

Christian Meditation: A Hermit Priest's Reflections

Where does contemplation lead one? Since it finds the Ground of Love in all reality, it leads to one's sisters and brothers: it creates a social consciousness; it leads to a deeper unity and love with and for the earth.

My hermitage is located in the heart of the ancient temperate rainforest, mid-Vancouver Island, British Columbia. The forest borders on the Oyster River which sings throughout the day and night. Now in late summer, it is all but inaudible. In the winter months the sound becomes more vibrant. But always it is music to my heart. It was this river that attracted me to this forest. Its sound is like a mantra. It reminds me of another river, the river of love that flows between Jesus and the Father which carries us on our journey. As a monk, as a hermit-monk, I seek God. But that is what we all do, search for God. We all have the archetype Monk writ deep within our being. God is the beginning and end of our journey.

The search led me here. I can't tell you when the search began. The New England Transcendentalists attracted me quite early. Emerson and Parker and Henry David Thoreau, and a friend of theirs, Walt Whitman and his *Song of the Open Road*. I wanted to go, like Henry, to the woods to see what life was all about, even in my early teens. And there was St. Paul who admonished me to "Pray always. Pray without ceasing." Was there a link between the two, between the forest and the meditative life?

And so the journey and search continued. It included teaching natural history subjects at Osceola Boys Scout Camp in the Ozarks of Missouri during my high school years, and the initiation into the honorary Tribe of *Mic-O-Say* and coming to know and respect the culture and deep religious spirit of the native peoples. They knew the Spirit filled the whole earth. It included service in the Air Force as a navigator; studying ornithology at Cornell University; studying theology and scripture for the Anglican priesthood at Nashotah House, Wisconsin and as a deacon travelling to England to explore the contemplative dimension of the Church of England; entering the Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield, Yorkshire, and being ordained to the Anglican priesthood. I returned to the U.S. to live as an Anglican hermit near Kent School, Connecticut. And then I returned to what I had begun earlier, a long and prayerful study of the Catholic Church.

Through reading Dom Bede Griffith's *The Golden String* I was given the courage and grace to enter the Catholic Church, after a year's study of the faith at St. Gregory's Abbey, Shawnee, Oklahoma. Easter of that year I spent at Gethsemani Abbey where I met Thomas Merton and spoke at length with him. He said, "Don't come here. We can make you a good monk, but not necessarily a good contemplative."

And the search continued. In 1956 I entered New Mellary Abbey, a Cistercian Monastery in Dubuque, Iowa, where for eight years I prayed the office, studied for the priesthood and meditated and bound the books for the monks in the monastic bindery. It was the time of Vatican II and as monks we were studying our roots. We saw that the hermits were the first monks, the monks of the Egyptian desert, where John Cassian went in the 4th century, seeking someone who would teach him to pray. I was given permission to travel to

by Rev. Charles A.E. Brandt (Yde)
Oyster River



DOM JOHN MAIN, OSB (1926 – 1982) "We find Christ in our hearts and then we find ourselves in him, and with him, in all creation." portrait by Brenda Bury

What does the hermit life have to do with the practice of Christian Meditation and with John Main and his teaching? John Main learned to meditate in the East and later found the same teaching embedded in our own Catholic tradition. He came to read seriously the Conferences of Cassian. Cassian was the teacher of prayer of St. Benedict who, in his Rule, admonishes his monks to read the Conferences of Cassian. Cassian learned mantric prayer from Abbot Isaac, a hermit of the Egyptian desert who passed on a tradition that he believed went back to apostolic times. And so our tradition and teaching of Christian Meditation has come down from the early hermits of the desert.

I first heard of John Main while listening to some tapes of Earnest E. Larkin, O.Carm., on prayer. The name John Main came up. There was a comparison of his teaching with others. The thing I recall is that Father Larkin liked John Main's insistence on the continuing recitation of the mantra, a teaching that goes back to Abbot

Saturday mornings. In 1988, I spent a month at the Benedictine Priory in Montréal to make sure that I was teaching it correctly. That same year I spent two months at Saccidandanda Ashram, Father Bede's Ashram in Tamil Nadu, India. The experience confirmed me in the practice and teaching of Christian Meditation. While at the Ashram I recall once Father Bede announcing at noon prayers that he had out on loan some ten books by Dom John Main, and please would some of them be returned so he could redistribute them to others. He felt that John Main was the best spiritual guide in the world today.

The point that I stress in teaching Christian Meditation is John Main's theology of prayer or his Christology: we enter into silence and stillness via the mantra, exposing our human consciousness to the glorified, human, infinitely expanded consciousness of Christ, and through him we are carried to the Father.

This leads to transformation of our consciousness. A monk takes a mysterious vow, *conversio morum*, conversion of life. This should lead to a total inner transformation. And that is why we meditate, to leave ourselves (our false self or ego) behind, to fall into the earth and die so as to bring forth fruit, to become Christ, find our true self. And since we all have the archetype of monk within us, we are all called to this same transformation, an ever deepening surrender to the love and grace of God within our hearts.

A final note: Where does contemplation (Christian Meditation) lead one? Since it finds the Ground of Love in all reality, it leads to one's sisters and brothers: it creates a social consciousness; it leads to a deeper unity and love with and for the earth.

In the Christian Meditation Retreats that I facilitate, I always link meditation with the environment. As John Main says, "We find Christ in our hearts and then we find ourselves in him, and with him, in all creation." The natural world is here primarily for us to commune with, not to exploit. We can, of course, make use of it. But primarily it is there to commune with. If we can enter into this communion with all beings of the earth, both living and non-living, we will come to realize that we are part of the earth and the earth is part of us. This type of communion is not a rational discursive process, but a way of love. Perhaps there is no other way to enter into this communion other than contemplation. We come to experience the earth and the universe as our larger self. We come to care for it deeply, passionately.

As a society, we are closing down our life support systems. This is terrifying. But there is hope that this can be turned around. As Thomas Berry points out, it is necessary for the human community and the earth community to go into the future as a single sacred community. And I think it is important to recognize that while we are distinct from the Ground of Love, we are not separate. Then we realize our unity and communion with every human being, with the earth and

Vancouver Island, to the banks of the Tsolum River, to visit a new colony of hermits founded by Dom Jacques Windany, OSB, and welcomed by the Bishop. My search took me there and this seemed to be my true home. Bishop Remi De Roo of the Diocese of Victoria, ordained me to the Catholic priesthood with a written mandate to be a hermit, the first such ordination in 200 years. Later we were given permission to find a more solitary existence and hence the move to the Oyster River, eight miles north of the Tsolum River site.

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the mantra, a teaching that goes back to Abbot Isaac. John Main's teaching reminded me of that of Dom John Chapman, OSB, a teaching that I had subscribed to for many years, even from my Anglican seminary days in the early fifties when we meditated one half hour every morning.

Here at the hermitage on the Oyster River, I teach Christian Meditation to a group who come on

ion with every human being, with the earth and with the universe. Let us not undervalue our great work, the work of meditation. •

Father Charles Brandt is a Catholic priest/hermit and lives on northern Vancouver Island. He conducts a number of Christian Meditation retreats yearly in Canada and the United States. Yde is his Danish surname. This piece was originally published in *Christian Meditation By Those Who Practice It*, Paul T. Harris, Ed., Dimension Books, Denville, New Jersey, 1993.

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