them, eventually selecting about half the newsletter articles for the present collection of *Don't Trust the Abbot*.

I am very grateful to my three coworkers, to whom I am dedicating this book. They gave the impetus and did much of the work and deserve a big share of the credit for any help new readers of these articles may receive for their spiritual journey.

Trust and Faith: Jesus Is the Way

Call It Trust

In spiritual conversations among Christians, before too long the word "faith" is likely to come up. The gift of faith is prerequisite for becoming a Christian. The church is made up of "the believers" and calls itself the "community of faith."

It was a dispute about faith that split the church at the time of the Protestant Reformation. Are we saved by faith alone, or by faith and works? We know now that the dilemma was a false one; both Catholics and Protestants agree that true faith "work[s] through love" (Gal 5:6) in opening us up to saving grace: "by grace you have been saved through faith" (Eph 2:8). But the consequence of the misunderstanding underscores the seriousness of the issue.

We still find it hard to define the meaning of faith. From the New Testament on, Christian faith has been capable of many nuances. The positive side of that is richness of meaning; the negative side is vagueness and imprecision. Faith means one thing in the admonition "Know your faith," another in the statement "My faith is weak." What does it mean to grow in faith (see 2 Cor 10:15)? What kind of faith is meant in the expression "Believe and you will be saved"? For Catholics, the word "faith" often implies a doctrinal content. We don't just believe; rather we believe something about someone and what that means for us. We have a Creed, which we use to profess our faith every Sunday.

Applying this broader understanding of faith to the questions in the preceding paragraph, a weak faith would indicate poor instruction or a lack of conviction about the truths in the Creed, and to grow in faith might mean to increase our study time and pray for stronger conviction.

The fact is that only one of the phrases above refers to doctrine: "Know your faith." In the other cases faith means "trust"—not

trust in a doctrine or belief but trust in a person: God the Father or Jesus, his son.

Faith as believing in something is secondary to faith as believing in someone. I think that the word "trust" is often more helpful than "faith" in expressing the primary New Testament meaning of faith, the fundamental attitude that opens us to peace and salvation. We may differ individually in our grasp of the details of revealed doctrine, but we all know what it means to trust another person. The call of the Gospel is to let go of our self-protection and anxieties and to give our lives over in trust to Jesus.

This is precisely the test. In the midst of the problems and dilemmas of my daily life, can I believe that there is really a God who knows what is going on, who cares about me and loves me? This is not the question of the existence of God. I may believe in God without trusting God. I may believe in the existence of a creator and judge for the whole world, without being convinced that this God is present in my life moment by moment, watching over me and loving me in the midst of my pains, doubts, tragedies, and loneliness.

Yet that is what it means to believe. It is the trust of Abraham, who left his known surroundings at the call of God, without a clue to his destination. It is the trust of Moses, who stood before the Red Sea with Pharaoh's army bearing down on him with nothing to hang on to except the promise of God, "I will be with you." Saint John of the Cross expressed this with the telling phrase, "O guiding Night."

Peace comes from trust. We are under the illusion that peace comes from knowledge of the future and secure provision for the future. Deep down we know this is a false hope. We will never know the future, only the present and the past; and we will never be able to provide absolute security for ourselves, no matter how rich or powerful we may be. Eventually disease, heartache, the diminishments of age, or calamity will break through our defenses—or if none of the above, eventually death. Ignorance of the future, one

of the saints has said, is the greatest unrecognized blessing of God.

At the Last Supper, Jesus told the disciples that he was going away to prepare a place for them in the Father's house. He assured them, "Where [I] am going you know the way." This was astonishing news. "Master," said Thomas, "we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" Jesus told him: "I am the way" (John 14:3-6).

This seemingly obscure answer is right to the point. The way to heaven is not a paved road or even a mapped road. It is a path that opens up in the darkness as we go forward, walking with Jesus. We do not need to know where Jesus is going. It is enough that he knows and that he takes us with him. Jesus promised to be with us every step of the journey (Matt 28:20). The faith that saves us is trust that Jesus can be taken at his word.

Don't Trust the Abbot

It is one thing to trust God and Jesus as the Son of God as faithful guides on the way to eternal life, but it is something else entirely to trust the people who exercise authority in God's name. There is no way around this dilemma, because God's plan of redemption is incarnation, that is, salvation mediated through human beings, beginning with Jesus Christ. Authentic Christianity requires obeying the human authorities duly appointed. How do we know that we can trust these weak human beings to lead us faithfully to God?

Saint Benedict addresses this question in chapter 4 of his Rule, "The Tools of Good Works," a manual of six dozen admonitions for successful living of the monastic life. He took this chapter almost verbatim from an earlier source, the Rule of the Master, but he edits a few maxims and adds a handful of his own. The one

that he has edited most elaborately is verse 61, which was in his source as "Obey the orders of the abbot." Benedict expands it as follows: "Obey the orders of the abbot in all things, even if his own conduct—which God forbid—be at odds with what he says. Remember the teaching of the Lord: 'Do what they say, not what they do.'"

Benedict is applying to the monk's life a comment of Jesus about the abuse of authority by Jewish leaders in his time: "The scribes and Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses. Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice" (Matt 23:2-3). The leaders are legitimately "on the chair of Moses," and so their directives can be safely followed, even if their own conduct does not live up to what they teach. Jesus is not referring here to directives that are immoral, unethical, or against the faith. He is not advocating "blind obedience." A faithful disciple may not obey such commands no matter who gives them. Jesus is talking about the legitimate exercise of religious authority. This is a great protection for the disciple. Obedience to the legitimate religious authority is obedience to God no matter who holds the office, saint or sinner. But on the other hand, the bad example of the superior is no excuse for the disciple.

In this way, Benedict relieves the monk of the wrong kind of respect for the abbot while preserving the abbatial authority that sanctifies the monk's obedience. It is dangerous to trust the abbot and other religious authorities too much, because when they slip, as all humans do, it may seem that the whole enterprise is going down. But the sinfulness and errors of those in authority do not invalidate the authority. Jesus does not say we have to trust the one in authority whom we obey. Hopefully the leader will earn our trust by faithfulness and good example, and that improves the experience of obedience dramatically. But it is not necessary to trust the religious authority in order to obey and to receive the blessings of obedience.

Problems arise when people fail to make the distinction between trust in and obedience to religious authorities. Since 2002, the media has carried many stories of Catholics who have left the church because of the failure of some bishops to respond honestly and appropriately to the clergy abuse scandal. We know that through history monks have left monasteries sometimes solely because of the poor leadership or sinful conduct of abbots. Laity have left the church because of pastors.

But we are not required to trust our religious leaders unless they earn our trust by their conduct. The requirement for salvation is faith, which means trust in God. Applied to the church and religious life, this means we are called to trust in God to carry out the divine plan and purpose for the church and its members through whatever human leaders God happens to have placed in charge.

Saint Benedict foresaw that some abbots might be saints and others might be scoundrels, and that bad abbots could create anxiety among their subjects. But he is reassuring: if you obey those God has placed in authority you will be obeying God, and God will sanctify you. In other words, he presents God as saying: You don't have to trust anyone but me—not the abbot, not the bishops, not even the pope. You need to obey them in the legitimate exercise of their office, and to trust them when you can. The obedience will make you a saint, no matter what they do. I can work out my plans, whoever is in charge on earth. It may not be pretty, but it will be effective. Trust me.

The Meeting Tent

As the pilgrim people of God made their way through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land, at every stage Moses would set up a meeting tent outside the camp. This was not a tent for public meetings, as the name might imply, but a

place to encounter God: "Anyone who wished to consult the LORD would go to this meeting tent outside the camp" (Exod 33:7).

Though anyone could go to the tent, it was critical to the journey that Moses, the leader, should visit the Lord in the tent, and so all eyes were on him: "Whenever Moses went out to the tent, the people would all rise and stand at the entrance of their own tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent" (Exod 33:8). When they saw the column of cloud descend to the tent, they knew Moses was conversing with God, and seeing this, all the people would worship at their own tents.

The way through the wilderness was uncharted. The people knew that they would make it through only by the guidance of God, and therefore it was vital to their interests that the leader stay in contact with God. Moses did not know the way, and he did not have to, as long as he stayed close to God.

This is always the pattern of spiritual leadership. The journey to the Promised Land is always in the wilderness, and no human leader knows the way. It is not the job of the leader to know the way, but to stay in contact with God, who does know the way. The main responsibility of a spiritual leader—the pope, a bishop, a religious superior, a pastor—is to go to the meeting tent to be with God every day. The people do not expect their leaders in the faith to know everything, and they become concerned when leaders think they do. What gives people confidence is that the leader is close to God. This doesn't put an end to the errors of human weakness, but it protects from losing the way.

The gospels tell us that the key ingredient to discipleship is faith: "Your faith has been your salvation." This is not just any faith, such as believing the truth of the teaching, but faith in its personal meaning as trust. Salvation comes from putting our trust in God and in his son Jesus. Growth in knowledge of the faith comes from study, but growth in trust comes only from personal contact—prayer—with God. We are not asked to put our trust in human leaders, but in God. The closer our leaders are to God, the more

at home they are in his tent, and the more we can put our trust also in them.

Everyone, not just leaders, is called to intimacy with God. But it is easier for people to seek a close relationship with the Lord themselves if they know their leader is praying. "As Moses entered the tent, the column of cloud would come down and stand at its entrance while the LORD spoke with Moses. On seeing the column of cloud stand at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and worship at the entrance of their own tents" (Exod 33:9-10).

Something happened to Moses when he went into God's presence, something he seemed to be the last to notice. When he came down from Mount Sinai after being with God for forty days, the people noticed that his face had become radiant, an outward sign of something happening within. The same thing happened to Jesus on Mount Tabor at the transfiguration (Luke 9:29). The inner transformation this represents is offered to all who spend time with God in the meeting tent. In the Latin Bible, the meeting tent is *tabernaculum*, the source of our word tabernacle, which the church very appropriately adopted as the name for the place of the Blessed Sacrament. The meeting tent with God can be pitched anywhere in our lives, but the tent of the Blessed Sacrament, a permanent witness to the Eucharist we have shared, is a privileged place to spend time in the divine presence.

The meeting tent of Moses gives one means of access to understanding the place of religious life in the church. Religious life is to be a sign or emphasis of a particular part of the spiritual journey that is true for every disciple. Yet all of us are called to holiness, all are called into intimacy with God, all are called to the tent every day. Some are invited to do this as a sign to the church, to be as Moses was for the people in the wilderness, a hopeful reminder that God is with us on the way. Religious (those who are members of religious orders) don't do this instead of others, and they don't necessarily do it better. But their life is a sign of hope. The other members of the Body of Christ want religious to be holy and to

pray, not instead of them but with them, keeping their eyes "fixed on Jesus" (Heb 12:2) as a reminder and encouragement for all to do the same. It should come as no surprise that religious communities, with their antennae up, are often among the first to sense and to respond to a new need or new opportunity in the church and in the world, a new direction in the wilderness. What are they to do about it? Only time in the presence of God will reveal the answer to that.

There is "one thing necessary," and when the journey is over, what will have made the difference for the religious is whether or not he or she has gone faithfully to the tent. And it is the same for all of us.

God's Mantra

A mantra is a short word or phrase used repetitively in prayer. We still sometimes call such phrases ejaculations—"My Jesus, mercy"; "Jesus, Mary, Joseph"—but the word "mantra," borrowed from the Eastern religions, indicates a particular way of using such phrases. They are repeated over and over again as a way of maintaining focus on God during a time of contemplative prayer.

In Christian usage phrases such as those above ordinarily express devotion or state a faith conviction or hope. Other favorites are "Maranatha" (1 Cor 16:22; either in the original Aramaic or in translation as "Come, Lord Jesus"), the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner"), or simply the name of Jesus. The Hail Marys of the rosary are a kind of mantra.

It is obviously a misapplication of the term to speak of God as having a mantra in this sense, but God does have a mantra in the message he repeats over and over again to his children, hoping we will hear. We find it repeated for us time and again in the Sacred

Scriptures: I am with you. I love you. Trust me. It is hard to imagine any message that could be more comforting or consoling as a promise from our Creator and Father, who holds the whole world in his hands. God says to all of us and to each one of us personally: I am with you. I love you. Trust me.

God's promise to be with us began at the beginning—with Abraham, our father in faith, who was asked to set out on a perilous journey with no clear destination, but with the promise "I am your shield" (Gen 15:1). Saint Gregory of Nyssa's comment on Abraham's unquestioning response is classic: "Abraham left his home without knowing where he was going, a sure sign he was going the right way." When Abraham's son Isaac was doubtful, God reassured him: "You have no need to fear, since I am with you" (Gen 26:24). The same message was given to Jacob (28:15), Moses (Exod 3:12), Joshua (Josh 1:5), and to all the prophets and leaders of God's people. Jesus embodied this promise in the name Emmanuel (God is with us), and in his turn promised the same to his disciples: "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Matt 28:20). I will be with you. I love you. Trust me.

Over and over again God told the people that he chose them out of love: "It was not because you are the largest of all nations that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you. . . . It was because the LORD loved you" (Deut 7:7-8). "[Y]ou are precious in my eyes and glorious. . . . / Fear not, for I am with you" (Isa 43:4-5). "With age-old love I have loved you; so I have kept my mercy toward you" (Jer 31:3). Jesus is the ultimate proof of that love: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). "God is love. In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him" (1 John 4:8-9). I am with you. I love you. Trust me.

When Jesus healed people he said, "Your faith has saved you" (Matt 9:22; Mark 5:34; 10:52; Luke 7:50; 8:48; 17:19; 18:42). He did not mean healing grace came to them because they understood everything about him, but it came because they put their trust in

him as God's servant. They were open to God in him. They knew they could put their hope in him. "Your trust has saved you." We are not required to have vast information about Jesus, but we must seek to know him personally and commit our lives in trust to him. We can trust him, as we can trust his Father, to lead us on our pilgrim journey: "Commit your way to the LORD; / trust that God will act" (Ps 37:5). "Trust God at all times" (Ps 62:9). I am with you. I love you. Trust me.

In our daily life the path is often unclear. We don't know which way to turn, and we are tempted to believe that no one is in charge, nobody cares, and no one is listening. This darkness is the necessary context for the struggle of faith, so that we may freely choose for or against God. In the midst of this struggle it is most consoling to realize that God's main revelation to us about himself is that he loves us, watches over each of us at every moment, and desperately wants us to live with him forever. If this is not true, nothing is true. Behind all the trials and troubles of the world a constant message pulsates throughout the universe, like the rhythmic beating of God's heart: I am with you. I love you. Trust me.

The Silence of Mary

Images of Mary, the mother of Jesus, are found in collections of great art, religious and secular, around the world. The favorite subjects are the annunciation, the birth in Bethlehem, Mary at the cross, and the Madonna and Child (including the *Pietà*). These are frozen frames that give an impression of still life, but they pulsate with action. However, the action is within and is accessible to the viewer only from within.

The annunciation scene portrays the most momentous dialogue in history. The question is delivered and the response is awaited. The decisive action is within the heart of the maid, who is depicted

in an attitude of wonder, openness, and pondering, and all time stands still. It is a moment of contemplation, in which the word of God is waiting for the response of the creature, like the finger of God reaching for Adam's hand in the Sistine Chapel. The word coming forever out of Mary's contemplation is *Fiat*, "Let it be done."

The scenes about Mary are all scenes about Jesus and her response to him. Her response is always captured in a silence that is filled with the one word, *Fiat*. Nothing else needs to be said and nothing else that would be said could improve on that response of this mother to this son, redeemed to redeemer. The scenes of silence pulsate with energy and deep communion.

Mary says very little in the gospels, certainly not as much as we would expect from the one through whom God set the work of redemption in motion, the one who is the mother of the Redeemer and is given to us as our mother. She listens to the angel, she responds, she lives the life laid out for her, she suffers, she observes, and she waits, "[keeping] all these things, reflecting on them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). She is very active, but her action, between herself and God, is unseen; it is in the heart, a contemplative action.

The silence of Mary is an essential ingredient of the life of the church. When it is lacking, no amount of fervor will cover up the nagging sense that something is missing. But we often respond to that feeling of emptiness by more words and more actions, even more prayerful words and more holy actions. But nothing will replace the silence of Mary.

Perhaps it is the increasing din of the modern world that is intensifying the present search for oases of silence. Retreat centers and hermitages are more and more popular, as are workshops and publications on prayer, especially quiet and contemplative prayer. This interest ranges far beyond the Catholic Church. In fact, many, if not most, of the contemporary books applying monastic values to lay life come from other Christians.

Or it may be that the life of worship within the Christian churches is not leaving enough room for the silence of Mary. Even many Catholics who appreciate the liturgical renewal of the Second Vatican Council miss the long silent periods of the Latin Mass. And many Protestants have begun to wonder whether in correcting abuses in medieval liturgy their ancestors did not discard an essential contemplative dimension that is still edged out in worship services of constant word and song, when even periods of private prayer are not silent. Our hearts yearn to rest wordlessly in the love of Jesus, like the silent Mary gazing at her newborn infant, or watching from afar at Nazareth, or holding his lifeless body, spent in love.

The resurgence of the rosary may be partly explained by this growing yearning for contemplative union. And not only among Catholics: there is an Anglican rosary now, though of different design and method, and a Lutheran way of using the rosary with a "biblical" Hail Mary, omitting the second part of the prayer. The beauty of the rosary has always been that it may be used in different ways, either with mental attention to the mysteries and even to the words of the prayer, or only as a bodily means of focusing our desire on God in quiet and contemplative union. And it may also be used whatever our situation or mood, when because of anguish, or sickness, or tiredness, or distraction we find it impossible to concentrate. Fingering the beads makes it possible for us to seek God at a different level, underneath the physical, mental, or emotional barricades.

The silence of Mary in the gospels is not an empty silence. It is a silence of waiting, of pondering, of loving. This contemplative silence is an essential ingredient of the life of the church and of each believer, and in our busy time we are hungering for it with new urgency. At first we are surprised by Mary's silence, and then, in the presence of Jesus, we understand.