

“Mark Plaiss describes in detail the daily routine of a monastic’s life. He explains, as well, how the monastic values and routine have influenced his own life, a married layman in the teaching profession. This book might be an invaluable resource for someone discerning a monastic vocation. All the pieces are there.”

— Abbot Vincent Bataille  
Marmion Abbey  
Aurora, Illinois



MONASTIC WISDOM SERIES: NUMBER FIFTY

# No End to the Search

Experiencing Monastic Life

Mark Plaiss



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For all my students at Carmel Catholic High School,  
Mundelein, Illinois



*Nor, I think, will a soul cease to seek him even when it has found him. It is not with steps of the feet that God is sought but with the heart's desire; and when the soul happily finds him its desire is not quenched but kindled. Does the consummation of joy bring about the consuming of desire? Rather it is oil poured upon the flames. So it is. Joy will be fulfilled, but there will be no end to desire, and therefore no end to the search.*

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux,  
Sermon 84 on the Song of Songs



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## Abbreviations

CF	Cistercian Fathers series
CS	Cistercian Studies series
CSQ	<i>Cistercian Studies Quarterly</i>
MW	Monastic Wisdom series
PG	Patrologia Graeca, ed. J.-P. Migne
RB	Rule of Saint Benedict
S(s)	Sermon(s)



## Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the three monastic communities that I discuss in the following pages, and especially to the monks who have welcomed me into their midst. I have received permission from all the monks whom I name; in other cases I have referred to them simply by monastic role. I have also received permission to give the names of friends, family, colleagues, and teachers who appear here. I wish especially to thank Br. Paul Andrew Tanner, OCSO, for his friendship and assistance; Fr. Mark Scott, OCSO, for permission to reproduce the Antiphonary from New Melleray Abbey (appendix A); and Fr. Columba Kelly, OSB, for allowing me to describe him and his chant workshop at St. Meinrad Archabbey and to print the *Graduale Triplex* from the materials he distributed at the workshop (appendix B).



## Prelude

The monastery is calling, and you know it.  
Thus spoke Bernard:

This is where the fragrance comes from, this is the goal of our running. She had said that we must run, drawn by that fragrance, but did not specify our destination. So it is to these rooms that we run, drawn by the fragrance that issues from them.<sup>1</sup>

But that raises the question, what is the fragrance of the monastery? Silence, choir, prayer, solitude, community, work? Each woman, each man, will prefer a different fragrance. Chanel will woo, but so will Estée Lauder. Just so the fragrance of the cloister.

You have inhaled that fragrance.

A curious stop in the gift shop at Gethsemani, perhaps. Singing Compline at New Melleray. Maybe a retreat at St. Meinrad Archabbey. Photographs of Fontenay? The choir of nuns at Our Lady of the Mississippi, maybe. Perhaps listening to an account of a friend who was wowed by Saint John's Abbey up in Collegeville or St. Vincent's in Latrobe.

And now you want more.

Do not dismiss your attraction to the fragrance. The odor of God is sweet, and the wiles of the Almighty are seductive. What says the Bride?

<sup>1</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs II*, S 23, trans. Kilian Walsh, CF 7 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976), 25.

*On my bed at night I sought him  
Whom my heart loves—  
I sought him, but I did not find him. (Song 3:1)*

God is peeking through the lattices for you, and the lattices are in the monastery.

So go there now. Go. Don't just inhale the fragrance; rub your face in it.

Go.

# **PART ONE**

## **Monasteries**



## New Melleray Abbey

Dead of night.

A quarter moon wanes in the southeastern sky. My Honda Civic, boasting over 305,000 miles, streaks westbound on Illinois Highway 176. Here are the towns: Marengo, Bellvidere, Rockford, Freeport, Eleroy, Stockton, Woodbine, Elizabeth, Galena, East Dubuque, Illinois; Dubuque, Iowa; and the destination: New Melleray Abbey.

I'll hit Marengo by four in the morning.

Moving from Indiana to Illinois has shaved an hour off the trip to the monastery. Gotta like that.

No radio. No music. No recorded books. No talking heads. Nothing. Just you, God, and the road. All that jazz just distracts, and that's the point: to rid yourself of distractions so you can experience God's mercy, so you can undergo metanoia, so you can attain union with God, so you can evangelize Jesus the Christ.

Your retreat doesn't start at the guesthouse; it begins with the journey to the guesthouse. The journey is a component of the retreat. The journey is important. So don't screw it up driving to the monastery with whatever blaring from your car speakers. Cassian got it right well over a thousand years ago:

Before the time of prayer we must put ourselves in the state of mind we would wish to have in us when we actually pray. It is an inexorable fact that the condition of the soul at the time of prayer depends upon what shaped it beforehand.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cassian, *Conferences* 10.14, trans. Colm Luibheid, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 139.

So, you want to pray at the monastery? Create an atmosphere of prayer traveling there.

Hwy 176 ends at Marengo. I hang a left at the light, drive about a half a mile, then, turning right at another light, I pick up US Hwy 20. From that point until the Mississippi River, it's Hwy 20: the Ulysses S. Grant Memorial Highway.

In my rearview mirror? The beginning of daylight.

West of Rockford, Illinois, the terrain changes. More hilly. Up and down, up and down; I feel as if I'm at Cedar Point in Sandusky, Ohio, riding roller coasters. The vistas of Stephenson and Jo Daviess Counties are soothing to see. Cattle graze on steep hills of green grass. Farms nestled in the bottoms. Houses perched on ridges. Hawks glide overhead.

Three hours and twenty minutes after leaving home in Fox Lake, Illinois, I cross the Julien Dubuque Bridge and glide into Dubuque, Iowa. At the stoplight at the foot of the bridge I hang a left and head south.

I follow US 151 as it splits off of US 61 just south of Dubuque and drive about five miles. Hang a right onto Monastery Road.

A few minutes later a building swings into view as I roll down a hill that fades right. I can make out the roofline of the monastery. When I reach the bottom of that hill the whole southern face of the stone quadrangle swings into view. I slow the car and turn right onto the long circular driveway.

I park in front of the guesthouse. I pop the trunk, remove my gear, and walk to the doors of the place. A canvas bag is slung over my left shoulder. I drag a red suitcase behind me.

I haul all my stuff to the third-floor landing, where I encounter a door bearing this sign:

*Monastic Enclosure  
Associates only*

I pull on the door and pass through. One of the four rooms in the Monastic Center is occupied, room 303. I move on to

room 305. Both of those rooms look out over the garth, while the other two rooms opposite them look out over the parking lot. You want one of the rooms looking out over the garth; the rooms looking out over the parking lot are too noisy.

I drop my gear in the room, step to the window, and yank on the cord, raising the blinds. The late May sun splashes through. I crank open the windows, and the mild morning air rushes in.

Feels good.

From the closet I remove a hooded gray smock; I slip it over my head. It falls to my upper thighs. I sit on the bed and remove my Reeboks and slip on my “choir shoes,” a pair of slip-on sneakers. I snatch the key on the desk and leave the room.

Back down the stairs I go. At the bottom of the stairwell is a locked door. I unlock the door and step through. Now I’m in the cloister. I can smell the aroma of cooked food. Hanging on the cloister wall to my left is an icon of Madonna and Child. I ask for her intercession. I step over to the window that looks out onto the garth. Now that I am on ground level I can see beads of dew clinging to the grass.

The door I had walked through clicks gently shut behind me. I step over to another door that leads from the cloister and into the abbey chapel. I pull it open and step through.

Light pours through the arched windows high above me. I glance to my left; no one is in the guest area. Course, why should there be? Terce doesn’t begin for another hour.

I turn right, east, and walk past the organ. Midway up the choir stalls I halt and make a deep bow toward the altar. I step into the north choir and slip into the first choir stall to the east of the break. I kneel down on the tile floor and thank God for bringing me to New Melleray Abbey in safety. I pray that this retreat will bring me to conversion.

It’ll take the remainder of the day and then some to settle down. The rhythm of the house takes its time to envelop you; you can’t rush it. Before me are five days of prayer, working in the garden, and conversion.

It is good to be back in my monastic home.

Let me describe my room to you, room 305 in the Monastic Center. High-school marble floor. A desk, a twin bed, a cushioned chair, a wastepaper can, a closet in which hang three hooded smocks as well as a tangle of black wire hangers. Walking from this main section, you move to the bathroom. First is the sink with a medicine cabinet. Next a shower. Finally the toilet. Two windows are in the bathroom; two windows are in the main room. Blinds are in all four windows.

On the bed are a fresh bath towel, hand towel, and washcloth, folded up nicely. A plastic cup sealed in plastic rests smartly atop the towels. The key to the cloister is on the desk. That's exactly what you're supposed to see when you first enter your room. You see, when you vacate the room at the end of your retreat, you are supposed to clean the room yourself. That entails sweeping the floor, dusting off the desk, cleaning the shower, toilet, and sink, changing the sheets on the bed, and replacing the pillowcases. More often than not you discover that is actually the case when you first enter the room. Men, though, tend to be slovenly creatures, and some don't always comply with the cleaning instructions. There have been times when I've had to do extensive cleaning before occupying my room, but those times have been few.

There are four rooms within the Monastic Center. At the northeast corner of the hall within the Center is a kitchen replete with fridge, sink, microwave, and a table on which sits a toaster. I've never seen people sitting at the table. At the southwest corner of the hall is a little library that has some good titles. A desk with a telephone is in there too.

It's quiet.

Real convenient are the washer and dryer in the room that is just outside the south end of the Monastic Center. Go out the door, and boom, there it is on your left.

I say *convenient*, because your clothes will get real dirty when you are a Monastic Center guy, and so the washer and

dryer so close at hand is a blessing. Why do your clothes get so dirty when you are a Monastic Center guy?

I've got three words for you: Brother Placid, garden.

Now, I don't live with Br. Placid. Living with a person and visiting a person once a year for five days are two different things. So my picture of Br. Placid is going to be somewhat different, I'm presuming, from the picture the monks who live with him have.

I love the guy. Br. Placid is the keeper of the monastery garden. He knows all things agricultural. The man is eighty-eight years old. He grew up on a farm in Minnesota. He fought in the Korean War and entered the monastery soon thereafter as a brother. His head is bald, his eyes are Windex-blue, and his skin is tanned. He's not tall, but that's also misleading, because he stands and walks in a stoop because of a back and neck malady, most likely the result of decades of clawing and scratching vegetables from the fertile Iowa dirt. He can wrestle a tiller onto the rear end of a tractor single-handedly. He has a nice grin.

When you are a Monastic Center guy, your afternoon work assignment is with him.

Now if you hail from the metropolis, as I do, your initial work with Br. Placid is bewildering. He tells you to do things that you are clueless how to perform. However, if you return to the Monastic Center year after year, as I have done, you slowly catch on to what he wants. The key is patience, with both him and yourself. He is not gruff, but you quickly grasp that there is only one way to do things: Placid's way. Believe me, you'll learn things you never thought you would learn.

Such as attaching a tiller to a tractor; planting corn, melons, pumpkins, and trees; erecting a hothouse; stringing a fence; placing a floor in a grain silo; digging up potatoes, radishes, and garlic; trimming apple trees; picking apples; the *proper* method of hoeing weeds; mending a beehive; picking corn (sounds simple enough; Placid's method has nuance); driving fence posts into a nearly frozen ground with a fifty-pound

“pounder”; removing boulders from the ground; closing down all the water outlets in the garden for the winter; sticking field-marking flags in the ground at designated intervals (intervals determined by a trusty pole of approximately 4.5 feet). After he gets to know you, he’ll have you drive his fifty-year-old Ford pickup truck around the grounds, as in, “Ok, take the truck over yonder and pick up those radishes you picked earlier.”

My all-time-favorite Placid job involved peanut butter.

One day Placid hands my friend and fellow Monastic Center confrere Hal Jopp a bowl of peanut butter. Then turning to me Placid says, “Dip this goo [the peanut butter] into those cups you see every so many feet. I’ll go over the way and turn off the juice. When you see me wave my hat, you can go.”

What?

Placid had a single-wire electric fence around a large section of the garden. Well, deer and other critters were still getting into the garden, so Placid attaches these cups to the wire. The cups were about the size of a half-dollar in circumference, and about a half-inch deep. Hal and I were supposed to walk the circumference of this section of the garden. Hal would hold the bowl of goo, and when we approached the section of wire that had the cup, I would dip my fingers into the bowl of goo and drop the goo from my fingers into the cup. Before doing that, however, Placid had to turn off the electric current (however, Placid did offer *not* to turn off the current—I declined the offer).

Now, the electric wire was running through the cup, the idea being that the peanut butter would attract the deer, and when the deer dipped its tongue into the cup to eat the peanut butter, ZAP! The shock would not be so strong as to harm the animal, but strong enough to discourage further entry into Placid’s garden. Far as I know it was successful.

The things you learn at a monastery.

Terce, at 9:15 a.m., will be my first office of the day, of my retreat. I like the Little Hours. Sunlight floods through the windows, and upon entering the chapel, the chapel seems to

be saying, "Come in and pray!" The long night of intense prayer and *lectio* is over. The daily Mass celebrated. We now roll into a more relaxed mode of prayer. The three psalms at each of the Little Hours are short, familiar, and fun to sing.

Using my key I walk through the locked door. I'm now standing in the southwest corner of the cloister. I step over to a window that looks onto the garth. I like to wait there until the first bell rings for the office. I see birds flit this way and that in the garth.

The monastery bell ringer rings the first bell for Terce, and with that I enter the chapel through the southwest door. I walk east, hugging the north choir stalls, and when I reach the break in the stalls, I bow. Then I slip into the north choir, stopping at the first stall east of the break. I kneel down on the tile floor, slipping my feet into the stall. I thank God for allowing me to worship him at this hour of Terce, and I pray that I will make this time of prayer fruitful.

I climb back to my feet and check out the two books on the stand in front of me: the antiphonary and the psalter. The antiphonary is a three-ring notebook divided by week, day, and hour. It provides the antiphon we will sing and informs us of the specific psalms we will chant. Up for today are Psalms 119, 120, and 121 (Greek numeration). The antiphon appears to be simple. In regard to the psalms, the community will go through the entire psalter every two weeks. The psalms are divided into two one-week cycles designated as Odd-numbered Weeks and Even-numbered Weeks. Since I am at New Melleray during the Ninth Week in Ordinary Time, the community is in Odd-numbered Weeks.

Monks begin to file in. They are not wearing the cowl or cloak as they had done at Vigils and Lauds. Most of them enter the chapel through the southeast door. On doing so they dip their fingers into the holy water font, bless themselves, and, turning toward the altar, bow. On arriving at their place in choir, and after a moment in knelt prayer, the monks stand, check out the books on the stand, then either sit in the stall or

turn and face east, awaiting the second bell, which signals the beginning of the Hour. I see no novices, no postulants in choir. Br. Charles, temporary professed, is in the south choir. He is the one who sometimes turns on the overhead lights in the chapel.

I like being in the north choir, because I'm right up against windows, and since I'm here in late May and early June, those windows are open. The grass has been recently mowed, and you just can't beat the smell of freshly mowed grass when you're at prayer.

The stalls in the south choir are full down to the break. Over in the north choir, it's the same, though Fr. Xavier fills the first stall to the west of the break.

The second bell rings and we blast off. Those who had been sitting now rise and face east. Brother Organist strikes the tone on the organ down at the southwest end of the choir. A lone monk rides on that tone, singing, *O God, come to my assistance*. The remainder of us then chime in, *O Lord, make haste to help*. Then, turning to face the space between the two choirs, the monks bow and sing the doxology:

Glory be to the Father and to the Son  
And to the Holy Spirit.  
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be  
World without end, Amen.

If there is a space between monks, that is, if a monk is not present in his stall, then now the monks move up from west to east to fill in those empty spaces. Trappists like to pray all cozy-like! (Or as my mother would say, "togetherness.") Having done that, we sing the hymn.

Since this is a ferial day, and since we are in Ordinary Time, the hymn is as follows:

Come Holy Spirit ever One, with God the Father and the  
Son.

It is the hour, our souls possess with your full flood of holiness.

Let flesh and heart and lips and mind sound forth our witness to mankind and love light up our mortal flame, till others catch the living flame.

Almighty Father, hear our cry, through Jesus Christ our Lord most high and with the Spirit Paraclete, whose reign the endless ages greet. Amen.

Brother Organist quickly gives the tone on the organ for the antiphon. This will be the only antiphon for the three psalms. The cantor begins, and then we all join in to finish. As I said, the antiphon at the Little Hours, especially on a ferial day, is short and simple and to the point. I like that. Antiphons can be quite complicated on feasts and solemnities. It takes a voice like the subprior's to carry those. Today's antiphon at Terce, however, I can handle.

After the antiphon we blast off with the psalms.

The chant we're using today for the psalms I like very much. Again, very simple. And since the tone for each of the three psalms is the same, one psalm melds right into the other in a seamless whole. Sometimes I hate when we stop chanting the psalms, because I'm in a groove or on a roll, and I just want to keep going!

With the conclusion of the psalms, we once again turn and face east. The reader gives us a brief reading from the Bible. A Marian versicle is then pitched. At Terce at this time of the year it is this:

In the bush seen by Moses, as burning yet unconsumed,  
We recognize the preservation of your glorious virginity.  
O Mother of God, intercede for us.

The abbot gives the dismissal, and the Hour is prayed. Ten minutes tops. What does Benedict instruct? "In community, prayer should always be brief" (RB 20.5).

My neighbor in choir to the west of me is frequently Fr. Xavier. This would be a good time to mention another monk who was frequently my neighbor in choir over the years, just to the west of me.

Br. Felix.

I first met the man in 1997. He was the guest master. I was struck initially by his quick, wide grin and his ears; they seemed to stick out a little. On my first visit to the Monastic Center, Br. Felix showed me the ropes.

"Are you familiar with the choir and the books?" he asked me.

"No."

"You have your key?"

I held it up for him to see.

So we walked from the office there in the guesthouse to the door at the southwest entrance to the cloister. We entered the chapel, and he showed me my place in the north choir, where the Monastic Center guys take their place. He pointed out the books on the stand and the ordo. He gave me a basic lesson in how to use them. But it was the singing in choir that he most emphasized.

"Don't sing too loud. Blend in with the monks. At the end of the phrase, don't sing as loud, soften your voice."

After that, Br. Felix walked me around the cloister showing me the refectory and other rooms just off the cloister.

Over the years I sometimes worked with Br. Felix in the old workshop, not the new plant across the road where Trappist Caskets is now located, but in the older building. I would help him sand down the wood used for the caskets.

One Saturday afternoon we finished work there, and he and I walked back to the house together. It was a gorgeous late October day, not a cloud in the big blue Iowa sky. The air was crisp and smelled like autumn. The leaves on the trees had peaked in color. We were both tired, but Br. Felix wore that big grin of his.

"No work tomorrow!" he said. "Much prayer!"

He was so delighted with his life, with that day, with that moment.

But mostly I saw Br. Felix in choir. When I made my first entrance in choir at any given retreat, Br. Felix flashed that smile and gave me a slight wave. Sometimes, he would shake my hand.

I liked hearing him read. His voice was strong but never jarring, and he knew how to give a line just the right amount of emphasis.

At this retreat, though, he is no longer my neighbor in choir. He died on Saturday, April 23, 2016, a little over a month before I arrived. I would very much have liked to attend his funeral, but since school was still in session, I could not make it. I was told the turnout for his funeral was large.

Br. Felix entered New Melleray in 1950. He was eighty-seven years old when he died.

Do you like to eat? Is good food something you look forward to? Well, then, the guesthouse at New Melleray Abbey is your kind of place.

Really, the food is excellent. The monks may be vegetarians, but you needn't be. Chicken, roast beef, and the best meat loaf I've ever tasted, period. Wicked mashed potatoes. Always a salad. Vegetables fresh from Br. Placid's garden. I've seen radishes that I know we had picked just the day before. Hearty soups. Great desserts. Yum, yum!

The main meal of the day is the noon meal, served right after Sext. The Monastic Center guys eat together in a little room just off the main dining room. It is there that Br. Placid stops by during breakfast to tell you what you're going to be doing during afternoon work.

However, some Monastic Center guys don't eat there. Take Silent Stan, for example. Silent Stan was in the Monastic Center one time, and not only did he not take a single meal with the remainder of the guys, but he never spoke a word to anybody. He came down to the dining room, filled his tray, and then went back to his room to eat. During afternoon work, he did

not engage in conversation. I only heard his voice in choir, but not at Mass. For some reason, he retreated to the guest area of the chapel for Mass.

I could never determine if he was naturally taciturn or if he was scrupulously following the ninth step of humility as prescribed in the Rule: "a monk controls his tongue and remains silent" (RB 7.56). But he was not a monk. Perhaps he was practicing to be one.

Be that as it may, let's get back to the food. As I said, the main meal of the day is at noon, and it's always top-notch. Breakfast is a simple affair: boiled eggs, cheese, cereal (I go for the Raisin Bran), and something along the lines of banana bread. There's a toaster. Orange juice and coffee.

The evening meal is often leftovers from the noon meal, or cold cuts of ham or turkey might be offered. For the evening meal, though, on Sundays no meal is offered. So what is a Monastic Center guy to do? Drive off in a snit to nearby Dubuque and delight in McDonalds' fare?

Of course not! All you do is go down to the kitchen, find the walk-in refrigerators, and help yourself to whatever is there. And there's always something good. Dig out a plate, slap the food on the plate, shove it in the microwave, and voilà! Dinner is served! However, since Monastic Center guys don't often spend Sunday nights there, I have frequently eaten the Sunday evening meal all alone.

Silent Stan would love it.

Usually when I'm in choir I wear a pair of khaki pants and either a pair of sandals (sockless) or some canvas shoes that won't squeak when I walk on the tile floor in the chapel or the marble floor in the cloister.

But not at None, which cranks up at one forty-five. At that Hour I'm clad in jeans and shod in boots, because right after the Hour I have to meet Br. Placid out front at two o'clock. To save time I wear my work clothes into choir, as opposed to changing clothes right after None and *then* going down to meet Br. Placid.

A few minutes after two o'clock, here he comes in that old Ford pickup truck. It's a 1966 special. Honest. To say it has seen better days is an understatement. It's running, but barely. When I slip into the cab, we chug away. *Chug* being the key-word there.

"Think they'd buy you a new truck?" I ask him.

He just laughs.

Placid is dressed in his usual work attire: blue bib overalls over a tattered shirt, his brown scapular of Mount Carmel clearly visible beneath his shirt. The scapular is nearly jabbing him in the neck. He's wearing heavy brown boots.

I gently slap his shoulder with my leather work gloves I'm holding in my right hand.

"What's on the agenda for today?" I ask.

"Well, I thought we'd plant some melons and then some corn."

The truck lumbers around the corner of the monastery, and we jostle over the freshly mowed grass toward "the pump house." Actually it's a toolshed, but behind the shed is a water faucet.

Placid stops the truck in front of the shed. As we climb out of the truck he says, "You'll need a hoe and trowel." So he disappears into the darkened shed and soon emerges with said tools. He places them in the bed of the truck.

"How about some nice cool water before we start?" he asks. We step behind the shed, and he says, "You go first. Get that water cold for me!" I twist the handle and gulp down some water, and he follows.

"Well, let's pray over there," and he points to the shade of a nearby tree. The day is brilliantly sunny, not a cloud to be found in the big blue Iowa sky. The temperature is probably around eighty, and the humidity is not too bad.

We sit down on the concrete ledge of an enclosed bed of lettuce. Placid removes his hat, places his hands on his knees, bows his head and begins, "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee." I chime in at the "Holy Mary, Mother of God." We pray three Hail Marys.

Then Placid invokes a litany of two saints, Saint Joseph and Saint Maria Goretti, and I reply, "Pray for us!"

And with that we're ready to head out for work.

We start back to the truck, but Placid says, "Oh, forgot the seeds." So he steps back into the shed and fetches the seeds, which are in little plastic bags. "Stick these in your pockets," he says to me.

We get back in the truck, and we lumber over the field to a large tilled garden. We walk about twenty yards into the garden, in which there are little field flags. "This is where I left off this morning." Placid then instructs me on how to plant melon seeds. Kneeling down in the dirt at one of the field flags he says, "Make a hole like this," and he inserts his index finger in the ground. "Then drop three seeds from your bag there into the hole." He drops three seeds taken from his bag. "Then knuckle it," and he demonstrates. With the knuckles of three fingers he pushes down gently over the hole where he planted the seeds.

"Ok?" he asks me.

"Got it. Hole with finger, three seeds, knuckle it, at each flag."

He then walks to the other end of the garden. We would meet in the middle.

For nearly the next hour Placid and I plant melon seeds. I kneel down on one knee when I plant, but I notice Placid simply bends over. My barking back tells me not to emulate Placid. I accidentally spill my bag of seeds at one point, but I manage to retrieve them all and replace them in the plastic bag.

When we finish with the melons we hop back into the truck and jostle over the fields to a much larger tilled garden. Here we are to plant corn. Again the little field flags dot the dirt. However, in this field four people are already planting. Not monks, but a woman and her three children, two of whom are teens.

"Take your trowel," Placid tells me as we get out of the truck. I reach into the bed of the truck and snatch it up. Mean-

while, Placid steps over to where the other four are already planting. I follow, and Placid introduces me to them.

After Placid is sure the planting is going properly, he and I walk through the dirt to the other end of the garden. I would say this garden is nearly one hundred yards long and about a quarter of the width of a football field.

Unlike with the melons, Placid and I work together planting the corn.

"Got your seeds?" he asks me as we approach the first flag marking where we'll plant. I show him the clear bag of orange-red seeds. "Give me the trowel," he says. I do.

"I'll dig the hole," he says, "and you'll drop in six seeds from that bag." And that's what we do for the next hour. At first I am scrupulous about making sure I remove exactly six seeds from the bag. But since that takes too much time, I begin simply pouring into my hand an approximate amount. Since Placid doesn't object, I figure he is good with that. We talk some, but not much. I come within an ace of asking Placid about the Korean War, but decide against it. If you really want to get him going, bring up that Police Action. We manage to plant the entire garden, but only because of the other four.

At about ten after four Placid announces that it is quitting time. We walk back to the truck and drive to the shed. I clean the trowel, and we both get a drink of water.

"Can you make it back home yourself?" Placid asks me. "I want to go back to them," meaning the four who helped planting.

"Sure," I say. So I walk back to the monastery, and Placid rumbles away in his truck back to the garden.

The first thing I have to do on arriving back at the house is remove my shoes before stepping in. My shoes are caked with dirt.

The climb up to the third floor, where the Monastic Center is housed, seems tougher now than when I first arrived. I shower, and then I haul my dirty clothes over to the washer down the hall. On returning to my room I just sit with a cup

of water and stare out the window. The shadows are long out in the garth, and the birds jabber away. The fan near my bed hums.

The work was good today.

Yet no one comes to a monastery to work in a garden. No one says to himself or herself, "You know, I think I'll go to a monastery so I can work in a garden."

When a man or woman enters a monastery, he or she is asked, "Why are you here? What do you seek?"

What's the answer?

I open one eye as I lie in bed. The red glow of the alarm clock reads 2:57 a.m. Perfect. I reach over and turn off the alarm I had set for three o'clock the night before.

I roll out of bed. I step to the windows and drop the blinds. I had them open while I was sleeping to allow the air to circulate better. I go into the bathroom and drop the blinds there as well. Now I flip on the lights.

Stepping to the sink I splash some water on my face in order to wipe seven hours of sleep out of my eyes. I brush my teeth and gargle. My mind somewhat clearer now, I quickly dress. I make up the bed. Before leaving the room I slip the gray hooded smock over my head. I snatch the key to the cloister.

I leave my room and descend three floors' worth of stairs. Reaching the door to the cloister I insert the key, open the door, and step into the southwest corner of the cloister. All is quiet in these wee small hours of the morning, and I am self-conscious about the noise when the door clicks shut behind me. The cloister is dimly lit, nightlight capacity illumination. At the far end of the western range, I can barely discern a ghostly figure approaching me. The figure is clothed in a white cowl with the hood up. The long sleeves of the cowl nearly drag the floor.

I slip into the church through the southwest door. Except for the sanctuary candle at the far eastern end of the chapel there is no light at all in the chapel. I take that back; there is the spotlight in the guest area.

I reach the stalls in the north choir, and, letting the fingers of my left hand gently glide over the top of the stalls, I walk until my fingers tell me I'm at the break in the choir (it's difficult for me to *see* the break). I bow. I then step into the choir and take my place in the first stall to the east of the break.

I kneel on the tile floor and thank God for allowing me to pray at this time of Vigils.

I rise quietly as possible, not wanting to disturb Fr. Tom, who is always in choir when I arrive for Vigils. I lower the wooden seat and sit. I take a few deep breaths. Stars flicker through the windows above the south choir. I've been in choir before, at Vigils, when moonlight streams through those windows and splashes down on the floor between the north and south choirs. Loved that!

So quiet. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." With my eyes shut and my chin slightly lowered, I repeat the Jesus Prayer several times until finally I let it fade away, and I just sit there and allow God to overshadow me.

Here comes Br. Placid. I can tell by his stoop. He does not wear the cowl, but the cape. Far as I know, he's the only solemnly professed monk to wear the cape instead of the cowl. At any rate, he shuffles through the southwest door of the chapel and approaches the north choir. Before slipping into the choir he stops and makes a profound bow. He holds the bow for a few moments before stepping to the choir and taking a seat in the far western portion of the choir. He coughs. He blows his nose.

More monks enter the chapel and take their places in choir. Presently, a monk comes walking down the length of the north choir, walking east. I notice he does not need to glide his hand over the tops of the stalls. He steps expertly through the break and by me, his cowl swishing, and slips into a stall several down from where I sit.

Someone other than Placid, someone down at the far eastern end of the north choir, coughs and blows his nose. This seems to open a floodgate of throat clearing and coughing, the sound of which bounces off the stone walls of the chapel.

A few minutes pass, and then I hear it: the chimes from within the house. It's not a bell ringing. Imagine someone striking several bars on a xylophone in quick succession. Sounds like that. It seems to be saying: it's time to wake up, boys, and pray. It's three fifteen in the morning.

Minutes pass, and more and more monks enter the chapel, most of them from the northeast door. They dip their fingers into the holy water as they pass through the door (wish there were such a stoup at the southwest door) and bow before the altar, then take their place in choir.

Some lights snap on. Now a sea of white robes rises. I, too, stand. We begin organizing the two books before us: the antiphonary and the psalter. However, some kind soul has already placed those books that are in front of me at their proper spot for the day and Hour. Great!

Most of the monks now turn, stand, and face east, though a few remain seated. Most of the overhead lights are extinguished except for the spotlight over the ambo. They are waiting for the bell.

The monastery bell ringer rings them at three thirty.

A monk approaches the ambo. He takes a moment, then begins reciting Psalm 133:

*O come, bless the Lord,  
all you who serve the Lord,  
who stand in the house of the Lord,  
in the courts of the house of our God.*

Then all say, *O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare your praise.*

The monk at the ambo finishes the psalm:

*Lift up your hands to the holy place  
and bless the Lord through the night.  
May the Lord bless you from Zion,  
He who made both heaven and earth.*

All repeat, *O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare your praise.*

The monk at the ambo says, *Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance.*

And the brothers conclude with the final petition: *O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare your praise.*

With that, Vigils has begun.

Vigils is divided into two nocturns, each one including a rather long reading and three psalms (or one long psalm, such as Psalm 88). The readings are from Scripture or the Fathers. A long pause, with lights out, separates the two nocturns.

With regard to Vigils, the Constitution for the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance reads:

In the sober anticipation of the coming of Christ, following the tradition of the Order, the hours before sunrise are appropriately consecrated to God by the celebration of Vigils, by prayer and meditation.

Then the punch line:

The brothers' hour of rising is so determined that Vigils maintains its nocturnal character.<sup>2</sup>

The OCSO was shrewd to maintain that "nocturnal character." For Vigils is *the* hour of prayer for monks. The night is quiet and so conducive to deep prolonged prayer. Terrence Kardong puts it this way: "It can be said that Vigils is the Office most characteristic of monks, while Matins and Vespers are the property of the whole Church."<sup>3</sup> New Melleray begins Vigils at three thirty, Gethsemani at three fifteen, and the Abbey

<sup>2</sup> [www.ocso.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/X-EN-Constitutions-of-the-Monks-2014.pdf](http://www.ocso.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/X-EN-Constitutions-of-the-Monks-2014.pdf), C.23.

<sup>3</sup> Terrence Kardong, *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 169.

of Genesee at two twenty-five. (Really? Couldn't make it two thirty?)

Yet Vigils also has the potential to be utter drudgery. André Louf, who was a Trappist monk and abbot, put it this way:

The calm of the night does not long remain a peaceful invitation to prayer. It becomes oppressive, inviting the novice to a thousand ways to escape. All the activities of the day start to occupy his mind before their time with a demanding urgency. And there seems much to be said in favor of a return to his own room for a further short sleep. Surely, he will be better able to meet the coming day after some extra rest? These suggestions do not come to him as idle insinuating thoughts, but with strength which will overpower him if he hesitates at all. In this way he discovers the ambivalence of his heart. He cannot see any sign of determination and will which were so evident earlier. He discovers how little the night vigils attract him, though he formerly saw them as the most beautiful elements of the monk's life. Now they are only a nuisance.<sup>4</sup>

At home I probably rise at three o'clock to pray Vigils about once a week. My point: it's easy enough to rise for Vigils at the monastery when you know you're only going to be there for five days. For a lifetime?

With the conclusion of Vigils I remain seated in my stall. I like to pray Centering Prayer there. Five minutes after the conclusion of Vigils all the monks have left the chapel except Fr. David. Sometimes others remain for meditation, but I usually see only Fr. David, a few stalls to the east of me, when I finish Centering and leave the chapel.

I return to room 305 usually between four fifteen and four thirty, depending on the day (if the day is a solemnity, the time for Vigils is extended). I then fix myself some hot chocolate

<sup>4</sup> André Louf, *The Cistercian Way*, CS 76 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983), 51–52.

(Land O'Lakes Mint & Chocolate) down in the kitchen at the west end of the Monastic Center. I bring the hot cup back to my room and begin a long session of *lectio*, usually about forty-five minutes. When I first started going to the Monastic Center I would remain clad in my hooded smock and pray *lectio* with the hood of the smock up over my head, *just like the monks do!* I no longer do that. It smacks too much of pretending, thus making it inauthentic and unreal. Today, I just pull off the smock when I return to my room. (I also don't wear the smock during meals down in the dining room—because I don't want to spill food on the smock while eating. I can be such a slob!)

Scripture. Silence. Stars outside my window, then the creeping dawn. Birds awake. Peaceful. The ongoing struggle for conversion, denial of self, and union with God.

Why are you here? What do you seek?

Precisely that.

Have I made a find! I was surfing the Internet and came across the web page for a monastery called New Melleray Abbey. I was exploring it when I came across a program offered at the monastery called the Associate Program in something called the Monastic Center. This program is for laymen who want a deeper commitment to the contemplative life than simply a few days of retreat each year. In this program the Associate lives in the Monastic Center and prays with the monks in choir. The stay in the Monastic Center can be longer than the usual several days. BINGO! THIS IS WHAT I'VE BEEN SEEKING! I'm so excited about this I could bust!

So I wrote in my journal on Wednesday, April 2, 1997, upon discovering New Melleray and the Monastic Center. I had to get there! Now it just so happened that my older son, then fourteen years old, had recently received the sacrament of confirmation. As part of his confirmation gift, he and I had

already decided to make an overnight retreat at a monastery. Our initial choice had been Gethsemani, but on my calling down there I was told that Gethsemani didn't allow (at least then) children my son's age to make a retreat there. That's why I was surfing the internet that day when I happened upon New Melleray; I was trying to find a monastery that would accept a fourteen-year-old.

By April 9 I had reserved our retreat at New Melleray for late July. At that retreat I would make my application to the Monastic Center.

My son and I arrived at New Melleray for our retreat on the morning of July 30, 1997. We were given room 316 in the guesthouse. After None that day I walked down to the guesthouse office. Fr. Bernard was at the desk. I asked him about the Monastic Center. He said Br. Gilbert was in charge of that; however, Br. Gilbert was not in the house at the moment but was in Dubuque for a doctor's appointment. Fr. Bernard took my name and room number and told me Br. Gilbert would get in touch with me later.

About five o'clock that afternoon a knock came at our door. It was Br. Gilbert. I invited him in, but he asked if we could just step into an empty conference room next door. We did so. He took down some basic information from me: name, age, home address, parish I attended, etc. I told him of my interest in the Monastic Center. I explained my having begun to pray the Liturgy of the Hours the year before. I told him the Monastic Center appeared to be a place where I could delve deeper into God.

He said there was absolutely no problem with my becoming an Associate. He said that the Monastic Center was booked up for the remainder of the summer, but September and October were clear for me to come back. He had forgotten to bring with him an official application form but said that after Vespers he would stop by and give me one. He did so. I filled it out and gave it to him.

My family and I were living in La Porte, Indiana, at this time, and when I told Br. Gilbert where that town was located, he said that there was a priest from Kalamazoo, Michigan—about a hundred miles northeast of La Porte—who came to the Monastic Center. So I wasn't the only one who lived hours away from the Monastic Center but wanted to be there!

Our meeting was short; Vespers was approaching at five thirty. Br. Gilbert was not in habit, having come directly to my room from his appointment in Dubuque. He thanked me for my interest in the Monastic Center and wished me and my son well on our current retreat. When my son and I left our room to go to Vespers, we walked down the third-floor hall to reach the stairwell. At the end of the hall, there at the top of the stairs was the door to the Monastic Center. A sign was on the door. It said:

*Monastic Enclosure  
Associates only*

Soon I would be an Associate and able to walk through that door.

I returned on Monday, September 22, 1997. I was housed in room 300. I was very excited. Sext would be the first Hour down in the choir. I wrote the following in my journal afterward:

By the grace of God through the life, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and with the intercession of the Blessed Mother of God, I appeared for the first time in monk's choir, chanting Sext on this Monday the 22nd day of September 1997, the 25th week in Ordinary Time.

Later that day, my first afternoon of work with Br. Placid, I helped put down a floor in a grain silo, followed by washing potatoes and tomatoes.

I was on my way.

One of my neighbors in the Monastic Center that year was “St. Louis” Paul Tanner (he hailed from The Gateway to the West). He was discerning his vocation to the Trappists and to New Melleray. Obviously he discerned well. Br. Paul Andrew, OCSO, is now a solemnly professed monk at New Melleray, the vocations director, head of the Monastic Center, and the book review editor of *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* (among other things; I’m sure he has other duties within the house). And I can say I knew him when!

Paul was not the only man in the Monastic Center that year discerning a monastic vocation. There were two others. As to their whereabouts and stations in life now, I am clueless.

You see, the Monastic Center is basically a space for men discerning a monastic vocation, specifically to New Melleray. The space is an introduction to solitude and communal prayer. In a sense the Monastic Center is the first hint (and I emphasize *hint*) of monastic life. Can you handle solitude? Can you pray with other people in a prescribed fashion? Can you dive into *lectio* on a consistent basis? Can you handle not speaking to others from the conclusion of Compline until after Mass the next day? The Monastic Center clearly occupies a space between the general retreat house and the dwelling of the monks living there. No fee is charged, nor is there a time limit on how long one may stay. Men who aspire to join the community, such as Paul Tanner back in 1997, often spend a month or so here. That married men, such as me, are allowed in this space at all is a wonder to me.

A married man with children in a monastery. But it gets even stranger. I grew up a by-God Baptist.

Here was a typical Sunday morning in the summer when I was young. My dad, his brother, and I would drive to a lake in a state forestry to fish for bluegill and bass. On the thirty-minute drive to the lake Dad would tune the radio to some station from deep in Kentucky. This station broadcast a preacher who yelled and screamed and pounded on the po-

dium so much that he frequently had to stop and catch his breath, as was quite audible over the air. As the preacher paused his bellowing to gasp for air, Dad and my uncle and I would howl with laughter at this guy. We called him "The Breather." I thought the man was crazy.

My parents were virtuous, but not religious. Both had been baptized, Mom in the Baptist Church and Dad in the Methodist Church. However, the family never went to church. Mom was wary of Christians ("They never do what they say they should do"), while Dad simply thought the whole thing daft.

When I was ten years old or so, my maternal grandmother would take me to her church, where she was a regular parishioner: First Baptist Church, 813 E. Spring Street, New Albany, Indiana. I also went to Sunday School there. I liked the music at the service. We sang all the old Protestant standards: "Softly and Tenderly," "In the Garden," "Just as I Am," "Blessed Assurance," "Amazing Grace," etc. I did not like Sunday School, but I liked the singing. We sang all the time, because our Sunday School teacher (whose name escapes me) played piano, and so our classroom had a piano in it. She didn't so much play it as pound out the chords. My favorite was "Brighten the Corner Where You Are." In my mind I can still see her sitting at that piano, her back to us, pounding out the chords and singing at the top of her lungs, all the while glancing back at us kids (see Burl "Big Daddy" Ives sing a cover of the song on YouTube. Wonderful!).

I was baptized at the First Baptist Church on October 9, 1966. I was twelve years old. Every fall all the twelve-year-olds were herded into the church to hear the pastor's pitch. The pitch was this: Jesus loved you so much that if you didn't believe in him he would send you to everlasting hell. Following this hour-long harangue was the altar call, at which time anyone who wanted to accept Jesus Christ as his or her personal Lord and Savior had to come forward up to the altar (hence, altar call) and say so.

Not wanting to spend eternity in hell, I marched forward. I was the only person who did so that day. The pastor placed

his arm around me, and turned me around to face the congregation. The pastor asked me, "Son, do you accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?" I said I did. He then said something to the effect, "This young man has been saved!"

The following Sunday I was baptized. Wearing a pair of blue jean shorts and a white T-shirt over which I wore a white robe, I waded into the baptismal pool that hit me at my waist. The pastor, Rev. McKeny, was already standing in the pool waiting for me. He placed his hand over my face and dunked me backward three times, all the while saying, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

After that I stopped going to church. I convinced my grandmother that since I had been saved, what was the point in my going to church and Sunday School?

I did not return to church until I was eighteen. I did not return out of any hankering for God, though. I returned because Sara Jacoby went to Central Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and sang in the choir. Ironically, Central was just down Spring Street from First Baptist. I was in love, you see. Sara and I met at New Albany High School. I was seventeen, and she was sixteen. We sang in the high school concert choir. After she and I had been dating for a while, I joined Central so I could see her on Sunday. I sang tenor; she sang soprano.

It was at Central that I got to know Martha Saunders. Ms. Saunders had been my math teacher in the seventh and ninth grades at Hazelwood Junior High (as it was then called), so I was familiar with her. She was also the wife of the pastor at Central. At Central Ms. Saunders and I had these great debates about religion. I was brash; she was patient. I was sarcastic, and she just smiled. Over the next four years we continued these battles, and by the time Sara and I left New Albany to begin our married life on the Bloomington campus of Indiana University (where I was a graduate student first in English and then in library science, and Sara finished her undergraduate degree before attending dental school),

Ms. Saunders had completely turned me around. I was Christian.

During those undergraduate days I went to school full time at Indiana University Southeast, lived at home, and worked part time during the school year and full time during the summer at Nance Floral Shoppe. I drove a delivery van and delivered flowers. Nance Floral Shoppe was, and still is, located at the corner of Eighth and Spring Street in New Albany, across from the former St. Edward Hospital, where I was born.

My job at Nance's was, until my teaching job at Carmel Catholic High School, the most enjoyable job I ever had. My route for delivering flowers was in rural Floyd, Harrison, and Clark Counties. I would load up the truck right after lunch and then head out for places like Sellersburg, Henryville, Charlestown, New Washington, Georgetown, Floyds Knobs, New Salisbury, and Palmyra. I would not return to the shop until late afternoon. All I had to do then was sweep the floor of the workroom where the women arranged the floral decorations.

Cruising down the road was fun, and the people I encountered on the job were always interesting. One of the customers sported bright orange hair (unusual in the years 1972 to 1976), and she swore on a stack of Bibles that a wild bird was loose in her house. She always wanted me to shoo it away. It didn't take me long to figure out that she was a few bricks shy of a full load. So when I came to her place (she ordered flowers for herself weekly), I'd ask for a broom and swish it under her couch. "He's gone," I'd tell her. She was pleased. Then there was the customer who worked at the Sellersburg branch of the floral shop. She was left-handed. When she gave me directions on how to get to a certain house in Sellersburg she would say, "Ok, honey"—she called everybody *honey*—"you turn *right* when you come to the first stop sign, then you turn *left* at the very next street." The problem was that when she said *right* she meant *left*, and when she said *left* she meant *right*, so you had to reverse everything she said.

There were the funeral home cutups at a certain funeral home in New Albany who liked to play bizarre games with a blank gun. One of these games was to burst in on you while you were alone in the back room where the flowers were actually deposited. You would be in there, alone, bringing in the flowers, when all of a sudden the door to the main body of the funeral home would fly open and out would pop one of the funeral home directors brandishing a blank gun and firing away with a maniacal grin. There was the massage parlor above the adult bookstore in Clarksville where I frequently delivered a dozen red roses, *always* with the admonition from the boss that if I wasn't back in thirty minutes I was fired. Mostly, though, I loved being out on the road. I savored the freedom of movement, and I seriously entertained becoming an over-the-road truck driver (so glad I didn't). *Overdrive* magazine was essential reading at this time.

Now one of the duties of this job was that every Saturday I had to place two vases of flowers on the old high altar at St. Mary's Church. The church was located just down the street from the shop. I had no idea what "the old high altar" was, but I was given instruction as to its whereabouts. So I did so every Saturday morning for four years. At first I merely stomped in with vases in hand, plopped them down on the designated spot, and quickly left the place. However, after the first year of doing that, I began taking my time while in the church. I had never seen the inside of a Catholic Church, and St. Mary's looked nothing like First Baptist or Central. What was all that *stuff*? Statues of people all over the place and red candles in metal racks burned seemingly everywhere. Huge paintings adorned the walls on either side of the altar. There was this railing running nearly the width of the church. St. Mary's didn't smell like First Baptist or Central, either. You could smell the candles, of course, but another odor wafted through the air as well. I later learned the odor was incense. After that first year I would place the flowers on their designated spots, and then I would sit down in a pew and gawk.

I wanted to know more about all this. Many of the women who designed the floral arrangements at the shop were Catholic, and so I began peppering them with questions about all this stuff I saw inside St. Mary's Church. Their answers led to more questions from me.

One day, one of the women at the shop brought me a newspaper called *Our Sunday Visitor*. I took it home and devoured it. Reading it was like being bombarded with a new language; a new vocabulary was being presented to me, words such as *liturgy, sacristy, lectionary, thurible*. The next day I asked the woman who had given it to me where I could get more copies of the paper. She told me that issues were often stashed in the narthex of a church (I had to ask her what a narthex was), free for the taking. The following Saturday I headed to the narthex of St. Mary's Church, and sure enough, I found issues of *Our Sunday Visitor*. From that day until my last day of work at the shop in early August 1976, I picked up a copy of that paper every Saturday.

In mid-August 1976, Sara and I headed to the main campus of Indiana University. I was housed in Foley (now demolished), while Sara was in Moffett. My curiosity about Catholicism continued.

Since the women at the floral shop were no longer at hand to answer my questions, I turned to the reference section in the IU library and pulled down the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* for answers. What a wealth of information! I spent hours reading this and that. I would read one entry, and that would lead me to read another entry, and then another entry, and so on. Also in the reference section was a copy of the Douay-Rheims translation of the Bible. What I liked about this was that in the front of the Bible were printed all these Catholic prayers: Hail Mary, Glory Be, Memorare, Confiteor, etc. There was a little section explaining how to pray the rosary. Also, I was fascinated by the names of some of the books of the Old Testament: 1 & 2 Paralipomenon? 1 & 2 Esdras? Those books were not in my KJV!

I began attending Sunday Mass at the nearby St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church. Scary stuff. Highly self-conscious, worried that I would immediately be spotted as a heretic, and clueless as to what was playing out before me, I parked myself in the very back pew and on the end (for a quick getaway if things got too overwhelming, as they did at first). I simply did what everybody else did around me: when they stood, I stood; when they knelt, I knelt.

One Sunday on leaving Mass I passed the bulletin board, and a flyer tacked up there caught my eye. The flyer said that a “schola” of monks from St. Meinrad Archabbey would be giving a free concert at St. Charles. Free. All welcome.

I went. St. Charles was packed. Even saw some of my professors there from IU. The concert was in the evening. A group of four to five monks, in habit, chanted medieval Gregorian chant. Blew me away! Never heard anything like that at First Baptist or Central! My resolve to join the Catholic Church only grew stronger after that concert.

I talked it over with Sara. She didn’t have any problems with my joining the Catholic Church but asked that I wait to do so until after our wedding on the day after Christmas. That made sense to me.

Soon after returning to campus following our wedding I contacted St. Charles and told the pastor I wanted to join the Catholic Church. In January 1977 I began meeting with a priest to do just that.

The priest’s name was Fr. Charles Fisher, but he asked to be addressed as Fr. Chuck. Fr. Chuck was the associate pastor at St. Charles. He was the first priest I had ever seen with a beard. I was the only man in the group of no more than ten. All the women in the group were coming into the Catholic Church in order to marry Catholic men.

We met weekly. Our textbook was Anthony J. Wilhelm’s *Christ Among Us*. I cannot recall a lesson. I very well remember, though, Fr. Chuck’s singing voice. One of the best voices I’ve ever heard in a priest. He sang the Mass beautifully.

A few weeks before Easter I made my first confession to Fr. Bob Borchertmeyer, the pastor. I was terrified, but Fr. Bob walked me through it.

I was received into the Catholic Church on Easter Sunday, April 10, 1977. The Mass was at six in the morning. Sara, both her parents, and her two sisters attended the Mass. Molly Mills, a friend of Sara's sister, was my sponsor. The morning was quite cool, but the afternoon was bright and warm. We all walked around campus later that day after lunch.

I have finished eating breakfast down in the dining room of New Melleray Abbey. The long night of prayer is over, so I head up to my room and change from my choir clothes (nicer clothes that I wear down in the chapel) into a pair of shorts. I snatch up my psalter, and I go back down the stairs and step outside. Warm, bright, and not too humid. A good day to be out in the garden!

I begin walking down the monastery driveway. At the base of the drive I cross the two-lane road that runs in front of the monastery and enter the driveway to Holy Family Church, which is right across the street from the monastery. The church sits about a hundred and fifty yards back from the road. Two rows of mature pines line the mowed yard that leads up to the church. I like to approach the church by walking up between those two rows of pines. Kind of like a cloister feeling.

When I reach the church, I walk to the back of it. Then, to the west, a rolling field of corn opens up. The green of the cornfield meets the blue horizon of the sky in the far distance. The air smells green. Very quiet. The only sound is a passing car on the nearby road and the rustling of the leaves of corn from the light breeze. At this time of year the corn is only about sixteen inches tall.

I love this scene. The field has alternated between corn, soybeans, and just plain grass over the years that I've been coming here, but the view always inspires me. The view begs for prayer, for it is filled with God. Hence the psalter I brought

along with me. I open the psalter (*The Psalms, A New Translation: Singing Version*) and begin where I left off: Psalm 61. For the next few minutes I pray five psalms over the fields.

When I finish the five psalms I just stand and stare at the sight. Back in August 2011 I stood at this same spot. Someone was driving a big green farm machine that day that mowed the tall grass and weeds of the field. Perhaps all that mowed grass was later gathered into those huge rolls that dot farm fields, but that is just a guess. Anyway, the machine would drive near to where I stood and then turn in a tight circle and head out the other way. The machine did not follow a straight line but curved slightly west in a large sweep, and all the while it did so, the machine slowly climbed a gentle hill. When the machine reached the crest of the hill I saw it turn north, and after that it faded out of sight. I would estimate that the point at which the machine disappeared from view was about a half a mile from where I stood. A few minutes later, without my being able to hear any noise, the machine would reappear and slowly make its way back to me.

All this was a beautiful sight, especially when the machine was moving away from me and was at a great distance from me. The machine was a bright green dot in the sea of grass and the bright blue sky. When it had been near, the machine roared with great power, but the noise lessened as the machine lumbered away from me. But the beauty was not just in what I could see or hear. The beauty was also in the loneliness the scene instilled in me. It was lonely watching the machine when it was at a great distance. I could see it but barely hear it. When it was near me, I could see the man in the cab operating the big machine, and he would wave. I would return his wave. But when the machine turned and began lumbering away, I would ask myself: Who was that operating that machine? Was he a neighboring farmer? How did that machine get to this field?

But then I thought: From the vantage point of the man operating the machine, he doesn't feel the loneliness. He doesn't

feel the separation. The man operating the machine seeks only the goal for which he is there: to mow the field.

From my vantage point, though, standing at the edge of that field, the feeling of loneliness was very real. Why? I don't know. I can't explain it. I only know that I experienced it. Nor can I explain why the whole thing fascinated me.

I awaken from my reverie with a jolt. I look at my watch: eight forty-five. I need to get back to my room; Terce is thirty minutes away. I spin around and make a brisk walk back to the monastery. I've been here one day now. Four more days remain. I pray that I will make this time of prayer fruitful.

About a forty-five-minute talk with Br. Paul after Terce. He caught me in the cloister as I was leaving the chapel. We started off talking there but soon moved to a couple of chairs in the gift shop. He always fills me in on stuff in which I am interested: what's new in the house, where he has traveled lately, situation down at Ava, etc. Today he wants to know if I would be willing to review the second edition of Maxwell Johnson's *Benedictine Daily Prayer*. Oh, yeah!

Br. Paul is very calm. He's quite measured in speech. However, he laughs and makes droll observations. I cannot, though, recall ever having a conversation with him in which he raised his voice either in excitement or anger. He's even-steven.

Unlike the subprior. He is spontaneous, flip, and earthy. He tells wonderful stories. I once met him for a summer conference at the University of St. Mary of the Lake in Mundelein, Illinois, the seminary for the Archdiocese of Chicago. Since the seminary is directly across the street from the school at which I teach, I was more than happy to be with him at this conference.

It just so happened that a colleague of mine in the department of religion was attending this same conference, so the three of us sat together. The subprior was assiduously taking notes. Afterward, a light reception was offered. At this reception the three of us enjoyed our refreshments, and the subprior blasted off on a wide variety of topics, both those covered in

the conference we had just attended and other subjects both ecclesiastical and civil.

The subprior was bobbing and weaving, tagging topics one after another, in a rapid-fire manner, and he was right on the money about them too. Making this all the more spectacular was his physical appearance. He is a tall, lanky fellow with a large wingspan. So when he gets going and he waves those arms and he punctuates the end of his sentences with “yeah, yeah,” you notice him. He wears black-framed glasses, and they tend to stand out against his salt-and-pepper beard. He gets your attention.

My colleague was agog.

There’s something else about the subprior that can leave one agog: the man can sing. You know how I said that Fr. Chuck had one of the best voices I ever heard in a priest? The subprior is better. It’s no accident that he frequently cantors in choir. I once complimented him on his singing. He bounced back immediately with, “Buy my CD?”

Departure day; always busy. Clean the room in the Monastic Center. Go down to the room just outside the Monastic Center where the linens are stored and fetch fresh sheets and towels. Sometimes, especially if Hal is in the Monastic Center as well, mop the hall. Pack up everything. Lug it all down three flights of stairs. Stash it all in the trunk of the car. Just as when you were a kid, getting to the vacation destination was all exciting and fun, while the return trip home was a drag, so it is when leaving the Monastic Center.

I jump in the car and fire it up. I take a last look at the place. Next year, 2017, will be my twentieth consecutive year at New Melleray.

“Next year, New Melleray,” I say to no one. I slip the gear-shift into drive and bug out for my three-hour tour home.