

On Vigilance

Of all the features proper to monasticism, the subject at hand is the most crucial. At the same time vigilance is the least visible to outsiders, yet people instinctively associate it with this vocation. Perhaps it is due to the relative physical isolation of monasteries and the perception that mysterious other-worldly pursuits are going on behind closed doors. Because of these popular misunderstandings, it may be helpful to reflect upon this unique way of life that has been part of the Christian heritage almost from the beginning. Although exterior monastic observances have their role, it's profitable to explore the dynamics in what amounts to an interior discipline. Not only is the art of keeping vigil the proper job description of a monk, but it has direct application to all Christians. At first glance vigilance may be a hard concept to grasp, although some visible indicators intimate what may be going on within a monk. Such signs are manifested indirectly through the liturgy or the Divine Office. A number of well-written books and articles exist by monks gifted with the ability to express themselves eloquently. Even better, why not visit a monastery? In that way you can see if what these authors have to say has any validity.

Let's begin with something more concrete, the best place to start. The monastic day commences with an Office (The monastic day consists of seven Offices from pre-dawn to dusk: Vigils, Lauds, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline. Terce, Sext and None are "Little Hours" in that they are brief; the rest are more important ones) appropriately named Vigils at 3.30am, although most visitors or retreatants forego attendance due to that ungodly hour. Still, a few brave souls rouse themselves from bed and stumble through the darkness over to the church, sometimes in less than desirable weather. They instinctively know that something very important is about to transpire, yes, the most important activity of the day (night!). Words can't describe the atmosphere, yet something immanent is in the air, almost as though you're one of the Lucky Ones privy to a secret rite. You almost wish you could rouse your fellow retreatants sound asleep in their beds; since this isn't possible, you're eager to tell them about your experience as soon as you can.

The Office of Vigils itself is fairly straight-forward as you'd expect at such an early hour; it lacks the musical adornments and complexity of the other major Offices. The monastic choir is divided into two halves which alternate with the recitation of the Psalms. This isn't done consecutively but over a two week period in order to give variety, let alone choosing those Psalms more appropriate for the pre-dawn period. This recitation is prefaced by a brief introductory hymn (appropriate for the liturgical day and/or season) followed by a reading from Scripture. The same format is repeated and followed by another reading, usually from the Church Fathers. Vigils lasts approximately forty minutes; on Sundays and major feast days it extends some fifteen minutes longer. That's a bare-bones description, uncomplicated and easy for sleepy eyes to follow. After completion of the Office, most of the monks disperse either to their cells, find a quiet place in back of the church or head off somewhere else nearby. Then again, quite a few head to the refectory (dining room) to grab a bit to eat after which they settle down to a prolonged period of prayer and *lectio divina*. That is a venerable practice of slow, meditative reading of Scripture, very important for nourishment throughout the coming day.

One the best descriptions of Vigils around comes from an Eastern Orthodox abbot who likened that Office to a concert pianist. If he misses practice for one day, he notices it. If he misses practice for two days, the critics notice it. If he misses practice for three days, the audience notices it. However, there are times when a monk will

invariably miss Vigils which doesn't affect his long term commitment. Actually, it's not a bad idea if you miss an Office here and there; it breaks the normal routine and makes you realize what you've been missing. That's something they don't teach you in the novitiate, but you pick up from long years of experience. It's another thing, however, if missing Vigils becomes a habit. Even though most monks are diligent as to their attendance, more often than not it takes some effort in rising so early despite the routine. This problem is compounded from late spring through mid summer when the days are long and we retire after Compline, that is, around 8 pm. Falling asleep when it's light outside isn't exactly easy. Fortunately around these parts such a problem is short lived; it lasts from June to early August. Nevertheless, rising at 3 am takes effort no matter how long you've been doing it. A monk don't realize this until, for example, he has been away for the monastery a few days and has gotten into a "normal" schedule. Then he returns and suddenly is faced with getting up at that unnatural hour. At the same time the monastery resembles a city or a ship. When everyone gets up at the same time it's much easier for the individual monk to go along with what everyone else is doing. Likewise the commonality of Vigils is supportive for newcomers who may struggle with rising, let alone other aspects of monastic life.

Making the effort to drag yourself into church with your fellow monks is vital in that we're all lazy. One monk has a bit of practical wisdom. Prior to Vigils, the act of washing up and brushing teeth is encouraging in and by itself as a means of rousing yourself from stupor. Although done in silence with several monks crowding the washroom, the collective nature of monastic life is brought home at times like these. A corporate effort goes a long way to alleviate sleepiness. Most monks will agree that the time after the Office of Vigils—approximately from four through six-thirty or before the next Office, Lauds—is without doubt *the* heart of the monastic day. You've just shaken off sleep, have participated in a communal service and are now ready to spend time by yourself in prayer and lectio divina. The day's activities still remain several hours off. I say "day's activities" literally in the sense that it's still night when you're in a position to contemplate them in a detached manner or before they assail your attention. Just the simple awareness that normal activities take place during daylight hours is reassuring because their proper sphere of influence does not impinge upon this sacred time. Although you and your brothers are awake, nature remains asleep until about thirty minutes before sunrise. Yes, sunrise is a terrific event, full of spiritual meaning. However, the time beforehand or prior to the breaking of dawn specifically belongs to monks and is even more important. It's a time of anticipation because without looking at the clock, we know that a momentous transition is about to occur. Sunrise is this event, the Great Separator between two halves of the twenty-four hour cycle; most folks are still in bed and miss the twilight which offers a natural buffer zone when night gives way to day.

The other end of the end is of equal symbolic importance, being representative of passing from life to death. However, given our ability to light up the night artificially and that most people prefer to stay up late, this half of the cycle has lesser significance. The time of twilight invites us to linger as we await the onset of full night with its general colorless tone. Evening twilight has a melancholic, wistful ambience, for when we pause to savor it, we become aware of the onset of unfamiliar territory symbolized by full darkness. In many ways sunset itself grabs our attention as we watch the sun decline towards and then under the western horizon. To paraphrase Henry David Thoreau, it's more mysterious to have something go away from you (sunset) than to have it come towards you (sunrise). He is trying to say that as we await sunrise, we have in back of our minds what's going to happen, that the sun will definitely come over the eastern horizon. On the other hand, sunset conveys a foreboding that maybe

this is the last time we see it; we're not sure what the night will bring or even survive it.

Such is a brief outline of the actual practice of Vigils done in most contemplative monasteries nowadays. Going against the grain of modern society which prefers the evening hours, the monk has opted for the opposite end of the twenty-four hour cycle. This option is more difficult today because people have become acclimatized to associate evening with a time for relaxation after a day's work. It's especially true on weekends. While perhaps not in the forefront of his mind, this time for unwinding is a kind of long-term, low-grade sacrifice on the monk's part. You get an inkling of it after Compline on a hot summer evening. Sometimes visitors will linger outside afterwards and engage in lively talk, much to the annoyance of monks trying to get to sleep. Because it's quiet around here, voices travel much further, and you can easily pick up the tone of the discussion. This problem can be compounded when you might hear distance music, for example, a party. Fortunately this doesn't happen too often, yet reminders pop up now and again to tell you that you're living a very different way of life. At the same time, the sun is still up. During winter the problem is minimal, for after 4.30 pm or thereabouts darkness descends and remains with us until well after 6 am. It makes no difference if you go to bed at 4.30 pm or 8 pm.

Staying awake either during or after the Office of Vigils can be a trying experience even for the veteran monk. In the former instance you may doze off, but your neighbor is there who can nudge you awake. The latter is more a temptation because you're alone in your cell...and your bed, always inviting, is just a few feet away. Some monks find dozing off more a challenge than others although most agree that like the concert pianist and his need for continuous practice, the day isn't quite the same if you have not attended Vigils. This is especially true when the day doesn't go very well. You almost feel that if you skipped Vigils, the day is cursed. Perhaps that's a bit too strong, but an indefinable, pervasive lack permeates the monk's waking hours until bedtime. While this may be true, the sense of deficiency throughout the day doesn't imply real harm; the danger is that it can snowball into a pervasive listlessness once you make skipping Vigils a regular habit. The ancient monks had a word for it, *acedia*, and is still used today. One monk, dead for some twenty years now, went so far as to say that his apostolate takes place during the pre-dawn hours. After that, he might as well call it a day...literally.

During the course of a normal day a monk has recourse to the experience of Vigils by recalling the special nature of that time. He does this not so much by actively holding in mind details of what had transpired then but by recollection or *anamnesis*, a Greek term I've comment upon in several articles on this Home Page, for it has many ramifications. Such recollection—more inclusive than a bunch of regular memories, pleasant or not so pleasant—is akin to a presence which accompanies the monk throughout the day: work, conversations with his fellow monks and attending the Office. Much of these activities are commonplace, not in the least bit exotic as an outsider may imagine. How can we describe the process of *anamnesis* as related to Vigils and its effects upon such activities? Not in a theoretical fashion but by allowing the special nature of those pre-dawn hours to inform the rest of the day...to transmit the silent pre-dawn form into those of daylight. We could spell this out in more detail by paralleling a monk's vocation with a person who makes a living as a watchman. In other words, such a person is an archetypal image not so much by the details of his job (usually nothing extraordinary, really) but by appreciating the overall shape of this job.

With the recent rise of worldwide terrorism we hear a lot about vigilance, of protecting vital facilities and resources

without which society would be crippled. In this instance the essence of vigilance involves being aware of one's surroundings and on the lookout for suspicious activities. Those who make a living doing this spend a lot of time pretty much hanging around and waiting for what (hopefully) never comes. When this diffuse notion of vigilance is formalized into a job, it implies not so much physical work but a lot of observation and attention to detail. Formalization of "doing nothing" quickly wearies the person engaged in it, eight hours a day (or night), five days a week. Prospects for advancement are bleak, so it's painful just thinking of them. After all, you're left on your own and probably your only contact with the outside world is through a mechanical device such as a monitor, phone or alarm.

While this type of vigilance isn't related directly to the one associated with monastic life, it points to the fact that rapidly watchfulness can degenerate into lethargy. By no means are monks immune to it. You could say that monks are professional watchers up there on the battlements while everyone down in the city is going about his or her regular business. Such a contrast between being on guard and gazing upon normal activity from high upon the protective walls can be arduous, to say the least. If you look down on the inhabitants long enough, it detracts from your real job, and the enemy climbs in. To put this in more familiar, modern terms, watchmen are frequently depicted as dupes. They're sitting at desks watching monitors while half asleep or munching on a donut. When a bank robber comes on the scene, these sluggish guards are the first (and easiest) targets to nullify before proceeding to blow up the vault. The inference is that such unfortunates are barely educated, hate their jobs and work for the minimum daily wage. The same popular image has a parallel with military sentries when a commando force is about to storm an encampment. Sometimes these victims manage to sound the alarm at the last moment, but then it's too late. The enemy (or heros, depending) already have made the breach. Then other hapless soldiers rush in who are promptly mowed down in a hail of fire. In brief, a watchman's job boils down to two radically different modes of comporting yourself: physical inertia on one hand and the need for mental alertness on the other.

A security guard requires little training. That's the image we retain as with a similar profession manifested in the recent take-over by the federal government of airport baggage-checkers. These people have to become familiar with the layout of the place, watch monitors (perhaps the most boring part of all) and make the appointed rounds. As for watchmen in general, the common image we have is nighttime when regular workers have gone home. To keep on your toes, adherence to a fixed schedule is tantamount because for the most part you're left alone for the night. If it weren't for the routine checks, quickly the job would become intolerable, for at least you have the opportunity to move around. How do you gage a security guard's performance? Not by what he's doing but ultimately by a lack of incidents during his watch. So here is our hapless fellow whose schedule alternates between being in one place and making his rounds. Although he might be alone, he is set apart from other people by reason of a uniform, badge and yes, a weapon. Statistically speaking, our watchman never uses his piece; it's there to make others comfortable (and most likely himself).

Because our image of a security guard or sentry invariably suggests the night, the absence of people and vast, empty buildings, makes the job is inherently lonely. Also you wonder what a watchman does when off duty. He signs off in the morning when the regular work force arrives and goes to bed when others are just waking up. Thus our man is a creature of the night. This schedule serves to isolate him even further by reason of absenting him from the normal course of human interaction. Perhaps the job's very nature requires a loner to do it and stick with it over

the long haul. During those odd hours when a guard is off duty and not sleeping (let's say the mid to late afternoon period) he might stimulate himself through various forms of entertainment. Then again, relationships with other people may be at a minimum because everyone is still at work. The real distinction between this job and normal ones becomes clear when he comes to work and leaves his post. At these times he meets other people but only in passing; he comes on duty while others are leaving their work and visa versa. Therefore the watchman's job symbolizes a break with the normal human cycle of day as the time to work and night as the time to rest.

Although a watchman's job is especially prone to boredom, there are advantages unseen to the common observer because the work is done while other people are absent. Being alone in a large building, warehouse or walking a perimeter at night is foreboding and comforting at the same time. Foreboding in that no one is around a place that bustled with activity during the day and suddenly appears threatening by reason of its emptiness. Sounds take on new meaning, for at night you hear things which escape you during the day. These sounds are vaguely threatening as we all know from movies which mirror our common fears. Vision or sight is important but takes a secondary role to hearing. The dim light or semi-darkness isn't so bad compared with those unidentified sounds lurking out there in the unknown. Sitting in a control booth or behind a desk in a vacant lobby is not as attractive as making the rounds. One advantage of the latter is that a watchman can fantasize about what went on during the day in this place or that. No one is around to observe you, even if your movements are registered by a time clock. Thomas Merton depicted the comforting side of night duty in fine poetic fashion, perhaps one of his best pieces which is included below in full. Early on in his monastic career Merton was assigned to the night watchman job and depicted his experience. It certainly is easy to extend this to monastic life as a whole, especially the time after Vigils.

The chief distinction between a watchman and a monk is that for the former it's a job and for the latter, a life style freely chosen. Despite the occasional romance associated with being on guard, it boils down to a way of earning a living. As noted earlier, usually such an occupation attracts people with little education or those who can't do anything else. You may also get someone doing it for extra income, a second job. It may seem odd to equate this with the monastic vocation, but when you consider what monks do, so much of it is taken up with common pursuits. Monks don't engage in activity outside their cloister such as parish work or teaching. Their work centers around earning income and maintenance of the buildings and property. Nothing at all romantic here on the surface level. This banal activity can be disconcerting after one has left the novitiate. Even more so when one has been at monastic life for some ten to fifteen years. After going through the first-flush of excitement of a new mode of life and the stages of initiation, one day the monotony of it all dawns upon the young monk. He wakes up and thinks to himself something like, what I've done thus far will be the same for the indefinite future with little or no prospect of what society terms "advancement." Not entirely unlike the theme of the Book of Ecclesiastes. The prospect can be bleak when you look at your seniors who've done it for much longer than you. On top of it there's a temptation to compare yourself with peers who've been successful on the outside.

This somewhat dispiriting outlook is to be expected, indeed welcomed, for it allows you to see the real difference between the "world" and the cloister. Also it can be a make-or-break situation. Now is the time to buckle down and listen to your elders, for the years that loom ahead without interruption have the capacity of being transformed into an opportunity for seeking God. One way of looking at this is you come to a point where being a monk isn't

a job but a life style. The distinction may be realized intellectually but demands an incorporation in the literal sense of the word, of-being-situated-within your body as well as that of the monastic community. In other words, you might have to suffer through some years when the life's hum-drum activities get to you. Given the nature of modern society, there's such an inbuilt distinction between one's job and free time that you don't shake this off as soon as you enter the monastery. Besides, it's being re-enforced constantly through the media which reaches its way within the monastery's walls. Thus the monastery offers a sense of being at home without the need "to do anything" special. It also has a kind of homemaker quality to it, quite foreign to modern sensibility. When you're at home you're...well...not at work. There's no place to go, a fact which requires a radical adjustment of your outlook on life. People in society are going about their lives unconsciously with that differentiation between work and leisure; they barely give it a thought. While entering the monastery traditionally has been perceived as leaving the "world," living there doesn't mean you achieve a clean break the day you sign up. It takes a good number of years for the distinction to set in. Even after residing there for a lengthy period, still some monks differentiate between their home or where they came from and being in the monastery. You don't find this discussed in monastic literature, for much of it is apologetic in the technical sense. This defensive stance precludes awareness of being at home, but you do pick it up among those who finally have come to grips with their vocation. Now a lot of baggage is left by the wayside; a genuine relief at finally having achieved what one was after—simply being at home—is where the monk differs from being a watchman.

Every monk at heart is in essence a watchman. Like any other professions, there are times when you become more aware of your vocation and hone in on it. The Office of Vigils is such a special time. You could say that the monk begins his shift around 3 am. The quality of attention a monk brings to Vigils has a lot to do with setting the pace for the rest of the day, so it's important to get started on the right foot. I don't mean the Office in and by itself, although that's important. It jump-starts the day. Monks will concede that they are most distracted at Vigils (at any Office, for that matter!), yet upon its completion feel that they have accomplished something important. A strange phenomenon, one that hits you indirectly like many other monastic practices. Just the fact of waking up several hours before dawn is daunting enough even though you get used to it and are supported by the rest of the community. The Psalms which are recited play an important part because they embody virtually every human sentiment. Despite the fact that monks quickly become familiar with the Psalms, it's sufficient if just one verse or word hits you. At such an early hour, the impact of this word/verse is larger than first imagined and even more so during other Offices.

Now let's get to the hidden aspect of this special time, namely, the hours after completion of the Office of Vigils which lasts until the next Office (Lauds), usually at daybreak. Temporarily speaking, this time is fixed but varies according to the seasons. During the height of summer, light begins to crack just as Vigils is ending, and in winter, Lauds (6.30 am) takes place in virtual darkness. Nevertheless, the predawn hours are special, the exclusive province of the monk (Paraphrasing St. Augustine, one abbot said famously, "Go to Vigils and do what you will." These little ditties you've heard in your early monastic years stay with you over the years and continue to be a genuine type of ongoing formation). One local monastery on a hill slopes off towards the south-southwest. If you stand by one of the windows in the south cloister, the view drops off some ten to fifteen miles away. Thus you have a snapshot of the world asleep, yet know that the hour of rising is relatively soon. You are doing what no one else is doing, of watching over everyone and everything so no harm will come nigh. What helps this perception is that

off on the southwest horizon (maybe ten miles distant) are blinking red lights on towers whose blinking joyfully add sparkle to the night. These towers are a good indicator of the weather and are the first things visible to monks coming from their cells on the west side of the cloister. If the towers are visible, the weather is relatively clear. Later in the twilight (same applies around sunset) you have to look hard to discern these towers until they disappear in more intense sunlight. Now couple this blinking with cold and windy weather as in winter, and you really get a sense that the towers are out there keeping guard. Some of the monks have a general idea as to their location but were never tempted to search them out. Say, for example, someone did just that. All he'd find are three spindly towers, no more, no less. Nothing romantic here. This is not unlike Henry David Thoreau. He never walked on mountains and hills towards the west (his favorite direction), for treading upon them would violate them. Thus vigilance is an art form of knowing one's place and that which you are contemplating.

Attention to these subtle features of the night are important reminders of a monk's vocation of keeping watch while the world is at sleep. Actually, the notion of watchman has played an important role in the Church and extends further back to the Old Testament. An image of a walled town or fortress comes to mind which inevitably has a tinge of romance. Something mysterious is here which we can't quite put our fingers on and the subject of many a story. In the days before electricity—and that's fairly recent in human history—all lighting was by fire, so the natural darkness in which watchmen had functioned was much denser and more forbidding than nowadays. Today we can play at being a watchman (the new atmosphere of potential terrorism makes it more serious, however) knowing that the danger is minimal. Such is what grabs people's attention on the material level, but when you move to the spiritual one, we're into different territory. No small wonder that what occurred on the physical level became a sign for that which was invisible and considered as belonging to a higher reality.

I began writing this document while on retreat in early spring not long after we had set our clocks ahead one hour. After a week or two of adjustment to the morning darkness, suddenly it becomes light which heralds the approach of longer days and shorter nights. Thus the transition from darkness to light is considerably shorter than it had been a few weeks earlier. Here in central New England winters are long and summers are short, so you appreciate the pleasantness this season has to offer. It doesn't last long, for around the second week of August we experience a shift in the opposite direction. Thus roughly from mid May to mid August the nights are short and the days are long; the brevity of this period doesn't favor the night watch because darkness is more limited. On the other hand, you appreciate the darkness that much more. This brings up the weather which is related to the notion of vigilance. People always pay attention to the forecast, especially when living in rural areas. It too is a kind of watching, especially when it comes to foul weather which intimates the sense of being on a ship at sea. While weather affects our daily lives, being attentive to the subtle shift in seasons—all four are very distinct in these parts—is a related type of watchfulness. Since each season is technically three months long, the variations occur much faster. Attentiveness to seasonal changes intimates watching the rising and falling of the sun. My preference is for the latter because it prepares you for the vigil ahead. Not that darkness in and by itself is desirable, but it quiets down the whole world in a way you don't get during warmer and brighter months.

So what does a monk "do" during the early morning hours? He starts the day by attending Vigils and extends this communal watchfulness to his private observance until dawn. Only the first part is visible to a visitor in the side chapel; the second is suggested when he sees the monks leave church. The Office of Vigils concludes with a brief

responsory hymn after which the monks face towards the altar awaiting a signal from the Abbot to disperse. At this signal quietly and quickly the monks disperse, and the church is empty except for a few stragglers. The questions that strike any retreatant brave enough to have risen at that hour is “Where are they going?” “What are they doing now?” As soon as the church has emptied, the lights are turned off except for a sanctuary lamp and one by the reader’s stand. If you really want to get an inkling of the monastic vocation, I suggest watching the monks disperse after Vigils. They fan out through the dark cloisters, 180 feet long, with a night light here and there, an image that makes the monks walking through them all the more mysterious. As many a time as I’ve seen this, the view is unforgettable; even more so when there’s a full moon illuminating the cloisters. However, like pinning down the actual location of those blinking towers on the horizon, should you wish to follow a particular monk, you’d be quickly disappointed. Just like everyone else he is human and has to attend to one human need or another. No mystery there, but the context in which these actions are happening is mysterious in and by itself. Most monks realize that they are interacting with a special environment as well as the commonality they have with all people right down to the last banal detail. One told me several years ago that he feels as though he’s living on a stage. Not in the negative sense of being watched (though some of that’s involved, by retreatants, for example) but for some indescribable reason he is partaking of a larger reality and that Someone somewhere is keeping an eye on him.

Okay, now we are getting to the heart of the matter, the part invisible to everyone else, including one’s fellow monks. Most brothers prefer retiring to their cells for the Vigils–Lauds duration. You have approximately two solid uninterrupted hours all by yourself which require some discipline to handle because you’re all by yourself with no one around to hold your hand. Obviously the monastery is a quiet place, but the predawn hours bestow a special quietness you don’t find at other times of the day. Always there’s some background noise either outside or indoors. The “preliminaries” have been done as we just noted: the Office of Vigils, washing up, breakfast, checking the blinking towers as well as an awareness of the night atmosphere in general. To anyone on retreat just the thought of having this time for oneself is a gift from heaven. Can’t disagree here, but try doing it day after day, month after month, year after year...for an entire lifetime. A daunting task by any standard. Monks are bound to experience ups and downs, but provided he keeps faithful to the schedule, the rewards are phenomenal. Like any worthwhile endeavor, considerable effort is demanded, and it doesn’t take long to get a taste of them.

Sometimes a monk can be filled with dread upon opening the door of his cell with full realization that he has “nothing to do” for the next several hours. Such an experience stems from familiarity and routine but is overcome promptly by just doing it. That is to say, walking over to one’s desk or chair and opening a book (most likely, the Bible) for some *lectio divina*. *Lectio* is a way of priming the spiritual pump, of quieting down the monk and getting him better in tune with the natural quietness about him. After spending a while—the time can never be determined hard and fast—you may continue sitting in a comfortable but attentive position. In other words, you place yourself in a position to “just be.” Here’s where the action’s at, to borrow a familiar phrase. You simply sit there after *lectio* and let what you just read sink in with the pre–dawn hours helping you along. Should your mind become filled with too many distractions, you have recourse to the text you just read as a means to re–establish this inner quiet. Also you can recall your recent attendance at the Office of Vigils and the communal support you derived there. Easily I is extended to the loneliness of your cell.

Usually the first half of time in the cell passes by without incident. It’s easy to become in tune with the natural pre–

dawn silence, but not long afterwards you become restless. Here's a further refinement of this entire process. After you've settled down and acclimatized yourself to the quiet atmosphere, thoughts begin to arise which in other circumstances would have passed unnoticed. Now we're getting at the very essence of vigilance, of keeping watch. We tend to watch over our thought processes and given them inordinate time, even cherishing unprofitable and destructive thoughts. Then we hear the bell for Lauds signaling the end of the vigil period and are tempted to say, what a waste of time this had been! This area is the province of spiritual writers of all ages. Here isn't the place here to develop this point, for dealing with distractions and temptations is a whole world unto itself. All I'm doing is pointing out in as clear terms as possible some features of monastic watchfulness hidden from outsiders.

As for the grander scheme of things, of how you fit it with the cosmos, you don't hit upon it right away. We're dealing with some pretty subtle matters which require slowing-down our attention span and getting in tune with other realities. This may involve severe doubt and questioning of what you may have taken for granted. Now here you are, facing it all by yourself in your monastic cell. The time may have been taken up following useless ramblings of our mind, but sticking with the daily discipline allows you to ride out the rough spots. We don't follow these thoughts willfully but are led by the nose, quite against our will. It's a strange experience no matter how long you've been at this vigil thing. If you want to see whether or not the experience has validity, try it out for a few days. Keep in mind that monks return to their post-Vigil vigil twenty-four hours later, repeat the same process indefinitely and come up with the same results. However, should we be patient and manage to stand back a bit, a pattern merges which is larger than what our immediate perceptions pick up. These are things nobody sees, not even your fellow monks. It's all done in the privacy of our monastic cell which makes what is going on even fuzzier. Sure, the idea of keeping watch up their on the battlements is romantic, but ask someone who has been doing it for a while, and you might get another answer.

Essential to the pattern of our daily watch is the requirement of sitting in one spot for a given period of time which anchors us not so much from roaming about in the physical sense but from doing so mentally. An odd parallel to this exists in the daylight hours. Monks find that time flies—even more than their counterparts in society—but the hours between three and around five in the afternoon can be awkward. By this I mean they represent a transition from the monastic day (which began at 3 am) to evening. Don't forget, monks retire after Compline around 8 pm. Thus the three-to-five period is equivalent to ten or eleven o'clock at night for most folks. Despite the opposite times of day, the second half of the vigil period has some resemblance to late afternoon. Both are transitional periods, of being on the threshold of a change in time which suggests that somehow you have to fill in the gaps. Perhaps a real watchman finds the last two or so hours of his night shift the most difficult because his "day" is in the process of winding down.

And so concludes a brief outline of the essence of what it means to practice vigilance within the monastic context. Although these remarks pertain to that way of life, they have application to anyone who follows the road of Christian contemplation. Sometimes it can be more difficult—and hence more rewarding—to advance upon this road within the "world," for those doing it lack the total environmental support offered by a monastic community. Although vigilance is very important, it isn't the whole story. After all, the bulk of one's monastic life is spent outside the special pre-dawn hours. That's where the notion of anamnesis, remembrance of that period, comes in

handy. It's meant to inform (in the literal sense of putting-on-its-form) these other hours. It's strange how short period a time, sometimes fraught with distractions and struggle against sleepiness, sticks out in your mind later in the day. You know that you've spend worthwhile time; difficult to communicate to others but surely a reality larger than what a monk does otherwise. The art of pre-dawn vigilance offers an answer to a nagging question most of us have. We're somehow "stuck" with a span of time (our lives) which we must fill but aren't sure if we're filling it correctly. This borders upon the search for meaning in life. Another way of putting this is to say that anamnesis of the pre-dawn hours which inform our lives spills out and assuages the tragedies and difficulties of life. We go through them in the course of a day with full knowledge that we will return to that relatively short but meaningful time before dawn.

Appendix

*As noted above, the following excerpt is Thomas Merton's "Fire Watch" from the **Sign of Jonas**. I include not the entire passage but selections which pertain more directly to the art of vigilance, notably within a monastic context:*

The night, O my Lord, is a time of freedom. You have seen the morning and the night, and the night was better. In the night all things began, and in the night the end of all things has come before me.

Baptized in the river of night, Gethsemani has recovered her innocence. Darkness brings a semblance of order before all things disappear. With the clock slung over my shoulder, in the silence of the Fourth of July, it is my time to be the night watchman, in the house that will one day perish.

Here is the way it is when I go on the fire watch: before eight o'clock the monks are packed in the belly of the great heat, singing to the Mother of God like exiles sailing to their slavery, hoping for glory...

The watchman's clock together with the watchman's slippers are kept in a box, together with a flashlight and the keys to various places, at the foot of the infirmary stairs....I take the heavy clock and sling it on its strap over my shoulder. I walk to the nearest window, on my silent feet. I recite the second nocturn of Saturday, sitting outside the window in the dark garden, and the house begins to be silent....

At eight-fifteen I sit in the darkness. I sit in human silence. Then I begin to hear the eloquent night, the night of wet trees, with moonlight sliding over the shoulder of the church in a haze of dampness and subsiding heat. The world of this night resounds from heaven to hell with animal eloquence, with the savage innocence of a million unknown creatures...

God, my God, God whom I meet in darkness, with You it is always the same thing! Always the same question that nobody knows how to answer!

I have prayed to You in the day-time with thoughts and reasons, and in the night-time You have confronted me,

scattering thought and reason...

And here, now, by night, with this huge clock ticking on my fright hip and the flashlight in my hand and slippers on my feet, I feel as if everything had been unreal. It is as if the past had never existed. The things I thought were so important—because of the effort I put into them—I never thought about the things I was never able either to measure or to expect, were the things that mattered...

On all sides I am confronted by questions that I cannot answer, because the time for answering them has not yet come. Between the silence of God and the silence of my own soul stands the silence of the souls entrusted to me. Immersed in these three silences, I realize that the questions I ask myself about them are perhaps no more than a surmise. And perhaps the most urgent and practical renunciation is the renunciation of all questions...

This nearness to You in the darkness is too simple and too close for excitement. It is commonplace for all things to live an unexpected life in the night-time: but their life is illusory and unreal. The illusion of sound only intensifies the infinite substance of Your silence...

O God, my God, the night has values that day has never dreamed of. All things stir by night, waking or sleeping, conscious of the nearness of their ruin. Only man makes himself illuminations he conceives to be solid and eternal. But while we ask our question and come to our decisions, God blows our decisions out, the roofs of our houses cave in upon us, the tall towers are undermined by ants, the wall crack and cave in, and the holiest buildings burn to ashes while the watchman is composing a theory of duration.

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