

Refuge for a Pilgrim

Journal of my 30 days in the Trappist Abbey

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TRAPPIST JOURNAL

Prelude, Day -3, Saturday, July 29, 2006

I am in the guesthouse of Trappist Abbey of Our Lady of Guadalupe outside of Lafayette, Oregon. I begin today a 3-day stay in the guest quarters preparatory to entering the abbey proper for a 30-day experience as one of the brothers. Bill and Delight Peterson, my dear friends from Fairview, Oregon, brought me on the picturesque drive through the rural countryside to the Abbey and will return to pick me up on August 31st. The Abbey is nestled into the woods just above the farmland of this alfalfa, wheat and wine grape region. Serenity is the word to describe it so far. There is quiet and a sense of peace all about the place. The buildings fit into the woods, themselves constructed of wood and of low profile. My guest room is ample in size (larger than I expect my cell inside to be), furnished like a bed-and-breakfast lodge in this area might be.

The first discovery I made is that this is a vegetarian community. There is peanut butter on the table, so I guess I will be fine. The bread in the guest dining room is packaged, however, a disappointment in a place that produces food products for its income. The Abbey I used to visit in Oceanside, California, made bread for one of its income sources. I was hoping for something similar. My first form of fasting is set: good bread.

I met Bruce and Joseph, the other two men who are doing the Monastic Life Retreat. I know nothing of them so far other than Bruce comes from Seattle and Joseph is from Colorado. This abbey practices respectful silence, but not total silence, so we will talk and I will learn more of their reasons for being here.

My reasons for being here? Desire and opportunity. I have been asking Father what my future is, from a feeling that the present pattern has run its course. So, I was looking for a way to change my pattern, temporarily, and focus on listening to him. Also, I have had the desire for many years – reaching back to the time I read of Henri Nouwen’s sojourn in a Trappist monastery in *Genisee Diary* – to experience the monastic life in a more authentic way. I have done several 3-day visits in monasteries as a guest, but I want to know what it is like to live this life each day and to sing the liturgy with familiar understanding. The opportunity came when the month of August looked open for me. Tim and his family were going to spend most of the month in Washington D.C. so I would be alone in San Francisco (their plans subsequently changed so they will be home for the month). I had something in September, but nothing in August. I checked and found that the Abbey is offering the Monastic Life Retreat in August and that they would consider me. I consider it a gift of God that they had an opening and accepted my application (I am neither Catholic nor a prospective monk). I have come, and now I look forward to what awaits me.

Prelude, Day -2, Sunday, July 30

I was wrong about the bread. It is baked here and rather good, just not the hearty, rough texture I like. And the vegetarian menu includes fish. We had a delicious salmon for the noon meal today.

I and the other “MLR’s” (Monastic Life Retreat) met with Brother Mark today. He is the monk in charge of the retreat program. It was an informational meeting, but Brother Mark’s easy, humorous style kept it light. The schedule of the abbey is structured but not strenuous, and they clearly take a casual attitude toward observance. It does not seem that I will be under any pressure. We are considered “on retreat,” so we have the privilege of a taking relaxed approach to things. Brother Mark’s advice is that we follow the rule number one of the army: “Don’t volunteer for anything.”

In my journal this morning I asked the Father, “What do you have me here for?” He answered:

- 1) *a community of simplicity. You will not form significant relationships, but, it is a community that does not project expectations onto you. Rather, it receives you as you are.*
- 2) *a rhythm of simplicity. The profound comes in meditation, listening to my Spirit, and reflection. It does not come (here) through sudden revelation nor pressured conclusions or speculations. Enter the rhythm and gather my words, as you would gather seeds while walking along the edge of a field.*
- 3) *examination of your life in an open atmosphere. Let the Psalms permeate your soul and seep into the meaning you apply to your life.*

My prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, be with me, be in me. Holy Spirit, keep me in you, the Father and Jesus. Triune God, you have brought me to this place. As the Angelus says, "Be it unto me according to your word." As the reading and commentary in Vigils rehearsed, "He (the Lord) himself knew what he would do." I am depleted, but not empty. This is good. Drain me yet more, and wash the vessel of my soul. Pour into me a new, fresh flow of yourself, water, oil and incense. Let me come out free to radiate your glory and offer a more pure version of your truth.

Prelude, Day -1, Monday, July 31

The last day before The feelings are familiar, like last day before starting college, last day before leaving for a new city, etc. They are not strong, and I have no fear. My only anxiety is about not doing things right in choir and feeling like a little kid who blows it. Today I read a few pages in Richard Rohr, *Return of Adam*, in which he talks about liminal space. This is the place where you are out of your comfort zone, in between the familiar, and out of control. It is the best place for God to meet you anew. The key is failing, for this is what breaks your attempts at control. So, I am releasing my fear of messing up in choir, to the point of hoping that I do. I want God to encounter me, and whatever allows this is good! Rohr also refers to giving over control to another. I am choosing to do this also. I am still a critic of monastic practice. I see some elements that I resist (like adoration of Mary), and I do not trust the spiritual vitality of some I see in monasteries. However, I decided today that I must submit to this community, its practices and its members, and yield control to the Holy Spirit working through them.

I made a spiritual direction call today to Doug. I was able to affirm my desire to hear God in the liturgy, especially in the recitation of the Psalms. I want to steep in the Word and let it permeate my soul. I hope that the practice of chanting the Psalms will carry them past mental analysis and into the unbelieving parts of my soul. Doug counseled moderation of my expectation, saying that not every word will get in. He prayed that the Holy Spirit will bring in those which are needed. He prayed blessing on my time, which I take also as protection of soul, spirit and body from any way that I could be contaminated by the unbelief in this place (as it exists in all religious places). This latter need I am inserting as it comes to mind now.

Last act on the "outside," before Compline closed the day: took a milk-coffee and cookies onto the front porch of the guesthouse and watched the early evening sun shine its glory through the clouds. And, I'm not setting my alarm for 4:00 A.M. tomorrow.

In the Abbey, Day 1, Tuesday, August 1, 2006

The three of us in the MLR program came in this afternoon. We settled into our rooms and then went around to relocate all the things Brother Mark had shown us yesterday. I walked around enough to feel confident, then retired to my room. In a monastery the monk's rooms are called cells and the whole area a cloister. "Cell" is a good name, because the room confines you into yourself alone. There is nothing to distract you, and not even enough space to pace the floor.

My room is sparse, yet clean and bright, having been recently renovated. It is 8x10, with a desk and chair, bed – with a 3” mattress that lets you know there is a board underneath, and a sink. There is no wardrobe and the only drawer is the one in the desk. Monks leave all possessions behind! The only ornamentation is a straw crucifix. I added my icon of the Holy Trinity. I have a single window, overlooking the garden that is to be pulled out to make way for the new church. Construction starts this month. At least my view will be changing.

I have discovered my first spiritual discipline – no, my second. The first discipline is corporate prayer, praying the liturgy in chapel. The next is fasting. There are no snacks around, and the dining hall seems to be off limits apart from meal times. So, my fast is no snacks, no latte, and no coffee-on-demand (fortunately the house coffee is passable, when available).

My first time in chapel was Vespers. In my white simple robe (Trappists wear white habits) I felt embraced in the community of faith. The robe covers distinctions (at least in theory – there is lots of individuality in facial hair) and for me brought up humility in my soul. The liturgy seems to flow more smoothly in choir, compared to observation from the pews. The introit, antiphons, and chanting of the Psalms of the day come out as from a single heart. Even the voices sound better in the choir circle. I was able to focus on the words pretty well, while trying to follow the notes and the lead of my partner. The collect and blessing from the priest leading the service came over me as the prayers of the faith of the church they are. It wasn't a *deep* experience, but it was good enough. My only goofs were to bang my seat too loud when lowering it and to be out of step for the blessing with holy water at the close of Compline.

Day 2, Wednesday, August 2

Not a very spiritual day. I slept only four hours in the night (something that “just happens” sometimes, even in my own bed) and had sinus pain the rest of the night. Laid low during the free hours of the day, napping and resting. In morning chapel I was not able to enter into the liturgy; I just tried to focus and follow. Still, resting through the afternoon brought home to me the luxurious privilege I have for the next 30 days. The many free hours knit into the structure of prayer, work, and eating – all ordered by others, are here for me to fill as my soul desires. May the bond between soul and spirit be clear so that I fulfill my own true desires.

This was my first day to work. After a few minutes pulling weeds in the garden, enjoying the feel of soft dirt, I was assigned to the bakery. I was part of the team making the fruitcake for which the Abbey is known and one of its sources of income. The head chef does the preparations and mixing, and we others pack the mix into pans and decorate it before baking. It brought a sense of order and simplicity to be just doing plain tasks with my hands.

By the time of Vespers I was feeling well again, so I could hear the words while singing and reciting them. The readings from the Scriptures and the saints speak directly to my soul. I took some extra time for meditation before Vespers began and heard the prayer rise in my heart, “Holy Spirit, may my intentions be pure.” I want a heart that is pure in all intentions, at all times.

Day 3, Thursday, August 3

Such little things, such big distractions. I had another poor night, so had a headache all day. I had trouble connecting my laptop to the internet through the house network, and when I used a telephone connection it took a long time, so I worried about what the call will cost the abbey, and that I may have done something not permitted. These bothered me all day, and interfered with my concentration on worship and prayer. I still received a little and could connect somewhat in worship, but I am disappointed that such little things keep me from my first desire. I made no attempt to pray or meditate in my private times. I hope that as I become familiar with the routine, I will be able to move into easily into direct communion with God – the ideal I hold for the monastic life.

I worked in the bakery again today, packaging the fruitcakes we made yesterday. Then I went into the garden to pull weeds. A garden is a wonderful place to meditate – but I was in my distractions, so did not take advantage. Pulling weeds in a well-tended garden does give one a sense of accomplishment, seeing the clean rows after one's work.

The rule of silence is very relaxed here. Talking is allowed so long as it does not bother a third person, which means no talking in common areas. But, chatting while working is common, although not as much as in other workplaces. Also, it is easy to stop a brother and ask a question or exchange a brief greeting. Several of them refer to “how it used to be” when there was almost no talking. Now they are at ease with talking, which makes me feel welcomed and included.

We had our first “conference” with Brother Mark today. He talked to us about journaling as a way of reflecting on our life journey, using his own story as illustration. We are to prepare our own journey for presentation the last week. In Mark's story his spiritual quest came through the story itself. He did not have to editorialize it in. I have my eye on a few monks whom I want to interview about the story of how they came here and why they are here.

Day 4, Friday, August 4

Today I am in the rhythm of the monastery. Sleep in the night was better with no negative symptoms during the day. I could focus in all chapel hours, was able to do centering prayer after Vigils, and enjoyed freedom of spirit in all the activities of the day. I confessed my conflict over using the telephone to Brother Mark, and he released me, saying it is no issue: calls to Portland are OK. However, in my own reflection I realized that the sin was not in misusing the phone, but in my resistance to submission. Since I was unsure about the call, I should have sought permission before connecting. However, I was impatient to do it that day and I saw no one whom I could ask. I hope that in my days here this resistance is broken, for it is a resistance to the Lord.

I realized something about offense and compensation. My inclination was to offer to pay for the phone call, feeling that this would set things right with the abbey and release my guilt. However, here you cannot do that. You cannot pay for anything, because you have no money and they have all things in common. In true community, an offense must be born by the whole. It cannot be satisfied through compensation by one. The whole community suffers the cost of the phone call. In chapel, one of the readings was from Exodus 21, on just compensation for wrongs done to another. Yet, here, I cannot make compensation. We all bear the effect together. So, these laws must be given “because of the hardness of your hearts,” as Jesus said, Mt. 19:8. The higher law is *let your neighbor love you as himself*.

My work assignment today was to help Brother Clarence in the forest, along with Bruce, another MLR. This was fun: got to drive an ATV in the forest and tramp all around the woods looking for an invasive weed to spray. Clarence looks, acts, and sounds nothing like a monk. He looks very at home in his overalls and hardhat on the ATV, roaming the forest trails. He speaks little, in a low voice, about instructions, not relationship. Yet, he is easy to work with, readily including us novices in his important project. I am interested to discover his monastic spirituality. I made the work a spiritual exercise: the discipline of Noticing. As I had to look intently for this one kind of weed, amidst all the growth and decay of the forest floor, so I can seek Jesus in all the aspects of the world around me.

Day 5, Saturday, August 5

A couple more brothers greeted me today, a few more nods came my way, better name recognition by me: I am feeling more part of the community. Each one who greets me for the first time offers his wish for a good retreat. I feel genuine welcome from their words and sincerity in their hearts. Each day I become more familiar with the liturgy and the chant melodies

of the psalms. Thus, I am more able to let the words flow into my heart. It seems that each collect, though a written prayer, in place for centuries, speaks of my heart or to my soul. I have no hesitation affirming these prayers.

Today was a Memorial to Mary. The hymns and prayers were deeply honoring and affirm for her a place above all women and all persons. Yet, they do not lift her above Jesus. She is not honored *alongside* Jesus, but as one who introduces us to him, and him to us. To encourage balance, on this day of honor to Mary, the scripture was read, "A woman cried out, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you.' Jesus replied, 'Blessed rather is the one who obeys the will of my Father.'" Also, the reading from a spiritual father was a caution from one of the Popes that we not elevate Mary above Jesus. I am finding a sense of comfort in honoring "Mary and all the saints." In my heart I include Linda, Dad, and Gracia, plus others, picturing them around the throne with Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the Father. I put myself in this communion of the saints and feel hope and encouragement. It is comforting to consider them there "for me."

Day 6, Sunday, August 6

I have read my own Bible only once since I came into the cloister – this morning. There are so many readings and recitations of scripture in the liturgy that my mind and heart are fully occupied receiving and reflecting on these. We recite 14 to 20 psalms in the course of the day; in 3 offices there are long scripture readings and short readings in 2 offices; an Old Testament text and a reading from the Gospels are part of the daily mass. Add to this 4 readings from spiritual writings. There is much to absorb, more than I can process. In chapel, the longer scripture readings are followed by 5 minutes of silence. This gives time for reflection, and 5 minutes of enforced silence allows for a significant inner dialogue. Reading the Bible for my own devotion or study pulls me out of reflection on the daily readings, but this is alright, even important. Were I to stay in a monastery I would have to learn the balance that is best for me.

As is my general practice, today I listened to much of the worship music I have on my laptop. What would I do without my music? I turn to my music in many of the open hours, especially the last hour before sleep. It is my familiar place, my entertainment, a comfort, and reliable nourishment for my soul. It fills the place of intimacy that conversations with Linda held. Books are my next source of satisfaction, and I feel bereft without them. I brought only one with me to the abbey – which I finished yesterday, because I want to stand open to what Jesus will bring to me. This source of study has not been revealed yet, although there are some books in the library I am considering.

When I think of the limitations Nicholas von de Flue imposed on himself in his hermitage – no stimuli, I wonder about the course of his thoughts and reflections. God has used him to inspire my own journey, but I do not believe I could go so far out (into isolation). In my hours without stimulus I am relaxed and my thoughts flow easily, but only occasionally do they proceed into significant reflection. It is in mental interaction with authors, speakers, and conversationalists that I develop my own philosophy and faith.

This experience is like being an exchange student in a foreign culture, with a language I do not know. I am not trying to become one of them, not even to understand the culture (although I will have a much better perspective on it when I leave). I am here to have my life expanded by interaction with this culture. I hear from the Father that I am to discern those interests I have which he honors from mere curiosities. I have the sense that I am doing this, and with this word I will hold more closely to his command.

Day 7, Monday, August 7

I found where the deer sleep. Working my way back and forth through the woods looking for the weed nemesis, I often walk the animal trails (the weed seeds are carried on the animals so plants often come up along these trails) and have come across several locations where deer have slept. Why does this touch me? It feels like a privilege, and an intrusion, to move along the paths of the deer, to enter their resting places. I sense the life in the woods, even without seeing living creatures. I perceive both the harmony and the dissonance, the interdependence of woods and creatures, yet the working of death all. It is a beautiful and broken world, just like my own. In this one I am an observer, not a perpetrator, so maybe it is innocence that I feel (when I repress the aggressor who arises in me when I attack the target of my search). That is a sweet gift.

I tried to use some of my free hours today for silence and Recollection. I stayed in it for about 30 minutes twice. In the silence I heard: Don't force the questions; let them come. The first question that came was, "Shouldn't I be trying harder?" With it came familiar feelings of the need to demonstrate to others that I am doing something of value; of measuring myself against activists who "do so much good." The answer was immediate: Try harder at what, at Being?

I *can* try at Being. I can hold myself within my boundaries by not giving in to the beckoning to "just do" or not giving my attention to things that I really don't care about. The discipline of silence here helps me by blocking the "nice things" I think to say to another and the incidental questions that pop up in my mind. When I have to restrain these, they face the test of importance. Then, for those that pass, I must wait for opportunity – rare here, or find another way to communicate or learn. The restraint also helps me speak from the place of Being. Both reflecting and waiting press me past the façade toward the center.

As part of my retreat I practice both Contemplation and Recollection. I do Contemplation through Centering Prayer, which I do following Vigils. This is the practice of centering inward, presenting my simple self unto Jesus and letting him touch me or speak to me in any way he will. So far I have not had any profound encounters (I have had "better" times of Centering Prayer with my Idyll-wild Ones friends), but the time of centered stillness is so rich that I do not want to rise and leave. I usually spend more than the 20 minutes I have allotted. Recollection is the practice of drawing all that I observe or experience into connection with the message Jesus is trying to give me. In addition to using some of the free hours for this, I can use the odd 15 to 30 minutes between things in the schedule. The helpful thing here is the corporate support for these practices. There is time for them. Other people are doing them. When someone observes another sitting alone and still, they understand and respect – and are careful to not disturb.

Day 8, Tuesday, August 8

The seat in choir is awkward and exerts a constant, small pain in my back. The tunes for the chants and hymns are challenging to follow so I stumble on pace. Some of the brothers who lead verses and prayers tend to mumble or strain and my ears cannot pick up their words, so I do not move easily into rhythm. The robe is too hot for this weather, so I feel my body during chapel. *And all these are for my good.* Sometime today, sitting in my choir stall (whether during the liturgy or waiting for it to begin I do not recall), I was reflecting on its discomfort, and realized that this is good. If my chair, and all of these other things, were comfortable, it would be more difficult to stay alert. These gentle nudges – and they are gentle; none of these discomforts are serious – poke my mind and body to remember what this is all about. The minimal pains help me stay alert to the intent and meaning of the acts and messages. This is a purpose of asceticism, though I can hardly call these discomforts asceticism. It is intentionally depriving of the body of what it needs or wants so that the soul can pursue spiritual truth. I will be more thankful for things that poke me when I want to worship, or study, or pray in the future. Maybe upholstered

pews were not such a good idea, to say nothing of the modern version of theater seats complete with cup holder.

I was practicing my discipline of Noticing in the forest again today. I discovered that it is easier to pick out the invasive weed by scanning than by looking. That is, when I just let my senses roam over the ground, I spot it (I think I am searching with more than my eyes). When I try to look for it, with concentration, I find some, but I miss many. I think this is because when I am in search-mode, looking hard, I have narrowed my gaze and confined my observations to a set: the identifying marks Clarence pointed out to me the first day. But, when I just scan, it seems that my peripheral vision picks it out more, or I feel pulled in certain directions. When I spot a weed, then I use concentrated looking to locate others in the same vicinity.

This is what Noticing does. It lets the spirit scan my experiences – as they are happening, or later in Recollection – and register those which have meaning for me. When I try hard to notice, when I *look* for something special, I do not find it. When something registers in my peripheral spirit vision, I can then concentrate on it and discover the value in it.

Day 9, Wednesday, August 9

An object I found in the forest yesterday has become the focus of multiple reflections. It is a seashell. I literally stumbled upon it, for I saw it when I fell to my knees after catching my foot in a hole. There were many pieces of broken shell scattered about, and one was sticking up, half-buried. When I dug it out, it was complete. I collected it, wondering where it came from. Clarence said it might be a fossil. They found many fossils when they had to dig a trench under one of the buildings to shore it up.

I cleaned it, set it on my desk, and pondered. What is it? What is its meaning to me? What shall I do with it? In a phone call that evening I shared this find with my mother. “Can you keep it?” was her first question. The question jolted me, because I had not raised the question to myself. I realized that I am coming from a mindset that automatically assumes: I found it; it is mine. But, I am in an abbey. I found it on abbey property, so it belongs to the abbey. What is more, I am in a community that has everything in common. What I find is ours, not mine. So, I am confronted by my possessive mindset verses true community; my desire to own verses the knowledge that nothing is mine. I am also asking if it is a token of my time here. Is there a message in the shell, or in finding it?

This morning I took it to the office of Terce that we MLR’s have alone with Bro. Mark. I wanted them to be impressed, and to process with me my claim or show me how to offer it to the abbey. I would have liked them to help me find its token-meaning, or probe the conflicts I discovered about possessiveness. But these did not happen. It became an object of curiosity and speculation, and an opportunity for the others to share stories of finding shells. In recollection, what interests me is this. I was in the middle of a spiritual process, exploring several attitudes in my soul, and the others did not recognize this. Nor did I assert myself to share my process (my excuse is that Terce is not a time for deep conversation). It’s OK. I am not offended. I can do the processing on my own just fine. But, it alerts me to what might be going on in another person when they present something that looks simple or mundane. Can I be so sensitive to the person, and to the Holy Spirit, that I catch when this is the case?

When I was in the woods today searching for weeds I plunged into a swarm of hornets and was stung several times. I have no reflection on this, but I thought it still belonged as a note on my experience.

Day 10, Thursday, August 10

It is common practice for the monks to kneel for a few moments in their choir stall when they enter. I copied the practice, feeling a bit awkward, then looked for some meaning in it. We kneel in the direction of the altar, above which hangs an icon of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The prayers and devotions offered in this direction sometimes refer to Mary and to the martyrs and saints. As these became more familiar to me, I could let myself enter into them, within my own theology, and I find that this has brought me to feel more connected with the heavenly communion of the Body of Christ. Now, I look forward to this time on my knees. I offer myself to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in their community of love, and I join myself with the communion of saints. I see these worshipping God, and thank God that I can enter into their worship through the liturgy.

I wonder if monks get attached to their choir stall. Mine is becoming a precious personal space (although it is identical to every other stall). When I enter I feel that all is well and all will be well. There I join in the worship of God, linking myself to the brothers here, to monks and nuns in monasteries all over the world, to other groups I know who practice regular group prayer, and to the communion of saints in heaven. I know that we will be declaring the truth of God in the Scriptures and this brings security, in spite of the many events in the world apparently in conflict with it. I know that we will be crying, "Lord, have mercy," which comforts me in my feelings of brokenness. I know that we will pray the Our Father, the Lord's Prayer, which reminds me of my hope, our hope. I know that we will receive a blessing from the Abbot, which flows like oil over my soul, enclosing me in peace.

Day 11, Friday, August 11

I came here to allow my spirit to come more open to God so I could receive more from him. So far it is from my body that I am learning the most. Working on the spraying project in the woods is alerting me to perceptions through my body that I did not realize. I walk in on ground littered with fallen branches, through dense blackberry patches, over terrain that climbs and drops, dips and mounds in very short stretches. I sometimes must duck nearly to my knees to get under branches, or work my way through thickets of young trees. I walk forward and backward, always looking at the ground ahead or beside. I am seldom looking directly at where I am stepping. Yet, my feet find solid ground. My legs rise over obstacles or fall to lower terrain. My head avoids low branches, and I even seem to stop short of most spider webs. How does this happen? Most of my recreational walking is on trails. I am not *that* familiar with woods. It seems my body is reading the environment while my concentration is on looking for the weeds. I am observing and discerning with more than eyes and ears. I knew that horses do this, and Native peoples, but I did not know I could. I believe that this is a work of the Holy Spirit, doing the very thing I referred to in the opening sentence. I am becoming more open in spirit, but not through the means I expected (so far).

I want also to believe that reciting the psalms in the daily office is doing the same thing in my soul. I am still mostly concentrated on being on the right page, speaking on the right line, and catching the correct tune. The words reach my soul rarely. Yet, something is happening. I am slowly entering in more deeply. I am feeling the emotions in the psalms even when I cannot hold the complete thought. Reciting or chanting in unison brings out some of the overtones in words. My spiritual perception is expanding, while my understanding is limping along.

I have had a few more conversations with brothers. Some come during the two offices the MLR's take with just Brother Mark or Brother Richard. Some come during work, or a brief exchange on the way to work. Also, the MLR's have had some sessions of instruction in monastic life and faith, which elicit discussion. The discipline of silence in the abbey has not diminished the ability of the monks to talk! Their conversations are fresh, lively, and spiced with humor.

Day 12, Saturday, August 12

As practiced in a monastery, the liturgy is more than the recitation of words and singing of songs. It is *acted*. The motions we make are integral to the worship we are offering. The motions and postures I follow fit me into the flow of the words. They begin with slowing my pace as I walk toward the chapel, shifting into the contemplative pace of the office. I don my robe, loosing the distinctive of self and uniting myself with the community. Entering the church, each monk makes the sign of the cross over himself, and so do I. It is the sign of belonging to Jesus, who includes us in his Body. When crossing in front of the altar, we bow, showing reverence to the presence of Christ. Coming into my place in choir I kneel, joining myself to the hosts of heaven and earth worshipping the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Waiting for the office to begin, most monks stand facing the altar, heads bowed. I have adopted this posture also, and let it turn my soul toward the service we will offer. A tone sounds and all make one step sideways, “stepping up” into readiness, and the first recitation is made still facing the altar. When the doxology is spoken, all face the center and bow. This gesture of adoration to God’s glory is made each time the doxology is offered. While reciting the liturgy we stand, although we are allowed to sit for brief periods in the longer sections. Standing together, united in posture yet individualized by our choir stalls, we are the church praying and declaring the Word of God. We sit for the reading from the Scripture and the other reading, and we remain in silence for several minutes, allowing for personal reflection and listening to the Holy Spirit from the reading. We bow for the cry, “Lord, have mercy,” and when saying the Our Father. These deep bows bend the body and lower the soul. In them I hear the call to humility, and feel it within my soul. At the close of the office we turn again to face the altar, offer the closing prayer and receive the abbot’s blessing. We leave the chapel in silence, again bowing when we cross in front of the altar.

The actions lead into the text of the liturgy, show its meaning through a gesture, and move us out in a reflective attitude to put the message into practice in our work and relationships. The liturgy has become a more complete experience for me with these motions. They turn prayer into a dance, one I am learning to do more gracefully. The motions of the dance are part of the communion of the dancers. The moves give a flow to communication, leading from one word to the next, from gaze to touch. It is a sacred dance.

When I was first making these gestures, I tried to put words to each one. I wanted to speak something to God as well as show something. I felt that this made the gesture meaningful. But now I find that the gesture speaks. The motion is a form of prayer. My body expresses what is within. My movement responds to the call from heaven. Like the clasping of the hand on one you love or turning your face to gaze upon a child, the meaning is in the action. Words are not necessary. And, just as with these actions, repetition is sweet.

Day 13, Sunday, August 13

I came for 30 days to give myself ample time to reflect and listen. Yet I still feel pressured. The urgency to *get* something out of my time here pushes like a current through my soul, which is trying to become calm and deep. It reminds me that I must “use my time wisely.” It challenges me to be sure to ask the right questions – of the monks, of self, of God – so I get more insight. It criticizes me when my mind loses focus in the recitations, readings or prayers, taunting me that I missed an opportunity.

What is offered here is a calm, leisurely pursuit, a quest for God as God, followed at an unhurried pace. Can I turn my attention to my primary goal, knowing God more deeply, and let any answers I need come as auxiliaries? Instead of sinking into the pull of the current, can I swim relaxed in the pool of my contemplative desire? Lord Jesus, you who knew this struggle, give me grace to do so.

Sunday’s are leisure days here. The day begins and ends at the same hours, but with no work there are more unstructured hours. I choose to enter into the leisure. I read, do some

journaling, listen to my worship music, and sit in the sun. The observation about urgency came in a journaling time. I can use the leisure of Sunday to counteract the pull of the current. But so far, I must exert myself to do so.

Day 14, Monday, August 14

Today I just pushed through. I woke up with some distress in my head and stomach, the result of excess yesterday afternoon. There was a public ceremony of dedication for beginning construction of a new church for the abbey, with a reception afterwards. It was too much socializing and too much red wine for me. I was surprised that I got engaged in several conversations with guests, but they drained me, I think. So, today was uneventful. I dutifully went through the offices of the day, and was able to take in a little from the psalms and readings. I did not do centering prayer or personal prayer, but rested instead. My work assignment was the bakery again, repetitive and the same as what I did there before. In the afternoon I worked on my story project for the MLR program. It was just a plain day in the life of a monk, so no reflection today.

Day 15, Tuesday, August 15

Today is a feast day in the Catholic calendar. For the monks that means no work and beer, wine and special desserts at dinner. My own day was the opposite of yesterday. I was well rested, open to the celebrations, and eager for the drinks and desserts. It is a feast of St. Mary, and I was ready to object to much of it. However, I took counsel with Father Casey before today to learn the Catholic perspective, not just hold the Protestant critical view, and today I tried to listen deeply to both words and feelings in the ceremonies. I was drawn in. This is more a celebration of the glorious destiny of the church, reigning with Christ, than it is of Mary in heaven. When we* sang of her beauty and purity, I anticipated *my* beauty and purity, and that of all the church. When we* acknowledged her alongside Jesus (and the liturgy always gives priority of place to Jesus), I pictured the church-bride in her royal place. The affirmation of Mary beside Jesus, in Catholic teaching, is that she is just the first of all Jesus' disciples who will stand beside him in glory and wonder. I was able to enter into the affirmation and have my own perspective enlarged. It was a relief too; then I could enjoy dessert without feeling like a hypocrite.

And that's where I was disappointed. Bro. Paul's apple pie was good, but the rest of the meal was rather bland, and the offerings of beer and wine limited. The monks did not seem disappointed, though. I don't know if they are pious and indifferent or just old and disinterested. Then, how much can you tell from men who have learned to eat in silence and expressionless? Is it in their vows that they are not to betray either disappointment or satisfaction? I noticed that few of them took advantage of the beers and wine, although they went big for the ice cream. Me, I was ready for a good meal, and my disappointment exposes the power that my appetites still hold over me. The Dessert Fathers would be as thankful for a crust of bread as for a full meal. They worked to bring all appetites into subservience to the pursuit of God and his love. I equate a wonderful meal with love. They moved beyond this, and could affirm God's love in whatever they were offered. I want to be so enraptured with God's love that I taste it in every meal and see it in every face. Lord, have mercy on me.

* When I first typed this paragraph I wrote "they." That was after the day offices. When I was waiting in the chapel before Vespers the Holy Spirit pointed this out, and I realized that it must be "we," for I choose to be included in this community.

Day 16, Wednesday, August 16

The mid day office (“Sext”) offers an interesting sight. If you notice the feet of the monks as they enter the chapel you will see work boots and coveralls under the habits on many. These monks *work*. They dig and hoe in a large vegetable garden. They drive tractors for heavy work around the grounds and a caterpillar for clearing the forest. They handle shovels, rakes, wheelbarrows and lawn mowers. They do carpentry, plumbing and electrical work in the buildings. They may have gotten dirty in the recycling shed or the machine shop. They may have wearied their hands in the bakery or bindery. At the appointed hour work ends promptly and all retire to the chapel to lift work into prayer, and petition God, “While you keep the body whole, Shed forth your peace upon the soul.” I recognize that I do not carry any responsibility for the work projects so I am not under pressure, like some may be, yet, this mid day prayer is a restful re-focusing of my body and soul on the central work we do: contemplation of the love of God. In the Rule of St. Benedict, work is prayer. It is done unto God, and it stands equal with meditation before him. I do not say mental prayers while I am working, but whenever I am reminded of the mid day office, I offer the work I am doing as worship.

My assignment in the forest was halted. Clarence wants to check with the local government forester before continuing the operation. I have taken a couple of walks since then, and, now that my eye is keen for this weed, I notice it everywhere. And I am troubled. We are trying to eradicate it, and we worked diligently in several sections of the forest, yet the weed is still pervasive. I started to feel discouraged and to question my efforts. Here I had gone after every little leaf I saw, had crawled into the middle of berry patches to spray a small clump, had roamed back and forth across difficult terrain to take out just one more spot. Yet, I saw numerous plants along the trails I walked, even huge outbreaks in some areas. What is the good of my work in the face of all these other infestations? I was tempted to be critical of those who worked these areas. I wanted to go higher up to get answers, to seek out the government forester and learn his master plan.

Then, while I was walking and pondering (or should I say grumbling?), I turned my feelings and questions to the Lord. After I settled down enough to listen, he answered. I had been assigned a particular area to work, under direction, that of Clarence. My task was to do as thorough a job as I could where I was assigned. It was my responsibility and challenge to take out every evidence of the weed I saw – a challenge I enjoyed. That is all. That is enough. The other areas of the forest are not my responsibility. I do not need answers from higher up. The problem rests with these officials, not with me. After this exchange I came to peace, and came back to joy in the forest and in my work. I could notice weeds and have no concern. I could recognize where others had missed some and let it go (certainly I had missed many plants too).

This is the way it is in the Kingdom. “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. ... The owner’s servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you my root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’” Matt. 13:24-30. When I am given a task by the master of the kingdom, whether to search out weeds in my own life or to do clean up in a certain area in the work of the kingdom, that is all I am responsible for. If I notice the same weeds in another person or in another area, I am free to leave them until the Lord’s harvesters arrive.

Day 17, Thursday, August 17

Today it all felt routine. The unvarying schedule is feeling tedious. The absence of anything different to look forward to in the day is sapping my enthusiasm. Even the meals are routine. The virtue of this place is its isolation. You really can be without stimulation from the outside world: no TV (they have one, but it is rarely on), no radio, no daily newspaper, no billboards, no casual conversations with people on the street or in parking lots. The reason for the isolation is to keep focused on the primary calling: contemplation. However, at this point in my stay it is also leaves an emptiness. That is probably the point. Emptiness is space to be filled, and I am seeking a fresh filling of the Lord's Spirit. I ask for this. I sit in quiet to receive, and the Father is touching me and speaking to me. But there is a lot of just routine and near boredom too. I have not asked any of the other monks if they experience this, because my purpose is not to interview them but to enter into my own experience, but my guess is that they would admit to the same.

What is the difference between routine and ritual? I looked up the words in the dictionary and the only difference in definitions is that ritual is "solemn" and often associated with religious observance. Applying these here, work and leisure are routine, the office and meals are ritual (meals are at least *solemn*). Yet, the liturgy of the office is more than solemn routine (in spite of the fact that the monks seem intent on the solemn aspect of it, by their demeanor). In this ritual we are carving out of daily routine, our routine and the world's routine, time for deliberate sacred expression. It is more than solemn. It is holy. It acquires some sacred character from its heritage of rites of the church throughout the world and the ages. It holds more in its use of Holy Scripture. It gathers yet more from the hearts of men (and women, in convents) turning their attention to the God whom they address. The "routine" part catches me when I loose concentration, but the words, the cadence or awareness of my brothers chanting quickly orient me again, and I am in the holy place, giving holy expression of the truth of God. Surely one does not need the divine office or a monastery to affirm the truth of God, even regularly. But, they help.

Footnote to routine. Because of the construction project one of the hallways we use to exit the chapel has a temporary closure of plastic sheeting. After Compline all monks go this way in a line. Those ahead of me passed through, each lifting the plastic sheet, keeping as normal as possible. I, the new person not yet completely immersed in the routine, held up the sheet for the line behind me.

Day 18, Friday, August 18

I am still working on routine and ritual. One factor that heightens the sense of routine is that we work six days a week. Saturday is the same as Monday through Friday. Saturday is usually an adventure day for me, although the adventure may be no more than going to a favorite coffee shop. Here, only Sunday is different, and it offers no adventure. This pattern must go back to the founding of Trappist Abbeys in the eleventh century, when all people worked six days a week. It may also be because if they did not work on Saturday, what would the monks do? Anyway, I have not broken through the *feeling* of routine to something more spiritual.

Then, this morning when I knelt in my choir stall before Vigils I heard, "Constancy." What seems like repetition is more significantly a demonstration of the constancy of God. The definition of constancy includes: "steadfastness, firmness, fortitude." It is also "steadfastness of attachment to a person or cause; fidelity;" and, "invariable, unchangingness." Those are good descriptions of the immutable God. They also describe the life and purpose of the abbey, especially, "steadfastness of attachment to a person." No matter what is happening around the abbey, or within it, the office will be said. No matter how the members of the community, monks and guests, feel, the office will go on as prescribed. The readings are ordered by the liturgy, not be events, so we work our way through the Psalms and the Scriptures as they come. All of this

upholds the unchangingness of God. He is constant, steady, faithful, regardless of people and events. This affirmation carries a sense of security, security in God, even when the readings do not seem relevant to the events of the day. It is also a call back to focus on God's long plan, his eternal purpose. I have often *said*, in consolation for difficulties in my life, that God is still faithful to his purpose, but demonstration of this in the ritual of the daily office communicates it even more profoundly.

Will I continue to say the daily office after I leave here? No, I cannot maintain that ritual without a community. But, I will remember that my brothers here are repeating it, and I will remember the message of constancy in it.

Day 19, Saturday, August 19

Routine is also rest. Today is a day of significant memory for me, one that often brings deep emotions to the surface. I wondered how I would be and what I should do with the day. As I entered my choir stall for Vigils I heard, "Sabbath." I knew that I was to take the day as a sabbath, rest. I also realized that the monastery routine would help me do this. By now the schedule is familiar and I move easily from room to chapel to refectory to work to chapel to room. I had been doing the same work assignment for several days, and doing it again would be routine, yet interesting (I am back in the woods, spraying the blackberry bushes that threaten recently planted trees). In the afternoon the abbey was even quieter than usual as the monks were all attending a play presented in the chapel. I choose not to go and to use the time in simple ways, alone. I rested all day, even when active. I received sweet consolation in my heart and mind and felt at ease emotionally, physically and spiritually. Blessed routine.

I do not think I have entered into contemplation yet. During the office, while I am in centering prayer, eating my breakfast or supper alone (because these meals can be taken over a couple of hours there are few if any other people in the room), or just sitting quiet, my mind is active, my thoughts rapid. I feel open and receptive, but I do not sense a flow in from the Spirit or a lifting of my soul to God. What *is* happening is a stronger awareness of wholeness. I feel more harmony of body, soul and spirit. The steady, slow pace of life here allows body and soul to stay in sync. The constant diet of Scripture and the perpetual invitation to prayer turn soul and body toward spirit. The routine motions, diet and work are quieting the body's demands and disciplining it to listen more to soul and spirit. This is probably the way into contemplation.

Day 20, Sunday, August 20

In my current job in the forest I am to look for very young trees and drive back the weeds that threaten them, especially blackberries. These trees have been planted wherever there is open space, and already weeds, grasses and the pervasive blackberries have crowded them. Some of them are so hidden that I literally have to walk over them to find them. I will spot one a few paces off, and as I go toward it, through the tall grass, I will step over another tree. Then I knock down the tall thistles, push away entangling vines with my boot, and spray the blackberries encroaching on its small space. I recalled Jesus words about the sower with seed, "Other seed fall among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants." (Matt. 13:7) I find in this work a parable of my own journey as pilgrim. As I go along I come upon little "plants" of faith. My service to the Sower is to push back things intruding on their development and open them to more light. Often it happens that while I am pursuing one group, for example in a seminar, I "stumble upon" a little plant of emerging faith, a person seeking more understanding of God and his ways. I then have the joy of offering something to open them to more Light. I have come to realize that my journeys toward destinations, e.g. seminars, are just ways the Sower guides me to these growing ones he has planted.

This job in the forest I have been doing *alone*. Apparently it is unusual for Clarence to send a worker out alone, but he had other tasks, and when I told him that I had a cell phone and could contact someone in an emergency, he sent me off. This part of the picture hit me today as I was doing this reflection. This service to which I have called is something I do wandering alone in the woods. If it is indeed a parable of my calling in this season, it confirms my desire and the opportunities I have been given to serve God and his Kingdom as a lone pilgrim.

Day 21, Monday, August 21

Compline is my favorite office of the day. It has been since the first time I visited a monastery. It is the one office that never changes. The same words are spoken and sung and the same psalms chanted each evening. Its uniformity gives comfort and its message is peace. Compline completes and closes the day. We sing, in Psalm 4, “I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety,” and in Psalm 91 (90 in the Catholic Bible), “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.” We give to God our work of the day and receive from him the promise of his keeping. I may walk in working through some emotion or debating a concept, but in the office I let these go, and I walk out composed and ready to sleep. This is the moment that begins the “Grand Silence” in the abbey (and in all monasteries), so everyone respects each other’s quiet, and the peace we gain in Compline is continued in full cooperation.

Earlier today I asked one of the monks what we are doing when we recite the psalms. He replied instantly, “We are praying with Jesus. Jesus is praying in us.” The Psalms were Jesus’ prayer book, his worship resource. They have been the prayers and worship songs of God’s people since the time of David. We continue as the people of God today, offering worship in unity with the church throughout the world and with the “communion of saints” already in heaven. “We are praying what God wants us to pray, his word,” the brother said. There is security in this.

I have experienced many forms of worship and of prayer with Christians in many different faith communities. All are good and honoring to God. All have their strengths. The form of worship in the abbey is not the best or the primary one (although the monk I talked with would say it is), but by worshipping as Jesus worshipped and praying what he prayed, this form lets me feel close to the heart of the Father. And I have this even when I do not feel emotionally or mentally connected through the service. It is a deep awareness of God’s acceptance. “I lie down and sleep in peace ...”.

Day 22, Tuesday, August 22

Monks complain too. Just like the rest of us. I have been here long enough to catch echoes of their complaints. They get irritated with each other. They get frustrated when things don’t go according to order. They cause offense and take offense, all just like the rest of us. But, the discipline of silence exerts a valuable check on these feelings. It keeps one from speaking out from the immediate impulse. You can’t blurt out your frustration. You can’t accuse or blame your brother. And, maybe most significantly, you can’t gossip the issue to someone else. You are forced to keep silent, which allows the Holy Spirit to turn the problem onto yourself. Without the escape of venting things upon others, one finds more energy to process the deeper issue in oneself. The silence re-reflects the matter onto oneself, which is where it belongs.

I was late to None (pronounced “known”) today. This is the afternoon office we MLR’s have together with Brother Dick, so there are only four of us. I forgot it completely; even the intention of going had dropped from my mind today, until I noticed the time on a clock. This yanked me back to the schedule. I walked in for the final “Amen.” Because of the rule of silence, I was able to make my apology only by the hand sign for “I’m sorry.” I could not use

words to make excuse or to soften my offense. The result is that I must allow each person to deal with it within himself and with Christ. I also can take it up only with Christ. And this is good. Surely it is good to be able to make amends with words, and to hear forgiveness spoken to us. However, when silence is the rule, the Holy Spirit is allowed to work in other ways, ways which I find go even deeper.

Some notes about silence in the Abbey: There are times when the monks meet together and can air grievances, make complaints and work things through in discussion. Individual monks are permitted to speak with one another if they agree and set aside a time to do so. The rule of silence is stronger than its practice. The brothers tell me that “in the old days” it was much more strict and monks could communicate only with hand signs, except for Chapter meetings. Now they manage to speak to one another, albeit quietly, in short exchanges during the day and longer conversations during work. One brother told me that keeping the rule silence is another matter that rests with the individual – and his obedience to God.

Day 23, Wednesday, August 23

I took off my watch when I entered the abbey. I just have to listen for the bells. A bell calls us to chapel for each office, and if there is a special event (like singing practice yesterday evening) a bell rings five minutes before it is to begin. The bells are more than time signals. They are a reminder of what we are about. Tonight I went into the chapel before Compline to meditate. Instead my mind ran about with many thoughts. Then the bell rang, and I was recalled to my purpose. The bell is a good sound. It beckons. It comes from above, calling from heaven, as it were. On feast days it rings joyously to begin Lauds, leading us in celebration. On Sunday nights it echoes solemnly as the Host is held up before being placed in the ark.

And the bells lead us in the Angelus Prayer*. I have come to appreciate this prayer we offer three times a day – after the first office, Vigils, after the noon office, Sext, and after the last office, Compline. It is the prayer of submission, following the example of the first disciple, Mary. In this prayer I receive anew the word of declaration – to me! I make my own submission, “Be it unto me according to your word.” I yield in humility that the Word may become “flesh” in me and be offered to the world in my life. The Angelus is offered to the rhythm of the bells: three rings for each section and twelve for the finale, which I take as celebration of what the Lord is doing in me and in all of us who pray.

I am still not “into” the offices enough to draw from them as much as I would like. I expect that it takes years to become free of self-consciousness and simply let the messages being read and chanted speak into the soul. One factor slowing down my assimilation of the form is that we change chant tunes. The number of chants is limited and their use is repeated in cycles, so the monks know them all well, but I am learning a new one every few days. Monastic life and worship is not designed for the casual visitor. The vow they take is for life, so years are available for the process of assimilation.

I have been a not-so-casual visitor many times in monasteries, and it has always been a moving experience to sit in on the worship, which visitors do from pews in the public section of the chapel. There I am lifted by the beauty of the scene and sounds. I listen for the work of the Spirit in the psalms and readings. I find solace in the gentle rhythm of the service. Yet, I always recognized that there is more to be experienced, which is why I engaged in this retreat. As a visitor to a grand garden one enjoys the flowers and plants, and can take inspiration from the beauty. But, it is the gardener, who toils daily in the garden, who is intimately familiar with each plant and who knows it in all seasons who takes the deepest pleasure in the garden and receives more from its beauty because of all that he puts into it. The monks who labor at their worship year after year are the ones who receive the most from it – if they do it from love.

* See Appendix for a copy of this prayer.

Day 24, Thursday, August 24

I got it. I think I got the idea of the liturgy. I have been trying to pray the liturgy, trying to use its words to offer my praise or petition to God, trying to fit my situation or that of others or a situation in the church or the world into the text of the Psalm we are chanting. I have been trying to use the liturgy and Psalms to make my prayer and my worship. But it is not that I pray the liturgy. *The liturgy prays through me.* Jesus, in the Psalms, prays and worships through me. The church, architect of the liturgy, is praying and praising through me. This is probably taught in Basic Liturgy class to Catholics and in other liturgical churches, but it came to me today, during the Mass, as a grand insight. *This* is corporate prayer, and not just by the people gathered in the room. It is the whole church at prayer, including the church above. The symbol of this corporateness is the uniform language in the liturgy. There is a part for the individual: to add faith to the words as they flow through the heart and mind. I can incorporate my own worship and petition into the language, and I do this in many of the prayers, so there is a way for individual expression. But what we are doing in choir, and with the congregation in the celebration of the Eucharist, is forming a channel through which prayer and praise flow. My tongue is the tongue of the Body of Christ. My heart is a home for the heart of Christ. My mind is an interpreter for the Holy Spirit. My being is an orator for the faith of the church, declared back to the God who inspires it.

I had much more freedom in the offices today after this insight. I was less concerned with doing it right and more open to let it happen through me. I felt joy, and I was relaxed. In Vespers we made a real hash of the chant. Leaders were off key, the organ started the wrong hymn, our side of choir was short several members so we sounded weak and also tentative. I was unsure of the tune for the chants and made several mistakes. Yet still I felt the joy. I could let the liturgy do the work, not our performance*. I want to add that “getting it right” is a great help to the flow. When we are in key and together we are more confident, we sing stronger, and the flow is more fluid. We feel more of the faith and joy in what we are expressing. So it is worthwhile to practice and to work at doing it well. Yet, the quality does not depend on our performance. The quality is already there, in the liturgy and the Psalms. The Holy Spirit renews his prayer each time we meet.

This is, of course, not the only way and time that the church prays and that Christ prays through his people. I will engage in many more models of corporate prayer when I go from here. Now I understand better that it is not me, and not up to me. The act of the liturgy is the substance and the faith.

*In work today another MLR and I were helping dig a large hole for a tank. We had to use a sledgehammer on some old pipe, and my cohort was using his arms to work the sledge. I showed him the better way to swing and strike with it, and said, “Let the hammer do the work, not your arms.” So it is with prayer in the liturgy.

Day 25, Friday, August 25

I have entered my final week here. Many emotions and thoughts are working their way up and out. I am ready and eager to go back into the world, and I am feeling the pull of my attachment to this community. I am counting, “Six days and I leave.” “One more week and I will be with my family.” “This is my last Friday in the Abbey. “This is my last Festive Eucharist.” “When is our last session with Brother Mark?” The schedule has taken hold of me; I will miss having my days ordered by the seven prayer offices. I will even miss rising at 4:00 A.M. and starting the day in Vigils (of course I could continue this practice, but I won’t). I will miss the bells calling us to chapel and leading us in the Angelus Prayer. I will remember with relish my days working in the forest, but I probably won’t miss them: it is hard work. I will *not* miss the

meals – except George’s raisin-nut bread, but I would like to hear the end of the book we are reading during the noon meal.

I will miss the fellowship of these brothers. Even though I have had very little personal contact with them (except for Bro. Mark, the host and guide for the MLR’s), I have come to appreciate them; I think I can say, love them. It is a testimony to the strength of the human personality that they are each so distinct. When they entered the order they took a vow of stability, which means they will remain with this Abbey all their lives, unless extreme circumstances call for a change. One of the elder brothers entered when he was 17. Others entered in the 20’s or 30’s, a few at later ages. So, these men have lived together, in a rather limited space, for 30, 40, even 60 years. They wear the same habit. They rise at the same time and go to bed at the same time (some variation there). They follow the same daily schedule, except for the differences in daily work assignments. They eat the same food (except for those few on special diets). They hold to the same theology, at least to that proscribed by the Catholic Church; I am sure there are differences in other matters. They do *not* hold the same political views, I have learned. They do so much in unison, yet they are all individuals. I have had enough contacts and have heard enough brief comments to pick up some of this individuality, and it is just as definite as with any collection of persons joined in a common enterprise. The Abbey is a community of *persons*, working for the same purpose, utilizing their differences to accomplish this purpose, just as they use the common practices.

Day 26, Saturday, August 26

I am just a beginner in the discipline of silence. I have learned to keep silent in my speech pretty well, so I do not say something just because it is in my mind. But, I have not come to silence in the thoughts themselves. I realized this today when I noticed a brother who had changed his haircut. I thought of a couple of remarks to make to him, and immediately held them according to the rule of silence: no conversation. But, the remarks came into my mind. They were not silent there. “Whoever slanders his neighbor in secret, him will I put to silence,” says the psalmist (101:5; 100:5, Catholic Bible), a text we recited in Terce today. It is this slander in the secret place of my mind that I want to put to silence. My thought-remarks, if they are humorous, make light of my brother’s action. If they are flattery, their praise may be of something he did not intend. Usually such remarks are a projection of something in my soul: envy, disappointment, fear. Words, should I speak them, that are appropriate, would follow his words; would respond with respect to his interpretation. They should not project mine.

Silence in the thoughts is nurtured in love. Love of my brother embraces him as he is, in whatever action he is taking. It does not judge him but honors him, respects the integrity in him. Thoughts would then flow from this respect, this honor, and would embrace him in acceptance. There is no place in love for thoughts that are projections of myself. When I am silent in thoughts, such remarks as I wanted to make to this brother do not even arise. My thoughts will speak the blessing that the love in my heart holds for him. Then, it should be only with great care and hesitation that I utter them. In community, silence must be practiced in love. It is not enough just to be quiet. The stillness must lie calm in the love of the Father – for me and for the other. Even in silence there is communication: gestures, looks, posture, whatever emanates from our soul. When my silence is bathed in love, all forms of expression, with or without words, will communicate this, to both the other(s) and myself.

I wonder what would be the next level of silence that I would learn if I stayed here.

I stopped my centering prayer exercise. It is a step in disconnecting from the pattern here. Now I take a first coffee after Vigils; my pattern in normal life. I never “broke through” in centering prayer. It did not bring me into a higher consciousness of God. It did bring me into a deeper harmony with myself. The kneeling pad and bench gave me a comfortable posture, letting me sense the structure of my body. The breathing pattern felt like a cleansing and refreshing of

my insides and my soul. The peace and composure I feel in the exercise is its conscious benefit. I know that these are all part of gaining higher consciousness of God, so I accept this benefit also.

Day 27, Sunday, August 27

The liturgy is supposed to carry mystery and to point us to the mystery in God and of God. For me, the place of greatest mystery is the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament which we do at the close of Vespers on Sundays. The Host, the bread of the Eucharist, is taken from the tabernacle in which it is kept and lifted up for us to venerate. Prayers are offered and benedictions sung. The Host is then returned to the tabernacle. The priest acts in great reverence, the ringing of the bell accompanies the display of the Host, and silence is held for several minutes during the ceremony. Over the tabernacle hangs a crucifix. This scene is a depiction of the Incarnation for me, and a poignant reminder of Christ's passion. Here are the mysteries of God-on-a-cross; of God-with-us; of the church-his-body. The ceremony is mysterious, with its candles, bells, and slow movements. It is a compelling way to reflect the greater mysteries it represents. I look. I sing. I pray. But mostly I am just there, before something, someOne, who is beyond understanding.

There are some icons in the abbey, located in places where we can easily look on them and meditate on the truth they communicate. Icons differ from other religious art. In other art the artist displays an image *in* which we see something *about* God, his work, or the gospel. It is a reflection of God. An icon is a window to look *through* to glimpse the glory of God or his work. In an icon the artist remains hidden, for the message is not his/her experience of God. The work is meant to lead the viewer directly to God. An icon painting is "flat," having no depth and almost expressionless, so that the viewer will not focus on the features in the painting but on the quality of the One behind it. An icon is a frame (a gilded frame, true) leading the viewer to someone beyond itself.

The conduct of the divine office here at the abbey is a pageant icon. It presents a frame through which both participants and observers can look to the Godhead. It is a pageant in word and form, all elements of the icon. The presentation is flat: all monks clothed the same, in the same posture, making the same motions in unison; the recitation and chant are unison, without emphasis; the liturgy is repetitious, following a two week cycle. It is the same thing day after day, week after week, year after year. At first I wanted to see a little personality in things, some harmonizing, some emphasis in the readings of Scriptures, a smile from the Abbot when bestowing the blessing with water that closes our final office. Now I understand that the purpose of the pageant is to direct us *past* the things we do and say to the glory of God. Since nothing we could add by way of personal expression could approach this anyway, it is best to let things be "flat" and beckon each of us to look beyond the presentation.

Day 28, Monday, August 28

Monastic communities that follow the *Rule of St. Benedict* worship and pray seven times each day, called The Divine Office. The seven times come from Psalm 119:164 (118:164 Catholic Bible), "Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws." Here at The Trappist Abbey those times are:

Vigils	4:15 A.M.
Lauds	6:30 A.M., 7:15 on Sundays
Terce	8:00 A.M., 9:00 on Sundays
Sext	12:30 P.M.
None	2:00 P.M.
Vespers	5:30 P.M.
Compline	7:30 P.M.

I have already indicated that Compline is my favorite office, because it closes and completes the day, bringing us into a state of quietness in which we go to sleep. Vigils is the strongest office. In it we recite the most Psalms, have a reading from the Scriptures and also one from an historic spiritual teaching, and pause for reflection after each reading. We say rather than chant the Psalms (a deference to morning voice?), so all are delivered strongly (in the other offices our chant is sometimes tentative). This office begins the day with a firm grounding in the Word that we are to be living, and by its before-dawn hour makes us attentive to the *vigil* we are to keep with Christ in all our waking hours. Lauds is the early morning office. It begins the active day. It calls us into praise then and through the day (although praise is part of the liturgy in every office). By both its time and its theme it sets the day in order for me. Some days I wish it were longer, and then some days I am glad that it is brief. Terce and None, at the *third* and *ninth* hours of the day (counting from “dawn,” but adapted to local needs), are short offices that use the same Psalms each day. For me, they are reminders that the day is ordered by prayer. It is easy to treat them lightly (and we usually do), but without them the workday could become separated from our dedication to prayer. Work is part of our prayer, and these offices help keep this in my heart and mind. Vespers is a mirror of Lauds. It uses a similar number of Psalms and includes a reading from the Scriptures. It ends the active day. Vespers helps bring me to rest. I often had plenty of time before Vespers and would sit quietly in the chapel. This composed my soul and quieted my body. Together, Vespers and Lauds set a boundary against the temptation to work too early and too late. The hours between Vigils and Lauds and again between Vespers and Compline are times for reflection. Sometimes they seem like nuisances: what do you do with 45 minutes? These times can be used for breakfast and supper, for personal hygiene, for reading and personal prayer, and for writing in one’s journal (as I am doing now). Because they are between offices, one is held in the spirit of worship, enabling reflection, even while doing other things.

There are hours or days, though, when I just “get through it,” without engaging these noble possibilities (and today was one of these). Yet, even then there is value, since it is the liturgy that prays through me, not me through the liturgy.

Day 29, Tuesday, August 29

I have started to disconnect from this experience. I am more outside than inside in my emotions and attention. This is a normal thing for me when I am moving from one place to another, so it is familiar. I am gathering memories of the Abbey, the community and the experiences of my time here: touching my choir stall, feeling the floor where I kneel, letting the chanting of the Psalms imprint in my heart, noting my gratitude for different monks (which I will most likely not be able to tell them), taking in the sounds, sights and motions of the offices, enjoying the view from my window, walking along paths. I even made a last foray into the forest. It is all simple appreciation, not strong attachment.

Bro. Mark had us (MLR’s) select a “stepping stone” from a collection he has. The stone I picked is variegated, the colors shading into stripes of gold. I saw in this a message that there are layers of meaning that have come into my soul during this month and these will be exposed over time. I have had many insights to my understanding and encounters in my spirit, but no grand revelation. I accept these results gratefully. I came looking for a vision of a new way and what I received is a clear affirmation of the way I am on. I am content with what the Holy Spirit has spoken and satisfied with the confirmations from the Lord. I go secure in the way and in hope for the future. I know no more about what the future will be than when I came, and with this I am at peace.

There was one disappointment: I never saw the salmon again.

Closing reflection, August 30

Of what good to the world is a contemplative? Of what value is an abbey, a community devoting most of its energies to prayer and meditation? By constantly focusing on God, they exert a power drawing all the world toward its true end, the worship of God's glory and enjoyment of God's love. The strong force, or pull, of their practice generates a force field which bends all those who yield to it, however slightly, in the direction of this purpose. This force field exerts an influence on all of life, working to orient all energies toward the "true north" of God's intention, even when these energies do not recognize it. In today's world this force field may be more like the weak force*, nevertheless it is essential, and effective.

*The weak force is one of the sub atomic forces scientists have identified necessary to holding the universe together. It is so weak that it is identified only by inference.

APPENDIX

My Trappist Abbey Schedule

Mon.- Sat.	Sunday variation	Activity	Location
4:00 AM		Rise	
4:15		<u>Vigils</u>	Chapel
4:50		Centering Prayer	Bethany House
5:15		Shower	
5:30		Personal prayer	
6:00		Breakfast	
6:30	7:15	<u>Lauds</u>	Chapel
7:15	8:00		
8:00	9:00	<u>Terce</u>	with MLR's
8:15	--	Work	
12:15 P.M.	--	End of work	
12:30		<u>Sext</u>	Chapel
12:45		Dinner	
1:15			
2:15		<u>None</u>	with MLR's
2:30			
5:30		<u>Vespers</u>	Chapel
6:00		Supper	
6:30			
7:30		<u>Compline</u>	Chapel
8:00			Room
9:00		Sleep	

Psalm readings in the daily liturgy, Trappist Abbey of Our Lady of Guadalupe
Catholic Bible

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesd.	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Vigils I	1 + 2 + 3 + 6 + 7 + 8 + 9	10 + 11 + 12 + 13 + 14 + 15 + 16 + 17:1- 35	17:36-51 + 18 + 19 + 20 + 21 + 22 + 24 + 25	26 + 27 + 28 + 30 + 31 + 32 + 33	34 + 36 + 37 + 38	39 + 40 + 42 + 43 + 44 + 45 + 47	48 + 49 + 51 + 52 + 53 + 54 + 55 + 139
Vigils II	58 + 59 + 60 + 61 + 62 + 63 + 65	67 + 68 + 69 + 70 + 71	72 + 73 + 74 + 75 + 76 + 77:1- 33	77:34-72 + 78 + 79 + 80 + 81 + 82 + 85	86 + 87 + 88 + 93 + 98 + 100	101 + 102 + 103 + 104	105 + 106 + 107 + 108
Lauds I	117 + 150	5 + 148	23 + 149	35 + 112	56 + 147	50 + 146	142 + 97
Lauds II	“ “	41 + 145	64 + 95	83 + 29	89 + 96	91 + 150	84 + 46
Terce	17:1-9	118:135- 144	118:41-49	118:62-72	118:94- 104	118:50-61	100
Sext I	120 + 121 + 122	118:105- 128	119 + 120 + 121	118:1-24	118:73-96	122 + 123 + 124	118:145- 168
Sext II	124 + 125 + 126	“	“	“	“	“	“
None	47:1-11	118:30-40	96:1-9	118:73-83	60	101:1-12	138:11-18
Vespers I	109 + 110	113	128 + 129	134	136 + 137	143	145 + 140
Vespers II	109 + 111	114 + 115 + 116	130 + 131	135	138 + 132	144	146 + 141
Compline	4, 90	4, 90	4, 90	4, 90	4, 90	4, 90	4, 90

- 1) Terce & None (pronounced “known”) are the same in Week I & II
- 2) Catholic Bible joins Ps. 10 of Hebrew/Protestant to Ps. 9, so Hebrew & Protestant are +1 from 10 to 146; then Catholic divides 147 into 146 & 147, so all are again the same for 148 – 150.
- 3) On festival days other psalms may be added or substituted. In this way all the psalms are included.

ANGELUS PRAYER

The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary.
And she conceived of the Holy Spirit

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb Jesus.

Behold the handmaid of the Lord.
Be it done unto me according to your word.

Hail Mary, ...

And the Word was made flesh
And dwelt among us.

Hail Mary, ...

Pray for us, O holy mother of God,
that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Let us pray. Pour forth, we beg you, O Lord, your grace into our hearts: that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son was made known by the message of an Angel, may by his Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of his Resurrection. Through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.