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A Retreat for All Ages

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CONFERENCE TWO

BASIL HUME: THE MONK

Strictly speaking, a monk's life is not organized for any particular work or service in the Church. His main purpose is to seek God and this he takes on as a life-long task. In a sense this is no different from the task of any Christian or indeed any person. The monastic life is simply one way of leading the Christian life and this the monk does in community...The principles which guide the monk in his search for God and the Gospel values, which he tries to make his, are relevant to both Christians and non-Christians alike.

—Basil Hume, *Searching for God*

We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus for the good works which God has already designated to make up our way of life.
(Ephesians 2:10)

Pope John Paul II on the nature of the artist: "Not all are called to be artists in the specific sense of the term. Yet, as Genesis has it, all men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life: in a certain sense, they are to make of it a work of art, a masterpiece."¹

FOR REFLECTION:

- ✓ Made in the image and likeness of God, how have you crafted your own life into a work of art?
- ✓ Who are the significant people in your life who have or continue to have a significant influence on you as you craft your life?
- ✓ Who has helped form you in the Christian way of life?
- ✓ Are you responsible for guiding others as they craft their lives? How do you do this?

¹ John Paul II, "Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists," April 4, 1999, accessed May 16, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html.

The Art of Monastic Instinct

Monastic instinct: It is a kind of instinct by which one is able to judge what is fitting for a monk and what is not. This can cover a wide spectrum of activity, attitude, speech, the way we pass our holidays, how we spend money, the kind of hospitality we give, the kind we receive, our behaviour, things we say, our values. There is no end to it.²

For reflection:

- ✓ What about Christian instinct? What is fitting for a Christian and what is not? How will people know us by our activities, attitudes, speech, how we spend vacations, how we spend money, the kind of hospitality we give and receive, our behavior and values?
- ✓ How should our “way of acting different be from the world’s way” (RB 4:20)?

The Art of Being Benedictine

Our life as Christians is not about *doing* anything, but about *being* something. Once we understand, and start to become, what we are meant to be, then we have a much better chance of understanding and achieving what we are meant to do.³

For reflection:

- ✓ What is the difference between *doing* and *being*?

We do not take you into this community because we think you are going to be useful to us; we do not take you on because we want your skill or your experience: we have taken you on because we think you are seeking God and we think that you will make good monks; that is what matters.⁴

- ✓ Does society place greater value on *doing* or *being*? Reflect and discuss this in light of one’s own yearnings and desires, compared to how others, or society in general, may project their/its yearnings and desires onto you.
- ✓ What does it mean when someone says, “oh, just *be* yourself”? Or, what does it mean if you say, “I can’t *be* myself here”?
- ✓ How important is self-knowledge in the search for God?

² Hume, *Searching for God*, 22-23.

³ Cyprian Smith, *The Path to Life: Benedictine Spirituality for Monks & Lay People* (York: Ampleforth Abbey Press, 2004), 88. Cyprian Smith, b. 1937, monk of Ampleforth Abbey.

⁴ Hume, unpublished conference, September 7, 1968, clothing chapter.

The Art of Treasuring the Silence of the Desert and Thriving in the Market-place

The desert: withdrawal from activity to meet God.

The market-place: involvement in pastoral situations of one kind or another.⁵

The Art of Balance

We shall never be safe in the market-place unless we are at home in the desert... The heart, too, must learn to live in its desert if it is to be capable of involvement in the market-place. It is only in the desert that you can learn to turn loneliness into solitude, and it is only when we have learnt solitude and freedom—the capacity to be alone—that we can be safely involved with others.⁶

For reflection:

- ✓ How do you re-fresh yourself so as to be your best self for God, yourself, and others?
- ✓ How do you balance the demands of life, namely, family, work, social obligations and responsibilities, with making time for silence and solitude?
- ✓ Do you make times of silence with your family or community? How do you feel during those times?

There is one aspect of Christ's life which needs to be constantly underlined and emphasised. From time to time he would withdraw from the crowds and his ministry to be alone with the Father. In that way he showed us the importance of *our* being alone with the Father.

Silence and solitude were part of the life of Our Blessed Lord. In his public ministry, intensely busy, he went off to look for solitude, silence and stillness.

We should do the same from time to time, just to think about the love God has for us. Go back to that constantly.⁷

To be silent and still is an art to be learned. It has its own discipline and difficulties, but the learning of it is essential, lest we be trapped in the purely secular and the material, escaping from the emptiness of the former by indulging in the attractions of the latter.⁸

⁵ Hume, *Searching for God*, 32-33.

⁶ Hume, *Searching for God*, 34.

⁷ Hume, *To Be a Pilgrim: A Spiritual Notebook*, 139.

⁸ Basil Hume, *Cardinal Hume: A Spiritual Companion*, 2nd ed. (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2001), 75.

The Arts of Humility and Obedience

**The first step of humility is unhesitating obedience,
which comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all else.
(RB 5:1-2)**

If the purpose of the monastic life, just as the Christian life, is to love God and love one's neighbour, there will, for a monk, be no true love of God or any true love of the neighbour, unless it is firmly based on humility and obedience."⁹

For reflection:

- ✓ What is humility?
- ✓ What is obedience?
- ✓ What do humility and obedience have to do with the pilgrim's search for God?

When all is said and done, the difference between a spiritual person and an unspiritual person is the difference between a humble person and a proud person...humility is the finest and nicest quality in a person and it is the hardest and most difficult to achieve.¹⁰

The Art of Being a Prayerful Benedictine

**Devote yourself often to prayer.
(RB 4:56)**

In seeking God, we need constantly to ask ourselves whether prayer has the place in our lives that it should. Do we really think and act as if prayer came first—before anything else whatever?¹¹

For reflection:

- ✓ What does it mean to pray without ceasing?
- ✓ How can you make your life a prayer?

⁹ Hume, unpublished conference, 1966, clothing of four.

¹⁰ Hume, unpublished conference, March 16, 1968.

¹¹ Hume, *Searching for God*, 81.

We do not know how to pray as we ought.
(Romans 8:28)

Good News All Round!

No one prays easily at first, just as I think no one really enjoys the first glass of beer. You've got to get used to beer, then you get hooked on it and want more and more! Prayer is like that, you have got to get hooked but at the beginning it is hard going.¹²



The key to learning the art of prayer is perseverance. If all else fails, pray for perseverance. Why is the art of prayer difficult? Hume explained, "It is difficult knowing it must go on year after year, always trying to pray, and to pray better. It is a difficulty one must face squarely and fairly."¹³ The art of prayer is also difficult "because we remember too infrequently that ultimately prayer is a gift from God, but the gift comes, I am sure it comes but only after solid perseverance."¹⁴

***Lectio divina*:** the necessary pre-requisite for lively and true prayer; a necessary pre-requisite for concentration on Divine Office. For that is what reflective reading, *Lectio divina*, is—not preparation for a sermon, not reading theology for its own sake, but prayerful reading which enables the Holy Spirit to move our minds toward an understanding of, an insight into, the things of God, coupled with a desire to give ourselves to God and to express this in prayer."¹⁵

Contemplation: Contemplation is not just looking at God; for most of us, now in *via*, it consists in looking for God, and if from time to time some 'sight' of him is accorded, this will only be a glimmer granted by grace in what will always be a 'cloud of unknowing.' So when I use the term 'contemplation' I use it in this sense: looking for God. This looking for God is done through, with, and in Christ, in unity with the Holy Spirit so that we can give, within that very life of the Trinity, all honour and glory to God, the Almighty Father.¹⁶

¹² Hume, *Cardinal Basil Hume: In My Own Words*, 94.

¹³ Hume, unpublished conference, January 19, 1964.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Hume, *Searching for God*, 118.

¹⁶ Hume, *Searching for God*, 100-101.

The feminine genius in prayer:

It is a feminine trait to listen, to receive, to watch. Perhaps that is why more women pray than men. Perhaps that is why among contemplatives there are more women than men—it is the 'feminine' which listens and waits. It is a feminine trait, also, to see, to observe. The wine has run out. Mary notices, and being a woman, she has a practical mind.¹⁷

Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.
(Luke 2:19)

'They have no wine'... 'Do whatever he tells you'.
(John 2:3,5)

The world is going to have to learn how to pray.¹⁸

For reflection:

- ✓ Why do you think the world is going to have to learn how to pray?
- ✓ What role do you, your family, your community, etc. play in teaching the world how to pray? How do we assist in building the Body of Christ through our life of prayer?

With all power and supplication, pray at every opportunity in the Spirit.
(Ephesians 6:18)

¹⁷ Basil Hume, *Searching for God*, 160. Here, Hume refers to the Wedding Feast at Cana in John 2:1-12.

¹⁸ Hume, *Searching for God*, 101.