

“Paul Ricoeur would no doubt rejoice! This lively account and appreciation of the sacred in the profane, the extraordinary in the ordinary, is not unlike the parables of Jesus and as such provides a wonderful model for theological reflection. Mary’s account of events and relationships have a matter of fact quality giving way to a deep appreciation and the profound influence of Benedict in chartering her way through life. Particularly poignant is her honest account experienced in the transition from an appointment as prioress back to her cherished teaching. Dashed expectations and the whirlpool of confusion chiselling out a greater connectedness to reality and to new life.”

— Marie Biddle, SJ
Coordinator of Spirituality Programs
Aquinas Academy, Sydney, Australia

“In my book, *Meditation in Motion*, I remind readers to ‘resolve at least for today to become aware of the many openings to prayer provided by ordinary reality.’ Needless to say, I congratulate the author of this book, a former student of mine, for helping her readers to re-appreciate the richness embedded in everyday life. She counsels us all to live on that razor’s edge between time and eternity and to see with new eyes what we might otherwise have missed.”

— Susan Muto, PhD
Dean, Epiphany Academy of Formative Spirituality

“In her inspired and indispensable book, S. Mary Reuter gives new meaning to ‘common sense:’ she teaches us how to employ all our senses in understanding the seemingly common and discover deep spiritual meaning in the everyday.”

— Martha Tomhave Blauvelt
College of St. Benedict
Collegeville, Minnesota

“*Running with Expanded Heart* offers a vision of how the spirituality of Saint Benedict can provide inspiration and guidance for 21st-century Christians—including the laity. Mary Reuter understands just how down-to-earth and practical Benedictine wisdom is and uses storytelling, personal reflection, and thought-provoking open-ended questions to illustrate just how relevant Benedict’s Rule continues to be. Beginning with an homage to her father whom she describes as an ‘extraordinary ordinary man,’ Reuter goes on to show, in a variety of ways, how Benedictine wisdom can help Christians to find the extraordinary in all of life’s ordinary moments. This book can serve both as an introduction to Benedictine spirituality for beginners, but also as a bouquet of new insights for those who have walked with Benedict for some time.”

— Carl McColman
Blogger (www.anamchara.com)
Author of *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism*

"Drawing on wisdom that has been slowly ripened in the rhythms of monastic stability, Benedictine Mary Reuter reveals the way she has grown into her own expanding heart by sharing engaging personal stories with which any one of us can easily identify. The words and stories discovered in *Running with Expanding Heart: Meeting God in Everyday Life* may be deceptively simple, but they illuminate the ultimately mysterious nooks and crannies of the human soul and encourage us to attend to the Spirit gently moving through the moments of our ordinary days."

—Wendy M. Wright, PhD
Professor of Theology, Creighton University

"Mining and minding the moment becomes thoughtfully exhilarating as Sister Mary provides a respectful look at the unfolding presence of God in daily life. Guided by her insights, her stories, her own vulnerability and her sharing of Scripture and the Rule of Benedict, readers gain ways to develop a pattern for strengthening and expanding their hearts as they discover God in life's experiences. Like supportive running shoes, each chapter takes one forward on the path of life."

—Michaela Hedican, OSB
Prioress
Saint Bede Monastery
Eau Claire, Wisconsin

"*Running with Expanding Heart* shows amazing and even startling stories of where, when, how to find God in everyday life. Mary's creativity opens new vistas when she invites us to consider 'finding a pearl in the salad dressing' or finding God in a world that is ' . . . studded and strewn with pennies.' Having been introduced by Sr. Mary to the image of the 'Walking Madonna' years ago reminded me of her incredible ability to discover God in the difficult moments as well as the jubilee moments of her life. This creative endeavor of Sister Mary Reuter's highlights her love of her Benedictine roots, her love of the Gospel and for all little ones and searchers of our world. A 'must' read for all who wish to *run with an expanding heart!*"

—Sister Eleanor Granger, OSF
Sisters of Saint Francis
Rochester, Minnesota

"Reuter reminds us with embarrassingly accurate detail that the intrusions and interruptions we grit teeth and grind jaws over can be, to the attentive, invitations from God who, once we offer a nod of permission, is ready to re-order our day toward the divine. Hers is a perennial and timely message for our lives that are so ruled by the immediacy of the internet."

—Larry Lewis, M.M.
author of *The Misfit-Haunting the Human Unveiling the Divine*

Running with Expanding Heart

Meeting God in Everyday Life

Mary Reuter, OSB

Foreword by Patrick Henry



LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Reuter, Mary.

Running with expanding heart : meeting God in everyday life /
Mary Reuter ; foreword by Patrick Henry.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.).

ISBN 978-0-8146-3308-3 — ISBN 978-0-8146-3920-7 (e-book)

1. Christian life—Catholic authors. I. Title.

BX2350.3.R48 2010

248.4'82—dc22

2009051935

To my family,
especially Mom and Dad,
and to my Benedictine community
who have taught me that *ordinary time*
and all that happens during it
are sacred and can be lived as praise of God.

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Foreword

by Patrick Henry

Once upon a time, 900 years ago, the line between the monastery and the “outside” world was fuzzy. In the twenty books of her delightful Brother Cadfael mystery series, novelist Ellis Peters demonstrates repeatedly how many contacts monastic folk and common folk had with each other. The monastery was a community center, the hub of civic activity.

There is certainly much that is different between our time and the Middle Ages, but one thing we have in common is an indistinct border between monasteries and the world. By this I do not mean that the twelfth and twenty-first centuries are secularized corruptions of an original monastic ideal. On the contrary, St. Benedict and other founders were committed to healing the world, not escaping from it.

In very broad strokes, this sets the scene for Sister Mary’s book. I am fortunate to know well both Mary and her community, Saint Benedict’s Monastery in Saint Joseph, Minnesota. It would be hard to find anywhere a group of people more alert to current events, to the hurts and joys of their neighbors, whether next door or on the other side of the world. Their core values— Awareness of God, Community, Prayer and Work, Listening, Hospitality, Stewardship, Peace—taken straight from the Rule of Benedict, mark the territory they claim for their mission. There is no member of the human family they classify as alien, no part of the planet they consider foreign.

In the popular imagination, monastics are sometimes an amalgam of sanctity and silliness, as in many movies where they are by turns pious and naive. Occasionally their cleverness

is portrayed, as when the sisters in *The Sound of Music* outwit the Nazis by pulling wires from a car's engine. But I suspect that most people, until recently, figured that those who live in monasteries wouldn't have much practical advice to offer.

In my lifetime, now beginning its eighth decade, I have witnessed many spiritual revolutions. One of the most profound (and surprising) has been the growing attention to monastics, and to monastic traditions more generally, as a source of practical insight that is practical precisely because it is grounded in a clear, unsentimental, but ultimately hopeful understanding of human nature. People are discovering that those who live in monasteries have something a friend of mine once called "a spirituality for the long haul"—and since we're all in the long haul together, we'd better pay attention to those who have reckoned how to make the best of it.

Running with Expanding Heart: Meeting God in Everyday Life takes its place in a growing library of wisdom literature that includes Thomas Merton, OCSO; Joan Chittister, OSB; Mary Margaret Funk, OSB; David Steindl-Rast, OSB; Sister Jeremy Hall, OSB (late of Saint Benedict's Monastery); and many others.

Kathleen Norris has alerted hundreds of thousands of readers to what she has learned about the depth and breadth of life in her encounters—some brief, some extended over many years—with sons and daughters of St. Benedict and his twin sister, St. Scholastica. And here is something Norris has noticed, and so have I: the Benedictine commitment to community, far from homogenizing monastics into indistinguishable holiness, produces people of stunning uniqueness.

Sister Mary Reuter makes her own inimitable contribution to the library of Benedictine wisdom literature. The point of her book is to prompt you to be alert to how God is there to be met in *your* everyday life, your unique everyday life.

You probably haven't had a moment of revelation when you dropped a salad dressing bottle and it broke, and a similar occasion might very well not get your attention as it did Sister Mary's.

But once you know what she learned from it, how it brought her face up against some habits that soured her spirit and diminished her effectiveness, you will be more ready to let God get through to you when you do something hasty or stupid.

“Dad seemed so ordinary he could easily be overlooked.” Maybe this is not your dad, but it was Mary’s, and the insights she gained from talking to people at his funeral might sharpen your alertness so you won’t “overlook” God’s image that other people are. Benedict “realizes that people are drowsy, going through their daily routine in habits that keep them comfortable and unaware of what’s going on within and outside them.” Mary has found that Benedict is right: if we’re awake, really awake, we’ll discover that God is lurking around nearly every corner, “hidden behind what we perceive.”

A monastic practice that attracts a lot of popular interest is one called *lectio divina*, a slow, ruminative reading of texts, usually from the Bible, in which the point is not to solve an intellectual puzzle but to let the text get under your skin and start to read you more than you read it. Mary is especially adept at this with the parables of Jesus, and she shows us not only the parables she has discovered in her own life but also how all of us can “serve as initiators and supporters of parables in the lives of others.” She is grateful to those who have been such initiators and supporters for her, who have given her “deep roots to support [her] life and branches to reach out to others.”

I suspect you will find much of what you read in these pages staying with you because what Mary knows is grounded in stories, and stories are what we remember. We also (I anyway) remember insights that sneak up, that mingle shrewdness and humor. Mary’s analysis of the way we talk about time—we mark it, spend it, kill it, run out of it, waste it, are just a few of the metaphors she notices—startled me, and maybe will make me more hospitable toward time, befriending it, as Mary suggests, not competing against it.

You may have suspected, as I did a long time ago, that monastic folks are more straitjacketed than the rest of us; after all, they live

a life of discipline, they follow a Rule. But Sister Mary makes clear that one fruit of the disciplined life is, paradoxically, a heightened ability to choose. Over and over again in these pages she reminds us that we can—must—make choices about how we interpret the things that happen to us and that we make happen. I don't have to react; I can respond. And Mary knows this can be really tough. She takes us through a period of several months when she was faced with disillusionment and disorientation.

Sister Mary, paraphrasing Gail Godwin, says that our lives can keep on making more of us. This is a pretty good summary of Benedictine wisdom and reflects the truth embedded in the title of the book, right out of the Rule of Benedict—*Running with Expanding Heart*. I daresay this is a truth that Brother Cadfael and his contemporaries in the twelfth century understood. We are lucky that Sister Mary Reuter and her contemporaries—you and I—in the twenty-first century are rediscovering it.

Patrick Henry lives in Waite Park, Minnesota, and retired in 2004 after twenty years as executive director of the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research. Previously he was professor of religion at Swarthmore College. He is author of *The Ironic Christian's Companion: Finding the Marks of God's Grace in the World* and, with Donald Swearer, *For the Sake of the World: The Spirit of Buddhist and Christian Monasticism*.

Preface

Some would call Leo, my dad, a custom tractor worker, but as a child I considered him to be a magician with a little Ford tractor. It seemed Dad and his tractor could do whatever he envisioned, as any artist can. He dug post holes for building barns and plowed gardens for planting in the spring. When a snowstorm blew in, I could hear the drone of his tractor by 3:00 a.m. as he left home to plow snow out of driveways and parking lots in our small town, making it possible for people to get to work and school on snowy days. In spring he plowed gardens for people who later watched in hopeful anticipation of vegetables and fruits. During the summer Dad dug basements that would serve as the foundation for new homes. Later he came back to landscape the yards to designer perfection. The partners, Dad and his tractor, worked well together. They also had fun. Many times they pulled my siblings and me on exciting toboggan rides out in the open spaces near our home.

With this brief introduction to Dad, I move to the events of his wake and funeral in 1970. Through them my eyes were opened wide, and I could see with new lenses. It was at that time I received the effects of Dad's magic. I became more sensitive to the value of ordinary events in my life that I previously had overlooked.

Dad was intent on living with a gospel heart. Thus, he looked to Jesus for ways to live his calling as a Christian, and Jesus served him well. Jesus is also here for us.

St. Benedict of Nursia (480–547) provides a guide, the Rule of Benedict, for Christians who are called to live the gospel as monastics.¹ They live within a specifically designed structure,

with special focus on Christ and some of his values expressed in the gospel and with emphasis on some practices that can form the heart and influence its expression. A gift of St. Benedict's guide is its applicability for any Christian's life. It draws from the wisdom he gained through his life journey, first as a hermit and then as he lived with and guided monks in the monasteries he established. In exploring ways that daily events offer opportunities to meet and respond to God, I note some of the principles and practices St. Benedict includes in his guide, especially those that focus on everyday life. St. Benedict also points out that "our hearts expand" as we advance in living as a disciple of Christ, as we stretch our hearts when we run "the way of God's commandments with love."² This wisdom echoes the invitation of Jesus who says to all of us, "Follow me," by loving in attitude and actions (Matt 4:19).

This book draws from experiences—my own, those of others, and those of people in Scripture and other literature. I invite you to let the examples evoke your own experiences. This book is not for me. It is for you, to expand your vision and heart so you can love more fully through your own daily events.

I suggest some practices you might use in your own life. I include questions to draw you into reflection. However, this book is not a "how to" text. I refrain from extensive descriptions of formative practices. I include the thinking of some wise people so you hear their voice of guidance. Also, sources noted in the endnotes and bibliography can lead you to further resources.

My dad awaits you in Chapter 1. Other people will walk with you through the pages of this book. The chapters focus on some of the values St. Benedict stressed: the view that everything is holy; hospitality; obedience (listening, discerning, and responding); stability; *conversatio* (structures and practices that support a change of heart and actions in daily events); and dramatic experiences. As you consider and value more fully the stuff of your daily life, expect blessings to be lurking in occurrences that might seem minor or that you have overlooked. I trust you will find that St. Benedict's hope will become a fuller reality in your

everyday experiences: “so that in all things God may be glorified” (RB 57:9 [1 Pet 4:11]).

I hope you will become much more aware of the miracles in your lives. According to a Jewish perspective, miracles are any events “in which one sees the power and love of God.”³ We know that miracles are God’s doing, but they also depend on us, the ones who, with the help of God, are attentive and who notice.⁴ I hope that as you read this book, you will see more miracles in your daily life and will live with deeper faith that God loves you unconditionally and constantly. I hope, too, that your life will continue to grow into a well-practiced prayer of joy, gratitude, and praise.

Acknowledgments

My gratitude goes to my family, especially Mom and Dad, who first modeled the importance of giving attention to encounters of daily life. I thank my Benedictine sisters for their influence in expanding my heart and in maturing my ability to live according to the principles given by Christ and later by St. Benedict of Nursia. I am grateful particularly for the example of their lives—lives that have taught me how to live a life of compassion and service.

I am grateful to Studium, the Scholars-in-Residence program at Saint Benedict's Monastery, for the space and resources that helped me step apart during my sabbatical to begin writing this book. Gratitude also goes to the faculty of the Institute of Formative Spirituality at Duquesne University for their guidance during my doctoral work: Adrian Van Kaam, CSSp, Susan Muto, Carolyn Gratton, Charles Maes, and Richard Byrne, OCSO. Thank you to Diane Millis and Lynn Bye, who served as writing partners during the early stages of this book. And to the many people along the way who have read and given feedback on parts of the manuscript, thank you; some can witness to the many shavings left behind as the book has been whittled into the shape it has become. Special thanks go to Stefanie Weisgram, OSB, who has read and reread versions of the text and found some of the resources I needed. I thank Scott Russell Sanders, who recognized vitality in what I was writing; his voice served as encouragement when I became tired of it all. Thank you to Marie Biddle, SJ, for the use of her photo of the "Two Madonnas" in Salisbury, England. My gratitude goes to Marold Kornovich, OSB, whose con-

temporary psalm gives us some of her wisdom gained during her ninety-three years of living with a gradually expanding heart. Thank you to Sylvia Sultenfuss for her reflection that highlights some of her surprises as she moved through an ordinary day, allowing it to reveal the extraordinary.

I am grateful, too, to the students and participants in workshops and retreats I have facilitated; their responses and commitment to their faith journeys have convinced me that the topic of this book needs to be explored so people can be open to their daily experiences with respect and expectation of blessings. I am especially grateful to the monks of Subiaco Abbey, Arkansas, whose invitation to present some reflections during a retreat has resulted in the chapters of this book.

I note readers, each of whom brought her perspective to the subject matter and writing style: Roberta Bondi, Rosalie Klimisch, Julia Ahlers Ness, Carol Johannes (whose eye for detailed editing could win her employment by any publisher), Martha Tomhave Blauvelt (who has already found herself in chapter 6), and Sylvia Sultenfuss (who has been a constant cheerleader and continually reminded me that this book needs to be written). And I thank Patrick Henry for his foreword; he “gets it” regarding my monastic community and the importance of daily parables available to every person. I also thank him for his editing that has given the reflections greater clarity.

I thank the staff of Liturgical Press for its expertise and gracious service. I note especially Mary Stommes, whose editing skills have become an art and who knows well how to serve as a companion to an author who needs to move through revisions and learn necessary “how to’s.” And thanks, too, to Ann Blattner, who sifted through several options for the cover and persevered with me as I discerned the focus and design.

Chapter 1

Everything Is Holy

*. . . the ineffable inhabits the magnificent and the common,
the grandiose and the tiny facts of reality alike.¹*

An Extraordinary Ordinary Man

October 5, 1970, started as an ordinary teaching day. A phone call from my brother Roger changed everything. “Mary, Dad just died of a heart attack.” Thus began days of encounters that opened my eyes wide. I caught glimpses of Dad that I had not seen or given much attention to. As I walked through Dad’s wake and funeral, I was plunged into awareness and reflection that would affect deeply who I was and how I would live in the following years. Little did I realize then how much my heart would expand, a change that would be irrevocable.

Dad was only sixty years old. His sudden death stunned everyone. During his wake, people stood in a long line outside the mortuary and gradually made their way to the casket to say good-bye. People kept coming, weeping, giving their condolences to my family, and sharing their memories of Dad, even as we consoled them. I noticed the stories about Dad’s jokes, chats, compassion, and gift for creating beauty. With his Ford tractor he had plowed people’s gardens in the spring, terraced lawns during the summer, and plowed snow out of driveways and school parking lots during the winter. These were Dad’s tasks. But there was more.

2 *Running with Expanding Heart*

Dad was a simple and unassuming man. On first glance, nothing significant marked his encounters with people. However, a second look revealed the influence of his simplicity, candor, and willingness to give something beyond the job he had been asked to do. Dad seemed so ordinary he could easily be overlooked. Yet his contagious spirit influenced many people. He was daily and ordinary, and yet so extraordinary.

I left Dad's wake and funeral with my heart tight. While weighed down with grief, I took home a heart full of stories and humor that had been exercised pulse by pulse through each person I'd met during those days of mourning and celebration. I also carried with me some questions: What lessons had Dad taught me throughout my life, even while I did not realize I was learning them? What lessons was I to learn from him now?

Dad reached out to people as part of his ordinary life. He soothed his crying children in the middle of the night; over the years he washed many baby bottles for his nine children. His lap welcomed little ones as a favorite place for rest and cuddling. We often heard stories from Dad's work activities. We learned about our aunts and uncles through tales of their childhood. Sunday afternoons gave us fun time with Dad as he played 500 Rummy with us. At times he'd interrupt the game to dance around the living room with my mother, in step with the ump-pa-pa of the old-time music on the radio. I recall Dad's special care during Christmas vacations when he'd warm the car before the family piled in and we'd set out to visit our grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Dad faithfully cheered on my brothers at their football and basketball games. Birthdays, weddings, births and baptisms of grandchildren, and funerals of relatives and friends all held honored places in his life. When he put on his dark suit with a white shirt and tie, he was transformed into a man of dignity while retaining his comfortable presence as Dad.

Dad, a shy man, took center stage for a scene in the play *Everyman*, presented by our local parish. Fear gradually loosened its hold on him as he publicly risked taking on a new identity for a few weeks. Dad was a man of deep feelings, even though

those who did not know him well probably thought him to be quite reserved and unexpressive. He felt more comfortable keeping his feelings to himself than expressing them. However, I recall how they erupted into sobs when he received the news that his mother had died. He allowed himself to be held, vulnerable and unashamed, by my mother in his grief. Until then—as a fourteen-year-old—I had thought that men did not cry. Dad taught me otherwise.

Prayer regularly punctuated Dad's life. He took for granted that we prayed the rosary as a family during the months of Mary: May and October. Groans from my brothers could not deter this regular ritual after supper. Sundays, along with weekdays during Lent, were church-going occasions for the whole family. Every night we children could hear Dad and Mom pray their nighttime prayers together.

Even when he was very busy, Dad put quality, artistry, and people before expediency and efficiency. He took pride in a job done well. Often he interrupted his work to listen to people's stories about themselves and their families. Sometimes he slipped into stores to visit with friends when he passed by on his way to a work site. He often granted extensions to people he worked for who were having a hard time financially. Special sensitivity went to the elderly and disabled. In the winter it was his regular practice to sneak in and plow snow from a driveway in the dark, early hours of the morning without charging for the service. At the same time his sense of justice became provoked when a customer was unwilling to make the payment he had originally agreed upon.

Dad's death and what I learned about the value of ordinary encounters nudged me into remembering and reflecting on my childhood experiences and questions. I became aware that I had been intrigued for a long time with ordinary events and their influence on people's lives. As a child I was told that God meets us in our daily experiences. How would this happen? Would I hear a voice? Would I see someone? I hoped not. I'd be terrified. And people might think I was strange if I told them I saw God or I heard God talk to me.

Although I did not have the language for it in 1970, Dad's life and death taught me many lessons about the richness and vitality of a sacramental experience: God meets us and touches our lives in the midst of our daily experiences. I began to understand that conversion, the turning of our heart and actions to the attitudes and actions of Jesus, occurs gradually and often goes unnoticed. Daily events exercise our hearts, much as workouts strengthen our muscles. The process appears simple at first glance, but it is not easy in practice. Living a Christian life with its daily invitations and demands is not for the fainthearted. Furthermore, we need guidance to make our way through all the messages and openings we receive.

Where can we find wisdom to guide us? Over the years I have found two sources especially helpful. One is the gospel, where we can learn about Christ's perspective and actions, and the other is the Rule of Benedict of Nursia that outlines one way to live the gospel.

Jesus—A Celebrator of Ordinary Time

The gospels reveal the life and wisdom of Jesus Christ and his efforts to get people to think about the ultimate meaning of life. He both taught and modeled this meaning, showing us that the reign of God's love is lived here and now, not only in some future time of full glory. Jesus respected encounters with persons, things and events; he trusted that they could be life-giving. For example, when in his daily travels Jesus met people who were diseased, blind, and lame, he looked at them with compassion. He spoke to them. He touched them. People's lives were transformed. They saw, they walked, and they ran to tell others what had happened. Their hearts were changed, opening in gratitude and praise. As Jesus' heart expanded with care and as he acted out of this love, people were healed and returned to life.

Jesus involved himself in the usual tasks and encounters of his daily life. Ordinary things and gestures served as ways of giving life, of celebrating what we might consider ordinary time.

He broke bread and people were fed. Jesus touched the eyes of a blind man and he could see. From noticing how a seed sprouts and grows, he learned about the dying-rising pattern of life. He taught these insights to the people. Yeast and bread dough, mustard trees, and a woman looking for a lost coin became some of the bases of his parables. Jesus' familiarity with seeds and types of soil gave him images for stories that urged the listeners to cultivate their inner soil to receive life-shifting messages and to nurture growth. Jesus interacted with relatives and friends; he experienced hospitality. He also found himself in the middle of a family conflict about who had the better part, Martha busy providing food for guests or Mary sitting and listening to Jesus. Again, life taught him how to welcome guests, to love persons in ways unique to each, and to live creatively within the dynamic tension of activity and solitude. Might Jesus' involvement with the stuff of life encourage us to value more our own daily lives? Might he also give us the foresight to expect blessings from encounters that, at first glance, seem of little consequence?

In contrast to Jesus, we instinctively look for what is extraordinary and dramatic. None of us wants our life to be only a whimper. Daily situations often seem too mundane, too insignificant in the big scheme of things, and too fleeting to be important. However, dads, moms, friends, teachers, and business people doing everyday activities bring God's love to people they meet, providing openings through which the Spirit breathes into the world; they give opportunities for Christ to continue engaging in ordinary life situations. Really? And do these people together really pulse the vitality of the Body of Christ? Do ordinary people who are trying, struggling, and failing continue Jesus' dying and rising? Yes! How extraordinary!

St. Benedict's Perspective

St. Benedict of Nursia heard Jesus' message that the reign of God's love is here and now, not only in the past or the future. He centers his spirituality on the person of Jesus Christ. This

focus casts light on the place of daily life as monastics seek God and put the love of Christ before all else (RB 58:7; 4:21). The events of everyday life offer opportunities for us to die to our own self-centeredness and to rise to fuller life with God and God's concerns.² Christ is embodied and received in guests regardless of societal rank (RB 53:7), in the poor (RB 53:15), in the sick (RB 36:1), and in the abbot or prioress (RB 2:2; 63:13). Sometimes the "guest" is someone we don't like; St. Benedict asks us to respect and pray for the person "out of love for Christ" (RB 4:72). God's incarnate presence is not limited to Jesus of Nazareth as he lived on earth; God lives on in all people. When we look at life through the eyes of Benedict, we will see more than is immediately evident; we can then respond with faith that God is in this place, this person, this event.

There is no line of demarcation between the sacred and the profane, between the holy and the material. Everything is holy.³ St. Benedict urges the person in charge of the storeroom and supplies (the cellarer) and others who are in charge of material goods to care with respect as if they are holy objects (RB 31:10). We are given similar challenges: treat things with care rather than thinking of them as easily disposable and replaceable; respond to people we are serving with patience, a sense of service, and joy.

St. Benedict also says things are to be handled carefully and cleaned after being used (RB 32:4). If you break something, you take responsibility for it (RB 46:1-2). We all know the challenge of acting responsibly when things belong to everyone and no one in particular: emptying the water out of the iron, picking up waste paper from the floor, washing the dirty dishes instead of leaving them in the sink, and replenishing cooking supplies. St. Benedict asks that clothing be cared for, and it should fit properly and match the season (RB 55). Those who have gone on a journey are to wash their underclothing before returning it to the general closet (RB 55:13). Because the material world is God's creative work, it deserves respect and use by responsible stewards.

The world is where we encounter God. Whatever happens in it can shift our vision, transform our heart, and move us through

dying to fuller life in Christ. St. Benedict shows us how to live so that “in all things God may be glorified” (1 Pet 4:11; RB 47:9). His instructions flow from his focus on Christ, who, as the incarnation of God’s love, is God-become-visible. As with Christ, our deepest and most unrelenting desire needs to be for God and to do what we can to enable God’s love to permeate the world. As we respond to this basic calling as Christians, our hearts will expand to welcome the persons, things, and events of our daily lives.

Rich with Pennies

When I am tempted to doubt the value of everyday encounters, I often recall Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. She says, “There are lots of things to see, unwrapped gifts and free surprises. The world is . . . studded and strewn with pennies.”⁴ Dillard explains that these pennies are the simple, hardly noticeable events in life—events we might disdain and see as unimportant. However, she also points out that we don’t get excited by a mere penny nowadays. A friend of mine doesn’t pick up pennies anymore. She believes that with the current rate of inflation it’s not worth bending over to get it from the ground. She winces when I remind her that Dillard says we need to “cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will literally make . . . [our] day.”⁵ Some experiences will remain “pennies.” Some will make us rich.

A few years ago I stopped at a local craft store to get a frame for a photo my brother had given me. I found one. It was an exact match of color, and the price was right. But I couldn’t tell if my photo would fit in the frame. It had a wide white margin around it—a border I planned to trim according to the size of the frame.

I went to the framing service to get a tape measure. A young woman had placed a shadow box and a couple of tiny baby items on the counter. Among the items was a short, white tape measure. “Perfect!” I thought. I asked her if I could use it to check my photo with the frame.

She held back and said, "It's my baby's."

I felt affronted. Sarcastically I thought: "Maybe she is afraid of getting my germs on the tape."

I caught my irritation and deciding not to leave in such a negative state, I engaged in a few words of conversation. When I commented appreciatively about the items displayed in the shadow box, the woman thanked me and said she wanted advice from a framing consultant about how to attach the items. The clerk took her to the adhesive shelf to point out some tapes that would work. Then she returned and helped me.

The young woman and I met again at the checkout counter. I commented: "I see you found some tape for your project."

"Yes," she said, "but it's so hard."

I must have looked puzzled. She went on to say: "My baby boy died."

Something stabbed my stomach. I told her I was sorry and asked how old he was.

"Five months; he was stillborn."

What could I say? I mumbled, "I'm sorry." Remembering that one of the items for her shadow box was a picture of Christ as the Good Shepherd, I presumed she was a Christian so I added my commitment to pray for her. She thanked me and walked out. And I choked down my tears and left for home.

I found a "penny" when my need for a tape measure or ruler drew me into conversation with the woman. I quickly noticed a deeper poverty—my irritation. The later conversation with the young woman at the checkout counter was an added gift. I gained an understanding of her situation and entered into it emotionally. Humility grounded me as I realized my self-righteousness in judging her reactions when I asked to use her tape measure. I also felt the armor of my defensiveness collapse.

The world is indeed "studded and strewn" with pennies. I'm glad I picked up those I found at the craft store. I left the store a rich woman. Furthermore, I had met Christ who was suffering, and in the midst of the pain I received the healing of compassion even though I was bruised with embarrassment about my hostile

thoughts. As I have reflected on the incident, I have grown in hope that my caring encounter brought some consolation to this suffering Christ. I realized, too, that I can bring Christ's healing compassion to people and the rest of creation.

Creation: Manifestation of God

God sings out God's love, magnificence, and extravagance through the created universe. Those who see, hear, touch, smell, and taste well get to notice. They get to marvel. They get to be grateful. Wonders await us: the first violet in spring, the tiny hands and feet of a newborn baby, the ravines on the aged face of an uncle, a cool breeze at the end of a hot day, the odor of manure on a nearby field in spring, a few fluent words spoken by a child who stutters. Such gifts help us come to know by experience that the loving presence of God permeates the universe.

Artists help us notice and appreciate what we often miss. They also encourage us to draw from our memories and imagination. Gerard Manley Hopkins, SJ, spills out his exuberance for all creation:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed.⁶

The psalmist reminds us that the world exists as God's creation and self-manifestation. We also receive words for a response when our own might fail us:

O Lord, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great. (Ps 104:24-25)

What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor. (Ps 8:4-5)

O come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
(Ps 95:1-2)

A dialogue about the surprises released when ordinary things
and people are encountered with a new perspective and aware-
ness opened this reflective expression in my friend Sylvia.

Out of the Ordinary

out of a background of obviousness
in midst of the mundane,
the usual and ordinary of living
a moment, an awakening, an "aha"
perhaps called forth in surprise

in anger, in a giggle of joy,
within depth of despair,
in a splash of beauty
from an unexpected hug, a familiar face
letting you in on a secret intimacy
opening you to a secret intimacy

an opening, an awareness
a glimpse of the Divine
discernment, consciousness,
something never claimed before
but always there . . . or was it

a God-speak moment,
a sacred gift of divine love
revealed in the unique, yet common
in an unpredictable presence
of grace and respondent gratitude.⁷

In the midst of the acclamations of these poets, we realize that sounds, colors, designs, textures, and movements cannot express adequately what our hearts, expanded in wonder and appreciation, want to convey. Wonders are indescribable; they are ineffable. We utter what often seem to be monosyllables, and at times we stand in silence. God is an extravagant giver. As we receive the “pennies” strewn across our path, our pockets will bulge and even spill over.

The Ineffable Inhabits All

Abraham Joshua Heschel states that “the ineffable inhabits the magnificent and the common, the grandiose and the tiny facts of reality alike.”⁸ Many of us readily admit to the “ineffable” being manifested through the magnificent, the grandiose, and the dramatic events where our attention is grasped and the effects are easily noticed. Even when we acknowledge ordinary events, we are poised to step over them. We are not satisfied with what theologian Peter Fransen describes as God the Father discreetly dropping a hint to his children that he is with them.⁹

Do we really believe and recognize that God’s love overflows into all of creation and continues to surround us? Do we trust that the God who became incarnate in Jesus Christ continues to disclose God’s self to us? When we come to believe, and as we experience encounters as hints of the presence of our loving God, we will expect and welcome them as extraordinary encounters with ordinary persons, things, places, and events. We anticipate meeting God in any experience. Indeed, we will exclaim with Gerard Manley Hopkins that “The world is charged with the grandeur of God,” even in and through the daily bits and pieces of our lives.