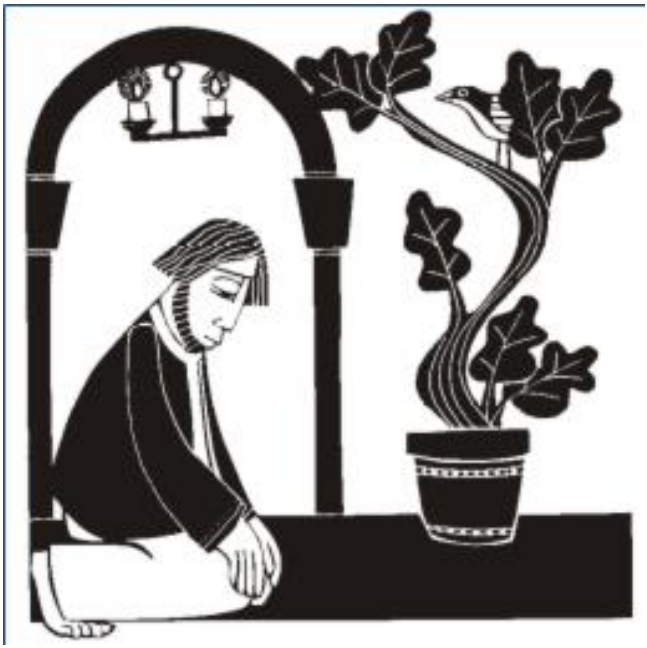
Reflections on a Monastery Retreat

Rev. Richard J. Bozzelli



"Come away . . . to a deserted place and rest a while."
Mark 6:31

29 June through 9 August 2004

Our Lady of the Holy Cross Abbey
Berryville, Virginia

To Danny –

“You’re only a prayer away.”

FOREWORD

The Tenacity of Grace

At some point this summer, I realized that I wanted to share with others the experience of my six-week retreat at Our Lady of the Holy Cross Abbey in Berryville, Virginia. It was shaping up to be something I could not keep to myself.

Rather than write a report on What I Did For My Summer Vacation, I decided to write a series of reflections on various aspects of the experience. Those reflections follow. They do not capture the fullness of my time there, but I hope they offer a taste of what it was like for me to be on retreat at a Trappist monastery. I wrote all of them while I was at the monastery, with the exception of the postscript, which I wrote soon after I arrived home.

I now thank God that I wrote them when I did. Three days after my return from Berryville, my 21-year old nephew, Danny, was hit and killed by a car when he tried to cross a major thoroughfare outside of Atlantic City. His death plunged my family into the deepest, darkest grief we have ever known. Within an instant, it seemed as though all of the joy in my life, including the grace of the preceding six weeks, had been sucked right out of me.

In the midst of this crisis, the peace and solitude of the retreat became part of a distant past. Danny's death was the only event in my life that mattered. I could only focus on the horror of his death and the pain of my family's grief, particularly that of his mother (my sister), father, and two younger brothers. In fact, any attempt to remember better times seemed to disrespect the depth of their suffering and to dishonor the gravity of his death. As far as I was concerned, the retreat could remain buried in the past with all of the happier days when my family was still intact.

Yet in my grief, I had underestimated the tenacity of grace – its stubborn refusal to be mastered by evil and its unrelenting determination to emerge from the tomb. As I re-engaged the world around me, I could not ignore the persistence of life, even after such a tragic death. At first, people's questions about my retreat made me wince, but later they allowed me to acknowledge that there had been better times than those that I was now enduring. The phone calls and notes from the Trappists assuring me of their prayers reminded me that the retreat had been very real, as had been the bonds of friendship and faith it had

forged. Within several weeks, I was able to retrieve the reflections that I had written and to begin reviewing them and preparing them for distribution as I had first intended. Through it all, at every point of contact with those six weeks in Berryville, grace conspired to penetrate the pall of death that lay over the spirit within me.

What began as a project to share my time on retreat has turned out to be a spring welling up to refresh my grieving soul. It has become clear to me that the grace of the retreat was never sucked out of me. It has been laboring tirelessly from within me, without my even knowing or asking it, to sustain me in the greatest tragedy of my family's life. Those moments of connecting to past times of joy were not occasions of disrespect or dishonor, but gifts sent to me from God at the urging of the saints in heaven, with Danny now among them. And, for all my initial reluctance to accept those moments as such, grace continues to find its way to me through the presence of family, friends, and parishioners and through the power of faith, memory, and perspective. The grief of Danny's loss has not gone away – I doubt it ever will – but its sting is softened each time God's grace surfaces in the most unexpected ways.

And so I now offer these reflections not only to share the experience of my time away, but to testify to the healing grace that they have set free. The retreat, like the blessings that flowed from it, was pure gift to me: a gift from God, from the Trappist monks at Berryville, and from the parishioners and staff at Corpus Christi Church, all of whom supported me in my desire to undertake it. In that context, I now share that gift with them in faith, hope, and love.

I thank the Trappist brothers of Holy Cross Abbey for hosting me during the six weeks of my retreat and for teaching me the power and importance of prayer in my life. I hope these reflections convey the high regard in which I hold them. I thank the parishioners and staff of Corpus Christi for accepting many additional responsibilities and inconveniences during my absence this summer. Without their prayers and encouragement, the retreat would not have been the same.

Finally, I thank the God of all ages for the blessings that have flowed from this retreat and that continue to be poured out upon me: the gift of family, friends, and colleagues; the gift of faith and priesthood; and, of course, the gift of grace, tenacious as it is.

Baltimore, Maryland
27 September 2004

ON HOSPITALITY

> *Then the king will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me."* Matthew 25:34-36

You would think that praying at a monastery would be easy. You would think that, after nine hundred years of strict Cistercian observance, the Trappists would have honed prayer to its core simplicity. You would be wrong.

Praying at Holy Cross Abbey requires familiarity with no fewer than five binders, an ordo, supplemental pamphlets and song sheets, particular liturgical gestures, and a highly developed, if not perfect, sense of pitch. (It also requires a sweatshirt at 3:30 in the morning.) Praying at Holy Cross requires a guide.

When Br. Barnabas, my retreat director, showed me to my choir stall on that first day of retreat, he pulled out the proper binder, found the right page, and handed me the book. We were ready to pray. Starting on the right page of the prayer book, however, did not guarantee staying on the right page. But with Br. Lewis to my left and Fr. Mark to my right, an unobtrusive point of the finger or a simple flip of a page kept me on track. For the first several days, each time I arrived at my stall, the correct binder was already opened to the correct page, and my two choir companions stood ready to assist me without my ever asking. It brought great comfort to me at a time when I felt very much a stranger.

And then one day in chapel, the pre-opened binder was no longer there. I had to find and open the right one all by myself. But it didn't matter. By then I knew which binder to open and which page to turn to. Maybe whoever was opening that book beforehand simply forgot to do so that day, or maybe he just had a sense of when I would figure it out on my own. But after opening the book to the proper place myself that first time, I proudly prayed the Office with a feeling that I had finally arrived.

Hospitality means knowing when to help and when to back off.

Dinner at the monastery was served at 12:30 p.m. It was the main meal of the day, and, other than prayer and chapter (a weekly conference with the abbot), it was the only time when most of the brothers were together. Sitting among the monks, I realized how small and, indeed, intimate the community was, and how

much of a threat that I, as an outsider, posed to them. I had lived in community when I was in seminary, but there were 120 of us then. One oddball outsider wasn't going to disrupt the life there too easily. But among a community less than a quarter that size, I realized the risk the brothers were taking by welcoming me into their midst.

It wasn't obvious to me why they were willing to take that risk. They didn't charge a fee for the retreat, so they couldn't be assured of recouping their expenses or even making a little profit from it. They would be getting six weeks of free labor, to be sure, but entrusting the work of the monastery to a stranger carries its own risks. No, the brothers did not welcome me into their midst because they thought that they were going to get something out of it. They welcomed me because, as Fr. Robert, the abbot, told me, they wanted to share their lives with others and to nourish the spiritual lives of their guests.

And that's when it occurred to me: hospitality means being willing to risk one's sense of security, not for one's own benefit, but for someone else's.

That's why Jesus valued it so highly. All too often, we are willing to be hospitable if we see something in it for ourselves: a desired friendship; a lucrative business deal; even a new parishioner for the books. But, as Jesus taught many times, if we do something for our own sake, then we can't expect a reward beyond that which we seek to achieve. But when we serve others out of concern for *their* needs – when we risk being questioned, challenged, or changed by those we serve – then we are serving Jesus himself.

I'm used to a lot of talk about hospitality. Now that I've been a stranger, it has new meaning for me: knowing when to help and when to back off, and being willing to risk one's own security for the welfare of another.

That's a pretty tall order. I guess that's why it gets you into heaven.

ON SILENCE

> *There is an appointed time for everything,*
> *and a time for every affair under the heavens.*
> . . .
> *a time to be silent, and a time to speak.* Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7b.

They really are quite normal – at least as normal as any of us is. At times they're downright funny.

One morning in the bakery, Br. Christopher spoke about his plans to enter seminary that fall. He hoped to be involved in some extra-curricular activity, and so he and the brothers began speculating about what he might do. They came up with the idea of a DJ – pretty amusing considering the Cistercian rule of silence. Then they began brainstorming what *kind* of DJ he might be: rock-and-roll, easy listening, the sixties and the seventies. When they landed on the absurdity of his being a shock jock, Br. Lewis quipped, "Yeah, Chris. You could be the next Howard Cistercian!"

They didn't know that I was part of the FCC team that busted Howard Stern in the 1980s, so they couldn't have appreciated the grin that came to my face. Br. Lewis's comment had conjured up for me the image of my undertaking that case years ago and discovering, much to my surprise, a Trappist monk at the other end of the microphone.

Oh, yes. These guys can talk. They can talk just as much as the next guy. And sometimes they do.

Which makes it all the more significant that they choose to be silent.

When I first arrived at the monastery, the community was on retreat. Their normal work schedule had been suspended until the following week. It would be seven days before I would have a substantial conversation with any of the brothers other than Br. Barnabas, my retreat director, and Br. Benedict, whom I have known for several years.

Seven days of silence. *Real* silence. I read. I prayed. I walked. I rested. Then I read and prayed and walked and rested some more. By the third day, I wrote in my journal that I had exhausted everything I had brought to do, and I still had five and a half weeks to go! I was going nuts.

As I experienced the silence of the brothers during this time, I had somehow convinced myself that they were "naturally" silent, that they were just reticent and shy to begin with. But my first full day of work with several of them – listening to and sharing in the camaraderie of their conversation – quickly disabused me of that idea. The rule of silence is definitely more relaxed in the bakery than in the main house.

It was then that I realized that a talking Trappist is not a contradiction in terms. There's a big difference between *keeping* silent and *being* silent. For the most part, I had kept silent from the moment I arrived at the abbey. I had not yet, however, been silent.

In time, as I grew accustomed to the silence, I was surprised by what I began to hear. Within a few weeks, I learned to identify most of the monks by their footsteps; and then I tested the accuracy of my recognition as they entered the chapel or refectory. I noticed how the songs of the awakening birds joined the buzz of the nighttime bugs in the hour before dawn; and then I listened to nature's overture before the rising of the sun. I waited to hear the cattle in the nearby fields call out to each other at dusk, back and forth, back and forth; and then I imagined them chanting an antiphonal psalmody all their own.

The abbey hadn't changed since my arrival. I had changed. I was becoming silent.

I now realize how many opportunities I've missed to cultivate silence in my own life: in getting ready for work in the morning, in driving alone in the car, in winding down at the end of the day. All are times when I'm inclined to have the radio or stereo or TV going when, in fact, I'm not paying attention to any of them at all. I may not be able to create a silent world, but I don't have to construct for myself a noisy one either.

It made me wonder how often I allow the noise of the world and the noise within myself to drown out the voices around me. Br. Barnabas pointed out that the primary purpose of silence is to make us aware of the presence of another, particularly, the presence of Christ, our God become human.

If I could *be* silent in my day to day life (not necessarily *keep* silent), how much better might I hear the fear in the voices of the patients I visited; the loneliness in the voices of the elderly with whom I prayed; the uncertainty in the voices of the college students I counseled? If I were silent, maybe I would be more than just aware of poverty and would actually hear, as God hears, the cry of the poor.

If we were all silent enough to hear God calling out to us in these voices, maybe when we heard them we would no longer be able to *keep* silent.

Scripture tells us that there is an appointed time for everything: a time to be silent and a time to speak. The reality of talking Trappists highlights the significance of their choice to be silent. It teaches us that, if we take the time to be silent, we just might recognize the time to speak. And there is indeed no contradiction in that.

ON GRAND SILENCE

> *Monks should diligently cultivate silence at all times, but especially at night. . . . When all have assembled, they should pray Compline; and on leaving Compline, no one will be permitted to speak further. If anyone is found to transgress this rule of silence, he must be subjected to severe punishment* . . . . The Rule of St. Benedict, ch. 42:1, 8-9.

A week after my arrival, Br. Benedict invited me to a party for his brother, who was visiting from out of town. I had come to know Benedict from many years of retreats at the abbey, and I was delighted by the prospect of meeting a member of his family. The gathering would take place after Compline in one of the houses reserved for the monks' guests. Benedict informed me that Fr. Robert had given me permission to attend.

The abbot's permission eased my still-green monastic conscience, knowing that the event would occur during Grand Silence, the period between the close of Compline (about 7:50 p.m.) and the close of Lauds and Mass the next day (about 7:40 a.m.). While the monks navigate under a general rule of silence throughout the day, Grand Silence calls for the strict observance of the rule. As the amateur on the scene, I wanted to be as faithful to the rule as possible, not only in refraining from speech but in avoiding any activity that would generate the slightest disturbance.

The guest house was on the monastery grounds, but distant enough to warrant the use of my car to get there. Permission aside, I still felt a bit awkward about leaving the main house at the time that many of the monks would be going to bed, to be socializing when they would be sleeping. And so I tried to leave as discreetly as possible.

After Compline, I left the monastery by way of the chapter room off of the chapel. I had brought my car keys with me just so I wouldn't have to return to the dormitory where I might be seen (and heard) leaving by that exit. I walked on the grass to avoid the crunching of my sandals against the gravel path, for while the parking lot was behind the monastery, it was still within earshot of the monks' bedrooms. I arrived at my car, satisfied that I had disturbed no one and hoping that the sound of my car engine would not sully that achievement.

I opened the car door with care . . . and set off the alarm.

On Lectio Divina

> *How different they who devote themselves to the study of the law of the Most High! They explore the wisdom of those of old and occupy themselves with the prophecies; they treasure the discourses of the famous, and go to the heart of involved sayings; they study obscure parables, and are busied with the hidden meanings of the sages.*
> Sirach 39:1-3.

Growing up, I remember my mother banning the television from two rooms: the living room, where we entertained guests, and the kitchen, where we shared our meals. These were to be places of personal interaction, undisturbed by artificial images and disembodied voices.

The monks see it a bit differently. They read to each other at dinner. St. Benedict felt that this practice would help keep the brothers focused on their solitude at a time when they might otherwise be tempted to break silence.

When I joined the brothers for my first meal at the abbey, Br. Christopher was reading from the introduction to J.M. Roberts's *Twentieth Century, The History of the World, 1901-2000*, a tome as long as the time period it covers. At first I was sure that we would only be reading the introduction; but when Br. Christopher yielded his weekly reading to Fr. Edward, and he gave way the following week to Br. Lewis, and he to Fr. Paschal, Fr. James, and Br. Jose Maria, I realized that I would have to join the Order if I wanted to see the book through to its conclusion.

Knowing that six weeks of retreat would offer me ample opportunity to pursue my own passion for reading, I packed a trunkload of books. From Paul Elie's *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* to J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, I soaked in every written word I could lay my eyes on.

The real literary passion of the Trappists, however, is known as *lectio divina*, a prayerful reading of sacred and spiritual writings. *Lectio divina* forms one of the three pillars of Cistercian spirituality (the other two being prayer and work).

While *lectio* is done most traditionally (and most importantly) with Scripture, it can also be done with other spiritual writings. Knowing the significance of *lectio* to Cistercian spirituality, I came to the monastery with the hope of focusing my reading on the Church Fathers, those Christian writers of the first several centuries. I had studied them in seminary, but had developed a renewed interest in them in recent months.

The traditional method of *lectio,* at least as taught by the spiritual "masters," involves several steps: 1) begin by asking the Holy Spirit for guidance and insight with respect to what you are about to read; 2) read the entire passage straight through; 3) re-read the passage, this time much more slowly and deliberately, sometimes several times, opening yourself to any word or phrase that might catch your attention (this is known as *lectio*); 4) stay with that word or phrase and reflect on its relevance to your life in your heart and mind (this is known as *meditatio*); 5) allow the Holy Spirit to move you to a higher level of prayer, praising, thanking, petitioning God (this is known as *oratio,* and is as far as most of us get); 6) experience the gift of your soul resting in the stillness of God (this is known as *contemplatio* – much, much more unusual); 7) conclude with a prayer of thanksgiving.

And so armed with this method, I began reading Clement of Rome (d. 100), Ignatius of Antioch (d. 107), and Polycarp of Smyrna (d. 155). For one week straight. I later admitted to Br. Barnabas that, while I found these Fathers intriguing, I was moved to prayer only once during that entire week by something Ignatius had written. "You're lucky," he said.

Barnabas had a much simpler (and more freeing) method of *lectio*: 1) ask the Holy Spirit for guidance; 2) read; 3) if something strikes you, go with it. "You cannot control when God decides to speak to you," he added.

In this age of technology, with e-mail, cell phones, and instant messaging, we have come to expect immediate responses to our efforts at communication. Sometimes we place those expectations on God. We say a rosary, we expect our prayers to be answered . . . now. We attend mass, we expect to be nourished . . . now. We go to confession, we expect to feel relief . . . now.

The fact is that sometimes weeks can pass before something we've read or heard in prayer has any relevance to us at all. Sometimes longer. Sometimes never. God just does not work on our schedule.

When I look at this time of retreat, it's amazing how much I absorbed about the history of the twentieth century, despite the fact that I seemed to zone out during much of the reading at dinner. But at least I was present for it.

Perhaps the monks read long books to each other at dinner to build up their endurance for the lifetime of *lectio divina* ahead of them. If that's so, then we can all learn something from them with respect to our own spiritual reading. Be patient. Be persistent. And when God decides to speak, be present.

ON PRAYER

> *With all prayer and supplication, pray at every opportunity in the Spirit. To that end, be watchful with all perseverance and supplication for all the holy ones.* Ephesians 6:18

When I awoke each morning at 3:00, I called to mind those who lay awake at that very hour, not by any choice of theirs, but because of the anxieties of life that burdened them. I know what that is like. And so I would begin my day with a brief prayer for them.

Then there was Vigils at 3:30 a.m., another half hour of silent meditation, and forty-five minutes of *lectio divina* before I took a break at 5:30 a.m. for breakfast. Afterwards, I still had time until Lauds and Mass at 7:00 a.m.

It was then that I retrieved the more than one hundred prayer requests that family, friends, and parishioners made in June when I left for retreat. They were too many to pray in one sitting. But I didn't want to relegate them to a generic "for all of these intentions"; they were too personal for that. So I divided them into seven groups and assigned each group to a particular day of the week. Each day I prayed for the requests within that group, for six weeks.

I prayed for each intention by calling to mind the people mentioned (especially if I knew them), reflecting on the concern that they identified (with which I was sometimes already familiar), and uniting myself with them as I placed their need before God. I concluded each intention with an "Our Father," a "Hail, Mary," and a "Glory Be"; and, as if finishing a rosary containing the mysteries of my parishioners' lives, I closed the entire session with the "Hail, Holy Queen."

At first, I was frustrated that "all" I could do was pray for these needs. No phone call, no note, no ability to "fix" the problem from my monastic enclosure. I even felt renewed twinges of the guilt from when I was preparing for this retreat that, somehow, I was abandoning my parishioners to satisfy a personal whim. I wondered if my parishioners themselves felt abandoned by me.

In time, however, my prayer challenged that feeling. As I prayed for one need, I associated it with other needs, and then still others after that. When I called to mind one person, I often remembered another related person, and then another again. By the end of my time in prayer, I was surrounded by a company of people and needs, united in the one God to whom I prayed. It was getting pretty crowded in that abbey chapel.

I may have left the work of ministry behind – the presiding, the preaching, the serving, the counseling, the managing – but I hadn't left my parishioners behind, that was for sure. Indeed, in a unique way, I felt very much their pastor during this time of prayer, perhaps even more so than at times in the parish itself.

I realized then that my relationship with my parishioners was not based solely on what I could do for them. It rested at heart on our relationship with God, the God who created us, who redeemed us, and who promised to be with us until the end of time. The God who called me in a specific way to be intercessor and priest for those entrusted to my care. I found that insight incredibly freeing, because a relationship based exclusively on the work of my ministry was always vulnerable to the success or failure of that work. But a relationship rooted in prayer, based on the God who brought us together, could survive the ebb and flow of life. After all, the answer to prayer is in *God's* hands.

Being cloistered in a monastery caused me to experience my parish in a whole new way – not through the work of my ministry, but through the reality of my prayer. Before this retreat, I would have seen prayer as just one of the many things I did for my parishioners. Now, I understand it as something essentially different, with a character and primacy of its own. Prayer is what brings us together before God; it's what gives us identity and relationship to one another in God. As Br. Barnabas told me at our last session together, whether you are separated from another by distance or by death, "You're only a prayer away."

So now, when I tell others that I will pray for them, I realize that I am offering them much more than a promise to place their needs before God. I am saying to them, in a most fundamental way – in a way beyond anything else I might *do* for them – that I will *be* for them their priest and pastor.

ON WORK

> *Jesus said, "This is how it is with the kingdom of God; it is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how. Of its own accord the land yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the grain is ripe, he wields the sickle at once, for the harvest has come."* Mark 4:26-29.

The mystery of the priesthood, I once told a priest friend of mine, has little to do with the sacrament of Holy Orders. No, the mystery of the priesthood has to do with the fact that only God and you know what you do all day.

So, too, the mystery of monastic life. I must admit that one of the attractions of this long-term retreat was that I would finally learn what the monks did behind that monastic enclosure. I had been making week-long retreats here for twelve years, but had gotten no farther than the chapel. A six-week retreat would not only allow me to discover much of what the monks did all day, but it would also give me the opportunity to experience some of it myself.

On my first Monday morning at the abbey, Br. Michael, the cellarer, assigned me to work in the bakery, where the monks manufacture their two main products of fruitcakes and creamed honey. That's when I met the man who would be my boss for the next five weeks: Ernie Polanskas, the bakery manager, a native son of Baltimore, a man who knew the value of a hot steamed crab and a cold Natty Boh, a touch of Charm City in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley. I had come home, hon.

Ernie showed me to a table, sat me down, and dumped the first load of a five gallon bucket of raisins in front of me. My job was to sort through the raisins and to remove any foreign objects that might detract from the quality of the fruitcakes into which they were destined. The monks had been given work assignments in other locations that day, so I was to perform this task alone. Thus I began to sort raisins, dutifully and carefully, if not particularly prayerfully.

Now, sorting raisins is about as engaging as watching a blade of grass fade on a hot summer day. So, my mind was free to wander to any place it chose as I fulfilled my monastic chore – to teenage memories of similar work in a candy store, to decisions I had made over the past forty-odd years, to the "what-ifs," the "could-bes," and the "still-possibles" of life's journey today. Three career options and two hours later, I was still a diocesan priest on retreat, and none of the world's problems had been solved. I had, however, collected a pan of tiny raisin stems, and I had retrieved one object that, had it found its way into a fruitcake, would have almost certainly broken someone's tooth. My back was sore; my hands were sticky; my work was done.

Although I doubt that Jesus ever sorted raisins (at least not for fruitcakes), he knew enough about tedious and repetitive work to teach us something about the kingdom of God. In one parable he likens the kingdom to a farmer who scatters seed on the land and, without the farmer's knowing how it all happens, reaps a magnificent harvest in the end. The point of the parable, it seems to me, is that the farmer engages his work day after day, and somehow his work contributes to a significant outcome. He doesn't understand how, but he doesn't need to. God has that part under control.

When our minds wander to the really big questions in life, we often find ourselves over-intellectualizing the world around us without making one contribution toward its improvement. In the worst case, we cower before the immensity of such problems as poverty, war, and injustice, perceive the insignificance of our own actions to solve them, and then stand paralyzed before God. If only we realized that before *and with* God we can handle anything.

Jesus teaches us that our role in life is simply to contribute to the coming of God's kingdom through our everyday actions. He will bring everything to fruition without our having to understand how. That's *his* job. Our job is to do our part, no matter how small, no matter how un-engaging, no matter how or whether we even understand its significance or its effectiveness. We only need to remember that, for the really big issues in life, we already have a savior who can do it much better than we.

It is hard for me to believe sometimes that the kingdom of God is in the simple, ordinary tasks that I do day in and day out, until that one time when it all comes together. It's in trying out a host of ideas for a homily in order to find the one that actually works. It's in sitting through a hundred conversations in order to be there for the one that ultimately changes someone's life. It's in being burned by addict after addict in order to help the one who genuinely wants it. It's in sorting through gallons of raisins in order to remove the one object that would almost certainly break someone's tooth.

So that at the end of the day, your back is sore, your hands are sticky, and only God and you know what you've been up to all day. And, sometimes, not even you.

Ah. Now, *that's* the mystery.

ON FACIAL HAIR

> *Are not five sparrows sold for two small coins? Yet not one of them has escaped the notice of God. Even the hairs of your head have all been counted. Do not be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows.*
> Luke 12:6-7.

I was 44 years old and had never grown a beard. I didn't even know if I *could*.

The Sunday School parents sort of dared me to do it. We were at the annual picnic talking about this retreat when someone asked if I would grow a beard just like the monks. (Hmmm. I wasn't aware that monks grew their beards any differently from the rest of us.) I had never grown one, I told them. I had started many times, but could never get passed the itchy stage. The men simply told me to stick that part out, but it was a woman friend who later offered the best advice:

"Shave your neck," she said.

"Shave my neck?"

"Sure. You only need to grow hair on your face. Shave your neck. It'll be a lot more comfortable, and you'll look better, too."

Who knew?

So, on my first day at Berryville, I put my razor on retreat, along with myself – except, of course, for shaving my neck.

A week or so into the venture, Fr. Andrew was the first to comment on it: "Are you growing a beard, Richard?" At least he noticed.

"Trying, Father. It's the first time in my life."

"I tried it once. My mother took one look at me and made such a disapproving face that it came off that afternoon."

"My father will probably disown me."

The only mirrors that I was aware of at the abbey were in the shower room, which meant that I only looked at myself a couple of times a day. That was probably a good thing. Had I actually seen what I looked like while the beard was growing in, I would have almost certainly chickened out. (Sort of like when I cut my hair short a few summers ago. I liked the feel and ease of its shortness. My brother thought it looked less than flattering. I told him that I didn't care, because I liked it. "Yeah," he said, "but we're the ones who have to look at you!")

As the beard came in, I became aware of new sensations: the self-consciousness that food might lodge in it as I ate; the prickliness of my chin when I rested it on my hand; the futility of brushing away cobwebs that weren't there. The beard turned out redder than I would have thought; it had patches of

grey (although not as many as on top of my head); and there were some places that hair just wouldn't grow. When it came to counting the hairs on my head, God got a break.

Final verdict: I hated it. Besides, most of the monks were clean shaven anyway.

So, now that I've finally "done it," how am I better for it? Well, for one thing, I can chalk up a few new sensations to my list of life experiences. Big deal. For another, I now have the expertise to advise another on the art of growing a beard; but, remember, it was a woman's advice that was most helpful to me. She may have known something about growing beards from her husband, but, to my knowledge, she has never grown one herself. One does not have to experience everything first hand in order to comment on it.

At least I can now say that I *can* do it. That may make me different, but does it make me any better?

Our society places way too much emphasis on self-discovery and self-knowledge – insinuating that we have somehow "missed out" if we don't have certain experiences. And so, we leave one relationship to begin another; we leave one career to try a new one; we leave one lifestyle to experiment with drugs, sex, or alcohol. Many a marriage has been broken, many a vocation lost, many a young life injured, all in the name of finding oneself.

We place so much emphasis on self-discovery and self-knowledge when all we really need to know is our self-worth.

Jesus tells us that God knows and notices all things about life in general and about our lives in particular. All we need to understand is that God finds value in each and every one of us, because God created and redeemed us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's only begotten Son. We need only accept God's love in order to be assured that we've not missed out on anything that life has to offer.

It is one thing to become aware of ourselves as life unfolds around us. That is a blessing. It is quite another to fabricate situations out of a desire to know ourselves better. We do not need to experience everything in life. We do not need to know the number of hairs on our head. God has already counted them and has found us worthy.

ON SOLITUDE

> *The word of the Lord came to me thus: Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you.*
> Jeremiah 1:4-5.

Their eyes rarely met mine. Or so it seemed those first few days. They did not greet me when I emerged from my room; they did not thank me when I held the door for them; they did not acknowledge me when I passed them in the hallway. It was hard to avoid concluding that they were unfriendly or, at least, self-absorbed. It made me appreciate the value of those simple gestures in my ordinary life.

But this was no ordinary place. This was a Trappist monastery. I could not expect the rules to be the same here. So, when in Rome . . .

I tried to adopt their practices as a way of opening a window into their world. I closed my eyes during the readings of the day, and I heard the words of Scripture come alive. I refrained from looking up at the slightest bump or motion, and I found that my prayer remained focused. I did not insist that my presence be acknowledged by trying to make eye contact or exchange a greeting every time I passed someone in the hall, and I discovered that, not only was my own solitude nurtured, but theirs, as well, was safeguarded.

The brothers were well aware of my presence. They were, after all, monks living in community. They were not hermits. They were men of prayer who knew how to be alone together.

That is how I would define solitude: being alone together. Being alone is not the same as being by myself: it is knowing that I am created and loved by God as a unique individual. I can be shopping in a crowded mall and still experience the solitary person that God created me to be. At the same time, being together is not the same as being with someone else: it is understanding that I am united with other people as children of the same God. I can be at home by myself and still be in relationship with others, experiencing the social being that God fashioned me to be as well.

For me, then, solitude joins these two elements of my creation: it allows me to be alone together with others. At the intersection of these two elements, I am disposed to the One who created me, drawn to the place in my soul that has existed in the heart and mind of God from the beginning of time. Whether I am

praying in a church, shopping in a mall, or reading in a busy train station, solitude enables me to be alone together with others and also with God.

The Trappists did not invent solitude, but it is clear how much they treasure it. Their spiritual disciplines of silence, prayer, *lectio*, and work all combine to cultivate and to nurture their solitude. With perhaps the exception of silence, I adapted to these disciplines without much effort, realizing how much I already follow them in my day-to-day routine: praying in the early morning hours before the rest of the house comes alive; reading whenever I have the chance to do so; performing mundane and repetitive chores around the house.

But there is an added twist to experiencing solitude here. As I wrote in my journal two weeks into the retreat:

> What I love about a Trappist monastery: you can read a book in the shade of a tree overlooking sixteen simply-marked graves, as cardinals dart about and monks tread nearby, and no one plops themselves down and starts talking to you!

The brothers here not only cultivate their own solitude, they respect the solitude of one another and commit themselves to safeguarding it from intrusion. Would that it were so in my ordinary life.

Cultivating and safeguarding solitude can be a tricky thing in our everyday lives. Back home, I am often amused when people feel sorry for me because I am by myself at times. I become annoyed, though, when they insist on keeping me company when I'd rather be alone. At the same time, I have to be careful that, in my own zeal for solitude, or in my desire to give other people their own space, I don't neglect the need to interact with others. Solitude is not the same as isolation. It requires developing the social side of our being as well. Even monks visit their older and infirm brothers to make sure that their human contact is not limited to professional care givers. People do become lonely, and solitude is not an excuse to keep them lonely.

God may have created us as solitary and social, but that doesn't make it easy to find the intersection between the two. My first few days here taught me the value of the simple gestures of acknowledging others in my ordinary life, but the days that followed also blessed me with the Trappists' commitment to cultivate and safeguard my solitude. I may not be able to figure it all out, but it sure is nice to read a book among monks who do not talk to you.

ON RETREAT

> *I am grateful to God, whom I worship with a clear conscience as my ancestors did, as I remember you constantly in my prayers, night and day. I yearn to see you again, recalling your tears, so that I may be filled with joy, as I recall your sincere faith that first lived in your grandmother . . . and in your mother . . . and that I am confident lives also in you. For this reason, I remind you to stir into flame the gift of God that you have through the imposition of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control.* 2 Timothy 1:3-7

When preparing a couple for marriage, I typically counsel them to be attentive to their relationship as husband and wife. All too often, once children arrive, a couple quickly becomes mother and father, neglecting their identity as husband and wife, partners, and lovers. The children eventually move out, and the couple finds themselves looking at each other, wondering why they ever got married in the first place. Some marriages don't survive it.

Years ago, I promised myself not to allow something like that to happen to my priesthood. I paid too high a price for it to have it slip through my fingers without my noticing. The tenth anniversary of my ordination seemed like the right time to make good on that promise.

And so, despite the whispered conversations around the parish, I did not come here to solve any problem, to reconsider past decisions, or to chart a new course for my future. I came here simply to renew the faith that brought me to the priesthood and to deepen my love for the One who called me to it in the first place.

I did not come with any prepared program or spiritual exercises. I figured that I would follow the Cistercian rule of life and allow that to be my guide. That made me nervous at first, because I feared that I would need something by which to measure my "progress." But Br. Benedict confirmed my instinct when he counseled me soon after my arrival: "Try not to *do* too much. Let the silence have its way."

Sometimes renewing a relationship with another isn't so much a matter of doing anything as it is a matter of taking the time to be with the other. I decided to take six weeks to be alone with God among men who devote their lives attending to God's presence, among friends I have known for twelve years and only met this summer.

I have never experienced more peace and joy in my life than I have as a priest. I liked my life as a lawyer, but I always felt that there was a reserve of myself that I still had to give – to God and to others. Priesthood, like no other decision in my life, has allowed me to do that. So, it's never been an issue of whether I've been happy as a priest. It's always been an issue of how I nurture the peace and joy I've discovered in the priesthood.

I know how the demands and responsibilities of ministry pull me in different directions, a pull that can sometimes cause me to neglect my relationship with the One who sustains me. Neglecting that relationship can only injure me and my ministry in the long run. In that regard, then, this retreat has been about attending to two things: my faith and my priesthood, my relationship with God and my relationship with the people of God.

There is nothing new about a desire to renew those two relationships. It's as old as Christianity itself. When St. Paul encourages Timothy to "stir into flame" the ministry that God has given him, the image is not one in which the fire has been extinguished, but one in which the glowing embers simply need the ashes knocked off and the blaze rekindled.

I came on retreat, then, to refresh my relationship with the God who called me, not because I had lost him somewhere along the way, but to assure him and myself that, amidst the spreadsheets, the leases, the employment contracts, and the construction agreements, I had never forgotten him to begin with. That among my many roles as business manager, landlord and tenant, employer, and builder, I had not laid aside my identity as priest and pastor. I can only trust that, whenever I remember who I am, others benefit, as well.

And so I came. I prayed, I read, I worked, I listened, I learned, I took long walks. I wasted six weeks of my life with the God I fell in love with years ago. And it was worth every minute of it.

As Br. Edward, 60 years a monk, would say: no regrets, no complaints, only thanks.

The gift has been stirred into flame. It is time to go home.

POSTSCRIPT

> *So, now my prayer is that re-entry go well, that I be able to face joyfully whatever I return to, that the benefits of this retreat don't get sucked out of me so quickly that, by next week, I will have forgotten that I came. . . . In the end, . . . only time will tell what the real impact of this retreat has been on me. That I just have to leave in God's hands.* RJB Journal entry, 9 August 2004.

I said goodbye and offered my thanks to the brothers with a touch of sadness. Not because of any fear of returning to my day-to-day activities, for it was indeed time to go home, but because of the friendship and gratitude that had been nurtured in the previous six weeks. I would miss them in the days ahead.

The day before my departure, Br. Barnabas had paid me what he considered to be the highest monastic compliment: "We hardly knew you were here." And just the day before that, Br. Edward, with whom I had worked many hours, said to me, "If things had been different, you would have made a terrific choir monk."

But things had been different. And as I told several of the brothers whenever the topic arose, "If God is calling me to the contemplative life, he's gonna have to hit me much harder over the head, because I'm sure not getting the message."

On my trip home, I called to mind the flow of the preceding six weeks: the awkwardness of the first week, as I tried to figure out the lay of the land and the expectations of me as a retreatant; the adjustment of the second week, as I managed to move into the pattern and rhythm of monastic life; the reality-check of the third week, as I became aware of the warts and challenges of community living; and the resignation of the fourth week, as I realized that, whatever was supposed "to happen" wasn't going to happen, so I should just let go and enjoy the rest of my time away.

And that's when it all came together. Finally letting go and letting it happen. Allowing someone else to move me through time and space during those last two weeks. Remembering what it is like to have another take care of me and assure me that everything would be alright. Realizing that I didn't have to be in control, or even in the center, for that to happen. Learning to let go and to let God.

It was the most extraordinary six weeks of my life. And they hardly knew I was there.

Copyright © 2004 by Rev. Richard J. Bozzelli
All rights reserved.