

On Aging

For approximately the past eighteen months a good friend located in a nearby monastery has been suffering from some type of mental confusion, the nature of which has taken considerable time to diagnose properly. His condition didn't come on all at once but gradually and became more noticeable in recent weeks, a fact which roused concern among his friends. The chief manifestation was forgetfulness, of not knowing where he was. To the best of my knowledge, rarely if ever has this person seen a doctor and is adamant about not going despite gentle suggestions to do so. He may have a hunch that if he does, the diagnosis will be serious and naturally is afraid of the results. Although he turned ninety the first week of December 2013, his physical health is in remarkable shape, not unusual for monks of an advanced age. In fact, he was seen shoveling snow several times this winter: not an occasional shovel or two but a whole walkway. When you get up there in age, the prime suspect is Alzheimer's disease though as of this writing a definitive diagnosis hasn't come in. As for Alzheimer's, today it's as common as catching a cold, that's how widespread this plague has become.

Many religious communities in the Catholic Church are aging and doing so rapidly, so we can expect more instances of their members requiring professional care. Currently most elderly members in this category are doing very well, but that could change in a second. Even though some orders are aware of the situation, others remain in a kind of collective denial syndrome. This isn't deliberate, for some other dynamic seems to be at work. Such groups of men and women tend to be too focused upon pressing demands and needs, many of which are being met by those in their seventies and eighties. Even a religious four years older than the brother just mentioned puts in four hours of office work a day. Such dedicated service spanning many decades creates the illusion that religious life as we've known it will chug along as it had in the past. The tacit perception is that somehow, almost magically, others will pick up the slack. Besides, there's something archetypal about an elderly monk or person in religion who represents what this life is all about, and archetypes don't die but hang around a long time.

The critical issue of aging in virtually all clerical and religious communities was crystalized in the behavior of this elderly man and how his brothers responded to him. No doubt, the grace with which these people handle their afflictions is inspiring, a point worth examining in this brief essay. More specifically, it's worth focusing upon the way those who've dedicated themselves to God prepare for this time, notably cloistered monks and nuns. This group differs from others because within their communities old age spreads out over a longer period of time. The reason? In addition to having a both a stable environment and diet, they aren't exposed to anxiety induced by exposure to the fast paced nature of society. With less distractions than other people, some who are approaching the time when they will require more care can become anxious about what lays ahead when they take up permanent residence in the infirmary. One particular example stands out, a monk in his mid nineties, who learned to thrive in the relative isolation of his infirmary. He has been dead some ten years now, but his confreres often recall him with great affection. More will be said about him shortly.

People age differently, priests and religious being no exception to this unbending rule of nature. However, the more stable environment of their life style sets them apart, much more so now because people are leading more hectic and complex lives. This setting apart used to be considered a higher form of life (the superiority of the contemplative over the active life as far as religious orders go), but that idea has faded away. Monastic life now is considered as one option among many for a young man to take up though its calling stands out all the more in today's society. Remarkably, some of the older members are still with us. This select group had entered the monastery a decade or so after World War I around the beginning of the Great Depression. Even more entered immediately after World War II, and nowadays even monks from the Greatest Generation are fading off the scene rapidly. Then we have three more general divisions: those who came in the mid 1950s, the post-Vatican II generation or those old enough to recall that watershed event and finally, those who matured in the post-Vietnam War era. Currently the mid '50s group is responsible for running their respective communities though quickly that is being supplanted by younger members who, it should be noted, are few and far between.

All these generations make for an interesting mix. Despite the broad spectrum, they get along surprisingly well: they must in a confined environment or else they would be at each other's throats. All more or less follow the same daily routine from the day they had entered until the day they will die. "More or less" are important words, for monastic life allows for variety of expression as well as taking into considerations health and age. And so the life much less monolithic than you'd suppose. Actually, dispelling mis-perceptions such these takes up a lot of a monk's time when it comes to dealing with visitors. This variety is a necessity because given the extended life span, a fellow when entered the novitiate can't be expected to live the same style of life in his nineties.

When you enter the novitiate everything is new despite having visited the monastery numerous times in preparation as is the policy of most communities. More important than anything learned in the novitiate is the influence of other monks. This can be either positive or negative; fortunately the former wins out. Even negative experiences are beneficial provided you can see through them. Often a newcomer will say that he'd like to follow in the footsteps of so-and-so. Usually that so-and-so turns out to be quite a character, far removed from any archetypal monk you may have entertained before entering the monastery. In short, that monk is fully human and lets his defects hang out there for all to see. Despite that (or through that) one can behold his shining example, that he has learned to take neither himself nor this manner of life seriously. On the other hand are plenty of exemplary monks who don't seem to leave a lasting impression which makes you wonder why this is so. The latter category is much larger and consists of those who have followed the letter of the monastic life. They are models as far as regularity, observance and personal integrity go, even having occupied key positions in the monastery over several decades. But when they pass off the scene and the obligatory praises have been sung, they fade into oblivion rather quickly. Perhaps the common

denominator is a seriousness they've displayed, of not having allowed their more vulnerable side to be seen. They've donned an official persona, if you will; once adopted it's difficult to shake, not unlike trying to discard a comfortable pair of shoes. Then again, many belonging to this category seem to have been naturally good from their birth and remain that way for their entire lives. Continuing like this for an extended period of time can make them mediocre and hence susceptible to being forgotten shortly after their deaths. Yet this is the class of people, outstanding in many ways, on which the monastery relies to keep it going.

Recollection of a noteworthy monk who had made an impression during one's early years is a strong motivation for perseverance long after his death. Things don't change in a monastery drastically like they do in the "world." This environment runs on a very different concept of time and thus puts time into proper perspective. For example, a decade ago seems like last week and a week seems like an hour ago. Really, this is no exaggeration but a fact of monastic life which even casual visitors pick up. Such compression of time, if you will, is part and parcel of a steadier, more focused environment which allows for things to be impressed upon your mind. So in the instance of that noteworthy monk, you don't see him once in a while but every day, warts and all. Of course the same steady focus applies to a book you've read, but that gets into the realm of *lectio divina*. Important as it is, *lectio* is a step removed from real life whereas here we're concerned with living people, people whose lives are a type of *lectio*. This brings up the issue of *anamnesis*, a subject discussed elsewhere and is more comprehensive than entertaining the image of someone in your memory. It is a prime way of acquiring knowledge usually by recalling an image which, in turn, evokes a whole way of being present to reality. While *anamnesis* may be rooted in the past, certainly it is not confined there because it has direct bearing upon the here and now. Actually *anamnesis* is at the root of monastic education. One example used on a daily basis: the novices' classes are called repetitions. The idea is that by repeating a small but important piece of information relative to this way of life the novice will incorporate it into his life. On the surface it sounds boring, even a childish form of education, but is not the case. Emphasis is upon absorption of the material at hand, not just looking it up on some home page and moving on.

A friend with close ties to one particular elderly monk now deceased for several years is a fine example at having adapted to the restrictions imposed by old age. He had been in several different monasteries over the years, so many in the community were not acquainted with him until he returned shortly before his death. After a brief stay in the community he moved to the infirmary which means that he was somewhat isolated from the normal flow of life. As for the infirmary itself, it seems that most monks dread the day they must move there and for good reason. After all, it's the last stop before being planted six feet under. However, there's a deeper anxiety which becomes more manifest once someone has taken up residence in the infirmary. It comes in the form of a question: What will I do all day? Over there you're pretty much set loose from communal obligations and are faced with having to invent your own schedule (*horarium* is the Latin word). Keep in mind the important fact that monks, even when elderly, don't have to face the pressures of income nor how they will be cared for.

Everything is provided, so it's natural to dread the prospect of so much time with nothing to do. Most in the infirmary do follow an *horarium* centered upon the Divine Office plus take meals in the refectory with their fellow residents. However, that constitutes a small portion of one's day, so they're left with a large bulk of time to manage. Then there's the problem of not getting a full night's sleep due to this or that ailment. Those who have not cultivated a deeper spirit of prayer, *lectio divina* and study during their active years have the most difficult time adapting. The same applies to elderly monks still living within the community proper; if they find it hard managing time now, what will it like be in the infirmary? Certainly all live the monastic life to the best of their ability. Yet one element seems to be missing in the formation of monks which can play a crucial role in one's latter years, and that is the spirit of study. In many ways it's more important than prayer and *lectio*. This is backed up by the claim of one monk who said that study is gives impetus to the other two practices and sustains them over the long haul. By long haul is meant one's entire career in the monastery, no mean accomplishment.

As for that now deceased monk just mentioned, he spent all his waking hours engaged in prayer, *lectio divina* and study. Just six months before his death at the ripe age of ninety-five he decided to take up German for reading knowledge as well as koine Greek in order to access the New Testament in the original. That's impressive by any standard. Several younger monks used to shuttle between his room and the library taking out this book and that. When one of these monks asked what drove him, his response? The day wasn't long enough to do all he wanted. All the while he was engaged in some kind of activity tucked away from the sight of most people. Obviously this monk was in class by himself compared with other infirmary residents. He provided a cautionary tale: if you don't start studying early, you won't do it later in life, especially when no one is around to hold your hand. Study gets you through the inevitable dryness and boredom of prayer and the occasional monotony of *lectio divina*. No small wonder study is the unsung hidden asset of a monk's life. While most people says that nothing excels prayer and *lectio*, study is a firm rudder which keeps you both from drifting off into an uninformed piety.

Despite the advantages of accumulated years of study when a monk reaches old age, daily commitment to it can be trying. Part of the reason is that cloistered monks lack a structure and outlet for such pursuits; they don't engage in an apostolate such as Benedictines who give a definite form to study as through teaching. Because cloistered monks must follow scholarly pursuits on their own if so inclined, they have to be very sure these pursuits are directed to a love for God. They aren't responsible, for example, to a classroom of students, only to themselves and indirectly to their brethren. That's why living in the infirmary can be an insurmountable hurdle towards study; once over there you're on your own, even more so than in the community, so it's imperative to build up a reservoir of practice well before the final move. Although monks lack outlets which people take for granted, in more recent years they've had access to the Internet. This is fine for most, but those in the infirmary do not make use of it because they are largely a pre-Internet generation. As for that reluctance to

living in the infirmary, it isn't peculiar to monks but applies to most elderly people who know they face the prospect of being farmed out in some nursing home. Enter any facility and you'll find people hanging around in this corner or that, mostly asleep. These good folks had spent their lives at honest, productive work, raised families and now are vegetables or close to that condition. We shudder to think that someday we'll end up like that, institutionalized out of sight and out of mind. Hence why that exemplary monk comes to mind. On no occasion did anyone see him succumb to a vegetative condition. Even better, never did he seek pity nor support. Always he was at prayer or at his books right up to the day he died. Literally. Being out of anyone's sight or mind wasn't even an issue. Such a person is not the rule but the exception which is why he stands out and is remembered long after his contemporaries have passed away. While he may be an exception, that doesn't mean his example is out of reach for the rest of us to emulate.

For most of us, the prospect of living in the infirmary or in a rest home is light years away. It's something that happens only to other people. However, the infirmary is part and parcel of the monastic complex, not a destination to which you drive, visit your parents and return home to your regular life. At the same time the infirmary is not located centrally but off to the side of the monastic buildings. An advantage in many ways (chief among which is privacy) yet a disadvantage in that elderly monks find it difficult to attend regular exercises by reason of the distance they have to walk, for example, to the abbey church. So when you come down to it, these men have high quality care from a dedicated staff despite their relative isolation. This is re-enforced by observations made by visitors to the monastery. They go through many of the impressive buildings and ask about "that one over there," in other words, the infirmary. Actually this word is misleading since like in the military it refers to those who are in need of medical attention, a hospital. However, in the past fifteen years, many infirmaries have evolved into a rest home, a place of retirement. Monks do go over there to visit the residents but admittedly this is rare; not that they don't want to, but it requires a certain effort as well as finding a suitable time in their busy schedules.

Getting back to that life long study project, ideally it should begin early...in the novitiate...when everything is fresh. There a newcomer is exposed to the whole array of monastic-Christian teaching, so you have plenty of opportunities to discover an area of interest and hopefully remain with it. Over the years a monk's interests are bound to evolve, so he may shift attention away from his initial field of study though invariably he returns to home base. Sometimes a given interest will lead to learning a biblical language and later, a modern one in order to expand his studies further. Still, cloistered monasteries in general aren't supportive of such a plan which is not an indication that they discourage these pursuits. In fact, many have a misinformed attitude toward studies, that they're not needed in this way of life. What re-enforces this perception is the dwindling numbers of monks where even those of advanced age are taking on additional chores. To pursue a plan of studies is more feasible in a larger monastery where the work load is distributed better. This arrangement doesn't guarantee a monk will continue his study project in later years, just offering you a wider variety of choices. Large or

small monastery, there's the inevitable bottom line: the difficulty of sustaining a study project over an extended period of time, actually one's lifetime, which is no mean feat.

As you'd expect, the older monks exert significant influence within the monastery, not just on the material level but more importantly, on the spiritual one. By way of personal example they hand down the life to their juniors who, in turn, are trained to adopt the role of seniors and thus carry on a venerable tradition. This picking up of the tradition from one's elders is done by imitation, especially how they respond in trying situations. It is coupled with *lectio divina* and prayer which work their magic over time by imperceptibly interiorizing age-old values. It is a process not unlike the ancient Greek one of education, *paideia*, which originally applied to the rearing of children and later evolved into the way a city-state or *polis* instructed their citizens. After all, St. Benedict composed his **Rule** at the end of the classical period and was affected not so much directly by the Greek system but as it had been filtered through the Romans. Still, the same system of education was in place and remained so for many generations to come. As for the monks responsible for *paideia*, almost always the ones living quietly and in the background had the greatest impact compared with those in positions of authority. They represent a constancy manifested in the faithful execution of what most people deem as insignificant or menial jobs. This helps to rid them, as it were, of that competitive spirit dominant in society which invariably creeps into the monastic enclosure. Of course, fidelity to work means fidelity to the larger scope of the monastic regime. As with all things monastic, invariably they are interconnected, so much so that too much (or too little) of one upsets the balance of life.

Those formed after World War II picked up a spirituality which worked well for them but has outlived its time. Despite this, it retains some force by reason of those monks still present within their communities but who now are on the verge of moving into the infirmary. We could outline their brand of spirituality in one simple sentence: God is in his heaven and we are on the earth. Its basis is ultimately biblical yet posits a separation which isn't at all interested in bridging the gulf. Only upon our death will this gulf be closed...never before. No exceptions. The two words "never before" sound dire and have long-range implications for a monk as he ages and must contend with on a deeper level when he takes up residence in the infirmary tucked away pretty much out of sight. This biblical principle of eternal life seems to have been distorted somewhere along the line. Old Testament references paint a rather gloomy picture which contrasts with the all-powerful God of Israel. Indeed, God is in heaven and we mortals must die after which we pass over into Scheol which is not unlike Hades, a realm of shadows. From the Israelite perspective, this view served to protect divine transcendence. Allow a passage from the philosopher Eric Voegelin which has some relevance to this matter: "The idea of the psyche could not be fully developed in Israel because the problem of immortality remained unsolved. Life eternal was understood as a divine property; afterlife would have elevated man to the rank of the *Elohim*; and a plurality of *elohim* was excluded by the radical leap in being of the Mosaic experience. As a consequence, the eroticism of the soul that is the essence of philosophy could not unfold; and the idea of human

perfection could not break the idea of a Chosen People in righteous existence under God in history. Instead of philosophy, there developed the construction of patriarchal history, a specific kind of humanism, and ultimately the apocalyptic hope for divine intervention in history.” **Israel and Revelation**, p. 327.

We could unpack these words by saying that not unlike ancient Israel, Christianity, and especially the witness of monasticism as just described by the WW II generation, has been unable to resolve “the problem of immortality.” That is to say, the boundary between God in heaven and us on earth is defined sharply with a large “no trespassing” sign posted. As with the Israelites, “life eternal understood as a divine property” was considered beyond our reach, so we have to settle for something less on this side of the Great Divide. Voegelin fleshes this out by referring to a common Hebrew name for God, *Elohim*, which is plural in form. *Elohim* in the lower case would apply to humans should they attain some form of existence in the afterlife, in other words, gods. And that, of course, is an abhorrence even to presume. Such in brief is the theological background which interestingly Voegelin sets against the (Greek) philosophic tradition, an issue that hasn’t been resolved satisfactorily down to the present day. It so happens that most adherents to “gulf” spirituality have an aversion, greater or lesser, to philosophical reflection and describe it by the adjective “intellectual.” Thus “intellectual” has become a catch-word of sorts but in actuality is mis-placed. That is to say, “intellectual” means thinking (that is to say, too much of it) but ironically applies more to those monks who are more hostile toward reflection while they stuck with observance of the monastic rule. This is a pity because a time will come when those critical of reflection will be over in the infirmary with plenty of time on their hands for it. All monks live their lives in their minds even if they deny it vigorously, so might as well start early to prepare for the future.

Should we subscribe to what Voegelin has termed the “eroticism of the soul,” we’d have to relinquish some of that biblical gap between God in heaven and us on earth. To speak of *eros* with its sexual implications is getting into dangerous territory, especially for monks. Still, *eros* was an important component of philosophic inquiry, the driving force behind a person’s search for wisdom. It meant that one was a *philosophos*, a lover of wisdom. Such a person loves (note: *phileo* is an alternate word for love, more akin to friendship) and directs it toward wisdom, *sophia*. Thus he has not attained wisdom but continuously is in search for it. To apply such an approach, venerable as it may be, to that category of monks under discussion would be out of the question. *Eros* as so presented is not the same as devotion or piety in the Christian context and thus viewed with suspicion. Because of this seeming incompatibility, those suspicious of philosophy prefer the “construction of patriarchal history,” the monastery and its patrimony, which indeed becomes a “specific kind of humanism.” Should a monk adhere to this vision, noble as it is, he stands on this side of the gulf and has an “apocalyptic hope” for the future where God is, the other side of the gulf. And so the outline from Voegelin’s book pertains to the interaction of philosophy and religion in Western society, reaching even into monasteries where a more intense form of spirituality is expected to be found. After a while in the monastery you pick up this “gulf” attitude of monks from older

generations through the way they express a difficulty they may be undergoing. The response is Stoic-like, admirable but with God at a distance who hopefully some day will draw nearer. Indeed, God is in his heaven and we are on the earth...

This perception of a gulf between God and our lives offered some comfort even though the prospect of bridging it in this life is impossible. In fact, attempts to bridge it aren't even on the radar screen. It took the form of obeying obey God's commandments and following the rules laid down by the Church and the monastery. It had worked successfully for many generations and despite being considered now as passé with respect to the larger spirit of monastic tradition, had exerted influence for a long time. However, those who subscribe to view God in his heaven and we on our earth are getting up there in age, on the verge of moving into the infirmary which offers a less than desirable prospect. Each community owes its life to those dedicated men who subscribed to it, having seen their monastery grow spectacularly after World War II, pass through the tumultuous years after Vatican II and the departure of many solemnly professed members. Finally they are staring at a considerably diminished community membership which doesn't seem to be easing. Although some houses recently have seen a surge of new vocations (though not as many as in the past), it's too early to see if this represents a trend. Both visitors and novices stand in awe of the older monks, and rightly they should for all they had bequeathed to their successors. When monasteries were experimenting with different life styles after Vatican II, these men continued silently and steadfastly in their established ways. Their stability, backed up by that sharp division between God in his heaven and we on earth, served to critique those who were more adventurous. Not that they did this verbally but by their example of quiet fidelity to an established norm. Their adherence to this norm continues today and remains a force, albeit one on the verge of extinction.

When you consider this group as it draws closer to retirement and hence the threshold of the infirmary (in fact, some are there already), their way of living is tinged with an indefinable lack despite all the dedication and well-deserved accolades. It could be argued that the view to which they adhered squarely puts God in his heaven helped shape current perceptions about monastic life. A younger person today might ask himself if he wishes to live out his days in accord with such a view. When God is in heaven and leaves...one could almost say when he forsakes...us on earth, the monastery can seem like an exile from our heavenly homeland. To compensate for the lack of God's presence, if you will, we can come up with substitutes. Usually these substitutes take the shape of special adherence to the monastery's history, place and culture, all very fine and exemplary pursuits. However, you can get only so much mileage out of them. Now that the last of that generation is approaching the infirmary or is about to be shunted off to the sidelines, the divide between heaven and earth becomes all the more intimidating. That brings up the question posed earlier, one which you could almost hear being uttered aloud: What will I do over there with so much time on my hands?

Perhaps that's why so many of these good people who have remained strong physically,

continue as such in order to put off that ultimate moving day. The question being faced is how to transit from that world view which made such a sharp distinction between heaven and earth to a monastic life in greater communion with God here and now. Certainly some elderly monks never subscribed to this world view. One comes to mind, a fellow who, despite his ailments, finds new discoveries each day and remains as a child but a deeply spiritual and well-read one. After his death and the deaths of his more traditional comrades, chances are that his memory will abide longer in the minds of younger monks who are quite sharp to pick out how their elders comport themselves. There's something captivating about a person diligently praying, doing his *lectio divina* and study out of sight from most folks. He comes into view once in a while which makes him all the more attractive and someone to be identified with. And so this fellow is an exemplar of what life should be like for the rest of those who eventually will live in the infirmary and more importantly, see the cemetery as their next stop.

The huge gulf between God in his heaven and us on the earth seems to have been lacking in the early days of monasticism (traditionally this goes all the way back to Anthony of Egypt, third century) nor did it seem present in the spirituality of other monastic orders which came on the scene a thousand years later. For example, the early Cistercians emphasized strict adherence to the Rule of St. Benedict but were considerably ahead of their time when it came to what they read for *lectio divina* (for information on this, refer to the classic book by Jean Lerclerq, **Love of Learning and the Desire for God**). That's a comforting thought as we strive to understand the "gulf" spirituality outlined here which hasn't been reflected upon sufficiently. To be fair, the generation adhering to it as well those prior to it were unaware of their monastic origins. Hard to believe but true. Only until the late 1960s did early Cistercian spirituality begin to be studied in earnest, that is, when primary texts became available. Even after some fifty years these texts have been received with not as much enthusiasm as you'd expect because they faced competition with alien forms of spirituality that had crept in and were adopted as normative. Chief among these was the Carmelite tradition and more specifically, St. Therese of Lisieux. To the present a struggle exists, if you will, to supplant the Carmelite form of spirituality with the original Cistercian one as well as the much earlier Desert Father tradition. All the while the former spirituality, especially in the guise of devotion to the Little Flower, influenced adherents to the "gulf" theology. Now that the days of their influence is drawing to a close, a spirituality more in tune with modern needs may take root. A stab in that general direction took a different turn at the same time the Cistercian heritage was being unearthed. That direction was experimentation with Eastern forms of spirituality which quickly ran afoul and perceived hostile to the devotional one. Not that Catholic monks became Zen Buddhists, but they were looked at askance by some of their confreres. Nowadays the situation is quite different: a more conservative atmosphere coupled with aging communities in which fewer monks will be able to study and assist in the recovery of the Cistercian tradition. And so, it could fall by the wayside yet once more.

To expand on this "gulf" spirituality further, let's take the example of God as completely absent, a kind of *Deus ex machina* (perhaps the same influences that contributed to that view

had something to do with the evolution of what's being discussed here). This may come as a surprise to some people visiting monasteries in search for spiritual guidance. They may not pick up on that "gulf" spirituality directly—after all, it takes some years of living within the monastery to understand it—and be surprised when it's explained to them. A good part of this spirituality is represented by a class of people belonging to monasteries called lay brothers. Their focus was upon work and an ethic that had built monasteries, made foundations and created the industries we take for granted now, the chief means of economic support. Yet once a person has spent a life time at this, is now at the point of becoming more feeble and ready for the infirmary, what is next? What are you supposed to do now? Because no longer do you participate in running a monastic industry, you're stuck with an endless string of days stretching out before you. You haven't been trained for this, thinking that you'd continue working until you died with your boots on.

Though the days of the so-called "gap" spirituality are numbered, they received a second breath...not a major one...but enough to support this view. Not long ago Mother Theresa of Calcutta wrote an autobiography in which she revealed the many years (rather, decades) when she felt God had been absent in her life. To some this came as a surprise but not so much for those who had cultivated an image of God as "up there." Quite a few monks could identify with her and became aficionados of her book. Mother Theresa, it seemed, was cut from the same cloth as these older monks and subscribed to the same type of spirituality. While all well and fine, something seems out of line with the larger picture of spirituality the Church has to offer. To a certain degree, this larger picture consists of that integration the Church had made with the Greco-Roman heritage and which had become lost. While many people may not see a direct connection between this heritage and Christian spirituality, recovery of those long ago achievements is one of the most exciting challenges today, even if it runs counter to the type of spirituality being outlined here.

Despite the rather pessimistic view of God as "up there" beyond our sight, it opened the door to all sorts of possibilities. If we can situate God beyond our human sphere of activity, he's out of the picture and can be managed. A bit unfair, even anti-religious and contrary to monasticism, yet is a view that has some currency. Like all influences, this one doesn't come upon us at once but gradually, and monks are no exception. The removal of God lacks the same force as found within the secular sphere. It does not militate against God but parks him in a convenient spot. Surely all monks try their best to be present to God. Some may have allowed their search to slip away because of public humiliations and their memories which continue to haunt them. If you've been burned yet don't want to give up, you may opt for a means of acknowledging God such as the rosary and other devotions. Once finished with these devotions, you're free to pursue your own activities. You don't forsake God as in the secular world but return to him at a later time through the rosary coupled, perhaps, with a bit of reading. Such reading isn't done in the fashion of *lectio divina*, the slow, meditative perusal of Scripture. Instead it is of a devotional cast such as lives of the saints and books intended to edify you in the monastic life. While valid, this material keeps spirituality one step removed

from daily life. In other words, you can delve into the divine just enough to keep you (and God) satisfied. With this mind-set in place, a monk could apply himself to a wide variety of activities and keep himself occupied for the rest of his life. In many ways it was attractive and created an ethic of responsibility semi-independent yet parallel to older monastic values. And since (strange to say), these values weren't known, this ethic was able to take hold more firmly than expected. Of course, this isn't applicable to all monks of earlier generations but is a kind of atmosphere which has affected many cloistered communities.

Some people credit the renewed interest in Christian contemplative prayer with the rising popularity of Eastern spirituality (particularly Zen) during the late 1960s. Partially true, and some forward thinking abbots saw a need to discover if they could offer a similar practice to young people who were flocking to meditation centers. Such was the birth of what we know today as Centering Prayer which turned out to be quite successful. In addition to this, the publication of early monastic authors revealed that contemplative prayer was natural to all monks, indeed, was part and parcel of every Christian's baptismal heritage. How, when and why we lost sight of that involves an examination of history spanning many centuries plus a host of other influences. What is of concern here, however, is that more recent generations of monks unconsciously developed the notion of a gulf existing between God and us. So if the monks didn't get this from within the Cistercian tradition, they found it outside their native environment as a piety mostly geared for lay persons and those engaged in active religious communities. Compared with this, interest in Eastern spirituality gave the opportunity for people to latch onto a spirituality that connected them with God right here and now. That tradition had the added boon of genuine masters with whom one could bounce off your inner trials and temptations. People discovered this and went at it with gusto. While that experimentation caused ferment and excitement, those who subscribed to that "gulf" spirituality continued their way not interested in such matters. They frowned upon them as too exotic and even hostile to monastic life. Due to the novelty of this interest, monks were bound to make mistakes and act a bit immaturely not unlike like other people. Because of their mistakes, the stable monks had no need to ridicule them outrightly but only sit back and let them flub up the situation. And so their perseverance through that period of experimentation served as a warning for future endeavors: don't get involved but keep your attention fixed on what's in front of your nose. That's all you're required to do. God is in his heaven, and we are upon his earth.

When we examine the spirituality of those monks who subscribe to positing a gulf between God and us, the term "spirituality" and all that it connotes doesn't quite fit. It seems more precise to speak of their approach as a devotion or better, a form of piety which borders upon spirituality yet does not qualify as such. This observation may be unfair because we're dealing with the superior quality of these monks' lives. However, we'll stick with this position because it brings out a point. Not unlike being in the military, these devoted men were told early on to keep their heads bowed during prayer and their gaze fixed straight ahead while at work. Anything beyond that was superfluous. This can sanctify a monk and inspire him to continue

with it, but now growth from following that path is questionable. Quite a few saw the limits of this way of life and opted to bail out at or around Vatican II. Throughout all the excitement and confusion of that time, the small, faithful bunch who stuck with the Original Plan remained a stable element in their monasteries. Surely they were bigger than any program thrown at them. However, this group is fading out quickly. These are very practical men and at the same time highly educated or well trained in a particular craft, having held positions of responsibility in the work place prior to entering the monastery. A friend recounted the story of one monk who had impressed him greatly who has passed away some twelve years ago, having supervised the construction of several houses, two of which are in South America. He was very gifted, devoted to work and afterwards could be found in the church fingering his rosary beads. When his health deteriorated, he had to move into the infirmary where not long after he contracted a whole host of physical ailments. During the last two years of his life this monk was terrified...more so than any recent member of the infirmary...of death. While few know the full reason, his sudden, enforced inactivity seems to have compelled him to confront his life which had been chock full of one activity after another. Most of his contemporaries envied the way this fellow comported himself, yet he was unequipped to handle being inactive or using free time.

People will observe that despite being enclosed, monks have everything they need and then some. They are exempt from the normal cares of family life, maintaining a job as well as health care (a hot topic nowadays). When monks are exposed to people bantering these issues about, they have a clear realization that they are far removed from them, as though they belong to a different planet. There's a danger, however, that such cradle-to-grave immunity can make monks complacent and so run the risk of spoiling them or more accurately, making them immature. This brings up a remark from a workshop from some years back. The presenter had recounted eloquently that the Catholic Church is endowed with the best philosophy, theology, liturgy, art and culture in the entire world, no exception regardless of one's religious persuasion. However, an important ingredient was missing all along and continues to be such, emotional maturity. A scathing observation which painfully has proven true for monks as well. Of course, such a statement doesn't do justice to each and every monk. At the same time it comes uncomfortably close to the mark. As for this emotional immaturity, you don't become that way overnight but drift into it gradually over a period of years. For example, a mature young man can turn out rather childish, and a less developed novice can blossom into an outstanding monk. This happens despite the implementation of psychological testing which prospective candidates must undergo. Still, just about everyone nowadays has something wrong with him, so it's a matter of degree. Even that boils down to a guessing game. A lot can escape notice until many years later despite the best efforts and intentions early on.

Introspection is an occupational hazard for monks. They are more liable to manufacture problems that otherwise don't exist, again, because of their unique environment. To deal with it is not easy nor do specific guidelines exist. In more recent decades monks have received

input from outside experts in psychology and sociology, most helpful indeed. Still, some degree of emotional maturity is endemic in monasteries nor should its members be ashamed when instances of it arise. It comes to the fore mostly in disagreements or clashes of personality. And so never can we eradicate emotional maturity, just understand it better and move on from there. Despite the embarrassments that arise, emotional immaturity does have the potential of becoming an asset. Not only that, it counters the relative seriousness of that “gulf” spirituality. In fact, the immeasurable distance between God in heaven and us on earth isn’t even on the radar screen for some who’ve been affected by the negative fruits of their immaturity, an insight of unspeakable delight provided you’re lucky enough to hit upon it. They don’t teach you this in the novitiate nor is it discussed aloud because it goes contrary not just to monastic norms but to other walks of life. Nevertheless, it’s a subtle insight gained only through the pain and hardship of being misunderstood. Even if you did speak about it, chances are you’d be met with blank stares or outright ridicule. Some more work has to be done about this, for it can be a resource of inspiration that may fit the way some monastic communities operate today.

It’s important to note that we’re dealing not so much with fretting about emotional immaturity nor trying to overcome it. Here the concern is with its cultivation. This agricultural term pertains to the raising and care of crops for harvest and implies continuous attention to details. At the same time what’s growing does so on its own aided by the quality of soil, rain and sunlight. All are important yet ultimately have an auxiliary function. The growth comes from within the seed and is not imposed from without. One can be born immature emotionally or stay that way for a good part of your life, an issue not pertinent here. It’s the *cultivation* of this immaturity that counts. One thing is certain. Should a monk go this route and is perceived as such by his fellows, he ends up being stuck with the label. Permanently. Monks have long memories because they live in the same community over an extended period of time. And so it doesn’t take much to cultivate this quality; all you have to do is go out there and make a gaff in public. Even if you don’t do it intentionally, a collective memory will stick. Do it several times and then you’re really a marked man, so better to embrace it fully now instead of lamenting over the fact. The cultivation of emotional maturity is the exact antithesis of those monks who have earned an exemplary reputation through their service to the community. There’s something so very serious about that world view and invites revolt because it’s too conventional. And to be unconventional doesn’t mean revolt commonly understood, only fostering an image of oneself that is less than desirable. The test of its validity is that it causes not harm to the perception of yourself. You use that self out there for all to see as smoke screen so you can do work on a deeper level away from prying eyes.

One who has cultivated emotional immaturity relishes that cradle-to-grave surety a monastery offers since it’s a place where it can play out fully. Instead of allowing this most secure of all environments lull you sleep away from reality, it is at the service of pursuing avenues normally not disclosed to people, even monks. To a degree, this involves a sacrifice deeper

than conventional ones associated with the Christian life, and that sacrifice consists keeping people in the dark, if you will, of not understanding you. Or to be more specific, keeping...cultivating...the way people consider you as immature and not quite up to ordinary standards. The first response might be to lash out in an attempt to defend yourself or to explain your behavior. While this may offer immediate satisfaction, the after effects are less than desirable. The best approach is to accept them, and after the initial response wears off, learn to relish them, a sign that you're abandoning images people have of you. Thus we have a specific way of living the monastic life, demanding on the inside yet not perceived so on the outside. Instead, it may be perceived as a cop-out. You have to cope with the ideas people have of you and retain the ability to function. This has nothing to do with having a thick skin because its inevitable that each monk will undergo fairly profound humiliations. What counts is how you run with the humiliations and use them as a preparation for death. A correction of sorts. The ultimate demand we all face is not so much death but old age, this being manifested by the unfavorable attitudes about taking up residence in the infirmary. As noted earlier, the same attitude is prevalent in society, but monks lead a more confined manner of life and don't have families which offer greater intimacy even though like them several generations of monks live together. The reality of the infirmary being the last stop before the cemetery confronts monks on a daily basis because most communities have their cemeteries close by where every passer-by can't help but glance out there, reminding him of his final destination.

Living along side a group of dedicated men, more specifically the elders, for several decades is revealing not so much of them but you. Their professional bearing sets them in a class all by themselves, a class most of us never could emulate. No question about it, they are the last of the Greatest Generation which is fading off the scene quickly. Rarely if ever did you see them off guard or to put it somewhat grandly, behaving like the rest of us mere mortals. Their dedication created a respect founded not upon fear but upon devotion manifested toward the material aspects of monastic life. Though you may wish to sit in their shadow with the hope that some of their spirit might rub off, this is wishful thinking because you and they are belong different eras. Besides, to imitate them would mean not being faithful to one's own gifts. Although it's easy to compare yourself negatively with these men, the changes in monastic life over the past few decades has thrown everything into a wholly different light. Compared with their stately bearing the challenge is knowing how to play second fiddle which borders upon cultivation of that emotional immaturity discussed above. They don't teach this in the novitiate, for it's a type of knowledge picked up along the way in bits and pieces until it forms a more coherent whole, one applicable directly to one's life. A sign that this has taken root: even if you could change places with them, you wouldn't. You started off more or less in awe going back several decades when this group was much younger and fully in control of the monastery. Over time you got acquainted with how they operated at their peak and now see them on the verge of entering the infirmary, that dreaded destination. And so your exposure has covered a considerable span not only of their lives but your own. All the while quietly you were developing your role as second fiddle, a role starting to bear fruit. That's no mean feat by

any standard. Even though you are different from these giants, to make comparisons is odious. Some time is needed getting used to living in their shadow and later, to get out from under it. The whole enterprise is quite tricky and full of dead ends. Still, if you persevere, you come up with something extraordinarily precious.

So if unlike the monks devoted to the monastic patrimony you don't have any stake in the current set-up of things, you're less concerned with what comes down the pike even takes a radical turn as the dissolution of the monastery. An offshoot of this attitude is that you have a different slant toward the solitude monastic life has to offer. Exteriorly it is identical with the solitude you'd expect to find, but the texture, if you will, is of a different order. A monk must acquire skill to cope with it since no manuals exist how to function within it. That poses a threat of becoming isolated, out of the loop, where you might have to confront the option of leaving the monastery. The price for adopting this view is quite high, and the threat of failure is very real. However, it adds a sense of excitement, a make-or-break attitude which frees you up in a relatively short period of time. As for the conventional type of solitude, it's the very milieu in which monks live. Since a larger monastery is more spread out and there's less interaction, this can be disconcerting for newcomers but is a boon if you accept it as an opportunity of allowing your role of second fiddle to flourish. The bottom line is that large monastery enables you to get lost more easily. The danger is that one can fall through the cracks. It comes on gradually and is marked by a withdrawal from communal activities. So if you withdrawal from them and at the same time find it hard to dealing with solitude, your role of playing second fiddle is pretty much sunk.

Playing second fiddle gives you the solitude of a second class citizen, not that of a first class member of the community. You find yourself in this position not voluntarily but as something that has come about. Dwelling upon this is useless; the task at hand is to live it fruitfully. Second class refers to being shunted off to the side as far as having a real say in how the monastery operates. That may sound like sour grapes but is not. After all, this article is about fostering the benefits of some less discussed aspects of monastic life which require clarification. Living as a second class citizen, if you will, doesn't have the perks this or that job may offer. Since you've never had them, you're not attached to them. And so when it comes time to move into the infirmary, chances are that the transition will be seamless. There you will spend your final days in the same mode as that of a second class citizen, no big deal.

All the talk about "gap" spirituality and playing second fiddle might sound a bit odd and unfamiliar. Yet should you find yourself playing second fiddle compared with those monks who subscribe to a "gulf" spirituality, you're well primed to accept the solitude and limitations of infirmary living. While you may appear to view the monastery as transitory, you are at home in a very deep sense. What may have caused considerable grief earlier on in your monastic career is now about to reap its benefits. An illustration. Quite often when monks get old they hearken back to "home" which reveals that their having been monastery for many years is a different life style. Despite having spent 99.99% of one's life there, still it's not home.

This is not unlike the military in which you serve and go home on furlough from time to time. A strange paradox, one to be avoided, because it reveals that rarely if ever have you been at home in the monastery despite your devoted efforts. Somehow a monk accustomed to playing second fiddle doesn't feel this way. Perhaps he may never have been at home prior to entering the monastery nor did he feel at home there for many a year. But now he has entered a new phase, wonderful and worth getting jealous about.

Let's conclude this talk about playing second fiddle with a concrete example, a monk well into his 80s, old in body yet young in spirit, and who has been in the infirmary approximately two years. Many years ago he had suffered grievously from misunderstandings which have all but disappeared from his memory. A lot of his sufferings came from his attitude, a self-inflicted wound which festered agonizingly long. During his earlier years this fellow's cynical attitude shunted him off to the sidelines where he moaned and groaned about it for a long time. Especially painful was that he had to live with the awareness that his brother monks fully were conscious of his past actions and attitude. Now he never refers to those painful days nor is affected by them. This cultivated forgetfulness was manifested the day he was asked to move into the infirmary, a move he did without batting an eyelash. One incident reveals the truth of this observation. When a fellow monk was driving him to the doctor, he asked if given the opportunity, would his companion choose the monastic life. He managed to worm out of it throwing the question back into his court. To his astonishment the answer was an immediate yes. He was quick to qualify it by saying never would he put up with the novitiate experience nor submit to other training. Somehow without knowing it he was talking about that "gulf" spirituality. Living in the "world" is so inimical to contemplation that putting up with all the stuff that comes your way in monastic life is well worth it (NB: monastic life and contemplation often are associated as one and the same, not necessarily true. In fact, they can be inimical, perhaps a subject for a later time). And so this story made a deep impression, that a man with so many limitations for all to behold underwent transformation into someone younger monks could admire and even imitate. Chances are that on the day of his death he'll be free as a bird as when he moves into the infirmary and from there to the cemetery.