

# INTRODUCTION TO THE CIRCLE DANCE

I am on permanent vacation. This surprising state of affairs is the life that I have been called to, and it has lasted almost six decades. My good fortune is known as a vocation. Monastic life is essentially a vacating, an emptying out, not unlike vacating an apartment and living without furniture, or even without an apartment. Monastics (men and women) vacate the world and go where people of the world do not want to go and remain. To live in solitude, to be specific, is one of the most difficult things for a person to endure. “Man’s unhappiness,” as Pascal said, “spring from one thing alone, his incapacity to stay quietly in one room.” In more ways than one, that is precisely what I have been doing for a long time—except, rather than inside a room, I prefer to be outside. The generous ceiling of the sky for me is more congenial to solitude, precisely because there I find company with the visible world around me.

But this outward solitude is not enough. Vacating means a personal emptying out of clutter within the mind and heart, certainly a clearing of the nonessential and even some essential furniture to make room for God. A normal home has spouses and maybe children. Life in a monastic community can never be quite the equivalent of a family, although there may be plenty of people around. Radically, there must be an interior journey into a wilderness to be alone, free of the world and at rest in God. Living in cenobitic community might seem to upgrade this desert to the status of a private

resort, with all conveniences provided, like laundry and cooking. Perhaps that sounds too good to be true. Well, it is. You will shortly find this is not the case. Everyone here has to put in a hand and do his own part. Work is one of the forms of this emptiness, this vacation. It enhances prayer and keeps it from going static and stale. Likewise, prayer is a form of work—"the work of God," as St. Benedict called it. It requires intention, attention, and persistence.

## TEAMWORK

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I follow—or stumble along—the "Benedictine way," which approaches life mostly in terms of prayer, work, and reading. To follow all three of these essential principles to the fullest is real work, and indeed at times a hard battle! Key phrases found in the Rule of St. Benedict are "the labor of obedience," "the strong, bright weapons of obedience," "the instruments of good works." It is only when the work of obedience is advanced and matured that we "run the way of God's commandments in the unspeakable sweetness of God's love." I have never been a great runner, but I do like to hike, and have worn out many a pair of boots on the dirt roads and paths up and over what are locally known as "knobs"—too modest to be called hills—on the west side of our monastery land. The knobs are steep enough to pump up breath and heartbeat, but small enough to shortly bring one to good elevation for sight and sense. From my earliest years I climbed, circled back down, saw the monastery steeple appear in the distance above the trees, and knew with increased clarity I wanted to live here, with whatever it offered me at the unseen hand of God.

Work it proved to be, and battle too, but "play" proves to be the fuller truth on this park ground, where St. Benedict says we end up "running with hearts expanded"; dwelling "at rest on the holy mountain"; abiding in the tent where "in his loving kindness the Lord shows us the way of life."

In this regard, the Holy Rule is about a life not far from a maxim in Plato's *Laws*: "Life is to be lived as play." Even more radically speaking, I myself am "God's plaything"—God who "alone is worthy of supreme seriousness." This might sound too Greek, too like pagan fatalism, but to St. Thérèse of Lisieux it was a joy; and so it is to any nun or monk with the heart of a child. It is fun to be a ball tossed about by the hand of Christ. On this Gethsemani Abbey ball field, with its lines and boundaries, there is a constant game going on that gets ramped up by the fact of its having rules and regulations. These rules do make for an intense game, but one's skills over time are dramatically enhanced.

## HOLY GAME

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In this arena, the biggest game is called liturgy. I can credit my confrere Fr. Matthew Kelty for coaching me broadly into this game analogy and mindset about monastic prayer life and daily activity. Matthew was my senior by age, and my junior in terms of monastic years. He came a year after I entered. We were in the novitiate together. He wrote eloquently of how song, movement, poetry, and music in liturgy are sacred theater. It needs no more substantiation than does a play by Shakespeare or Euripides. In our case, the scripts are coauthored by such ancient masters as that pleading, poignant, and pugnacious bard King David and the immortal narrators Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, not to mention Isaiah and a stellar rostrum of other prophets and sages.

Why we must carry on this way, day after day, may not be obvious to anyone outside the community. One needs to be inside this chosen life, intensely centered on this space, to understand our odd behavior. It springs from an inner drive as deep as a child's instinct to play, and even more, it rises from a love of life that wants to bring the great inner source of life forward and outward. There is danger herein as well. Like any game, it can be spoiled by a wild, temperamental

player or, conversely, by someone rigidly fixated on rules. But when the heat is on, you flow with the rules and just throw yourself into the freedom and play.

I must warn you in advance that I will appear to be playing outside the rules. Even to write this book may seem a broad step outside the enclosure walls and says much that departs from a prescribed script. Well, at least it shows how I've survived, and even thrived, and found a flourishing mode of monastic life. Fr. Matthew has put it quite beautifully:

We have but to live, take each day as it comes, see the Lord in all that happens and have a kind of response to the will of God that is much like dancing. You must work with it. It is not a matter of passive submission. This no way to dance; it is too heavy, too leaden, too dragging and uninspired. No, you must dance with your partner, you must cooperate, you must work with the will of God. This is the sort of dancing that leads to the kingdom and makes one free.

Thomas Merton, my novice master, had a great capacity for work and play. How else did he write all those books? For him, I suspect, it was a form of play, engaging wit, art, and creativity. Yet much that he wrote demonstrated the strange paradox that out of inner poverty and emptiness come abundant wisdom and great joy.

## LIVING FOR THE SAKE OF LIFE

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The daily routine of the monastery eventually levels you to the plateau of your ordinariness. There the Word become flesh meets me, precisely where I feel the ache of being human. Although life here can be very busy, once accustomed to the schedule, you have little to divert you from the normal state of affairs, which is a simple quiet and

self-forgetting. At least when things are working right, that is the way it is. Ambition and striving fade into the background, and life lived in God is sufficient. To be alive, to move from day to day, to do the chores and greet the smiles of others is a gift and a precious blessing. So gratitude becomes the intrinsic animation of prayer. To live in gratitude simply for being becomes the motif of life, liturgy, and mutual love. It serves no apparent purpose, other than the hidden marvel of being in God. The meaning of love, according to St. Bernard, is love itself. *Amo quia amo*. Why do I love? For the sake of love itself.

For this reason, it is radically a life of play. The purpose of play is play. Despite whatever else you may say about it, play is for exercise, for refreshment, for winning, for community. If play begins to serve an end beyond itself, it ceases to be play. Prayer is much the same thing. Why should I pray? Basically it is for the sake of praying. There is much else we might claim about prayer—it is for the sake of the world, it is for those in need, for the Church, for individual souls—all of which is true. But unless it is rooted in the boundless freedom of love and confidence in God, it is void and crippled. It has some effect perhaps, but lacks the current of grace and graciousness that flows from God.

## THE DANCE OF THE LORD

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On the day of my solemn vows, Fr. Louis (Thomas Merton) tossed off a quip: “Vows are useless.” The funny thing is that one of my two companions at that profession said the same thing to me before the services. I was not thrown off balance by either one of these radical remarks because Fr. Louis had been speaking for months about how the whole monastic life is useless. By then I was ready to lead “the useless life.” For all its obligations and demands, its idealism and elaborations, monastic life is a way of entering into the cosmic dance. This primarily requires freedom. As Merton put it:

[L]et go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, [that] we might be able to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance. . . . For the world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness. The silence of the spheres is the music of a wedding feast. The more we persist in misunderstanding the phenomena of life, the more we analyze them out into strange finalities and complex purposes of our own, the more we involve ourselves in sadness, absurdity and despair.

## WRESTLING WITH GOD

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Another image of monastic life is to say it is a stripping away of the extraneous for the most demanding of sports—wrestling with God. One afternoon I was looking for an explanation of what faith is all about. Fr. Louis told me that faith is a *wrestling*. Jacob wrestled in the darkness with the unseen God. The result of such an intimate engagement was not that Jacob wrestled out the secret of God's name. The undisclosed name remained undisclosed. Faith continues to be a struggle in darkness. God gives no answer to the question, "What is your name?" Rather it is our name that is learned, our identity that is changed. In that new identity comes the dawning of a new life. One perhaps that has to be walked with a limp in the hip socket, leaving each of us more vulnerable and weak, but forever marked for having closed in and engaged with totality.

This wrestling is another and tougher kind of game. Christ likewise was a wrestler. Christ in the Garden of Gethsemani was described as being in "agony." The Greek word *agonia* means not "pain" so much as "worked up and sweaty," to the point of dripping blood. In his case it was a tussle of wills—a tussle with the Father whose will would be done.

In a strange leap of the imagination, my most soul-mate poet, Emily Dickinson, elevates this contest to an everlasting competition. Christ and the Father continue in a perpetual go-around after the Ascension:

He outstripped Time with but a Bout  
He outstripped Stars and Sun,  
And then, unjaded, challenged God  
In presence of the Throne.

And He and He in mighty List  
Unto this present, run,  
The larger glory for the Less,  
A just sufficient Ring.

## DANCING WITH GOD

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The Holy Trinity, in Greek theology, is described as a perichoresis, a circle dance. As three dancers in one circle, they are dancing as one undivided reality. This dynamic image was translated into Latin with a comparatively static image—the word *circumincession*, indicating a mutual indwelling, a being inside one another. Both images are valid, and both pertain to the Christian life. We engage in the mutual abiding of Christ in the Father and the Father in the Son. Expressed dynamically, we are caught in the flow of the generation of the Son from the Father. In that timeless flow, we are already chosen in Christ, even “before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4).

Through this temporal life on earth, with all its twists and turns, the dance and the dancer are becoming one. The pattern I dance and who I am as dancer are indistinguishable. No one knows what the dancer means until the dance is completed. What the dance becomes and how I dance speak of who I am. When action on earth is joined with the larger choreography of heaven, my meaning expands infinitely beyond myself, and I expand along with it. For this

to happen, I must get lost in the dance and forget myself. "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:19–20).

This is partly why a strange exhilaration usually comes over me when somebody I have known well in the community dies. It feels like a cutting free and a circling around. The feeling comes strongly at the end of the funeral. After the final blessing, when the bier is lifted and carried toward the west door to the burial ground, I get excited like a boy getting out of school for summer—a thrill that the training has ended and the real fun has just begun. I certainly felt this strongly at the death of Fr. Matthew Kelty, but it came earlier, a day before the burial. Similarly, when Fr. Louis died, I felt one joyful *Yes!*—in that, at last, he had arrived at the end of the course. The God of perichoresis ever draws us beyond, out into a wide open course—into endless movement, into the limitless depth and height of God. Such ultimately will be "the noblest of games" as Plato says, the circle dance everyone is destined to enjoy.

The following pages are episodes, just a few go-arounds in the life, liturgy, and labor of monastic life. It all happens in the context of the larger, ongoing cycle of the liturgical year, that ritual wheel that turns slowly within the broader cosmic wheel of the earth on its course around the sun. Thanks to the Cistercian order, our monasteries are situated "far from the haunts of men," as expressed in one of our early founding documents. I have lived many years in the country close to the earth, and have acquired a positive sense of traveling a long track around the sun.

When, for example, I awake to the alarm in late February at 2:40 a.m., I see my personal sign again, Scorpio, coming up in the east. Then I recognize I have completed another great round riding this little space car, the Earth. My blood tells me change is coming; the tone of the liturgy moves into challenge, the conflict and dark drama of Lent; then follows a break into the golden blaze of Easter, while grass releases



fresh oxygen and trees swell to green. In all, I am carried along by a great dance, and I engage in the dance. And in the end, the dance and the dancer become one.

# A LIFE OF SONG AND MUSIC

## ENGAGING MIND AND BODY

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People sometimes remark on how youthful some older monks look, and I reply that the secret of their vitality is simple: they sing.

Monks stand in choir and sing seven times a day. To breathe often and deeply, to resonate subtly with sound, vibrates all the fibers and is bound to be healthy. It raises the heartbeat and boosts metabolism and soothes the whole system. I generally leave choir feeling energized and refreshed, rather than tired—unless it is one of those excessively long ceremonies. But even on those rare occasions when I feel tired, it's a good tiredness.

Of course, there are other reasons for a monk's youthful appearance: for one, a shaved head is a clever trick for any old man gone gray, and that for us is part of the uniform code. Likewise, a beard masks the folds of a sagging chin. Our vegetarian diet and regular daily schedule keep the animal spirits tamed and relatively contented.

Nature loves habit, which is how habit came to be called second nature. Repeated actions eventually occur instinctively. When the hour comes around for work, prayer, or sleep, a monk's system is ready. Strangely, even prayer feels like a physical need—a spiritual hunger becomes a holy second nature!

To say I need to pray expresses more than a spiritual want; it is a hankering of the body as well. For instance, when I am traveling or otherwise can't get to choir, if time for Terce or None passes me by, I instinctively sense something is missing. My remedy for that was to memorize all the Little Hours psalms so I could recite them alone when I can't get to choir. This has served me well.

## KEEPING THE MIND FIT

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Memorization as a practice keeps a mind young. It is one vital component of mental well-being. To keep my aging brain from turning into oatmeal, I began to devote a lot of time and effort into recovering Latin and Greek, improving upon something I already knew. I read books by Augustine, Boethius, and Cicero. The mind needs application to work; memory is a kind of mental muscle that can easily atrophy. In our culture, memory goes largely underutilized. Only a couple generations ago, people could recite long poems or songs.

One morning old Br. Claude, while helping the cooks chop vegetables, launched into a whole string of Broadway songs that were so old I had never heard any of them before—tunes that were even pre-World War I. I also recently had the pleasure of listening to a ninety-eight-year-old woman sing “Blue-Eyed Sally” through eight verses—a song I had never heard before.

Most monks in our order memorize a handful of psalms. Every monk knows at least the two regular psalms for Compline (recited every evening in the dark). Frequent repetition of psalms after years of familiarity has its own value. You may ask, does this daily repetition dull the intellect or help it? If constant novelty is the measure of mental agility, then this is a dumb-downer, but if content and quality are the measure, this is a mind builder. Not that we are in choir to develop our minds, but I can testify to the healthy harmony