

Refashioning the Likeness, Playing with the Differences

Monastic Interreligious Dialogue at the Abbey of Gethsemani

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ALMOST TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS after Thomas Merton's accidental death in Bangkok while speaking at a meeting of Catholic monastics¹ in Asia, the Trappist monastery of Gethsemani (Merton's home abbey in Kentucky U.S.A.), hosted a week-long conference of Buddhist and Christian monastics. The Gethsemani Encounter, as it was called, brought together over 100 participants from Benedictine, Cistercian and Camaldolese monasteries as well as from Tibetan, Zen and Theravada Buddhist centers in Asia, Europe and North America. Following the World Congress of Religions in Chicago in 1993, the Dalai Lama expressed a desire to participate in an interreligious meeting where he could be a monk among monks. The board of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue responded by organizing this meeting, with the community of Gethsemani graciously agreeing to host the encounter.² I attended the meeting as a "monastic representative," that is, as an invited observer. Two Japanese Zen Buddhist monks were present as participants: Nishimura Eshin from Kofukuzen-ji (Shiga) and Okumura Shahaku, who directs the Zen Meditation Center in Minneapolis (Minnesota U.S.A.).

The Gethsemani Encounter opened on Monday evening, July 22, 1996, and continued until Saturday noon, July 27. From Tuesday through Friday, the daily program began at 6:15 A.M. with a Buddhist or Christian ritual, followed by breakfast at 7

A.M. Those who wished to start their day a bit earlier (and there were some!) could join the monks for the Vigil Office of Psalms and Readings that began at 3 A.M. There was also an optional half hour of Zen meditation before the 6:15 ritual. The morning session began at 8:00 and consisted of two oral presentations, with time for questions and discussion. Another Buddhist or Christian ritual was celebrated at 11:00, followed by lunch at noon. The time from 1:00 to 2:30 was designated as a time for rest and for private, informal conversation between Christian and Buddhist participants. For the invited observers, who were not permitted to participate in the formal discussions that followed each of the papers, a debriefing session was scheduled to discuss their reactions to the presentations. There were two more papers during the afternoon session, which lasted from 2:30 to 5:30, and then the group joined the monks of Gethsemani in the abbey church for Vespers. Dinner was at 6:00, followed by another oral presentation at 6:45. The day ended with a closing ritual at 8:30. All in all it was, shall we say, a rather full schedule.

In many ways the Gethsemani Encounter was a fitting sequel to Thomas Merton's interest in interreligious dialogue and to his conviction that Christianity had much to gain from an open and receptive dialogue with non-Christian religions. One of the most poignant moments of the week was a

spontaneous walking meditation to Merton's grave, led by the Cambodian monk and Nobel Peace Prize nominee, Maha Ghosananda. The Dalai Lama recalled that his meeting with Merton in 1968 had a profound impact on his own views of Christianity, and that our coming together for this dialogue was the fulfillment of one of Merton's deepest wishes. Another participant recalled that in Calcutta, Merton had said we had come to a point where one could be faithful to the Christian tradition and still learn deeply from Hindu or Buddhist teaching. Some of us, Merton added, need to do this to remain faithful to our monastic calling. One of the Trappist monks present recounted that he had once asked Merton if he would have been able to write what he did about the Christian faith if it had not been for his exposure to Buddhism, which had been mainly through books. Merton considered his question very seriously, and then acknowledged that his study of Buddhism had indeed helped him come to a deeper understanding of his own Christian faith.³

A MARTYR'S WITNESS TO INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

It could be said, however, that another deceased Cistercian monk had as much of an impact on this meeting as Thomas Merton. Father Christian de Chergé, was prior of the Trappist monastery of Notre-Dame de l'Atlas in Tibhirine, Algeria.⁴ After having been held captive for two months, he and six of his confreres were executed by the Groupe Islamiste Armé (GIA) on May 21, 1996. On the first full day of the Gethsemani Encounter a celebration of the Eucharist was held for all victims of religious persecution. At that Eucharist the homilist, Father Armand Veilleux, procurator general of the Cistercian Trappist Order, described the events surrounding the abduction of the monks of Atlas on the night of March 26 and their execution two months later. Eyewitnesses in

Tibhirine had seen them being taken from the monastery by members of the GIA and led single-file through the darkened streets of the town into the surrounding hills. The monks had entered the monastery to follow Christ, said Father Armand, but they were no less his followers when they were led out the door of their monastery on a journey from which they would never return.

On Christmas Eve 1993, the monks had been warned by Emir Sayah Attiya, the leader of the GIA, that if they did not provide medical aid, economic support and logistical help, their lives would be in jeopardy. A few days after receiving this ultimatum Father Christian wrote to Sayah Attiya:

Brother, allow me to address you as man to man, believer to believer.... In the present conflict in which our country is living, it seems to us impossible to take sides. The fact that we are foreigners forbids it. Our state as monks binds us to the choice of God for us, which is prayer and the simple life, manual work, hospitality and sharing with everyone, especially with the poor. These reasons for our life are a free choice for each one of us. They bind us until death.... May the ONLY ONE of all life lead us! AMEN! (Chergé, 6).

A year later the community again reviewed its decision to remain in Tibhirine. Describing the discernment process they went through, Father Armand told us that all but two of the community felt the time had come for them to leave. However, they decided to spend twenty-four hours in prayer before taking a secret ballot. When they voted, the decision to remain was unanimous.

As it was becoming clear just how perilous it would be to remain in Algeria, Father Christian wrote his final testament and sent it to his family in France, directing them to open it only if his life should be taken. His words furnished me and other participants at the Gethsemani Encounter with a cre-

ative way of viewing interreligious dialogue and why we engage in it.

Father Christian's testament is, in its entirety, a profound and moving statement of his love for the people of Algeria, his admiration for the religion of Islam and his commitment to Christ and the Christian call to forgiveness. Near the end of the document, Father Christian speaks of life after death. It is here that his words take on particular significance with regard to interreligious dialogue:

This is what I shall be able to do, if God wills,
immerse my gaze in that of the Father to contemplate with him His children of Islam
as he sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ,
fruit of His Passion, filled with the Gift of his Spirit,
whose secret joy will always be to establish communion
and to refashion the likeness, playing with the differences.⁵

The secret joy of the Holy Spirit of God is the establishment of communion within the created universe. In so doing, the Spirit of God is subtly but steadfastly at work, bringing into being new ways of imaging the perfect communion that exists within the Godhead itself. In Christian theology, this divine oneness does not entail the dissolution of differences into a bland uniformity. Rather God's unity is constituted by the—dare we say it?—playful communion of three persons, each of whom is different from, but in no way inferior to, the other two. In this light interreligious dialogue might well be seen as a way of self-purification through the clarification (not elimination) of differences, so that cleansed of all that is not of God, and refashioned in the divine likeness, all may participate as full partners in the circle dance of God—the root meaning of *perichoresis* (“circumincession”) in the

Trinitarian terminology of the Greek Fathers.

During their week together at Gethsemani, Buddhist and Christian monastics came to a deeper understanding of their differences, along with a broader awareness of the gold and the dross in their own religious and monastic traditions. Thanks to the example and teaching of Father Christian, they learned that acknowledging differences does not require labeling them as right and wrong, true and false, good and bad. The next step rather can be a recognition and grateful acceptance of the manifold diversity of religious beliefs and practices that the Holy Spirit uses in order to refashion the divine likeness within us.

The Gethsemani Encounter was primarily a monastic rather than a theological interreligious dialogue. Although theologians were present as participants and resource persons, their reason for meeting was not to discuss doctrine but to describe their own *praxis* and to learn about other expressions of the monastic life. Theological issues did arise, of course, because *praxis* and *theoria* go hand in hand. But even these more abstract issues were discussed in terms of the impact they had on individuals and society. Among the various topics that were addressed during the week, however, the two that commanded the most attention were meditation and suffering.

MEDITATION METHODS IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM

For those non-Buddhist participants whose familiarity with Buddhist meditation practice is limited to a rudimentary understanding of Zen traditions, it must have come as something of a shock to be exposed to the complex theories and methods of meditation that are such a prominent feature of Tibetan and Theravada Buddhism. During the course of the conference the Dalai Lama gave four formal presentations, two of

which dealt explicitly with the practice of meditation: "The Tibetan Buddhist Approaches to Meditation" and "Meditation Stages and Experiences on the Tibetan Buddhist Path." Although the Dalai Lama speaks fluent English, he chose to give these talks in Tibetan because of the technical terminology involved. An able assistant translated his talks into English and these will appear in the published proceedings of the Gethsemani Encounter.⁶ The following excerpts from the Dalai Lama's talks will serve to demonstrate how abstruse some Buddhist teaching on meditation can seem to one who is not an initiate.

There are five factors that oppose the development of Calm Abiding and eight antidotes to those five factors. The opposing factors are Laziness, Forgetting the Object of Meditation, Laxity and Excitement, Non-application of the Antidotes, and Over-application of the Antidotes.

Among the eight antidotes to these faults are four that are directed at Laziness: Faith, Aspiration, Exertion, and Pliancy. The advantages of Pliancy are that your body will become light and pliant, enabling you to set your mind on whatever virtue you want. Thus, you can reflect on the good qualities of Pliancy that will be achieved through meditation in order to overcome Laziness....

Among the various types of exposition of objects of meditation, I want to speak of Pervasive Objects of Meditation. One is called Image with Analysis, the other, Image without Analysis. The former is used for developing Special Insight; the latter for Calm Abiding.

Calm Abiding and Special Insight are common to both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. The difference between them is determined by the way one engages the object. For instance, there is Calm Abiding that even observes emptiness and Special Insight that observes the variety of phenomena. For a Christian

there could be both stabilizing and analytical meditation with regard to developing faith in God; and both with regard to developing love for fellow brothers and sisters.

What are these objects that appear to the mind? I am not speaking about objects that appear to the sense consciousness. Rather, there is an appearance to the conceptual mind of objects that have been seen with the senses. These meditations are achieved with respect to these internal images. That is why they are called non-analytical and analytical images....

In regard to the way of applying the antidotes, the process is as follows: first, setting the mind, then continuous setting, then resetting, and then close setting, then disciplining, then pacifying, then thorough pacifying, then making one-pointed, and finally setting in. When one reaches the ninth level, one has a level of concentration that is included in the desire realm; this is not yet the form or the formless realm....⁷

The Dalai Lama put flesh and blood on his exposition of meditation theory in the discussion period that followed. One of the participants asked him to describe his own practice of meditation. He laughed, saying that "he was a very poor practitioner." On a more serious note, however, he said that he rises at 3:30 A.M., does some chanting, and then begins to meditate. After each analytic meditation, he does some single-pointed meditation. The main object of his meditation is interdependence. His object is compassion. He engages in prayer and meditation until 8:30 A.M., with some breaks. After that, if it is not a work day, he reads and listens to the BBC. Lunch follows at noon, office work in the afternoon, tea at 6:00, and bed around 8:30 P.M. The latter, he said with a chuckle, was "his most favorite meditation."

When asked to provide a visualization technique that would make meditating on

compassion easier, he replied that we should take as our object sentient beings and wish that they become free of suffering, that is, visualize a being whose level of suffering is so high that we cannot conceive of bearing it; we then move our meditation to other persons; and finally think about our enemies, one by one, taking them to mind and seeing that they are similar to ourselves in that they too do not want to suffer. Such compassion is unbiased, not limited to people who are close to us, because genuine compassion is without regard to the attitude of the other toward us.

PARALLELS WITH SOME CHRISTIAN APPROACHES TO MEDIATION

As I listened to the presentations of the Dalai Lama and subsequent discussions, I was suddenly struck by the similarities in approach between this highly developed Tibetan analysis of the techniques and theory of meditation and the ratiocinations of numerous, mainly French, Catholic authors whose treatises on the spiritual life, written during the first half of this century, were standard fare in Catholic novitiates and seminaries up until the Second Vatican Council.⁸ Their works provided a sophisticated and complex methodology for the practice of mental prayer by an elite corps of Catholics, mainly professed men and women religious, who, the authors felt, were called by God to higher levels of the spiritual life than was possible for ordinary Catholics. True to the dictum of the Scholastic philosophers, who held that *philosophare est distinguere*, these books abounded in distinctions and definitions. The very first sentence of Augustin Poulain's *The Graces of Prayer*, for example, reads, "Before reviewing the various degrees of mental prayer, they must be divided into two main categories—the prayer termed ordinary, and mystic or extraordinary prayer" (Poulain, 1). A bit later he writes,

It has been proposed to give the name *deific* (*indéiques*) to those graces by means of which we penetrate into the Divinity. The others, which have for their end something that is outside of God, would be termed *ex-deific* (*exdéiques*). Nothing so contributes to clearness of thought as the practice of bestowing very *short* and *sharply contrasting* names upon things which we are inclined to confuse (53).

There follow, *inter alia*, listings and definitions of the four states or degrees of mystic union, the various kinds of preconceived ideas that suffice to veil the knowledge of God's presence, the twelve characteristics of the mystic union, and even God's five principal motives for sending us numerous crosses.

In one debriefing session for observers I mentioned that I was surprised to discover how complex the practice and theory of meditation had become in some Buddhist traditions, and that I was reminded of the Scholastic manuals on mysticism that I had studied as a novice and seminarian. Listening to the Dalai Lama outline for us some of the methods of meditation in the Tibetan tradition made me all the more grateful, I added, that contemporary Catholic authors on prayer and meditation were no longer so concerned to categorize and compartmentalize the life of the spirit.

This statement provoked an immediate and passionate response from one observer who said that she had been raised a Catholic, and it was precisely the sophistication and intricacy of their meditation practices that led her to join the Tibetan Buddhists! Her response helped me to recognize how hastily I had moved to judgment about what was good and what was bad, what was right and what was wrong without first recognizing and appreciating the wide variety of methods that exist in the different religious traditions, and within my own tradition as well.

The words of one of the participants during a subsequent discussion period were especially helpful to me, "Tibetan Buddhism," she said, "can appear as an incredibly intricate maze to Westerners, many of whom mistake the map for the journey. The description of the methods and stages of meditation provides an important training tool for refining the mind, but the actual experience of the practitioner is incredibly direct. When one follows up on the experience by studying and learning the details, there is an elegance to the system and a logic that is clear and simple. The analytic breakdown is merely the calisthenics of the spiritual path."

RESPONDING TO SUFFERING

Even though none of the papers presented at the Gethsemani Encounter was on the topic of suffering per se, it was in fact one of the major issues dealt with during the course of the week. This is not surprising, given the significance of suffering in both Buddhism and Christianity. What may have been peculiar to this gathering, however, was the concrete way in which the issue was addressed.

On the first morning of the dialogue, an American Jewish Zen Buddhist abbot remarked that everywhere he looked at Gethsemani, he saw crucifixes which made him very sad—in a way that the cross alone did not. He wondered how Christians felt about the crucifix, and how it affected the way they prayed.

One of the Trappist participants, noting that the question of the cross is one that always comes up in Christian/Buddhist dialogues, replied that the crucifix speaks eloquently of uselessness and is thus very close to the Zen emphasis on the uselessness of Zazen. He added that he once complained to his Zen master that his legs were aching from sitting in the full lotus position

to which his master retorted, "Did Jesus come down from the cross? More Zazen!"

Other Christian participants responded by saying that the crucifix reveals a Savior who made himself one with all human suffering. Others admitted that the crucifix had also become a symbol of human sinfulness, provoking self-condemnation rather than compassion, and turning God into an angry tyrant who, to atone for the crime of *lèse-majesté*, hands his Son over to a excruciating death.

The question of suffering and our response to it was again addressed when Father Armand, in his conference on "The Importance of the Monastic Community and the Church in the Contemplative Life" described what contemplative witness meant for the Trappist community of Notre Dame de l'Atlas. "People had begged them to leave their monastery, arguing that they could pray just as well in another, safer place. But since the monks had become deeply united with one another and closely connected to religious Muslims in the local community, this reasoning made no sense to them. Their monastic life in that particular place had enabled them to come to know a God, to contemplate a God, who had found a face in their Muslim brothers and sisters." Father Armand underlined the beauty and profundity of the title of Father Christian's testament: "When an A-DIEU is envisaged," as it incorporates the double meaning in French of both *adieu* (farewell; to God) and *envisagé* (anticipated; given a face). Thus, Father Christian commends to God *and* sees the face of God in the person of his anticipated killer.

A female Buddhist participant responded that the themes of martyrdom, sacrifice and transformation loomed so large in the Christian way of dealing with suffering, and were very difficult for her to comprehend. She could understand the personal transformation that the Cistercians in Algeria went through. "But how did their staying

show compassion for the Muslims who killed them? Were the aggressors benefited by their suffering and dying?" According to the Buddhist point of view, the Muslim killers would now be subjected to negative karma for their crime. She also voiced her inability to understand the meaning of eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ. "I want to know how you experience personal transformation and compassion for others through the Eucharist. How are they joined together in this act?"

Father Armand explained that while many early Christians seem to have desired martyrdom, the monks in Algeria did not. In fact, shortly before their abduction Father Christian had spoken to a group of lay people and said that to desire martyrdom would be wrong, because it would mean wishing that a "terrorist brother" would sin against God's commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." His daily prayer during these last months was, "Lord, disarm me; disarm them." Father Armand continued,

Martyrdom is a witness, a possible consequence of a love that remains faithful to the end. Jesus would not abandon his Gospel of God's love for the outcast and the sinner, and for that reason he was put to death. When we receive his body and blood in the sacrament of the Eucharist, we celebrate this love of God for us, shown in the life-giving death of Jesus.

Abbot Bernardo Olivera, the Superior General of the Trappists, described the two months of anguish he went through as he prayed incessantly for the safety of the monks of Tibhirine, whom he knew personally. When he heard the news that they had all been killed, his first thought was, "I forgive those who took the lives of my brothers." Abbot Bernardo went on to say,

I do not think the people who killed my brothers are going to hell. The Christian God takes our prayers very seriously. Christian and I asked God to pardon

them. And so I am sure I am going to meet them at the right hand of the Lord. Forgiveness is the only answer to your question.

A theological adviser to the gathering reflected on the relation between the sacred and violence in the Jewish/Christian tradition. From the beginning, he said, societies were founded on violence. Early Israel was immersed in this culture of violence and often described its relationship to God by declaring that the LORD was on its side in the struggle to survive in the volatile and violent world of the ancient Near East. The problem, however, is that when one perceives God as taking sides in a violent struggle, violence becomes sacralized and God is seen as a powerful ruler who ruthlessly annihilates all opposition. With the passage of time the prophets of Israel came to realize that the LORD is a God who stands not on the side of the powerful and the violent, but on the side of the weak and persecuted. The supreme expression of this prophetic understanding is Isaiah's figure of the Suffering Servant. When Jesus comes into the world, he comes as a Suffering Servant, making the grace of God available to all, regardless of the boundaries that were set up to cut certain people off from God's grace—the prostitutes and the tax collectors, for example. He even goes one step further, declaring to the temple authorities, "These people are going to be in the Reign of God before you." The message of the Reign of God as preached by Jesus is that God's love is all-inclusive. Because Jesus remained faithful to this message, he was crucified as a blasphemer and rabble rouser. Jesus saves us by being the concrete incarnation of God's will to save everyone, even the sinner.

SUFFERING AND ANGER

These clarifications of the Christian approach to suffering did not clear up all the problems, however. Coincidentally, the week we were

at Gethsemani a number of the "Cursing Psalms" were being used by the monks in their daily offices, including the hour of Vespers, which we chanted with them.⁹ Having sung together in a Christian house of prayer verses such as,

O God, break the teeth in their mouths;
tear out the fangs of the young lions, O
Lord!
Let them vanish like water that runs
away;
like grass let them be trodden down and
wither....
The righteous will rejoice when they see
vengeance done;
they will bathe their feet in the blood of
the wicked.
People will say, surely there is a reward
for the righteous,
surely there is a God who judges on earth
(vv. 6-7, 10-11, NRSV),

it was no surprise that Buddhists wondered if Christianity, which appeared to regard anger and even violence as appropriate responses to evil and the suffering it causes, was not partly responsible for nourishing an attitude of intolerance in the world, rather than one of compassion.

One Buddhist explained that anger is the result of focusing on the evil activity of another person. "If we focus on what is behind the action, we can more easily respond with compassion," he said. The Buddha taught that the near enemy of compassion is sorrow, as sorrow contains aversion, a feeling of ill will towards a situation or a person. Compassion, however, is free of the feeling of aversion towards injustice.

The Venerable Samu Sunim, a Korean Buddhist, spoke of the anger of Koreans in his paper "The Relation of Zen Awakening to Social Transformation."

Koreans have been victims of violence, discrimination, and social injustice. And so it is understandable that they are angry. They get very emotional, and their

anger does not come out very well. The attitude of the Japanese has largely been one of unrepentance: "What's wrong? What's the problem? That's the sort of thing that happens all the time." They are like men who respond to the anger of women by asking, "Why are you getting so emotional?"

He went on to say that the most effective way he has found to deal with his own anger is to recognize that the people who hurt him acted out of ignorance. What else can he do but forgive them?

Although the Christian participants agreed that too often an appeal to "righteous anger" is used to justify intolerance and even violence, some felt that the Buddhist emphasis on compassion and forgiveness as a response to individual and collective suffering could lead to an attitude of passivity. Work for social transformation had to be a part of the response both for monastics and non-monastics, though a monastic way of contributing to social reform would be different from that of the non-monastic. A Trappist monk recalled Thomas Merton's struggle over accepting the invitation to join people in the peace movement. In the end, Merton always refused. His place to work for peace would remain within the monastery.

Some Buddhist participants concurred that compassion must lead to action on behalf of change, and that this was, in fact, the way of the Buddha. The Venerable Samu Sunim said that although the West may be more familiar with smiling bodhisattvas, there are also sad bodhisattvas. The history of Tibet shows us that imperialism is not something confined to the West; it is also present in the East. Both Christians and Buddhists have actively collaborated with imperialism—or remained silent. "The difference between the East and the West," he said, "is that Western Christians were willing to reflect on their past wrongdoing and make amends. Buddhists, on the whole, were not so disposed." He went on

to indict Korean Buddhists for becoming a propaganda tool of the government, Myanmar Buddhists for remaining silent in the face of the suppression of democracy, and Thai Buddhists for their failure to confront serious ethical issues such as child prostitution. "Many of us Buddhists," he concluded, "are not content with the stance of Buddhism in the world today." He then asked the Dalai Lama to respond to his observations to which the Dalai Lama replied,

As in all religious traditions, we have to distinguish between the individuals and the institution. Buddhist monks who remain indifferent to the world around them are not genuine Buddhists. They should be more conscious about what is happening in the world. Individuals need to raise their voice, and then the whole community. When that happens corrections can be made.

The Venerable Maha Ghosananda, an advocate for peace and a leader in the campaign to ban land mines, was among the participants at the Gethsemani Encounter. He "raised his voice" and insisted in his paper, "The Arahant Ideal and its Relation to Socially Engaged Buddhism," that reconciliation does not mean surrendering one's rights but rather using love in all negotiations. With Gandhi he held that the essence of nonviolent action is that it seeks to put an end to antagonism, not the antagonist. He called on his fellow Buddhists to find the courage to leave their temples and enter the temples of human experience—temples that are filled with suffering. "We need to remember," he said, "that our temple is with us always. We are our temple."

In the discussion period that followed, one participant wondered if monks who marched for peace were not in fact manifesting anger and a desire for revenge. "Would it not be better," he asked, "if they limited themselves to teaching?" "We make peace in every action, in every step," the Venerable Ghosananda

replied. Another asked, "What do you tell a young person who wants to walk with you but is afraid of dying?" This time his answer was a single word: "Meditation."

GIVING BIRTH TO THE COSMIC CHRIST

The final morning of the Gethsemani Encounter was an open forum in which all participants and observers were invited to share their experience of the dialogue. From that three-hour session, I especially remember three comments:

A Catholic laywoman from Switzerland: "When I was a young girl, I had a class on the Trinity. After three weeks the priest who was teaching the course said to me, 'Mademoiselle, you now know everything there is to know about God.' I started to cry because I thought, 'If I already know everything, what will I do for the rest of my life?'"

An American Benedictine abbot: "Christian churches have been arrogant in thinking they could tell God where to speak. God will not be told where to speak. And so we need to listen in order to come to know the mystery more deeply."

An American Benedictine sister: "This room has become a womb giving birth to the Cosmic Christ."

The Christian participants at the Gethsemani Encounter came away with a fuller understanding of Buddhism and of their own Christian faith and practice as well. True dialogue always leads to personal growth and transformation, to a deeper comprehension of the tradition in which one stands. We will never know all there is to know about God. That is the beauty of the continuing quest for God that St. Benedict proffers as the primary work of the monastic. As we attend to others engaged in the quest to know the source and goal of human life, but whose expression differs from ours, our own faith is purified, deepened and transformed, and we are refashioned into the divine image. Through dialogue such as

this the Cosmic Christ, the full manifestation of the divine mystery for all peoples is born.

POSTSCRIPT

As I was putting the final touches on this article, I received a copy of the *lineamenta* for the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Asia.¹⁰ This preparatory document affirms the various religions and philosophies on the Asian continent as signs of the saving presence of the Spirit of God among the peoples of Asia (18). It cites the teaching of the Fathers of the Church who spoke of the Spirit "preceding, accompanying and following the mission of Christ in history" (19). The Spirit's task "is to make all peoples into the image of Jesus Christ in his obedience to the Father's will and thus recreate the image of God in persons so that they can find the fullness of communion with God" (20). What else did Father Christian do but transpose this theological position into poetry and prayer?

As might be expected, the document is well-disposed toward interreligious dialogue. "In dialogue the church receives the religious and cultural riches of the nations and in turn gives them the saving riches of Jesus Christ" (33). Dialogue, the document says, is essential to the evangelizing activity of the Church, but it does not exhaust the whole reality of evangelization. While the Church recognizes an especially powerful and pervasive manifestation of the saving activity of the Holy Spirit in the religions and philosophies of Asia, it also believes that

The presence of the Spirit in creation and human history was not an end in itself, isolated from the mission of Jesus Christ. The salvific presence of the Spirit in humanity was to lead all peoples into the full participation of the life of God in Jesus Christ, his Son (20).

For this reason, the document insists, the proclamation of Jesus Christ remains an

essential component of the Church's mission.

By their willingness to speak in personal and practical terms about their own relationship to Jesus Christ, the Christian participants in the Gethsemani dialogue were engaging in a type of proclamation. Theirs was not a proclamation of those convinced that they alone possess the whole truth. It was rather a descriptive narrative of their own search: what they were looking for, how they went about looking for it, and what they had, at least in part, found.

Toward the end of the meeting one of the Buddhist participants declared, "Perhaps our differences are that we really don't understand one another yet. For example, yesterday, after Fr. Armand's presentation on the life and death of the Trappists in Algeria and the meaning of their martyrdom, I heard Christians come up and speak about their compassionate love for Jesus. I really don't understand that, though I was very moved by their witness. If I did understand the love that Christians have for Jesus, I might myself be one."

NOTES

¹ I am using the word "monastic" as a noun to include both women (nuns, sisters) and men (monks). This usage has been criticized by some as a neologism. However, the Oxford English Dictionary (compact edition, 1971) provides evidence that the word was used as a noun as early as 1632 ("Your order...by all the other Monastiks is hated" [sic!]). It is probably true, however, that only in recent times has "monastic" been used as an inclusive term.

² Monastic Interreligious Dialogue is the American branch of *Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique*, an organization founded by the Benedictines and Cistercians in 1978 in response to Pope Paul VI, who had called on Christian monastics to be in the vanguard of the dialogue between Christianity and the great religions of the East.

³ Writing on Merton's spiritual teaching, one scholar says, "Because Zen Buddhist writers insisted most strongly on a radical self-emptying, Merton

had more interest in them than other writers on Asian religions. Zen Buddhists do not speak of a personal God, yet Merton found them very germane and close to our own *approaches* to inner truth in Christ. It is their approaches that resemble the Christian approaches; they too insist on the radical denial of self. But in opposition to the Buddhists Merton continued to insist on the personal nature of God" (King, 565).

⁴ The terms "Cistercian" and "Trappist" are often used interchangeably. The Cistercians, a reformed branch of the Benedictines, were founded in 1098 by Robert of Molesme at the Abbey of Cîteaux (whence the name "Cistercian"). The Trappists, in turn, are a reformed branch of the Cistercians. Their official title is "Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance—OCSSO.). The term "Trappist" comes from the Abbey of La Trappe where the reform originated in the seventeenth century.

⁵ Father Christian's testament was written on December 1, 1993, and renewed on January 1, 1994, just a few days after the GIA came to the monastery with its demands for assistance. The testament was originally published, I believe, in the French Catholic newspaper, *La Croix*. An English translation was printed in various publications. I am quoting from the newsletter of the Alliance for International Monasticism.

⁶ According to Brother Patrick Hart, OCSSO, a monk of Gethsemani and general editor of Thomas Merton's journals, "Continuum Books is planning two volumes from the Gethsemani encounter, the one containing the papers that were presented and the other reporting the ensuing dialogues. The first volume should be available by fall." (Letter to the Editor, *Commonweal*, February 28, 1997, p. 4.)

⁷ A Buddhist monk from the Theravada tradition, the Venerable Dr. M. Vajiragnana, spoke in a similar vein when he described the states of meditation in the Theravada Path of Purity, insisting that these states were sequential and had to be followed in order. I quote from my notes:

First, Purification of Virtue. We begin with the five basic moral laws and go on from there. A moral foundation is laid for the development of the Five Spiritual Faculties.

Second, Purification of the Mind. Development of Tranquillity Meditation; removing the five hindrances. A second method, Insight Meditation, leads to the complete eradication of the hindrances, which, in turn leads to spiritual enlightenment.

Third, Purification of View. The meditator begins to come to a clear understanding of reality, knowing the difference between the body and the mind.

Fourth, Purification of Overcoming Doubt. Understanding cause and effect.

Fifth, Purification of Knowledge and Vision of What Is the Path and Not-Path. Observing the three characteristics of existence: impermanence, dissatisfaction, insubstantiality.

Sixth, Purification of Knowledge and Vision of Path Progress. The meditator is brought face to face with the insubstantiality of life. (Now the mood changes to a negative mode: experiences of the terror, danger and horror of living in such an evanescent world. The meditator is led to a great desire to escape. Following upon this desire for deliverance comes the understanding that liberation does not come with running away from suffering.)

Seventh, Purification of Knowledge and Vision.

⁸ I am thinking of authors such as Augustin Poulain, SJ (*Des grâces d'oraison*, 1901), Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, OP (*Perfection chrétienne et contemplation*, 1923), and Adolfe Tanqueray (*Précis de théologie ascétique et mystique*, 1923).

⁹ These Psalms are not included in the 1970 revision of *The Liturgy of the Hours* of the Roman Rite, but some religious communities have chosen to continue to pray the entire Psalter, and so they include them in their public prayer. The rationale for excluding these Psalms, as well as selected verses from other Psalms, is given in the "General Instruction of the Liturgy of Hours":

Three psalms (58, 83, and 109) are omitted from the psalter cycle as heavily imprecatory in character. In the same way some verses are omitted from certain psalms, as noted at the head of each. These texts are omitted because of the difficulty they can cause due to their psychology, even though the psalms of imprecation are used as prayer in the New Testament, for example, Revelation 6:10, and their purpose is in no sense to encourage cursing (#131).

¹⁰ The *lineamenta* is a preparatory document for a special meeting of Asian bishops that is expected to take place before the year 2000. The Asian synod is one of the continental synods Pope John Paul II called for in his apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*.

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