

18 May 1990
Most Reverend Remi Joseph De Roo, S.T.D.
Bishop of Victoria
No. 1, 4044 Nelthorpe St.
Victoria, V8X 2A1

Dear Bishop Remi,

I am writing you about the document from the Vatican on Christian Meditation and Prayer. I received several copies of this, one from Sr. Cecilia, SSA. I took it upon myself to send copies of the document to outstanding, well-known, and known to me -teachers on Christian Meditation and requested their critique of the document. I pass these on to you for your review and study. I have enumerated the responses in pencil, from 1 to 9. Included with each response there may be additional material which describes the authors work, etc. I send them in the following order:

- 1) A clipping from the New York Times.
- 2) A response from Dom Bede Griffiths, OSB, S. India, in whose ashram I spent Nov. and Dec., 1989. 2)b is a copy of NCR in which is printed this same response along with Pascaline Coff, OSB, a friend of long standing.
- 3) A response from Don Thomas Keating, OCSO, recent abbot of St. Joseph's Abbey, Spenser, Mass, now in Snowmas, Colorado, who teaches centering prayer throughout N. America, and the world.
- 4) Fr. Pat Hawk, Redemptorist, Bishop DeFalco Retreat Center, Amarillo, Texas, with whom I have made several retreats. Also enclosed is the announcement of the retreat to be given this summer in Portland which I plan to attend.
- 5) A response from Pascaline Coff, OSB, Prioress of Forest of Peace Priory, Sand Springs, Oklahoma.
- 6) A response from Dom Laurence Freeman, OSB, prior of the Montreal Priory founded by Dom John Main, OSB, a centre in Canada and the world for the teaching of Christian Meditation. I spent a month there in March of '89.
- 7) Another article by Peter Steinfelds.
- 8) Announcement of the retreat to be given by Sister Marguerite and myself at Glenairly in early June of this year.

I regret that I have taken so long getting this to you, but I wanted to wait until all of the responses were in.

I would like very much, at your convenience, to discuss with you the teaching of Christian Meditation, and would appreciate hearing from you in this regard.

Respectfully yours in Christ,

Rev. Charles A.E. Brandt, (yde)
R.R. 1, Site 22,
Black Creek, B.C., VOR 1CO 337-8525

Document on Christian Prayer

"Many Christians today have a keen desire to learn how to experience a deeper and authentic prayer life despite the not inconsiderable difficulties which modern culture places in the way of the need for silence, recollection and meditation. The interest which in recent years has been awakened also among some Christians by forms of meditation associated with some eastern religions and their particular methods of prayer is a significant sign of this need for spiritual recollection and a deep contact with the divine mystery."

So begins the 7,000 word letter sent in mid-December, 1989 from the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to all the Roman Catholic Bishops of the world. The purpose of the internal Church document is primarily to give Bishops support in their pastoral solicitude for the Churches entrusted to them, especially in the area of teaching Christian prayer. Therefore, the letter sets out to give sure criteria of both doctrinal and pastoral character that will allow Bishops "to instruct others in prayer, in its numerous manifestations, while remaining faithful to the truth revealed in Jesus, by means of the genuine Tradition of the Church."

One regrets that the outline set forth of the Church's genuine prayer Tradition stops short of the riches of her mystics and likewise those of the Eastern religions. While the letter states clearly that Eastern approaches to prayer should not be rejected out of hand, it gives no hint of the great depth and profound wisdom of this spirituality. John Borelli, director of interreligious relations of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs said the letter contains "an implicit recognition of the importance of studying the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, to name two, so that there will be no misunderstandings of what these traditions teach regarding meditation." (CNS 12/18/89).

The warning against the use or over-use of some Eastern prayer "techniques", while necessary, could equally include some of the Christian methods, e.g. the Jesus Prayer and breath control as outlined in the Philokalia. If overdone this too could lead to brain damage.

Fr. Thomas Keating, O.C.S.O., chairman of the North American Board for East-West Dialogue and wisdom teacher for the Christian spiritual tradition at Harmonia Mundi, October, 1989, said many of the Vatican's cautions were well taken. "In my experiences of talking with Eastern spiritual masters," he said, "they are just as cautious as this document is" about mistaking psychological states that can be induced by meditation "for some great enlightenment."
(N.Y. Times 1/6/90)

On the last lap of his journey in this life, the monk Thomas Merton set out with an icon in his Breviary on the back of which he copied in his own hand, a passage from the Philokalia:

If we wish to please the true God and to be friends with the most blessed of friendships, let us present our spirit naked to God. Let us not draw into it anything of this present world--no art, no thought, no reasoning, no self-justification -- even though we should possess all the wisdom of this world.

(john carpathios 49)

Merton's fascination with the "naked knowledge" of the God who is love, a tradition that goes back to Evagrius, would have come up short at the Vatican letter's insistence that we must never in any way seek to place ourselves on the same level as the object of our contemplation. An octagenarian Christian monk in S. India reflecting on this teaching in the document says: "Of course we don't seek to place ourselves on the same level. It is God who has already placed us there." (B.G. 3/90)

As this holy Easter season prolongs the graces of Christ's Passover who can be unmindful of the great gift of friendship given the Apostles and all of us at the Last Supper when Jesus said: "I no longer call you servants but friends," and the joy of his priestly prayer still rejoices our hearts:

"that they may be one, as thou Father in me, and I in them, that they may be one in us."

The document is a good beginning but far from complete treatise on Eastern and Western prayer.

Pascaline Coff, OSB

THE BISHOP DEFALCO RETREAT CENTER

10 March 1990

Dear Charles,

Thanks for your letter and the copy of Ratzinger's letter. My apologies for this late reply. I've been overwhelmed by correspondence these last two months. It is good to hear from you and I hope your work in the Northwest goes well.

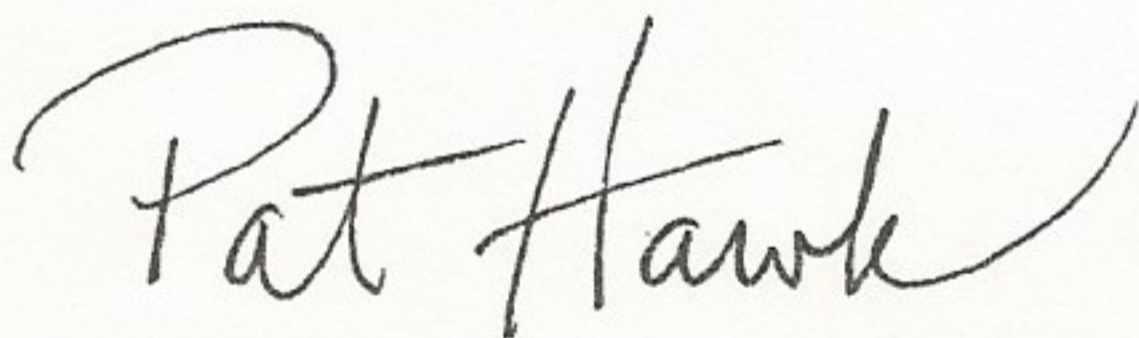
Your trip to India sounds fascinating. I hope one day we will be able to get together again and I can hear more of what your experience there was.

I met Ama Samy in Germany when I was there studying with Willigis Jaeger. He is quite a character and world traveler. I will be going to Germany in April for a big meeting with all the teachers in Europe who studied with Yamada Roshi. Yamada's son Masumichi will be there and I hope that Ama Samy will be able to make it also. It should be interesting.

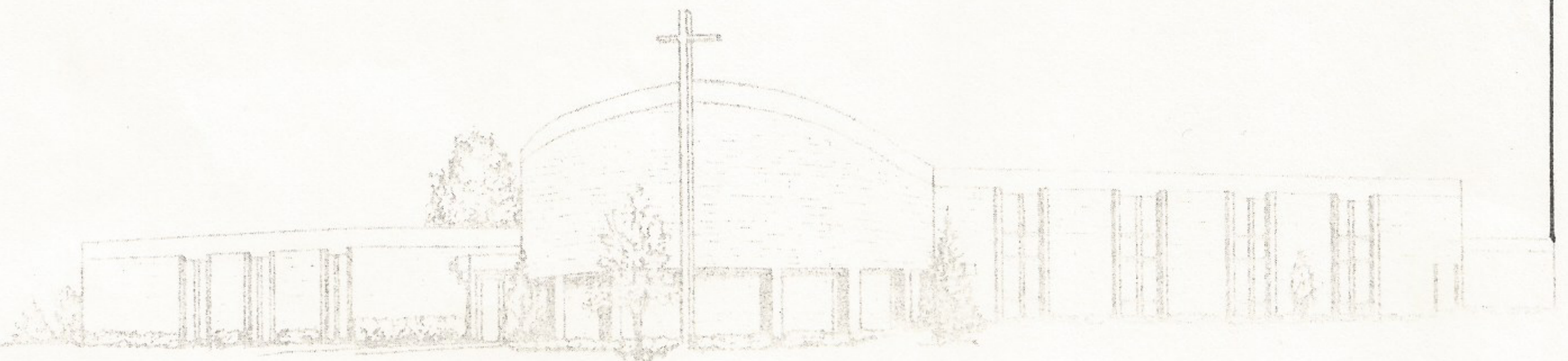
From the initial reports in the media it seemed that Ratzinger's letter was going to be a sever criticism to those who use Eastern methods in the teaching of contemplation. However, after reading the letter carefully I find that it is actually an encouragement. It gives some cautions about mistaking psychological states for true mystical experience, but all authentic teachers I know would agree with that. There are a couple of points I would take issue with, but I think that they are merely misunderstandings of what the position of the Eastern Ways is. I'm always wary when a Western writer tries to state what the Eastern Ways mean without real experience of what the Eastern Way is.

I am sending you a couple of Aitken Roshi's books. They can be ordered from Northpoint press. He is publishing a new one this year on the Mumon Kan.

Hope you are well. Live long and prosper.



Pat Hawk



The Redemptorists

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Jan. 13/90

Vatican edict shuns Eastern faiths

By Peter Steinfels
New York Times

A cathedral could be built with all the books written on prayer — how to do it, why to do it, when and where to do it, its glories and its dangers.

In mid-December, the Vatican added to this library. With papal approval, the watchdog Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a 7,000-word warning to Christians on the pitfalls of meditation derived from Eastern faiths.

In the San Francisco area, where Eastern and Western spiritualities are regularly mixed and matched, the Vatican statement was front-page news.

Elsewhere interest was far less intense but sufficient to disturb the many Roman Catholics, especially priests and nuns, who have tried to enliven or enrich their lives with insights and techniques from Zen, yoga and other strains of Buddhism and Hinduism.

Many devotees of Eastern faiths also took offense at what initially appeared to be a sharp papal rebuke in an era of growing interfaith understanding.

As the text of the letter became more widely available in the last several weeks, some Roman Catholic experts on Eastern meditation concluded that it was far more measured than the early press notices had indicated.

Eastern approaches to prayer, the document said, should not "be rejected out of hand simply because they are not Christian." But it insisted that there must be some fit between the nature of prayer and Christian beliefs about ultimate reality.

Those beliefs include the distinction between creator and human creature. Though the two are united in Jesus, for Christians the otherness of

Devotees take offence at sharp papal rebuke

each is not lost. The world is God's creation, in need of redemption rather than escape. Union with God is a grace, not something that can be mastered by any spiritual technique.

Similarly, the Vatican warned that euphoric states must not be confused with prayer or assumed to be signs of the presence of God, a state that should always result in loving service to others. Without these truths, the Vatican said, meditation, which should be a flight from the self, can degenerate into a form of self-absorption.

Some reports of the letter highlighted harsher phrases, like the warning that concentration on the physical aspects of meditation "can degenerate into a cult of the body" or that equating bodily states with mysticism "could also lead to psychic disturbance and, at times, to moral deviations."

Such concerns can be traced to the early days of Christianity, when the church opposed the gnostics, who believed that salvation came not through faith but through a mystical inner knowledge.

While regretting the negative impression the document gave, Rev. Thomas Keating, a Trappist monk and former abbot who founded a movement called Contemplative Outreach, which has introduced tens of thousands of lay Catholics to contemplative prayer, said that many of the Vatican's cautions were well taken.

"In my experiences of talking with Eastern spiritual masters," he said, "they are just as cautious as this document is" about mistaking psychological states that can be induced by

meditation "for some great enlightenment."

Rev. David Toolan, a Jesuit whose 1987 book, *Looking West from California's Shores*, is an account of his spiritual searching in Eastern mysticism and contemporary psychology, said that some of the Vatican's concerns are pertinent. "Abandonment of the world and perceptible things, being locked up in yourself — those are real dangers," he said.

Groups influenced by Eastern religion often use "a lot of loose language" celebrating "a fundamental identity with the divine," Toolan said, and denigrating the Judeo-Christian and Islamic insistence on the distinction between Creator and creation.

But Toolan doubted whether the Vatican letter would be "pastorally helpful." It was "written in an utterly dense 'churchspeak,'" he said, "hardly a readable, effective guide for any ordinary Catholic."

Stronger objections were voiced in *The Tablet*, an influential British Catholic weekly. Rev. John Wijngaards, who has worked with many people drawn to Eastern-influenced religious movements, wrote that the Vatican's letter overlooked the long Judaic and Christian histories of absorbing elements from surrounding religions.

Most important, he said, it failed to address the absence of any intense experience of God's power that sends many Christians to Eastern religions.

Rev. Joseph Roccasalvo, a member of the Centre for the Study of World Religions at Harvard, said that many people he met in Eastern religious groups were former Christians and former Catholics who told him that they had gone to church regularly but were left hungry. "They wanted God, not to hear about God," he said.

January 25, 1990

Dear Father Charles,

Thank you for your letter of January 14th.

I have studied and discussed the document with others. I enclose several articles that seem to address some of the issues and the reactions to the document that the document raises. It does not refer as far as I can see to Centering Prayer since Centering Prayer emerges out of the Christian tradition as such and is not a baptized discipline from the east.

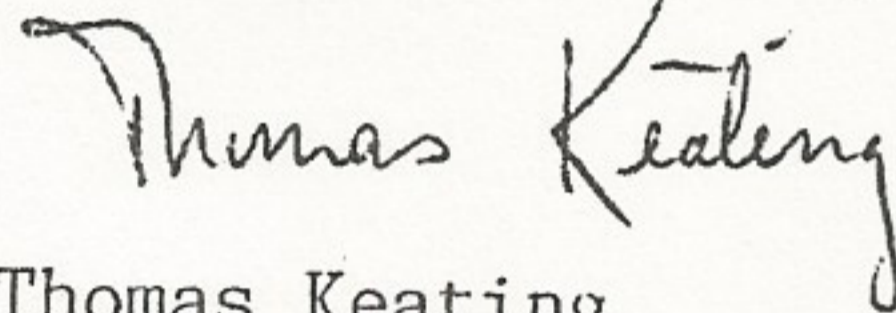
Certainly the document does not censor Christian meditation which in several places it highly recommends. Since the document is highly nuanced, it has been misinterpreted in the press to a great extent giving rise to the very questions that you present.

I hope the enclosed information will be helpful to you in advising Bishop Remi.

I am glad to hear you had a chance to visit Father Bede in India. He is one of the great spiritual luminaries of our time.

With all best wishes and in union of prayer,

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Thomas Keating". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Thomas Keating

India's population is in excess of 800 million. After two thousand years only 3% of its population is Christian. Unlike earlier evangelists carrying with them to this great subcontinent their gothic churches, clerical garb and western civilization, Pere Mochanin, Dom Henri Le Saux and Dom Bede Griffiths (the present prior of Saccidanada Ashram in southern India) adapted their life and religious customs to those of the Indian people. These early monks (from 1947) went barefoot, adopted the Sannyasi kevi habit, kept a vegetarian diet, lived in simple thatched huts with dirt floors with minimum furniture and sleeping on the floor on a simple mat. In addition the monks studied the Indians holy writings (the Vedanta) and even sometimes read these aloud at their communal office. This was a far cry, this kind of inculturation, from earlier missionaries to India, and indeed from the type of evangelization that occurred in Canada among our native people.

In time, the Indian people of the surrounding villages came to respect the religious community, and the community has grown strongly with Indian recruits. Perhaps no one today has a greater knowledge and understanding of eastern religions than Dom Bede Griffiths, OSB. It was my privilege to live at his ashram in Tamil Nadu during the last two months of 1989. Hundreds of people from all parts of the world came to consult with him during the brief time that I was there. He is truly a Christian guru.

On my return from India I received from several parts of the world copies of the Dec., 1989 vatican document on Christian prayer and meditation. This document has been reviewed in the London Tablet, America, Sunday Visitor, New York Times, etc, etc. The various reviews and interpretations of this document have created concern and some confusion among western christians who practice christian meditation or centering prayer. I sent copies of the document to five world known teachers of christian meditation for their critique. Amongst these was Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO. One response came from Bede Griffiths who asked that Fr. Keating review it before it became public. Fr. Keating stated that Dom Bede's response was the most powerful one that he had seen.