

NO WISHFUL THINKING

April 16, 2015

A few weeks ago I gave each of you a copy of Abbot President Richard Yeo's letter about our upcoming visitation, along with a copy of the report he gave us at the end of the previous visitation in early May, 2011. In his letter, Abbot Richard referred to his asking me to indicate what I consider the important issues facing our community today, in the hope that this might help each of you formulate the thoughts you'll want to share in the interviews with him and the assistant visitator, Abbot Gregory Polan. So this evening I'm complying with Abbot Richard's request, but I'll say at once that I will be speaking mostly about issues that face *any* monastic community at almost any time, though more so today than half a century ago. I am also going to begin in a rather unusual way by distributing to each of you right now a copy of a painting that is in no way especially religious but that can nevertheless tell us something important about human life in general, above all in our own country....

The painting is by one of the best-known of all American painters, Winslow Homer, and dates from 1873, eight years after the end of the Civil War and President Lincoln's assassination, the 150th anniversary of which we commemorated only two days ago. During the war itself, Winslow Homer had produced many woodblock engravings for *Harper's* magazine, a few of them quite gruesome in their depiction of fierce fighting between Union and Confederate troops at close quarters. In still another work, he shows a Confederate soldier standing on the ramparts and taunting Union troops to fire, and he also produced a very somber oil painting titled *Prisoners from the Front*, in which three captured Confederates stand bedraggled and forlorn before a Union officer and one of his aides. In short, Homer knew firsthand much of the horror and deadly seriousness of that war, which left more Americans dead than any other war in our history.

It would be natural to conclude that once the war ended, the artist turned to far more soothing and even saccharine subjects, such as this painting *The Four-Leaf Clover*, seems to be. As far as I know, Homer himself never commented on it, but a recent interpretation by a man named Philip Kennicott that appeared in the *Washington Post* a few weeks ago suggests that there is far more to this painting than first meets the eye. The girl in the foreground is looking at a window that presumably leads to a basement, for all one sees behind it is utter darkness. Between the girl and the window is a pot of bleeding heart flowers, slightly askew, and the window itself is partly open, suggesting a lack of closure. Its black panes can easily lead us to reflect not only on the trauma that afflicted our country during the dark days of Reconstruction—with its lynchings and Jim Crow laws—but also on the way that period afflicts parts of our country still today, as the recent troubles in Ferguson, Missouri and North Charleston, South Carolina make all too clear. And the tiny four-leaf clover in the girl's hand, those green leaflets that give us the title of the entire canvas—what is that but a symbol of the wishful thinking that can prevent us from looking honestly and attentively at anything even slightly threatening or unpleasant? According to the art critic whose reflections I am following, that four-leaf clover “suggests the folly of trying to wish away the structural problems that grind us down. Some part of America has always been a child, naively longing for the best.”¹

To turn from that to my reflections on the upcoming visitation, I am certainly not at all suggesting that we are facing “structural problems that grind us down,” but I do want to emphasize that we, and perhaps monasteries all over the world but especially ones in North America and Europe, never dare assume that everything is going just fine and will continue to do so. We are indeed blessed with three men in simple vows, with a man aspiring to become a claustral oblate, with a postulant who will be back with us as soon as he does whatever he can to

assure proper care for his mother, and with at least a couple men who are seriously hoping to join us. But let's not forget that our postulant Brian Booth would not even be with us if another monastery that was his original choice had not been forced to close for lack of vocations and that, from what I heard at the recent meeting of American abbots and prioresses, at least one other American house may well close before the year is out, even as the just-arrived issue of the newsletter from St. John's Abbey announced that they have decided to close their foundation in Fujimi, Japan because of a lack of native vocations and their inability to send any more American monks over to Fujimi to help keep that priory going. I've also been discussing with Brs. Francis and Brian the eight autobiographical essays of EBC monks and nuns in that fine book *A Touch of God*. In one of those pieces, David Morland noted that when he entered Ampleforth Abbey in 1961 he was one of sixteen novices. About fifty years later, that rather large community had only one novice in 2012, none in 2013, and but two last year.

I say all this not to make anyone feel despondent but only to help keep us realistic and thereby avoid the naïve wishful thinking that is symbolized by *The Four-Leaf Clover*. There are unquestionably powerful forces in society today that militate against entering monastic life. When I was giving the retreat to members of Jim Dickerson's church this past weekend, the single question that one of them most wanted to ask me at the end of the retreat was how it was possible for me (or anyone) to live in one place for fifty years, just as I recall Fr. Peter once saying that the vow of stability also seems to be the biggest stumbling block for students in our school who might otherwise be open to the Benedictine way of life. If anyone had an easy answer to this kind of issue, it would long since have been given and put into practice. But the only real answer, even if not always easy, is what we have all heard before but can perhaps never be repeated frequently enough: If we really take to heart and put into practice the kind of

teaching we find not only in the Gospel but in such parts of our Benedictine Rule as the beautiful chapter on “the good zeal of monks,” we may indeed have firm grounds to hope that men will want to live this way of life. There really is a wonderful balance here among what I like to call the five basic pillars of monastic life: prayer together in the Liturgy of the Hours and at Eucharist; personal prayer whether in solitude or here in our church, either after Morning Prayer or before Vespers; *lectio divina*; productive work, especially in caring for the property, in education, and in hospitality; and supporting one another in countless ways on our common ascent to what St. Benedict calls “that perfect love of God that casts out fear” (RB 7.67).

I don’t like to speak at too great length in these conferences since psychologists say that most listeners soon forget well more than 90 percent of what was said anyway, but I do want to offer some reflections on these so-called pillars. While we should never think that our common prayer is beyond improvement, I also think we’d agree that what we do when coming together in this church five times a day is truly prayerful, aided by music that is generally both beautiful and not unduly difficult. Before too much longer we hope to have an abbey hymnal to replace our loose-leaf sheets and so to complement our new Vespers binders for both ferial and festal use. And whenever we eventually get around to redoing Morning and Midday Prayer, whose books are getting rather dog-eared, I think we should at least consider the possibility of doing what the Sisters at Bristow, Virginia and now at Ridgely, Maryland have already done, namely, put those offices on Kindle readers. I was talking with the Bristow prioress, Sr. Cecilia Dwyer, at that recent meeting in Cullman, Alabama and she said they are altogether pleased with this change, which began a couple years ago. If we ever seriously consider following suit, we’d have to look into this very carefully. All I’m saying tonight is that in this and almost everything else, we should be willing to think “outside the box.”

As for the next two pillars—personal or “private” prayer and *lectio divina*, we’re all obliged by our EBC Constitutions to give at least a half-hour to each of these practices every day. The former has always had a special place in EBC spirituality at least since the time of Augustine Baker in the seventeenth century. It is a wonderful counterbalance to the Liturgy of the Hours, for in the latter we are bound to a particular format of prayer as given in our liturgical books, whereas when each of us prays by himself there is much scope for freedom: some will be drawn to the so-called Jesus Prayer or to Centering Prayer, some will find the use of beads or a prayer cord helpful, some will pray using words from the Psalms or other parts of Scripture while others will use words of their own formulation, at times words will not even be necessary to accompany the kind of loving gaze or fiery desire discussed by authors as diverse as Cassian, Augustine, and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. One ought never ignore that advice I have repeated before from Abbot John Chapman: “Pray as you can, not as you can’t,” even as we recognize that the way we pray in one circumstance or at one time in our life may need to change in different circumstances or at a different time. St. Benedict himself recognizes this kind of freedom when he writes in chapter 52 of his Rule: “If at . . . times someone wishes to pray privately, he may simply go in [to the oratory] and pray, not in a loud voice but with tears and heartfelt devotion” (RB 52.4).

Benedict is equally insistent on the importance of regular, indeed daily *lectio divina*. In recent decades numerous books and articles have been written about this, some going into very detailed suggestions or recommendations about how this holy reading may best be done. Luke Dysinger, Michael Casey, and Mary Margaret Funk are among the best-known of such authors. All I want to say about the practice this evening is that we should take from such recent writings whatever seems personally helpful, but we ought always keep in mind that St. Benedict didn’t

feel it necessary to give any specific, detailed advice whatsoever. He simply assumed, and surely correctly, that if a monk gives a significant amount of time each day to the attentive reading of Scripture and other religious works, the effect will certainly be positive, keeping the mind and heart clean and pure even if one doesn't remember a lot of details about what was read. Our library is full of marvelous works of this sort. It should be both a privilege and joy to make good use of them.

With regard to the pillar of work, one important aspect is that each of us should, if our physical health permits it, be doing something to support the community in its material needs, for Benedict expects his monks to earn their livelihood and not be mendicants. Equally important is that we work conscientiously for the service of others. In our monastery the work has always included maintenance of the buildings and grounds, and beyond that has focused primarily on education and hospitality. In previous talks I have quoted from some truly inspiring letters and emails we have received from guests after their stay with us, some of them having experienced profound transformations in their life after some days at the abbey. I won't treat that further tonight so as not to prolong this talk unduly.

As regards our work in education, I would only like to read a few lines from a wonderful woman whom I once had the privilege of meeting and who will very likely be beatified and canonized someday: Sr. Thea Bowman. I'm taking these lines from a biography of her that is at times excessively adulatory but is for the most part both enlightening and inspiring. It should make good refectory reading. As you may know, Thea died of cancer about twenty-five years ago in her early 50s. For the previous couple decades she traveled all over this country and other parts of the world giving talks and leading workshops, regularly interspersing her words with songs rendered in a rich soprano voice. In January, 1988 she was interviewed on Milwaukee

Public Television and used that opportunity to speak about the importance of teaching children and youth. After she had discussed some of the major problems facing our country, the interviewer said: “Okay, those are all the negatives.... How do we get ourselves out of that situation?” Thea replied:

We get ourselves out of that situation by demanding of ourselves, demanding of the body politic, demanding of the public sector that we put top priority—high priority—on the education of our children and of our youth. I mean physical education, vocational education, parenting education, moral and value education, cultural education.... We need to teach the children ... that they can change things.... I love teaching.... And, in a remarkable kind of way, children will believe you if you tell them your truth. Not that you have a corner on the truth, but if you tell them your truth, there’s that intuitive grab—the children believe you. If you love them, they will let you love them. I think it is so important that they learn to value themselves before the world has a chance to beat them down. I have worked in Wisconsin, for example, with children of affluence, and I have found the same kinds of insecurity and fear among some of these young people—of grade-school age, of college age—as I find among the poor. They’re waiting for somebody else to tell them what to think, and they live in fear of what others will think of them. And they don’t realize their power: their power to reach out; their power to effect change; their power to grasp happiness and freedom.... See, my dad was one of those people who felt that if you could read, you could do anything.²

There is, of course, a lot of work involved in teaching well—class preparation, classroom discipline, correcting papers and tests, attending meetings, and so forth—but the rewards and satisfaction can also be tremendous. I'm finding that a lot of our students say a very pleasant, "Thank you, Abbot James," as they walk out of the room at the end of class. If a teacher shows that he wants them to learn a subject well, the students will normally respond quite generously. For a monastery to have education as one of its major works is definitely a blessing.

What I am calling the fifth pillar—life together in a way that reflects all that St. Benedict says in his chapter on the good zeal of monks—was phrased very well by Abbot Primate Notker Wolf in a circular letter that he sent to all monasteries just before Pentecost last year. It was in our calefactory for a while, so I hope some of you read it then, but in any case what he wrote near the end of that letter is worth hearing again: "It is the [Holy] Spirit who enables us to love one another as Christ has and still does today, [Christ] who has washed the feet of his disciples and given his life for them,... [He said,] 'This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.' This is our mission as part of the universal mission of the Church. Our communities are challenged to give this witness; otherwise, we can close the doors. But I see no reason to be discouraged. These days let us ask God that he send his Spirit to our communities, for he has the power to give us new life and to transform us all.... Let us trust in his word, 'I am with you always, until the end of the age.' Let us approach the feast of Pentecost with this optimism; let us venture into this horizon of our monastic life!"

I hope all this will help you prepare for our visitation so that it may enrich our whole life.

1 Philip Kennicott, "No Closure after Appomattox," *Washington Post*, March 27, 2015.

2 Thea Bowman, quoted by Charlene Smith and John Feister, *Thea's Song: The Life of Thea Bowman* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009), 215, 218.