THREE TALKS BY THE REV. MARTIN L SMITH GIVEN DURING THE CELEBRATION OF THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE CONSECRATION OF THE CHAPEL OF ST AUGUSTINE, WEST PARK, THE ORDER OF THE HOLY CROSS

The Axis of Adoration

The Word Issuing from Silence

The Bodies' Offering

The Axis of Adoration

Mediaeval obituaries of revered monks, especially founders of monasteries, underscored certain traits as sure signs of holiness. Prominent among these was *amor loci*, a love of the place. The vow of stability rooted them in a particular place, chosen out of love, sustained in love. May I suggest that our celebration of the centenary of the dedication of this monastic chapel be in the spirit of this same love of place? We are drawn together in reverence for this unique place, and I have the privilege of inviting you to accompany me as we circle round this place in our imaginations in three reflections, exploring some of its resonances, and tracing some of the ways in which it throws into relief challenges we face in the practice of worship at this particular juncture in history, this turning point in time. My first talk is entitled "The Axis of Adoration." The second is "The Word Issuing from Silence" and the third is "The Bodies' Offering."

A starting point for our first reflection might be the founding of the first proper Benedictine oratory. St Benedict founded his monastery on the summit of Monte Cassino in the year 529, and this year was one of those visible seams in history when we sense that an era is coming to an end and a very uncertain and threatening future is in the offing. In that year the Christian Roman Emperor Justinian, ruling in distant Constantinople, shut down the Platonic Academy in Athens, bringing an abrupt end to this pivotal institution where classical philosophy had been taught for nine centuries. And Benedict chose as the place for his monastery Monte Cassino, a hill that loomed over one of the main roads along which swarms of Germanic tribes were streaming down into Italy, one of the great migrations of history whose outcome no one could predict, except that nothing would be the same again. The monks could hear the creak of the waggons day in day out through the windows of the oratory.

It is worth remembering that the background to Benedict's emphasis on stability in his rule is turbulent cultural instability, the shifting of the ground where the old center can no longer hold. I think this can help us identify something of the power of the symbol of a monastic place of worship as the staking out of "a still centre of the turning world" when the turning is painfully disorientating. We ourselves are living in a very uncertain moment of history where much of the culture, both religious and secular no longer seems in any way secure. Never have the famous words of Marx in the 1848 Communist Manifesto seem so vividly prescient. "Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed fast-frozen relations with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all newly-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned."

We are very unclear how to survive the onset of threatening change, the inexorable alteration of the planetary climate, the migrations it will unleash: the revolutions of cyberspace and the onset of artificial intelligence and the 'metaverse'. We find ourselves in an anxious 'in between time'. Three years after Marx's declaration, the English poet and educator Matthew Arnold made a visit to La Grande Chartreuse, the Mother House of the Carthusian order of monks,

which inspired his poem "Stanzas from the Grande Charteuse," in which he gave voice to this modern queasy sense of 'in betweenness,' as he wrestled with what the uncanny stability of this ancient abbey represented: He found himself

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere yet to rest my head,

With this in mind, let us ponder how we might interact with the symbol of the monastic chapel. Symbol is it is, not just one pleasing 'liturgical space' among others. A symbol is recognized as such because it arouses our quest for meaning, and it resonates significances and truths that we must explore for ourselves, and make our own through reflection and meditation. And a genuine symbol is known for its inexhaustibility. We don't squeeze meaning out of a symbol and then discard it as a husk for which we have no further use. We always come back and find more facets, more layers of meaning. As Paul Ricoeur, the celebrated philosopher of symbolism, put it succinctly, "the symbol gives rise to thought."

Now the first facet of the symbol of the monastic chapel can be identified by exploring the concept of the axis. An axis is the invisible line of connection around which something revolves. One of the attractions of the symbol of the axis, is that it isn't much used in conventional religious discourse. It might be a particularly vivid symbol for our connectedness and intimacy with God because no one has turned it into a cliché. So let us go forward with the idea of a monastic chapel as an embodiment or symbol of the axis of adoration; the line of force along which human beings can adore and be loved, and celebrate that gift of intimacy in the ongoing acts of prayer, contemplation and worship. And we can get a sense of how we might claim this image of the axis by considering how a modern author used it: Christopher Isherwood in his novel *The World in the Evening.* (1954, p.99)

"Sometimes, though, you talked about love in a way that shewed me you were remembering a personal experience. I can see you now, in the twilight of a winter afternoon, sitting with your finger-tips stretched towards the fire, looking deeply into it and saying, 'No, Stephen, that's not how it begins, not by two people being drawn together. It's the moment when they suddenly know they're different from each other. Utterly, utterly different, so that it's horrible painful—unbearable almost. You're like the North and South Poles. You couldn't possibly be further apart. And yet, at the same time, you're more connected than any other two points on the surface of the earth. Because there is this axis between you. And everything else turns around it."

We could claim that this image of the axis of love really belongs to the relationship between ourselves and God, the mystical core of the gospel. God is emphatically not a word for 'our higher selves.' God is the Absolute Other who calls forth and claims from us love without the brakes on, without reservations, an encompassing claim to our adoration, loving with all our heart and with all our mind and with all our soul and with all our strength. It is around the axis of worship, the axis of contemplation, the axis of adoration, that the world turns for the

Christian believer. And this creates the possibility that certain places that are solely and exclusively dedicated to the sustaining of worship around the axis of adoration, take on a special significance as axial places. I have no idea whether anyone has used this expression before, but if not, you heard it for the first time here! Certain places are radiant, or resonant, with meaning as axial places that transmit the invitation to adoration. They act as magnetic attractors drawing us to take our place at the axis of adoration. They signal that we belong to this axis, and that the true meaning of our lives will be emerge to the extent that our potential for adoration is realized.

I might surprise you by claiming that I have been meditating about axial places since the age of five. Allow me to tell you about my first, primal religious experience. One morning my grandmother, who looked after me during the day while my parents were out at work, slipped into our house and burst into the bathroom while my father was shaving. His fury at her invasion of his privacy was met by icy resentment on her part. In revenge, she refused to look after me that day. My mother had no choice but to bring me along to the downtown office where she worked as the secretary of a formidable stockbroker, Miss Moscrop Robinson. All day I had to sit motionless in the gloomy hallway, counting the hours by the clanging of the grandfather clock and staring down the pug dog that grumbled at me from his lair under the boss's desk. No wonder I felt entitled to a reward after this heroic feat of good behavior, and only one favor would satisfy me. I wanted to be taken inside a strange stone building on the other side of the road and solve the puzzle of why the towering structure over the imposing entrance didn't have any smoke coming out of it, as I thought a proper chimney should. My mother was very uncomfortable with the proposal: this was St Marie's Roman Catholic church and she wanted nothing to do with religion, having spurned the influence of her convent education long ago. On my insistence we slipped inside. I was transfixed. Candles flickered around a statue of a lady, light from the stained-glass windows dappled the walls, which were the color of a thrush's egg, and a mysterious aroma filled the air. But most impressive of all was the scattering of men and women in the pews, some of them with shopping bags bulging with vegetables next to them on the seat. They were gazing into the air, their expressions tender and inscrutable. I couldn't tell whom they were looking at. A few moved their lips, though a deep silence reigned. I whispered to my mother, "What are they doing?" "They call it adoration," she replied. Moments passed and I asked her quietly, "Is there anyone who can teach you how to do it?" "They are called priests," she replied, cutting off any further questions by pulling me quickly out into the street.

To the consternation and amusement of all who asked me from then on what I wanted to be when I grew up, I replied: a priest. On the lips of a five-year old it was eccentric: in an entirely non-religious family it was absurd. But I had stumbled into an axial place, and I intuited, I felt the axis of adoration, where ordinary working class folk had taken their place there at the axis of adoration, on their knees.

I would not be surprised if everyone here today had stories of their own religious experience at axial places. There is such a thing as a 'prayed in place' where, over time, the practice of contemplation has imbued it with an inexplicable gravitational force which causes one to sink

to one's knees, a palpable gravitation, detectable by our sixth sense, that cannot be rationalized as a mere side effect of art works or architecture, an illusion triggered by the odor of incense and beeswax. There is an irreducible mystery to this. No one can make a building or place to resonate in this way, there are no short cuts to it. Cumulative prayer is the only way. This is a matter of incontrovertible religious experience. Our certainty about its validity is confirmed by experiences of the polar opposite. How many ostensibly religious buildings can affect us with a dispiriting sense of sterility and coldness, churches that feel so un-prayed in that nothing technically impressive about their architecture or arrangements can compensate for what is lacking. While this church at West Park was being built, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke was finishing the Tenth of his *Duino Elegies*, which includes a painful jab at the sterile absence palpable in many churches built as mere amenities of our capitalist culture:

How an Angel would stamp out their market of solaces,
set up alongside their church bought to order:
clean and closed and woeful as a post office on Sunday.

Many of us here will testify that the monastic church here is just such an axial place of pilgrimage, and each one could list many more. Some of us have an inner geography which map axial places that have welcomed us into the activity of adoration. They are deeply personal. The side chapel in the Carmelite Church near the Palais de Justice in Brussels. The chapel of the Little Brothers of Jesus in Nazareth. The Jesus chapel in Worcester Cathedral. The Islamic shrine of the prophet Job on the outskirts of Sanliurfa. Personal they may be, but we are never possessive about them. We are happy to point other to them, so they can experience for themselves. Decades ago, I used to lead retreats for medical students and of course the reality of prayer was something we would discuss into the night. But arguments could only go so far, and I used to take them on a visit to the Abbey of the Society of the Precious Blood in Burnham, where Anglican contemplative nuns had made a home in an ancient priory. I simply invited the students to sit quietly in turn at the back of the chapel where the sisters took turns in a constant vigil of silent prayer. Afterwards, arguments had fallen away, and each strove as best they could to express what they experienced of the axis of adoration, the felt sense of being present at the center, at the Mystery, around which currents of energy were flowing.

Another resonance that authenticates a genuinely axial place is that it silently refuses to be a place of escape or avoidance from the suffering of the world. Popular spirituality loves to imagine places of oasis and respite, where our self-care draws us to 'recharge'. Retreat houses advertise 'spiritual spa days' and the like, and the narcissism that so often permeates 'spirituality without religion' encourages this focus on the self, and its efforts to find a private peace, personal harmony, individual respite. Authentically monastic axial places resist this cult of the self, and its self-referential escapism. From the beginning, the setting apart of the place to take a stand is an act on behalf of the suffering world, a place profoundly hospitable to its brokenness. Abba Evagrius, one of the most learned of the desert fathers, spoke of the monk as "separated from all in order to be united to all." (*Chapters on Prayer 124)* We get the sense of the first monasteries as axial places of vicarious prayer, places where worship is offered in

solidarity with, on behalf of, in profound empathy with a suffering world. One of my teachers, the great historian of that era, Peter Brown, writes,

"At Saqqara, a little to the south of Cairo, the monastery of Apa Jeremiah stands on the edge of a spur of sand so utterly dead that no flowers bloom there even after the January rains. Its back to a horizon ringed with the uncanny shapes of the pyramids from Gizeh in the north to Dashur in the south, the monastery looks down into a valley of blue-green vegetation. This was "the world" for Apa Jeremiah: "This is the spot on which our lord and father Apa Jeremiah bowed himself, until he removed the sins of the people of the whole world." (*The Body and Society,* Columbia, NY, 1988, p257)

"This is the spot": From this ancient memorial tablet dug up from the sands we get a sense of the early origins of the vow of stability, and fidelity at the axial place. The life of prayer is vicarious, an offering in solidarity and in compassion, or what is going on is not prayer. And if we come as pilgrims to an axial place of adoration, we cannot project onto monks the role of intercessor, as if they were specialists upon whose shoulders we can transfer the responsibility of prayer for the world's brokenness. No: the axial place of adoration is a place where we learn too that our lives, and our prayers are to be expressions of the call to share the world's joy and bear the world's pain, with God, and towards God, and in God. I often recite to myself a poem of the great poet and prophet of justice, Charles Péguy, (born 1878) which he wrote as a pilgrim to that great focal point of Christian mystical life, the Cathedral at Chartres,

"And not at all from virtue, where we have no part,
And not at all from duty, which has never charmed,
But like the steady builder with his compass armed,
We needs must take our stand at sorrow's very heart,

And be firmly placed at the axis of distress,
And by that sacred need to bear a heavier load,
And to feel more deeply and go the hardest road,
And receive the evil at its greatest stress."

(*The Mystery of the Holy Innocents and Other Poems* London, Harvill Press, 1956, p. 35)

Ah, here again is the image of the axis! "L'axe de détresse", the axis of distress. In the Christian mystery, where God is revealed on the cross of Jesus as suffering love, absolute non-violence and all-embracing compassion, taking our stand at the axis of adoration—adoration of a suffering God—means taking our stand at sorrow's very heart, firmly placed at the axis of distress.

Robert Hugh Benson, born in the same year as Péguy, was one of the extraordinarily talented children of the Archbishop Benson of Canterbury. He joined the Community of the Resurrection, an Anglican religious order, and then later became a Roman Catholic priest and a prolific author. He created a form of mystical short story, in which he imaginatively spun out in

a kind of visionary fantasy the supernatural drama going on beneath the surface of religion. He had made a visit once to the Anglican Benedictine community at West Malling (the predecessor of today's community of nuns) which had reclaimed a medieval abbey. His retreat made a profound impression on him. He wrote up his visit in the story "*The Convent Chapel*", published in 1903 in a widely read volume of short pieces titled, "*The Light Invisible*." The narrator of the story insists that the time he spent in the chapel where a nun was motionless in contemplation, had not been accompanied by any uncanny effects. There was just the plain silence and stillness. Nevertheless, with the eyes of faith,

"Now in the tabernacle I became aware that there was a mighty stirring and movement. Something with it beat like a vast Heart and the vibrations of each pulse seemed to quiver through all the ground. Or you could picture it as the movement of a clear deep pool when the basin that contains it is jarred—it seemed like the movement of circular ripples crossing and recrossing in swift thrill. . . . Now I was aware that there was something of the same activity in the heart of the woman, but I do not know which was the controlling power. I did not know whether the initiative sprang from the Tabernacle and communicated itself to the nun's will, or whether she, by bending herself on the Tabernacle set in motion a huge dormant power. It appeared to me possible that the solution lay in the fact that the two wills co-operated, each reacting upon the other. . . . I perceived that the black figure knelt at the centre of reality and force, and with the movement of her will and lips controlled spiritual destinies for eternity. There ran out from this peaceful chapel lines of spiritual power that lost themselves in the distance, bewildering in their profusion and terrible in the intensity of their hidden fire."

This visionary tale about the mystical dynamic of the axial place made a great impression on Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who consciously imitated it in in three pieces he called *Three Stories in the Manner of Benson*, published after his death as "*Christ in the World of Matter*." We can't forbear to mention this, for as we all know, this great scientist, priest and multi-disciplinary visionary, is buried just a few miles from here across the Hudson, in the graveyard in the grounds of the Culinary Institute of America.

Now I want to pose the question: What sort of witness does the monastic oratory, the place of the Opus Dei and of contemplation, bear as the church struggles with the shape of worship today? Now of course, by witness I don't mean any kind of aggressive pointing to the monastery as an example, or noisy argument. It will be necessarily a silent kind of witness, a living out of a vocation, which then causes people to reflect and wonder about what we are doing currently in the public worship of the church. Let me pose a question: Is it possible for the activity we call worship to altogether come off its axis of adoration and mutate into something else? The answer is a clear yes.

Let me give you this example. I regularly attend All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington. My husband is a leader in this very thriving, multiracial congregation. The Sunday services are graced with wonderful choral music from many sources, the sermons are spirited and thought provoking, the ministries of the church especially for social and racial justice strenuous and exemplary. It is all very stimulating and life-giving. But the activity of worship is not on the axis

of adoration. “Come let us worship!” the minister announces—but the worship is not directed to God either explicitly or implicitly. Many in the congregation are not theists, many are humanist or ‘post-religious’, so the verb worship has mutated and become an intransitive verb. We are called to worship, but not by or for any object of worship. We will not be engaging in adoration. Here worship is an activity of edification, of sharing of concerns, of arousal to commitment to moral values, exploration of soulful wisdom and the life issues it can interpret. You really can have wonderful ‘church’ without any reference to God at all, without adoration.

We might by way of contrast propose the Orthodox liturgy as the polar opposite of this. From start to finish, the prayers, music and rituals act as the passing of a magnet does over iron filings, aligning our attention, our prayers, our emotions, towards the Triune God. In the litanies of intercession people join in again and again with the sung refrains, the most telling of which is simply *To thee, O Lord*. This is adoration: stretching into God with upturned faces. It is no coincidence that the word for litany *ektenie* derives from the Greek for stretching. Prayer is the axis of stretching around which everything can turn, all one’s experience, whatever that may be. And this refrain, “To thee, O Lord,” offers simultaneously adoration and intercession.

Now if we consider these acts of public worship as opposite poles, our own churches are situated in a variety of places along the spectrum between them. Of course, the forms of liturgy are maintained that seem to guarantee that worship is theocentric, that it is offered as adoration to the mystery of God. But even where the forms are retained, spiritual mutations are taking place which bend the direction of worship back to ourselves. One of the main causes of dissatisfaction and disarray in the worship life of the church is a disavowed turn towards self-referentiality. By this I mean, that worship comes derailed off the axis of adoration to become an activity directed at the satisfaction of our own selves and our own needs.

This is not the result of a conscious loss of faith, as much as the result of cultural forces so ubiquitous that we are hardly aware of them. There are cultural pressures that act as an undertow pulling us off course, taking us off the axis of adoration. For example, we are influenced by the forces of consumerism that converts everything into a product among products. The question about participation in worship mutates into, “Can I buy into this activity? What is in it for me? Is it worth the expense of time and effort in the satisfaction that I derive from it? What I am going to take away from this activity, and what happens if often there doesn’t seem like much to take away as far as my life and needs are concerned?”

Closely related is the influence of the entertainment industry. Worship is subject to the demand imposed by our culture that we identify as people dependent on being entertained: to be amused, instructed, stimulated by novelty on the one hand, or soothed and reassured by a formula as predictable as my favorite sit-com on the other. And now the influence of the entertainment complex as it proliferates on the internet is more irresistible, with the onset of virtual and online worship. Just as I can change channel, switch off, embark on a search, whenever I am momentarily dissatisfied, now in on-line church I can pull the plug on it as soon as I feel ‘this isn’t doing anything for me!” I never had the nerve to walk out of church and now I

can do it whenever I want. The unredeemed part of ourselves has often wanted to mute an annoying preacher: now we can do it with the click of a button!

The symbol of the monastic church resonates as an act of witness to worship as the *Opus Dei*, an activity that is aroused by the Spirit of God, an activity that is offered to God in and with and as the Risen Christ, an activity of losing ourselves in adoration for God, towards God. The monastic church can only be one witness, but it is a powerful one, against the denaturing of worship into an *Opus Hominum*, a human activity of edification reflexively turned in upon ourselves that has only the appearance of an offering to God. A dangerous disillusionment may be in store for the church. It may be that changes in liturgical language, experiments in ritual, new forms, ceremonies and all sorts of seemingly hopeful movements of revitalization will turn out to be largely futile and hollow unless the underlying claim of adoration is addressed. The renewal of worship is ultimately dependent on a rediscovery of the mystical core of the gospel and the re-initiation of Christians into adoration as core practice. As things stand now, the very word 'adoration' is utterly foreign to many, even frightening. They simply can't imagine what it means or how it would be for them. And it is certainly not what springs to mind as motivation when they are 'attending church' in person, let alone virtually.

In my primal experience of church as a five-year old, the question occurred to me whether there were any people who could show others how to adore. I instinctively knew that it was a potential that could only be realized if someone helped you. My mother told me that it was the role of priests. And now after fifty years as a priest I am more conscious than ever of the priestly role to release in people their denied, repressed or simply unrealized capacity for adoration, to help them be aligned with others along the axis of adoration. This is a work of primal spiritual formation. Shirking this work would be profound indolence, a laziness that betrays the fear of depth.

Well, some of the ways in which worship can be realigned along the axis of adoration will be touched on in my next talks, but before we bring this one to a close, let us stay with the judgment implied by my use of the loaded word 'indolence' to refer to the church's avoidance or shirking of the core task of spiritual formation and arousal. It comes from the Latin word *dolor* which means pain, so indolence is not mere inertia: it is the shirking of a task that involves pain. And so it would be right to repeat the claim I made earlier, that because our worship is in and with the crucified Christ, the axis of adoration is at the same time the axis of pain-bearing distress. The word liturgy is often claimed to mean 'the work of the people' but that is not correct. The Greek word originally meant a civic project, a work for the public, to benefit the people, on behalf of the people. It referred to philanthropic acts like building a bridge or sponsoring a market. And our worship is liturgical because we are offering worship on behalf of the world, in empathy for its brokenness, in pain for its unrealized potential, in thanksgiving for its glories, in solidarity with its sufferings. The restoration of the axis of adoration to our worship cannot happen without a costly deepening of our sense of solidarity with and responsibility for the world suffering from its self-defeating violence. The vagueness and blandness and non-committal safeness of many of our current versions of 'the prayers of the people' will have to give way to something much more passionate, more painful, if they are to

express a renewed awareness that we can only be before and towards God in adoration, if our hands are holding those of the suffering and the denied.

The Word Issuing from Silence

In my first talk I reflected on axial places as spiritual attractors that can draw us to realign our lives on the axis of adoration, and I want to reflect in this second talk on how places dedicated to silence can be the setting in which we hear the Word of God truly resonate. I invite you to recall times in which pilgrimage to this chapel has brought you into an environment in which the gospel sounds new again, and old words that had been seeming exhausted and depleted are heard again with freshness and force. Whether in a retreat, or in the liturgy, or receiving counsel, monastic silence enables us to hear the deep resonances of the Word. This may lead us to reflect about ways in which the religious experience of the resonant Word in places of silence, has something important to say about the crisis of spirituality that underlies many of the inadequacies and frustrations of contemporary worship.

I was remembering the other day a pilgrimage in Spain on which we halted for a few days at the ancient Abbey of Lleyre in Navarra. The massive almost windowless Romanesque Church was profoundly quiet, and at Mass in a dim side-chapel I had one of those experiences of a word issuing forth from silence. My understanding of Spanish was enough for one saying to stand out in the very simple homily given by the monk who was presiding, and it echoes in my mind. "Never Jesus without the Cross, never the Cross without Jesus." (A dictum, I learned later, of St Louis de Montfort). And this memory prompts me to begin our reflection by exploring the significance of this chapel as the place of worship of the Order of the Holy Cross, and the relationship between silence and the gospel of the crucified.

Ignatius of Antioch, a bishop in the early second century, has left a collection of his letters written on his long journey as a prisoner being escorted across Asia Minor to trial and martyrdom in Rome. In one of his letters to the Christian church in Magnesia, Ignatius speaks of Jesus Christ as "God's Word issuing forth from silence." Let us explore the many layers of this simple utterance.

Silence is the environment which evokes a sense of God's unfathomable mystery, and if we believe that God is revealed and 'spoken' in the person of Jesus Christ, we recognize that silence is the matrix from within which God is exposed as suffering, vulnerable love. In the self-expression of God as a human being, the fate of that living person is the core of the revelation, and that destiny was rejection, torture and execution. On the cross God is exposed as entirely non-violent. The news that makes the gospel the good news, is the news of the absolute non-violence and vulnerability of the suffering Love that holds all things in life. The resurrection is the revelation that vulnerability and non-violent love is the Heart and Source of all life: the open wounds of the risen one reveals that this vulnerability is both the mystical core of the gospel, and the secret of its irreversible, revolutionary and subversive power in the world. But the message of the cross cannot, by its very nature, be other than a vulnerable message, subject to scorn, misapprehension, all too liable to be distorted, to be exploited, and to mutate. The message of the cross, cannot be a triumphalistic message of impressive power, because a triumphalistic message would need as its propellant a dark energy siphoned up from inner

violence, the need to overpower the other. So Paul goes out of his way, in the face of early attempts to twist the gospel into an impressive declaration of triumphant divine power, to insist that the gospel is a message of divine vulnerability that is bound to present the appearance of something intrinsically stupid and ineffective. Once the gospel is presented as overpoweringly convincing, absolutely persuasive and powerful, it turns into an alien parody of the gospel and is co-opted as a pious agency of the violent status quo of broken human societies.

"For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,
'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'
Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor. 1:18-25)

The most heart-breaking aspect of the vulnerability of God revealed on the cross is the bitter paradox that this message can be appropriated and alienated by the very forces of power and violence that Jesus subverted in the proclamation of the kingdom and by his passion. Just before the crucial battle at the Milvian Bridge the would-be emperor Constantine supposed he was having a vision of the cross of Christ in the sky, with a motto emblazoned, "In this sign, conquer"; whatever it was could not have issued from the crucified and risen one. Following his victory and the subsequent imperial sponsorship of Christianity, the authentic gospel has henceforth been in unequal contest with the superior impressiveness of an imperial ideology, the cross distorted into a regal emblem of dominant force and sacrilegiously converted into the seal of divine sponsorship for rulers.

Father Benson, founder of the Anglican religious order, the Society of St John the Evangelist, declared, "I always regard Constantine's vision as an artifice of the devil. When Constantine took up the cross, the Church laid it down." (Letter, Oct 23, 1906). One of the main forces of resistance to this appropriation of the message of the cross was the monastic movement. The first monks and nuns did not take violent issue with the appropriation of the gospel, because all violence begets violence. They took the non-violent path of taking their stand on the margins of society to create zones of silence out of range of the power games. As the Christian message became noisier and noisier with the passing of the risk of persecution, and theological controversies more argumentative and hostile, the silence of the early monastic settlements stakes out an alternative zone for arduous conversion to the life of the divine peace, divine non-violence. (The fact that later 'rent a crowd' mobs of monks joined noisy demonstrations in

defense of orthodoxy only proves how demanding it is to stay faithful to the way of non-violence.)

Perhaps one of the explanations of the currency of all things monastic today, paradoxically at a time when many monasteries themselves are depleted, is that the monastic protest against the appropriation of the gospel by systems of power is actually powerfully relevant. We live in an era of disillusionment in which at every level, we are unmasking the ways in which religion has been used to justify violence. We can see through the ideological tricks in which Christianity was coopted to justify the violence of slavery, the violence of Jim Crow and segregation, the violence of inequality and racism. We see now different histories than the ones we are taught, told through the eyes and with the new found voices of the invaded, the colonized, the exploited. The colonial systems stand out for what they are, as violent means of systematic theft. Wherever we turn, we see how the gospel has been exploited for ideologies of violence. Here in America, we are experiencing the manifestation of the true colors of fundamentalist evangelicalism as a perverse mutation of the gospel: a reactionary ideology, wedded to late capitalism, and suffused with violence, in its obsession with Armageddon and hell, the cult of guns, the belligerent rhetoric against science, reason and new knowledge, against otherness of every shape and form.

This talk would have to go on for many hours to detail every facet of this convulsive unmasking of systems of coercive power and the way religion has been coopted to buttress them: systems that saw to the subjugation of women, the erasure and suppression of gays and lesbians, the marginalization of indigenous cultures. We could go on. And we would not even have begun to tackle the unmasking of the intrinsic violence of capitalism itself against planetary systems, the animal populations, in the name of what can be gained and extracted in disregard for the claims of the ecological biosphere. But the main point we would want to make here is that the disillusionment with religion that is setting in so widely is related to this unmasking. Christianity has been free to make a lot of noise in collaboration with systems of violence for almost two millennia and whenever this noise is exposed for what it is, its credibility collapses.

There is an incident in E. M Forster's novel *A Passage to India* which has touched a nerve in a couple of generations of preachers in England. The novel (written just as the chapel at West Park was being built) deals with issues of imperialism, the movement for independence and complex issues of sex and race. Mrs Moore, a representative of a pretty decent kind of colonial Englishwoman at the height of the British Raj, is taking part in a group excursion to some renowned caves; she gets separated from the rest of the party and ends up alone in a side cave, panicked by the darkness and isolation. She has a kind of existential crisis brought on by an uncanny echo… boum, boum. Recalling it later, she realizes that it had suddenly exposed the utter hollowness of her religious faith.

"But suddenly, at the edge of her mind, Religion appeared, poor little talkative Christianity, and she knew that all its divine words from 'Let there be light' to 'It is finished' only amounted to 'boum.'" (14, p.166)

Poor little talkative Christianity. This mordant phrase can stick in the mind like a burr.

Another dimension of the precariousness of the gospel of the cross in cultures permeated by violence is the likelihood that it will simply be drowned out by the environment of noise, propaganda and sensory over-stimulus that systems of power create to intimidate, subdue and distract human beings they want to keep passive. The gospel needs a certain silence to be heard, received and responded to. Here is the 20th century lay Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov, writing on the theme and drawing on a rich vein of Russian spirituality focused on the *kenosis,* or self-emptying of God in the Incarnation: "the voice of God is almost silence."

"Every compelling proof violates the human conscience and changes faith into simple knowledge. That is why God limits his almighty power, encloses himself in the silence of his suffering love, withdraws all signs, suspends every miracle, casts a shadow over the brightness of his face. It is to this kenotic attitude of God that faith essentially responds. It keeps and will always keep an element of darkness, a crucifying obscurity, a sufficient margin to protect its freedom, in order to guard its power say *no* at any moment and to build on this refusal. It is because a man can say *no* that his *yes* can attain a full resonance; his fiat is then not in accord, but on the same dizzy level, of free creation as the fiat of God.

Faith is a dialogue, but the voice of God is almost silence. It exercises a pressure that is infinitely delicate and never irresistible. God does not give orders, he issues invitations. "Listen, Israel" or "If thou wouldst be perfect." (*The Struggle with God, 1966,* p.34)

In the early 1980's I led a retreat on the subject of silence for the community here at West Park drawing extensively on a remarkable book by Swiss philosopher Max Picard, called *The World of Silence.* (Harvill Press, 1948) It was little known at the time, but now it has been reprinted, and deserving of new attention as extraordinarily prophetic. He talks about the banishment of silence from modern urban life and its dire consequences, which we can see have redoubled since he wrote in the middle of the last century, with the proliferation of media and the overwhelming of the psyche by the hyper stimulation of life constantly on line. He points to the relationship between propaganda and verbal and visual bombardment for those who are unshielded by silence. As a Jew educated in Germany he had experienced all this at first hand. "Everything therefore is carried along in the noise, and any and anything can develop out of it. Nothing arises any longer through a specific act, through a decision and through the creative. Everything turns up automatically: through a kind of mimicry the noise produces what is required in the circumstances of the moment, and this is conveyed to man.

For example, if the surrounding world is Nazi, then Nazi ideas are conveyed by the noise, and this takes place *without man's having decided for Nazidom by a special act of his own conscience.* Man is so much part of the verbal noise going on all around him that he does not notice what is being conveyed to him." (p.181)

He writes penetratingly about how once the media dominate our consciousness to a critical degree of saturation, our responsibility, our human need to make our own response to what is

presented to us, becomes almost paralyzed, and we succumb to a dehumanizing collective psychosis.

“It seems to me that this is the cause of many modern psychoses; an unlimited mass of words is thrown into us through the radio, words that really demand an answer. But there are too many words for an answer to be possible, and no answer is even expected, for at every moment a new mass of words is thrown out.

The people who still know somehow or other that an answer must be given to everything that is brought before the human mind become confused. They feel that an answer ought to be given, but there is no time and no room in which it can be given, and out of this confusion of mind a psychosis can very easily develop which may show itself in all kinds of inhibitions. Such a psychosis may serve as an escape from the world that has taken the most essential thing in life from a man: his power to answer and to be responsible.” (p. 209)

Of course, things have changed. Now the system has adapted to demanding responses from us at every turn. Responding to consumer surveys after every hotel stay, every visit to a bank branch, every purchase, feeding the algorithms and the robots, is overwhelming, and utterly trivializing of our actual human need to respond to what is being forced on us.

These reflections about ideology and modern culture, now all the more relevant as we are well into the ‘overdrive’ we call post-modernity, shed a lot of light on the monastic impulse. A convert to Christianity, Picard, was familiar with monasteries, and his remarks about them as the last refuges of silence seem biting, but they are actually heart-felt and poignant. He knows that the silence of monasteries today has an inevitably different quality from that of a previous era. “There is still perhaps a little silence; a little is tolerated. Just as the almost completely exterminated Indians are still allowed a little living space in their miserable reservations, so silence is sometimes allowed a chink of space in the sanatoria between two and three in the afternoon: ‘An hour of silence’ and in the ‘two minutes silence’ in which the masses must be silent ‘in remembrance of. . .” But there is never a special silence in memory of the silence that is no more.

It is true that silence still exists as true silence in monastic communities. In the Middle Ages the silence of the monks was still connected with the silence of other men outside the monastery. Today the silence of the monasteries is isolated; it lives literally only in monastic seclusion.” (p.223)

So let us think further about the meaning of monastic silence today as it prevails in this rare place, this particular monastic oratory. There is much more to it than being a place of respite and refreshment: an oasis of temporary detoxification for visitors who must return to the fray, a kind of spiritual spa run by kindly brothers. Let us take soundings again in the beginnings of the monastic movement, the ‘silent rebellion.’ Abba Arsenius, who had belonged to the power elite of the Roman empire as tutor to the emperor’s children in Constantinople, was awakened to the call of the desert by a mysterious voice urging him: Arsenius, flee, be silent, find inner

peace, "*pheuge, siopa, hysychadze*." (*The Sayings of the Fathers,* Arsenius, 2) These three summonses help us discover what monastic silence really means. Monastic flight means extricating ourself from being embedded and trapped in a social system, a status quo, a prevailing ideology. It is the act of differentiation, a disentangling ourselves from the nets of conformity to a broken culture. Second, becoming silent is a painful discipline of ceasing to parrot or repeat the shibboleths and slogans of that culture, and detoxifying ourselves from compulsive participation in the babble and din that drowns out the voice of the soul, the voices of the excluded and marginal, and, of course, the still small voice of grace, the intimations of divine presence hidden in the everyday. Thirdly, there is the discovery of *hysychia,* inner receptivity and self-abandonment to grace, the still place of inner quiet where we have space and time to respond to the non-violent touch and intimate speech of God.

In this celebration of the century-long witness of this monastic chapel, we have a great deal of experience of the radical effect of a place of worship and contemplation that is sustained by silence. When words, the words of scripture, the words of the liturgy of the hours, the words of preaching emerge from silence they resonate and come back to life. Divorced from silence even the most hallowed words degrade over time, so that scripture can seem dry and wearying, the words used in worship stale and inert, the words of preaching sometimes aggressive, sometimes impotent.

Silence can make all the difference in the world, and generations of pilgrims and retreatants at places like this have experienced the difference. And this is not an occasional and rare religious experience but the outcome of participating in a fundamental rhythm underlying both liturgy and the practice of *lectio divina*, meditative reading. When the Word issues from silence we become listeners, and the worship of a monastic chapel is above all about listening along the axis of adoration. It is initiation into receptivity. Secondly, silence is the spaciousness within which we can make the word our own through meditation, through rumination, active absorption, an allowing of an inner resonance in the heart, an intimate engagement. And then thirdly, as we experience the inner dynamic of monastic prayer, silence gives us the space to respond to the intimate speech of God in prayer. "Let prayer be pure and short" says Benedict in the Rule, "unless it happens to be prolonged by an inspiration of divine grace." The speech of God in the heart does not trigger our talkativeness, but the opposite. It opens up our latent capacity to distill our yes to God into the simplest of words and phrases, felt in the bare act of repetition to be more than enough. Then prayer draws us on further into the silence from which it emerged.

Now as we consider this place of worship and all that it enables and represents as a place where the Word comes to life, how shall we consider its witness as a symbol to our parishes and other places of worship? If we have experienced the relationship between silence and the experience of intimacy with God, we shall not be surprised by the ambivalence with which silence is regarded in the church. The self-defeating brokenness of the human heart puts up resistance to intimacy with God, preferring religious forms that keep God at a safer distance than in the heart. Silence in worship excites both yearning, and fearful pushback. This goes right back to the very earliest days of the church's liturgical life. Ignatius of Antioch, writing letters

that give us a window into early forms of the eucharistic assemblies in the first decades of the second century, refers several times to the qualitative difference experienced in settings where silence is honored and practiced. It is a matter of ethos. "He who possesses the word of Jesus, is truly able to hear even His very silence" (*Letter to the Ephesians,* chap. 15) he writes in his letter to the church in Ephesus. He highlights the powerful difference a bishop, the presider at the eucharist, can make, when he ministers through the practice of silence and sustains this ethos. "Now the more any one sees the bishop keeping silence, the more ought he to revere him" (chap. 6)

Here, just as the church is beginning to regularize the patterns of ministry into the three-fold orders of deacon, presbyter and bishop, and to take on the risks of institutionalization and officialdom, Ignatius, points to the charism of silence. The spiritual centeredness of a minister and leader who is drawing on the silent mystery and hidden presence of God, stands out with the kind of authority that genuinely claims the heart's attention. The church, and the church's eucharist needs the leadership of those with the charism of silence, if it is to protect the Word from being swamped by words.

Let us reflect a bit more on the charism of silence in the arena of contemporary worship and the ministry of the Word. First, there is clear evidence of a groundswell of demand for liturgies that are less wordy, less talkative, less hurried, more spacious, reflective and yes, contemplative. And here the influence of the Taizé community has been worldwide and profound. Only a monastic community could be the matrix and model of forms of contemporary worship that integrate silent reflection and receptivity, chants through which worshippers imbibe and absorb the living words of scripture, rituals of quiet gazing on icons that speak to us wordlessly. The influence of Taizé through providing the church all over the world with models of worship drawing on the deepest traditions of Catholicism, Reformed Christianity and Orthodoxy, in which silence allows the word to resonate, is incalculable in its scope, depth and appeal.

A second sign of this groundswell of demand is the rise of 'contemplative eucharists' often branded as 'Celtic' style services. People are demanding an alternative to the rather hectic forms of Sunday service in which the stream of words never pauses, and in which music may largely be a performance by choirs. There are now parishes in which the alternative styles of worship, more participatory, more contemplative, spacious with more silence, are drawing more participants than the regular type of Sunday morning service. Silence is the setting in which people can feel invited rather overpowered.

But of course the institutional church often responds by containing this influence, holding quite separate 'Taizé services' to appeal mainly to the young, and 'contemplative eucharists' for those few members who are 'into spirituality', instead of allowing the values that shape these forms of worship to be deployed in renewing and reshaping regular Sunday worship.

There are places in which a little more reflective silence is being woven into the regular liturgies, as the prayer book actually encourages. Even just a minute here, a minute there can

have a profound effect. But a failure to teach about silence, a failure to show people how to be in silence, a reluctance to face into the pushback from those who are made uncomfortable by it, often means that these brief elements of silence are limited to being half-measures, which, to adapt the famous slogan from the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, "avail us nothing." The quotation is apposite of course, because the talkativeness of poor Christianity, now exacerbated by the hyperstimulating culture, is a case of chronic addiction. The path to sobriety is a very demanding one. Which brings us back to the relevance of monastic spirituality, a path with many steps towards spiritual detoxification, freedom and sobriety.

Finally, let us consider what preaching might be like if it were brought into a more intimate relationship with silence. What would it be like to hear sermons today in which this theme of St Ignatius—"Jesus Christ, who is his Word issuing from Silence"—were something we could actually experience? First, we would discover that preachers who have a relationship with silence, and who themselves experience life as turning around the axis of adoration, will want first and foremost to evoke the self-giving of God in the present moment, the gift of God's desire for us. The sermon will evoke the good news that Suffering Love is the Heart at the Centre of everything, a Heart that yearns for us. Preaching will be that Word of Divine Desire. The preachers will not instruct us, correct us, or dazzle us. They will not assert over us their views about God, their opinions. They will not lecture us about programs of social justice, rather they will humbly make real for us in the present moment the scope of divine yearning which encompasses each of us. Their spare words will invite us to feel what God feels and begin to have a sense of what the divine yearning wants to do through us to transform and renew the brokenness of all lives and repair the injustices with which our systems and our culture is riddled. The Word re-issues from the silence of God's suffering love and if the sermon is true to the Spirit, then it offers us practical help for embracing that Word and responding to it. Sermons that issue from a genuine relationship with silence, will gently propose to us ways we can take the word of divine desire to heart. It will help us pray ourselves into an experience of what is being preached. And it will provide practical incentives for us listeners to make our personal response. The sermon will not only offer us help as to how to receive the Word, it will prompt us how to respond to God in prayer and in self-offering.

Such would be the spiritually formative preaching that is congruent with the monastic way, the preaching that is consonant with this holy place. It might be the kind of preaching that is urgently needed by the rest of us, in our own settings and communities.

The Bodies' Offering

In this talk I will be inviting you to reflect about ways in which the worship of a monastic community can be one of the touchstones, a sign of authenticity, at a time when the liturgical and sacramental life of the church is subject to currents and cultural headwinds that pull us away from embodiment, from grounded location, from gathered community, from sensuous, physical interaction in ritual. Many of the things I would want to suggest would have been entirely valid even if Covid19 had not struck. The drastic adjustments in response to the pandemic have mainly inflamed issues we would have been dealing with in any case as we negotiate the multiple challenges of the postmodern era. Minds far more acute than mine that are expert in the relationships between religion and culture are already plotting out directions that the Church may be going in under these pressures, so I must ask for forbearance if these reflections bear the tell-tale signs of the amateur.

A high proportion of congregations in our tradition were already experiencing reduction, even reduction to a level below the critical mass that is usually necessary for the degree of creativity and energy which attracts newcomers. And then comes the devastating hiatus in public worship, followed just now by a tentative and limited resumption of public worship, with rituals subject to stringent constraints and inhibiting hygienic precautions. Online services through Zoom and Facebook are devised, in which, from the safety of their own home, participants log in for live or recorded events, with various degrees of engagement ranging from taking turns to read or pray certain elements, to actively responding with messages and interacting in chat groups, to blank passivity, listening and looking at the screen while simultaneously multitasking with chores.

Online accessibility of liturgies recorded by camera has had many effects that are registering as positive: shut-ins have a way of being included, complete strangers can get a taste of Christian worship and activities. Participation can become truly global, as in the case of the worldwide virtual congregation for the Dean of Canterbury's daily Morning Prayer from the deanery garden, or the worship of National Cathedral in Washington. I am quite used to being told when I preside at a church that there is an eager following in the West Indies, or that a presentation is being used by congregations in Myanmar! Even certain religious communities are simulcasting their offices and celebrations of the Eucharist, attracting thousands of online viewers who are attracted to their pace and style. I am sure you are already hearing the refrain, "hybrid worship is here to stay. Every church now will need to be equipped with the technology and the future lies with churches that make themselves accessible on line." And I must leave to your imagination, or the pronouncements and predictions of pundits that you have already heard, the benefits claimed for remote online participation. Now I want to bring some different considerations into play.

The technologizing of liturgy and its transfer to the virtual realm raises some very thorny questions about the way the church both necessarily conforms to the culture in which it is embedded and the ways it is called by the Spirit of God to question, to dissent, to resist, to subvert the currents of the time, to swim against the current and create alternatives to the

various social models and styles that the culture is propagating. The rapid transfer of human activity to the virtual realm is unprecedented in its reach and intensity. So, from one angle the technologizing of liturgy and its shift towards the virtual is just the church going with the flow, except that flow is a rather tame word for the torrent that is sweeping all in that direction.

Consider the transfer of the erotic and the sexual to the virtual realm: online dating, sexting, innumerable hook-up apps, and the vast industry of pornography that supports sex as an individual quest for private stimulus and gratification, the effective separation of sex from intimacy, physical intercourse, erotic embodied communion, the volatilization of sex as bodies-at-play into a hallucinatory activity of the brain, accompanied by self-stimulus. Consider the transfer of commercial traffic to the virtual realm in which hyperconsumerism enables the individual to acquire uncountable objects from a dizzying plethora of sources delivered to their door in day—either daily necessities or selections from the vast array of the exotic and superfluous—without the need to stir from the couch or interact with human beings in any way. These are just two of the tributaries that pour into the current that is changing human activity and molding human identity.

Even if the current is so full and strong that our culture is in full flood, this abandoning of the physical and the real for the virtual could stream along channels that have been in the process of being carved out for a very long time. The sacramental worship of Catholic Christianity, embodied active worship in the flesh, and in the local community of committed believers, worship that engages all five senses, blesses and offers created things, expresses itself in physical arts of ritual is a phenomenon that has from the beginning been questioned and resisted, and subjected to counter movements. Eucharistic, baptismal, sacramental activities, and the rituals of assembly, of gathering in person, were seen even as controversially provocative and questionable in the earliest days of the formation of Catholic Christianity.

I have already quoted the letters of the martyr bishop Ignatius of Antioch in these talks, and one of the most striking things about them is the insistence that the embodied celebrations of the gathered community are intrinsically related to the Incarnation, the self-embodiment of God in the flesh, as Jesus Christ the actually crucified, the One who was resurrected in the body through the Spirit. The churches were taking shape in a climate in which gnostic claims and values were coursing through the religious culture of the day, pulling in the opposite direction, presenting religious progress as emancipation from the flesh. A direction that scorns the gospel of Incarnation as a vulgar error, and denigrates bodies, earth and creatures as the deplorable outcome of epic blunders perpetrated by cosmic entities utterly inferior to, and at odds with, the truly Transcendent. The churches are being denounced as wrong for insisting in the actual crucifixion of Jesus, and the claim that communion in his very Body and Blood is available for eating and drinking in the Eucharist. Ignatius insists on the vital nexus between the good news of Incarnation, the Cross and the Resurrection, with the eucharistic life of the local community gathered around its bishop. From this perspective, deliberately absenting ourselves from the physical community of persons is a symptom that we are avoiding the concrete, real, redemptive activity of God in Jesus Christ.

Some of the reasons for which the sacraments are being abandoned today, such as the culturally reinforced realization we could sum up as, "Oh, I realize I too am really *spiritual but not religious*," actually re-enact the motivations of those who found themselves wanting to pull away from the ritual and sacramental life of the church during its early formative years.

Of course, in a short talk we couldn't possible explore all the ways in which the sacramental and ritual life of the church has experienced counter-reaction. There was the Iconoclastic movement for several centuries in the Eastern Church, which wanted Christian worship to be entirely without any visual representation of the events and mysteries of the gospels and the lives of the saints. In the Western Church, there was the Reformation, in which reaction against superstition and ritualism, and the availability of the printing press, resulted in a bias privileging words, pronounced, preached and printed, over sacramental action and ritual. It resulted in forms of public worship which tended to immobilize participants in pews as listeners above all else. There was the cultural intensification of individuality, which more and more placed the self as the location of religion. There was the onset of Enlightenment and Rationalism with the denigration of ritual as primitive and superstitious as one of its many features. In American religious culture there was the emergence of Transcendentalism in the 19th century which was deeply inhospitable to sacrament and ritual. The Catholic novelist Flannery O'Connor coined a rather wry expression for this tendency. In a talk she gave at Swarthmore she declared:

"When Emerson decided, in 1832, that he could no longer celebrate the Lord's Supper unless the bread and wine were removed, an important step was taken in the vaporization of religion in America and the spirit of that step has continued apace. When the physical is separated from the spiritual reality, the dissolution of belief is eventually inevitable."

Let us consider a range of challenges that churches in the catholic tradition face in the immediate future in the shaping of its worship, and reflect on ways in which the monastic communities have a role to play as models. I group these challenges under the heading of a French word associated with the spirituality of Charles Péguy, *approfondissement.* The English word "deepening" is an approximation. Will the confusion that the church faces over how to order its liturgy now, be an invitation to going back to the roots, taking soundings in the depths of our heritage and the collective wisdom of the catholic tradition in its many facets? We will see.

Challenge number one: Can we see our way to bringing back to life a mostly lost theology of offering, sacrifice and oblation? "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewal of your minds, so that you many discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:1,2) Paul is talking about a full embrace of life in Christ as a way of resistance and non-conformity through the renewal of our mindset (though we would have to add a new word 'heartset' to get the full force of the Greek word he uses). An essential aspect of this renewed and non-conformed way of life is a powerful sense of the goodness and meaningfulness of our bodies. God invites and draws us as whole persons in relationship, and

so our self-offering to God in response to this divine attraction is the presentation of our bodies to God, bodies which are holy because we are identified with the Body of Christ. “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?” Paul asks sharply, in his first letter to the Corinthians, (6:15), assuming this to be such an axiom of faith that sexual misconduct violates the very core of our identity.

Liturgical renewal can never succeed in being other than a rearrangement of verbal and ceremonial furniture unless there is a spiritual re-appropriation of worship as the bodies’ offering. Our bodies ritually re-offered, re-presented to God in union with the offering of Christ. This part of our eucharistic tradition needs to be celebrated and re-explored. “And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee; humbly beseeching thee that we, and all others who shall be partakers of this Holy Communion, may worthily receive the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son Jesus Christ, be filled with thy grace and heavenly benediction, and made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him.” (*Book of Common Prayer,* p. 336)

The worship of a monastic community has to be grounded in a spirituality of oblation and offering, with the rhythm of the hours and the eucharistic assembly: bodies converging together in the chapel, and expressing through interactive physical rituals of procession, of bowing, of turning, of kneeling, of encircling, of sprinkling and blessing, the corporate and corporeal offering of the self in community. And in monastic settings where the oblation or offering is intentionally and consciously vicarious, offering on behalf of the world, this physicality of worship testifies to the ultimate goal of the yearning of God for our re-creation, so it is eschatological and intercessory. “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now, and not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for our adoption, *the redemption of our bodies*.” (Romans 8:22,23)

Challenge number two: Can we help a new generation of believers embrace a positive and rich understanding of ritual practice? Here is an enormous task of re-building, almost from scratch. There is still in our culture a pervasive bias against ritual, the ordered interplay of bodily acts in worship. It is as if there is a regressive, built-in assumption that the basic posture of the worshipper is to be immobile in a chair or pew, where he or she can be talked at or read to or sang to, and that actions and movements in space are decorative optional extras, ‘mere rituals,’ more or less charming, but always dispensable. Even basic movements and physical actions are almost apologized for by jocular priests who refer to the alternations of sitting and standing as ‘episcopal calisthenics,’ something arbitrary and quaint. Or ritual is associated with ‘high church’ antics and with tired old cliches about ‘smells and bells.’ It is in fact rare for people to have had any initiation into a knowledgeable experience of the transformative power of ritual as bodies in play, as corporate and corporeal spiritual practice.

Now this ‘knowledgeable experience’ is precisely what monastic communities have. Without it the monastic life would be unlivable. And we can easily point to ways in which monastic communities have been effective models of ritual as the bodies’ offering, and as transformative

sacred activity. The example I choose for this is the way the Community of Taizé has influenced the world-wide church in the adoption of chanting as core liturgical practice. It is an example that is close to my heart because in 1965 I spent six months with the community as a construction worker in a multi-national team of volunteers. It was truly a Pentecostal experience for me, as I took part day after day in the chanted psalms and antiphons, with worshippers of many languages, converging from all over the world. These daily assemblies united in chant, were the most profoundly grounding and transforming experiences of the divine I had ever had. I had been educated in a Cathedral School, and was fully initiated into the daily round of choral worship in the Anglican tradition at its most sublime, but here at Taizé they had found ways of chanting the scriptures which were wholly accessible, inviting and participatory. And this practice has caught on, and continues to do so because people experience it as grounding, centering and a practice that creates in the moment a felt sense of communion and community.

Rebuilding a culture of knowledgeable experience in our lives of worship will need two kinds of initiative at least. The first is coaching people in bodily worship through experiment. In the work of spiritual formation we propose experiments for people to try out. Only afterwards can we explore their actual responses and find the meaning of what they discover. Surprisingly to many people, the experiments proposed in spiritual formation are issued as prescriptions to do something physical. “Go wash in the pool of Siloam,” says Jesus, prescribing an action which will lead to enlightenment, rather than attempting to mess with the guy’s thought processes. (John 9:7)

An example that is very vivid to me was given by one of my teachers at Oxford, Professor Nicholas Zernov. Returning from a trip to his native Russia, Dr Zernov recounted the story he had heard of a parish priest with a reputation for spiritual guidance. Recently, a Soviet intellectual from the Academy of Sciences, sought him out to discuss his desire to find faith, admitting that he had been brought up in an environment of militant atheism and he was finding it totally impossible to wrap his mind around Christian doctrines. Apparently, the priest had embarked on no discussion at all. Without further ado he taught his visitor how to make a prostration, a full-body gesture used in the liturgy as well as personal prayer which consists of the signing of the whole torso with the sign of the cross and then with a stooping motion to touch the ground with the fingers. “Do this a hundred times a day”, he instructed him, “ and come to see me again in a month”. The visitor duly returned and simply said, “I am a believer.” The priest of course was drawing on generations of experience that the body can believe before the mind can, and that the actions of the body’s offering could speak from and to the heart first, and then the mind can follow in due course. Faith is an experience of the whole person.

Here is another example, this time about an experimental ritual in the context of the eucharist. It fell to me to be the presider at the Church of St Stephen and the Incarnation in Washington at the first liturgy following the election of Donald Trump as president. In this very progressive, radical church, everyone was in a state of shock and profound discouragement. What to do? Now, the church’s calendar had just given us the feast of St Willibrord, on November 7th, and I happened to know, since I am ridiculously learned, that his shrine at the Abbey of Echternach is

the scene of an annual dancing procession every Pentecost. Huge throngs snake through the streets in an ancient ritual dance which consists of three steps forward and two steps back. So I quickly instructed the servers to process into church with me, taking three steps forward and two steps back. The congregation was intrigued to say the least. I explained in the homily that the myth of constant progress was a cruel deceit. In relationship, in the life of faith, in politics, in science, in almost every human endeavor, we must integrate the experience of set-back, of inevitable failure and falling behind. Our progress must yield to the patience needed for integrating set back. In our great open space, it is the custom of this church for all to gather in a three deep circle round the altar, and I invited the congregation to approach the altar at the offertory making three steps forward and two steps back. Everybody joined in the experiment from the smallest toddler waddling back and forth to our elders, who pushed their walkers forward and then dragged them back again. The spiritual effect was dramatic. People experienced the wisdom of their bodies, and they had a felt sense: this is what life is actually like, not steady progress at all, and this alternation of progress and setback is what Christ participates in as our companion: this is the dance he leads us in as our crucified and risen pioneer. Through the ritual we found encouragement, not despair. We have knowing bodies, and if we let them have their play, then we can embrace with heart and mind the knowledge stored in them.

If the first movement of knowledgeable experience is experiment, the second movement engages the mind through the exploration of meaning. Why, we ask ourselves, is whole-person ritual actually transformative? Is it magic? Is it miracle? Well, we have discovered more about the brain in the last thirty years than all previous generations put together, and we now can begin to get an idea about the pyscho-somatic unity of the human person, and the way the brain is engaged in ritual. If we are going to deepen our liturgical culture we need to explore new knowledge that sheds light on ancient wisdom. Let us stick to the example of the ritual practice of chant, since we are focusing on the monastic church as a storehouse of spiritual experience. And because chant is a practice found in all religions.

Researchers using the disciplines of anthropology, the study of religions, and neurophysiology have now got lot of results to inform us about how chanting works. Gary Eberle, in his fascinating book *The Geography of Nowhere,* (Sheed and Ward, 1994) reports that it has been found that in all cultures the practice of chanting sacred texts has the same underlying form, whatever the language. The pulse of the chant is in bursts of between 2.5 and 3.5 seconds. Think of the psalms, and buddhist sutras, and Christian hymns. Now the researchers Frederick Turner and Ernest Poppel report that the human brain seems to process information in discreet packages of about three seconds duration. It is as if there is a buffer that becomes full after three seconds, and then there is a slight pause while this information is processed and incorporated, and passed one hemisphere of the brain to the other, before the next packet is admitted. In chanting, it seems that the pulse, co-operates with this basic rhythm of the brain. The brains capacity for synthesis and integration is harnessed. New information taken up by the neo cortex can be checked against the older store of experience in the reptilian and older mammalian brain. This integrating pulse brings to the one chanting an enhanced sense of wholeness and reconciliation of the different parts of the self. And when the chanting is done in

a group, and these processes are synchronized in the assembly of individuals, the effect is to reduce the sense of alienation from one another, to support a felt sense of oneness and togetherness which is not the artificial result of any external pressure, but a harmonizing felt as a common experience of the sacred that holds us in life together.

This state of intrapsychic harmony and group communion, referred to as 'ritual trance' where normal distinctions of time, self and place becomes indistinct is something that every human being is capable of experiencing because all human beings have the same physiology. Gary Eberle asserts, "When one participates in the group's rituals, therefore, one achieves a balance both within and without. The collective rhythm of the tribe and the unique rhythm of the individual become one. For the ritual participants this rhythm is also the beat of the universe itself, and thus all three worlds are at one." (p.115) He is referring to the three worlds of the Self, Society and the Cosmos.

He comments on the severity of the losses incurred when ritual that involves the body is set aside. "If one denies oneself this sort of ritual activity, as we could say the modern world has done in its denigration of ritual forms and the 'mere stories' that give rise to them, then one runs the risk of ending up in a state of fragmentation, alienation, anxiety, fear, dread, despair and all the other states of being into which the modern world has fallen."

With these reflections on a few of the ways the knowledgeable experience of monastic communities can contribute to a rediscovery of worship as the Bodies' Offering, our explorations have reached the limits imposed by time. We have been taking soundings in the fullness of meaning with which this chapel resonates for those who attune themselves to it. But questions about what this sacred place means for us must yield to an even more important question: what does this monastic Church of St Augustine mean to God?

You have all noticed that in Orthodox icons the laws of perspective are deliberately reversed. Instead of the lines converging on a distant vanishing point, the lines converge on the heart of the one gazing on the icon. In the icon the lines spread wider into distance, witnessing to the limitless horizon of the divine glory, and losing themselves in the infinity of divine mystery. So as we ask what does this chapel mean to God, we are aware that we can't know until we are taken up ourselves into eternity through death. But we do have intimations about what this chapel means to God when we reflect about the glory of the memory of God. God has taken into his eternal and infinite memory everything that has ever happened in this place from the first moment that the ground was broken just over a hundred years ago, to this very day. Nothing is lost to God, all flows into God's total memory, and every phase of the life of this beautiful place will take part in the resurrection of our endeavors into eternity.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was of all the spiritual visionaries of modern times the most vividly sensitive to this mystery. In section two of the first part of his book *The Divine Milieu* there is a wonderful unfolding of the eschatological promise in the Book of Revelation, that our works, what we have built and created on this earth, are going to be taken up by God into the fullness of eternity. "People will bring into it the glory and honor of the nations." (21:26) And the

promise of chapter 14: 13, “their deeds follow them.” Teilhard de Chardin breaks into prayer that we shall all grasp the implications of God’s bestowing of resurrection on all that we have accomplished: “Show all Your faithful, Lord, in what a full and true sense ‘their works follow them into Your Kingdom, *opera sequuntur illos*.” This chapel and all that it has meant and will be is being continually taken up into the fullness of God’s memory, and one day we will have access to this fullness and be amazed.

In the gospel of John, Jesus tells us that the fruit of our lives lived abiding in him will last, and so part of the mystery that gives such depths to our celebrations of the church’s centennial this week, is that it has been and is a vessel for movements of prayer, of penitence, of adoration, of enlightenment, of communion, of inspiration, of arousal, of surrender, hidden movements *that will share in the resurrection*. One day this material church will be a ruin, and later disappear. As Jesus ruefully reminded his contemporaries about the inevitable fate of the Temple: “Not one stone will be left standing on another.” But everything of the heart that will have happened here will live on in and for eternity.