

## WE DO IT FOR YOU

Today on the Church's calendar we have the option of celebrating a little known saint, Saint Apollinaris, who was said to have been consecrated a bishop by Saint Peter himself, and then was sent to Ravenna in Italy as a missionary where he was martyred under the reign of Emperor Claudius. What makes that so auspicious for us is that Saint Romuald, the founder of our congregation, entered the monastery of Saint Apollinaris in Classe, just outside of Ravenna after Apollinaris appeared to him, twice. Actually he appeared to him again later urging him to return to San Apollinaris as abbot. (None of those times turned out too well: the first time his brother monks tried to throw him off the second floor balcony; the second time the abbot himself tried to strangle him, but never mind that...) I myself have a connection to all of this. Back when I was finishing my BA and studying Art History I fell in love with Romanesque architecture and specifically with the mosaics of Ravenna, both at the mausoleum in town called the Galla Placidia (whence comes that mosaic of the two birds drinking out of the fountain that is our *stemma* and the symbol of the World Community for Christian Meditation), and then in the grand basilica in Classe, long before I had ever heard anything about Romuald or this rag tag bunch of monks called Camaldolese. The first time I was there it was as a monk, and I could barely enter in the church, I was so overcome with emotion to see it all up close.

When we were beginning to make preparations for this celebration of the installation of the new prior, I was consulted, as much as the liturgist as a candidate. I made it known in the strongest terms possible that I would really like to see it be a very small celebration, mainly for the community, maybe our support staff and one or two invited guests. Instead it was decided that there would be a more or less open invitation, on the heels of the Camaldolese Gathering at Asilomar, because this would be a big deal for our friends as well. So you see just how much influence I have, the sheer gravitas of my presence and the weight of my personality! I say that with a bit of humor and with absolutely no bitterness, mainly to make the point that actually either way would have been valid, and somehow the tension between those two options points right to a tension that I see in monastic life in general and in our Camaldolese charism in particular, that tension between withdrawal and belonging, you might say, between being alone and being available.

I chose to stay with the readings of the day today, mainly the gospel,<sup>i</sup> for two reasons. First of all, because Matthew cites the very line from the prophet Isaiah in regards to Jesus, that Saint Benedict points to in reference to the attitude an abbot (or a prior as the case may be) should have in regards to his brother monks: "He is to distrust his own frailty and remember *not to crush the bruised reed.*"<sup>ii</sup> The other reason is that that same tension that I mentioned seems to be going on in this little scene from the gospel.

In some ways, I have always thought that the dichotomy that we place between the active and contemplative life in Western Christianity is what my philosopher friend calls a "false dilemma." These two energies are only distant from each other because we are so distant from our own true selves. Father Bede Griffiths was very fascinated in a concept he got from India called *sahaj samadhi*. *Samadhi* is the final stage of yoga, when one is,

as I like to translate it, “absorbed” in some way into the Divine, whatever that word means to you. And *sahaj* means something like natural; and so *sahaj samadhi* means “natural contemplation” and the best example of it according to Fr. Bede was Jesus, who had gone beyond the categories of active and contemplative. Whether he was in the desert or in the marketplace teeming with lepers, priests and prostitutes, he was a pure contemplative, as Bede wrote, “always abiding with the Father as the source of his being, and always seeing what the Father does as the source of his action. He is in that state of transcendent awareness in which he is one with the Father, and at the same time perfectly natural and human.”<sup>iii</sup> “Perfectly natural and human”; that reminds me of Athanasius’ description of Antony the Great when his friends came and broke down the gates of the deserted fort where he had been living for twenty years and Antony emerges and he is *kata physin*, Athanasius tells us—according to nature, “all balanced, as one governed by reason and standing in his natural condition.” The ascetical life did not destroy Antony; he was deified, and deification made him into a real human being.

What I note about Jesus is how often we see him go off to a remote place to pray, on a mountain often; and sometimes he takes his disciples and tells them *Come away with me to a lonely place*.<sup>iv</sup> But, notice, when he is off by himself and his disciples come looking for him he never says, “Go away, I’m on a desert day.” When crowds come looking for him and his disciples, sometimes the disciples want to send the crowd away, but Jesus always welcomes them. And sometimes, like today, it seems that he brings the whole crowd with him—*he withdrew from that place. Many people followed him*, Matthew tells us.<sup>v</sup> And as was said about the early monks in Egypt, “the desert becomes a city.”

The spiritual life for Jesus was—and I suppose the ideal of the spiritual life for us could be—like breathing in and breathing out, as simple as that. Breathing in the love of God, breathing out the love of God. Breathing in strength, breathing out compassion. Breathing in the fire, breathing out justice. Or, simply put, breathing in the Spirit and then delivering it over, as he did with his last breath of his life on this earth.

Please don’t misunderstand me, I think that for most of us mere mortals it is not that easy, and I think that there will always be a place for the purely contemplative life. And our constitutions say right at the beginning that, “In both the hermitage and the monastery” we monks are to “attend to the contemplative life above all else.”<sup>vi</sup> And the reason I think that there will always be a place for the purely contemplative life is this: we are one body, the body that is the church, the body that is the human race; and a conservative guess would say probably 90% of the body is active almost all the time, and so some part of the body has to be contemplative to give it some equilibrium. My friend John likes to quote Thich Nhat Hahn who says that when the boat is rocking on a stormy sea someone in the boat needs to sit still. That’s our job, to sit still. The Katha Upanishad says, “every now and then some wise souls seeking immortality turn the gaze inward.” That’s our job—to turn the gaze inward. But we don’t do it just for our own sakes; we do it for the body, the body that is the human race, the body that is the church, the Body of Christ, and even in some way, as St. Paul intuits, the body that is *all creation that is groaning and in agony*<sup>vii</sup> while we work this out. We are not separate from the Body; we are part of the body, as our Don Emanuele put it, “an image of the praying church.” Abhishktananda said that the

monk is not supposed to worry too much about the canals downstream, he is supposed to stay close to the well. Not because we're better, not because we are wiser or holier; just because that's our job; it's what we do for the sake of the body, the body of the church, the body of humanity, the Body of Christ.

I remember so distinctly September 11, 2001, the day of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington D.C., we were on retreat with Laurence Freeman; and I remember at Mass that morning looking around the rotunda at all my brothers with their arms raised singing the Our Father, and I thought to myself, "This is exactly where we are supposed to be." While the rest of the country and many in the world were running around dazed and horrified (and rightly so!), while jets were being scrambled over the sky and military units mobilized, here we were standing in our silly white robes with our hands stretched up to the sky murmuring our prayers—and that is exactly where we were supposed to be. Even in the midst of that crisis, someone had to remember the holy words, someone had to sing the holy songs, someone had to remember the stream of life-giving water that promised to flow from out of the believer's heart, someone had to remember that Jesus ordered us to *Love your enemy, and pray for those who persecute you*, especially then when no one else could remember.

We monks sometimes make the mistake of thinking that we are the center of this life, of this monastery. But we are not. I love the altar in the middle of our rotunda; it always reminds me what or, better, *who* is the center of our life: God in Christ. That altar there for me is like a well, and those who stay close to that well stay close to the center of our life, because they stay close to God in Christ. That altar is like a cauldron, that's what the center of our life is, and so all those who stay close to that cauldron, stay close to what Saint Bonaventure calls "the raging fire that carries the soul to God with intense fervor and burning love." If I may stretch the metaphors a little more, that altar is like the foundational stone that Jews say is buried deep inside of Mount Moriah over which the Temple was built, and which they think is the very center of the world; this altar is like the *ka'ba* in Mecca, cleansed of all its idols, around which the pilgrims on *hajj* process as if the whole world were swirling around it in surrender to God the Merciful and Compassionate; it's like Mount Arunachala in South India, a symbol of the Shiva-lingam, around which pilgrims circumambulate singing songs, that is meant to melt the ego of anyone who meditates on it in their hearts. We're not the center of this life; we're circling around the center, God in Christ is the center, our practice is the center, all those things that will remain after more than one generation of us are in our graves; and whoever stays near to that altar, that well, that raging fire is at the center of our life.

But what I really mean to stress is that we're here for *you*, and we need to stay here for you. We do our job for the Body because you do your job for the Body. We get up at 5:15 in the morning and croak out our feeble prayers because you get up at the crack of dawn and feed your children. We show up here four times a day to pray because you show up at your work five, six days a week, 8 to 10 hours a day to build a world of justice and peace. We fast and pray and keep vigil in our cells because you bear such pain and loneliness and we want to bear it with you. We take care of each other here in our lives of charity because we have learned from you how to do that, how to care for a sick friend,

how to guide a dying loved one to death's door with dignity; we do this because you feed the hungry and clothe the naked. We do our job because you do yours.

All that to say that this is your monastery too. If we lack sometimes in extraverted energy and social skills, if not all of us travel around the world doing concerts or write books or preach retreats and sermons, please don't think we have forgotten you or what our job is. We are here close to the well to keep the waters flowing for you too, so that the waters flow downstream and so you can come a dip in any time you need to. We keep the fire burning so that the whole world can see it, and so you can come and warm yourself and relight that spark of divinity within you whenever you need to. We keep murmuring these sacred words and holy songs over and over again in case you forget them and need to hear them again to be reminded. We stay near this altar to remind you that the altar around which we really circumambulate is the altar of the heart, our hearts, your own heart, because that's where God is, in Christ: the Spirit poured into our hearts, so that we can be defied, and in being defied become truly human for the sake of the Body.

cyprian, osb cam  
20 July 2013

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<sup>i</sup> Mt 12:14-21

<sup>ii</sup> Is 42:3; RB 64:13

<sup>iii</sup> Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 273.

<sup>iv</sup> Mk 6:31

<sup>v</sup> Mt 12:15

<sup>vi</sup> *Constitutions and Declarations*, I.4

<sup>vii</sup> Rom 8:22