

“By patient endurance you will win life for yourselves” (Luke 21:19):

Patience as a Central Christian Virtue
(for Lenten Day of Recollection, March 8, 2014)

When many of us were growing up, one of the most dynamic cities in the country was Detroit, the center of the American automobile industry, the city which gave us the saying, "As goes General Motors, so goes the nation." And yet in July of last year, Detroit became the most populous city in the country ever to file for bankruptcy. There is no single reason for its decline, for both management and the unions were at fault. One astute observer of the situation, Stephan Richter, the editor-in-chief of a daily online magazine about the global economy, has pointed out that both sides shared a "shortsighted focus on extracting the maximum amount of compensation from companies, even in the face of the underlying businesses' failing strength." The necessary skills base was allowed to fall behind that of workers in other parts of the world, and reversing this, Richter writes, "is not a short-term project. It [will require] decades of concerted effort on many fronts ... including collaboration among companies, government, trade associations, colleges and universities." He went on to say that "this kind of common purpose, however, is not something that American society, with its ethos of individualism and personal independence, seems capable of undertaking. Doing the right thing for the long haul is typically put off for a later time, if it ever happens. That such a 'strategy' is self-defeating ought to be obvious. Sadly, it is not—not in an instant gratification world."¹

That last phrase, "an instant gratification world," calls to mind what M. Scott Peck wrote near the beginning of his very influential book *The Road Less Traveled*, namely, that one of the greatest signs of maturity is the capacity to practice delayed gratification, that is, patiently to put off what might be most pleasant and attend instead to what is more important, even if more demanding. All of this has ramifications not just for the national economy but also for the conduct of our own life and work, which is what I want to focus on this morning. My main point is that it is generally misguided to yearn for or expect quick results, whether from ourselves or

others, and that in the long run, patiently doing what Richter calls "the right thing for the long haul" is more productive.

Let me begin these reflections by referring to a key statement of Jesus and then to a comment on that statement by an ancient author from my own monastic tradition, for I am convinced that even persons who do not live in monasteries can find in this tradition much wisdom that is applicable to anyone who wants to live a full and fulfilling life. I will then refer to some more recent Christian authors who wrote some important things about patience, including Pope Francis, and will then turn to a very different religious tradition, Buddhism, to hear some of the wise teaching available there. Finally, I'll look at the value of patient waiting even apart from a spiritual or religious context, for patience is just as important in such activities as viewing a work of art or dealing with persons whom we are trying to help but whose progress may be slower than we would like.

As many of you know, there are passages in the Gospels that give Jesus' advice to his followers on how to deal with persecution. For example, in the twenty-first chapter of Luke's Gospel, after saying that many of his followers will be handed over even by friends and relatives to stand trial before kings and governors and that some of them will be put to death, he urges that they nevertheless should not be dismayed, for, he says, "by patient endurance you will win life for yourselves" (Lk 21:19).

As you would expect, this teaching was commented upon numerous times in all the centuries that have followed. Back in the fifth century there was a man named Nilus who founded a monastery in what is modern-day Turkey. Commenting on that verse from Luke's Gospel in one of the more than thousand letters that he wrote in the course of his life, Nilus had this to say:

In time of trial it is of great profit to us patiently to endure for God's sake, for the Lord says: "By patient endurance you will win life for yourselves." He did not say by your fasting, or your solitude and silence, or your singing of psalms, although all of these are helpful in saving your soul. But he said: "By patient endurance ..."

[Similarly, Nilus went on to say,] the Apostle Paul writes: "With patient endurance we run the race of faith set before us" (Heb 12:1). For what has more power than [this] virtue? What more firmness or strength than patient endurance?... This is the queen of virtues, the foundation of virtue, a haven of tranquility.... It makes those who practice it stronger than steel.²

When Nilus referred there to a work by St. Paul he was, strictly speaking, incorrect, for that quotation about patiently running the race of faith is found in the Letter to the Hebrews, which is certainly not one of St. Paul's own letters. However, of the genuine Pauline letters we should note something important in that passage in praise of love that is so often used as one of the readings at wedding ceremonies. It is from the thirteenth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, and the first two verses of that well-known passage go like this: "Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, not pompous. It is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury" (1 Cor. 13:4-5). I consider it quite significant that of all the traits that the Apostle ascribes to love, the very first is patience. This means, among other things, that we cannot expect others to conform to our own expectations. For one thing, our expectations of how others should speak or act may be biased, but even if we correctly see in others traits that tend to make them unlikable or unlovable, we

must allow for the possibility that they will gradually change for the better, not least with our own encouragement. Just as importantly, we have to be patient with ourselves. If and when we find ourselves failing in the practice of love or any other virtue, that's not a time to get down on ourselves but rather a time to recognize that full and complete conversion is regularly the work of years. This is not a recommendation of complacency or laziness, but a simple recognition of a point made by the nineteenth-century British writer Frederick Faber, who was a contemporary and acquaintance of Blessed John Henry Newman, even though they did not always see things eye-to-eye. In one of his finest passages of spiritual advice, Faber wrote:

God is slow and we are precipitate. It is because we are for but a time, and He has been from eternity. Thus grace for the most part acts slowly, and mortification is as long as leveling a mountain, and prayer as the growth of an old oak. God works by little and little, and sweetly and strongly He compasses his ends, but with a slowness which tries our faith because it is so great a mystery.³

The same kind of teaching appeared in the work of William Bernard Ullathorne, another of Faber's contemporaries and a man who, like me, was a Benedictine monk. We recently had as table reading here at the abbey a fascinating memoir about the first half of his life, giving the account of his ascent from being a cabin boy on sailing ships to being named archbishop of Birmingham, England. In addition to that work, Ullathorne also wrote two very thoughtful books about basic Christian virtues. One was on what you might expect, for, being a Benedictine, he knew very well the centrality of humility in the Rule of St. Benedict. His book about humility is titled *The Groundwork of the Christian Virtues*. The other was titled *Christian*

Patience: The Strength and Discipline of the Soul. Early on in that book, Ullathorne makes the key point that "every new restraint we put upon the hurry and impetuosity of our excitable nature is a reduction to order, a weakness removed, a further subjection of nature to grace, a step in the way of peace, that makes us less unlike to God."⁴ Some pages later he insists that the primary rule for acquiring patience is to realize that "the first manifestation of *all* temptation is impatience."⁵

That claim may sound surprising, and I expect that it is one that very few people have ever thought about, but there is much to be said in support of it. After all, when we are tempted to do something wrong, even though we have at least a vague sense that we ought not proceed but that we should ponder more carefully what acting on the temptation really entails and how much we will eventually regret doing it, if we avoid such reflection and instead follow the inclination at once, that really is a manifestation of impatience.

There is also a Benedictine monk of our own day who has written some fine reflections about the importance of patience. He is Brother Victor D'Avila-Latourrette, of Our Lady of the Resurrection Monastery in Millbrook, New York. Some weeks ago we had a reading from him at Evening Prayer that had the genuine flavor of perennial monastic wisdom, not least because Br. Victor referred at one point to the early monks and nuns of the Egyptian desert. Here is part of what he had to say:

So much in the spiritual life consists in having the patience to wait for whatever designs God has for our individual lives. God wishes to be included in our personal lives, to be an integral part of them. But to grow into awareness of how close God really is to each of us demands time, patience, and perseverance. While God is never in a rush to act, we,

on the contrary, are impatient and restless. We wish to see things accomplished immediately, including our own spiritual growth.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers teach us that to begin to grow in the spiritual life, we must first learn to slow down and wait, remembering that it is not so much our own activities that count, but the work that God is doing in us. True enough, waiting is not always an easy task. But waiting can become a time of spiritual grace, furthering the growth of God's life in us. While waiting patiently for the Lord, we allow his light to enter the darkness of our hearts, those deep recesses of our innermost being, transforming us more and more into his image and likeness.

To conclude this part of my talk, this survey of a few Christian authors who have spoken of the importance of patience, let me turn to our present Holy Father, Pope Francis, who in so many ways has initiated a new spirit and vibrancy in the Church but whose teaching is nevertheless firmly grounded in the best of our centuries-old tradition. One of his most important writings thus far was titled *Evangelii Gaudium*, "The Joy of the Gospel," promulgated toward the end of last year.⁶ Familiar as he is with contemporary life, Pope Francis wrote that "in the prevailing culture, priority is given to the outward, the immediate, the visible, the quick, the superficial and the provisional" (§62). Because of this mindset, he lamented that "it has become very difficult today to find trained parish catechists willing to persevere in their work for some years" (§81), while some priests and other ministers fall prey to a tense and burdensome fatigue because "they lack the patience to allow processes to mature; they want everything to fall from heaven.... They are unable to wait; they want to dominate the rhythm of life. Today's

obsession with immediate results makes it hard for pastoral workers to tolerate anything that smacks of disagreement, possible failure, criticism, the cross" (§82).

It is not only Christian authors like Nilus of Ancyra, Frederick Faber, Archbishop Ullathorne, Br. Victor, and Pope Francis who have taught the importance and value of patience, for this is a practical truth that belongs to what we might call "the wisdom of the ages" and so has been taught by spiritual masters in other traditions as well. Since those of us who are Catholics have been urged since Vatican II not only to tolerate but also to actually promote the positive values found in other religious traditions, I think it is worth hearing something about the value of patient waiting in the teaching of a quite remarkable Buddhist who died in Sri Lanka in 1994 at the very advanced age of 93. His name was Nyanaponika Thera, which means something like "the venerable one who is inclined toward wisdom." His best-known work was titled *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. In that book he says a lot about the value—indeed, the crucial importance—of what I am calling patient waiting. Here's a brief summary of his teaching:

What Nyanaponika means by "the heart" of Buddhist meditation is something quite specific—mindfulness—which he discusses under several aspects, of which the first, and the one most relevant here, is what he calls "bare attention," a matter of clearly recognizing what is going on in our mind at any given time. The immense practical value of this is that it really can help prevent us from pursuing rash courses of action. In his words, "Very often a single moment of mindfulness or wise reflection would have prevented a far-reaching sequence of misery or guilt. By *pausing* before action, in an habitual attitude of Bare Attention, one will be able to seize that decisive but brief moment when [the] mind has not yet settled upon a definite course of action or

a definite attitude, but is still open to receive skilful directions.... Bare Attention slows down, or even stops, the transition from thought to action, allowing more time for coming to a mature decision. Such slowing down is of vital importance as long as unprofitable, harmful or evil words and deeds possess an all too strong spontaneity of occurrence ... without giving to the 'inner brakes' of wisdom, self-control and common sense a chance to operate."⁷

In hearing these words, each of us may be led to reflect back on things we have once said or done but now regret, and on how the wrongful action could have been avoided if we had patiently taken the time to reflect more carefully on the long-term ramifications of what we were inclined to do, and if we had perhaps first, in all humility and honesty, sought the advice of some trusted friend or counselor.

If at times we have not acted thus but have rushed ahead impatiently, it would be helpful to recall something from the monastic rule that we follow here at St. Anselm's, the Rule of St. Benedict. As you may well know, this is a rather short document, dating from the middle of the sixth century but clearly having stood the test of time. In fact, it was Benedictine monks who preserved much of ancient literature, both Christian and pagan, in those dark centuries following the fall of the Roman empire, and today there are thousands of Benedictine monks and nuns who follow that Rule, not to mention even more laypersons who are known as Oblates and who seek to put into practice the spiritual teaching of St. Benedict in their own way of life. Preceding the 73 short chapters of the Rule is a beautiful prologue in which Benedict writes about the importance of acknowledging our various sins and failings and yet not becoming despondent over these, for he assures us that we can confidently trust in the Lord who, like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, patiently awaits our return. In one of the most striking parts of the prologue, Benedict writes: "The Lord waits for us daily to translate into action ... his holy

teachings. Therefore our life span has been lengthened by way of a truce, that we may amend our misdeeds. As the Apostle says: 'Do you not know that the patience of God [*patientia Dei*] is leading you to repent? And indeed the Lord assures us in his love: 'I do not wish the death of the sinner, but that he turn back to me and live'" (Prol. 35-38).

So far, I have been discussing patience mostly from what you might call a religious or spiritual perspective, but I hasten to add that patience is a virtue valuable in many different kinds of activity. One of the most remarkable articles I have read recently was in a magazine that in a sense comes to the abbey by mistake. We once had a man living with us for a while as he studied over at Catholic University. Because he had earlier done some studies at Harvard, he received the alumni magazine of that university, and the magazine still comes to the abbey even though the man has long since moved away and said that he no longer had any need for such mail to be forwarded to him. In the November - December issue last year, Jennifer Roberts, a professor of the history of art and architecture at Harvard, wrote a piece titled "The Power of Patience."⁸ Early on in that article she said she had given her students an assignment to go to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and spend three hours simply looking at a particular painting by John Singleton Copley, a work known as *Boy with a Squirrel*, and write down any observations, questions and speculations that arose from their observation. She said that the time span of three hours was deliberately chosen to seem excessive, but when she had done it herself before assigning it to others, she was amazed at how much she discovered. After about ten minutes she discovered that the shape of the boy's ear precisely echoed the ruff along the squirrel's belly, apparently indicating that the painter was making some kind of connection between the animal and the human body and the sensory capacities of each. Twenty minutes had passed before she

noticed that the boy's fingers holding a chain exactly spanned the diameter of the water glass below. It took 45 minutes before she realized that the seemingly random folds and wrinkles in the background curtain were "perfect copies of the shape of the boy's ear and eye, as if Copley had imagined those sensory organs imprinting themselves on the surface behind him. And so on."⁹ This might well make some of you want to go down to the National Gallery of Art and try something similar when viewing a painting by some great artist.

But Professor Roberts' main point was that this lesson about the power of patience goes far beyond art history, for she said "it serves as a master lesson in the value of critical attention, patient investigation, and skepticism about immediate surface appearances," and this led her to argue that there are "few skills that are more important in academic or civic life in the twenty-first century."¹⁰ Her overall conclusion was that if the virtue of patience was originally understood as something rather passive, as the ability to forbear or suffer unpleasant situations, today it is better understood as something active, allowing us to take control over the fast-paced tempo of contemporary life that would otherwise control us.

One specific way in which we often succumb to this fast-paced tempo is by multitasking, which can refer to performing two or more tasks simultaneously (such as driving a car and speaking on a cell phone) or rapidly switching back and forth from one thing to another or even performing a number of tasks in rapid succession. This can, of course, allow a person to conclude that you can get a lot more done that way, but Russell Poldrack, a professor of psychology at UCLA who has studied multitasking as part of his research, has warned: "We have to be aware that there is a cost to the way that our society is changing, that humans are not built to work this way. We're really built to focus. And when we sort of force ourselves to multitask, we're driving ourselves to perhaps be less efficient in the long run even though it

sometimes feels like we're being more efficient."¹¹ Similarly, the psychologist David Meyer at the University of Michigan concluded that productivity may be reduced by as much as 40 percent by the mental blocks created when people do it. Of course, the situation matters a great deal. The negative costs of texting a friend while watching a football game on TV are not going to cause any major problems, but a second or two of lost attention could mean life or death for someone driving down an interstate highway while trying to find a good radio station or talking on the phone. One of the great lessons constantly taught by Zen masters is that the most human and humane way to live is to do one thing at a time, giving that one's full attention and doing it as attentively as possible. This is also a much more pleasant way to live.

There is one other specific value of patience that I would like to bring up, namely, dealing with our own faults and failings. I am not speaking here of full-blown addictions, where persons regularly need the help of some specialized treatment center, ongoing participation in a twelve-step program, and the like. But short of that, there are many areas where we must honestly admit that we fall short. Sometimes one hears a person say that no matter how many times he or she confesses such and such a sin, there almost always seems to be some relapse. We all want to be fully integrated persons, whether it be in regard to eating habits, controlling anger, living chastely according to one's state in life, and so forth. Progress may at times seem so slow as to lead to discouragement, and this is where the virtue of patience is so important. We simply have to acknowledge that the kind of integration or integrity we want will normally not come about all at once. We rightly hope for progress without needless delay, but we must accept the fact that this kind of integration is "a slowly developing grace over the course of [one's] life."¹² Or it may be that a parent is understandably disturbed by the errant behavior of a son or daughter which doesn't seem to be improving no matter how many admonitions one has given. I am certainly

not saying that in such cases one shouldn't challenge oneself or another person to live in a more wholesome way, or that one should blithely accept lapses as though they don't matter at all, but it does mean recognizing that the challenge is normally one for the long haul. In the literature of the early monks of the Egyptian desert, there is an anecdote that recounts a question someone put to one of those monks: "What do you do all day long?" to which he replied: "We fall and we get up, we fall and we get up." As long as one keeps getting up, as long as one sincerely cooperates with the best advice available, there is every reason to hope that the ultimate outcome will be good, no matter how much patience is called for. We honor St. Monica because she never gave up on her son Augustine, even when he seemed farthest out of reach. We can learn a great deal from her example in the way we deal with others, even as each of us must have patience with our own failings and shortcomings, never being content to stand still but always willing to try to take two steps forward whenever we find ourselves falling one step back. There is surely no better season for doing so than this holy season of Lent.

1^o Stephen Richter, "What Really Ails Detroit," *New York Times*, August 16, 2013.

2^o Nilus of Ancyra, *Letters* III:35, in *Journey with the Fathers: Commentaries on the Sunday Gospels, Year C*, ed. Edith Barnecut, O.S.B. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1994), 134.

3^o Frderick Faber, "Patience," being chapter 9 of *Growth in Holiness* (Baltimore: John Murphy Co., n.d.), 145.

4^o Bishop [William Bernard] Ullathorne, *Christian Patience: The Strength and Discipline of the Soul* (London: Burns & Oates, 1886), 51.

5^o *Ibid.*, 107.

6^o Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, in *Origins* 43, no. 27 (Dec. 5, 2013). This issue of *Origins* contained the first half of this Apostolic Exhortation.

7^o Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, 39-40.

8^o Jennifer L. Roberts, "The Power of Patience," *Harvard Magazine*, Nov.-Dec. 2013, 40-43.

9^o *Ibid.*, 42.

10^o *Ibid.*

11^o Quoted by Christine Rosen, "The Myth of Multitasking," *The New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology & Society*, Spring 2011, http://faculty.winthrop.edu/ininera/CRTW-Spring_2011/TheMythofMultitasking_Rosen.pdf (accessed Feb. 8, 2014).

12^o Fr. Brett A. Brannen, *To Save A Thousand Souls: A Guide for Discerning a Vocation to Diocesan Priesthood* (Valdosta, GA: Vianney Vocations, 2012), 223.