



Monastic Musings

Living in and Practicing the Presence of God

Fall 2014

It's Fall!

by Right Reverend Barbara



Once again we have come into the season of Fall. Summer was really strange for all of the country: hot and dry in some areas and hot and wet in other areas. And then there was that sudden cool down in the middle of July and again in September. If it had been Winter, we would have seen feet of snow! Sure glad it was Summer! Then look at the west coast and all of the hurricanes there! Now to see what will happen with the El Nino. In some ways, I can only hope that the El Nino does grow so that the southwest will get some much needed rain. But then mother nature can be really fickle. I can only hope that the areas of the country that are affected by the drought will see some good amounts of rain but not continue to get the destructive rain. It is time for the reservoirs and rivers to fill up again.

The leaves have been falling around here. The squirrels have been collecting and burying their acorns and hickory nuts for Winter and Spring use. It is so much fun to watch them working to decide where to put the nuts knowing that another squirrel will come along and steal the nuts for themselves! I wonder if mister groundhog will hang around here next year? It was nice to see him for the first time in many years around our area when we looked out the kitchen window. The rabbits are making their nest under our neighbor's shed to be able to weather the snows coming. Even mister skunk is joining the rabbits for shelter. The wildlife around our hermitage is prepping for winter and they will be missed until the spring. They manage to bring such joy as they frolic in the yards.

Days of Awe

By Fr. Ron Lahti

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are known as the Days of Awe in Judaism. They are considered the holiest days of the year. Rosh Hashanah marks a new year, but more importantly, it marks "the opening of Heaven". It is believed that on this day, the Book of Life is opened and, over the next ten days, G-d decrees what each person will experience in life during the coming year. Consequently, the greeting during this time is "*L'Shanah Tovah*", "May you be written for a sweet and prosperous year!" Apples dipped in honey are eaten to insure a healthy and sweet year. On Rosh Hashanah it is a *miztvot* (a good deed) to eat more than normal to celebrate G-d's bounty. This is contrasted to the absolute fast that occurs on Yom Kippur – the

Day of Atonement. Fasting is enjoined to turn one's attention to one's faults, taking responsibility for one's weaknesses and failures, and making firm intention to do better.

Everything during the Days of Awe, indeed even during the month preceding the Holy Days, is punctuated by the haunting call of the Shofar, the ram's horn used since ancient times. The Shofar's blast serves to awaken one to the coming holidays and to one's place in life.



Beyond the customs and practices of the Holy Days, lie deeper truths which speak to our souls. We are reminded during this traditional harvest time that we will reap the results of our actions, thoughts and words. Though tradition tells us G-d "writes" our life for the upcoming year, in reality G-d gives us the responsibility for creating our future. We "write" our own pages of life, and then, at this time of year we take time to review our choices and efforts with our loving G-d, making corrections as needed. An especially moving prayer during the Holy Days includes the repetition of the phrase "*Aveinu Malkeinu*", "Our Father, Our King". We are reminded that G-d is at once our loving Parent, and the Power and Life of all worlds. As we proceed to "write" our lives we know that we are not alone. Our Loving Parent is always with us, always close to us, ready with Omnipotent Effect to assist us in our lives.

L'Shanah Tovah to all!

The Presence of God in Ordinary Life

By Rev. Myrella LeClair

Have you ever allowed yourself to feel overwhelmed by the circumstances surrounding you? You know what I mean – the feeling that God has deserted you. Deep down, however, you understand that you have allowed your perceptions, judgments, and seemingly righteous anger to block out God's presence just when you most need His direction.

For the past few months, I have let negativity surface. My conventional spiritual reading could not penetrate the illusion of Hell with which I had surrounded myself. When I read the usual spiritual material, what I saw were just words on a page and not the inspiration I needed to lift me out of my spiritual funk. However, even when we don't know what to do, God is still with us. He doesn't just command us to straighten out and get over it. Instead, the Holy Spirit (His Voice and Our Helper) leads us to whatever will help us to realize that He has not left us and never will! In my case, that was through very ordinary things and events - reading a novel called *The Life of Pi*, several phone calls from friends whom I had not talked with in a long time, a religious poem by D. H. Lawrence, and some meditations from a couple of spiritual web sites, all of which led back to dispelling my spiritual disquietude and to my knowing that God is within me – surrounding me with His Love.

In the novel, Pi is a person of deep faith in God. Although he is a Hindu, he also wants to be a devout Christian and a devout Muslim, Pi sees no conflict between the traditions, asking the Roman Catholic priest to baptize him, and the Muslim imam to give him a prayer rug. To Pi there is no contradiction, faith in God is Faith period. The traditions may all be very different but Faith in God and living a spiritual life is what is important to Pi. As a 16-year old boy, his faith is tested when the cargo ship that he, his family, and their zoo animals are on sinks at sea, and he is the only human survivor on a lifeboat in which, a tiger, a hyena, a zebra, and an orangutan

also inhabit. Soon, only Pi and the tiger are left. Rather than rail against God for his unfortunate circumstances, Pi is convinced that God has a plan for his life. It is his faith in God that allows Pi to come to terms with his situation. Tending to both his and the tiger's daily needs gives him a sense of purpose. During his entire 227-day ordeal at sea, Pi doesn't lose his faith in God. He knows and understands that God is with him! Although the story is fictional, it allowed me to come to terms with my circumstances and to regain my spiritual perspective that God is with me.

The Life of Pi also helped me to not only to understand what true Faith is but also to understand what Russian Orthodox priest Alexander Schmemmann meant when he wrote:

"Faith is the touching of a mystery. It is to perceive another dimension to absolutely everything in the world. In faith the mysterious meaning of life comes through. . . . To speak in the simplest possible terms: faith sees, knows, senses the presence of God in the world."

As for the phone calls, all were from friends who were undergoing spiritual crises. We all had a spiritual connection with one another, and our conversations allowed us to help each other to look at our current circumstances with a fresh viewpoint and to regain perspective. Some would say that those phone calls were purely coincidental, but I know that it was blessed synchronicity at work to move us all back to our recognizing the presence of God – to seeing Him in all that is ordinary.

While perusing various spiritual websites, I was delighted to find the poem by D. H. Lawrence. There is no question that he is aware of what the purpose of life is and what it means to be in the presence of God. Read the poem with your spiritual eyes and open your heart to its message.

Pax

by D. H. Lawrence

*All that matters is to be at one with the living God
to be a creature in the house of the God of Life.*



*Like a cat asleep on a chair
at peace, in peace
and at one with the master of the house, with the mistress,
at home, at home in the house of the living,
sleeping on the hearth, and yawning before the fire.*

*Sleeping on the hearth of the living world
yawning at home before the fire of life
feeling the presence of the living God
like a great reassurance
a deep calm in the heart
a presence
as of the master sitting at the board
in his own and greater being,
in the house of life.*
(From The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence, by D. H. Lawrence)

God is right there with you, and you live and move in Him.

*“Father, we have no words except Your Name upon our lips and in
our minds,
as we come quietly into Your Presence now, and ask to rest
with You in Peace a while.”*
(From ACIM Lesson 222)

Peace be with you as you strive to sense God’s Presence in all that is ordinary.

Communications brings the Presence of God *by Right Reverend Barbara*

Life is unique and so full of challenges for each of us. Nothing really stays static very long and maybe that is really a good thing. We constantly have to adjust our attitudes and way of doing things just to be able to “survive” within the world as it comes at us each day. The world has become one of such destruction in so many areas. I find I am so saddened in just reading the news or watching the news daily. I know the dreams that I had for the world are really just that, dreams. I look at how we have to live today and it really is nothing like I thought we would have to live. I look around me and instead of seeing religion helping to draw people together, I am seeing it tearing the world apart. People are using religion as an excuse to be mean to others instead of religion being the tool that helps people to help one another. I sit back and wonder – What has happened? Where is God’s presence in all of this? And the churches all over the world are wondering why their pews are getting empty! People are really getting tired of having other people’s religious beliefs pushed on them knowing that what the people are preaching is not in line with one’s own religious beliefs thus do not ring true to them. For example: a harsh punishing God versus a loving and forgiving God. It seems that religion has become big business and that is not what Jesus was teaching. Until the churches realize this situation and are willing to return to their true roots, the teachings of Jesus as he taught and lived them and not as we want to interpret them, the churches will continue to die. It seems that it is time for the churches to become New Testament Churches and believe and teach the love of God and not all this condemnation that is presently being taught.

To me, it appears that as far as religion, we have returned to the 1500’s and the 1600’s – a period of religious persecution first in Europe and then here in the US. Then somehow we learned to live together, respecting one another’s religious ideas/teachings. But as I look at what is happening today, especially here in the US, I see where we have once again reached a point

in history that we do not respect each other's religious ideas/teachings, but instead we want to push our religious ideas/teachings on all those around us no matter what the end results are. Let us learn to be more gentle and loving with each other. Let us be more respectful of other's religious ideas/teachings even if they do not respect ours. Remember, all religious faiths, no matter what they are, lead to the one God! It is only through love that we effect change about us! We need to learn to exist together much like the rabbit family and the skunk do under the shed -- sharing what we have so that both can enjoy life. We need to remember to always make time each day to bring the presence of God into our lives and other people lives.

These feelings led me to start increasing the level of my spiritual reading. I turned to Anthony M. Coniaris who is a priest within the Greek Orthodox Church. He also is a professor at the Holy Cross Seminary. In wanting to read more of Anthony M. Coniaris' writings, I looked for something on the Presence of God given that the problem I am seeing with the world is that we have lost the true feeling of the presence of God within our own lives thus are always looking outside ourselves to find God. In the process, I stumbled upon the book: *Discovering God: Through the Daily Practice of His Presence* by Anthony M. Coniaris. It is a short book of 82 pages, but it sure packs a punch when you are reading the preface since Fr. Coniaris wants to wake you up to what you have been doing and why it is not the correct way to bring the presence of God into your personal life.



The punch starts right in the Preface of the book when Fr. Coniaris writes the following:

“Walt Whitman was listening one night to an astronomer lecturing on the stars. The hall was stuffy, the lecture dull, and the charts even more dull, until, says Whitman, I could no longer bear it. I rose and wandered out into the night and looked up at the stars themselves. I was overcome with breathless wonder.

There are people today who do the same with their religion. They stay inside poring over the charts and diagrams, memorizing the number of sacraments, concentrating on the mere mechanism of faith. They will not walk outside to see the stars for themselves. They need to proceed from theory to experience, for the knowledge about God, which is abstract, to the knowledge of God in Christ, which is personal.” (page iii)

So true is this statement! When it comes to our lives, we rather be “force fed” everything that we need to know so that we can live our lives. Not a good thing actually as we are often given information that is irrelevant at the moment or is downright dangerous to our lives. I remember one conversation I had with another Bishop a few years back. He was talking about the church's weekly church bulletin and how one person of the congregation wanted things. You have to understand that the bulletin was emailed each Sunday with the email containing also the sermon for the day. Well, one member did not like the fact that the Bishop quoted lots of different sources to justify what he was saying. Instead the member told him: “Just tell me what to believe and I will”. Is that not what Fr. Coniaris is saying?

Over the many centuries, we have become people who attend church only because we know we must so that we can be “acceptable” to God when the last days arrive. We go to church but we have not learned how to bring God into our lives on a personal level. What God wants of you and me is to be a big part of our lives every day! We want to intellectualize God, but that really cannot be done since God has not shown His true face on this earth. We experience God

through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. God is real when we feel him in our hearts. It is only in our hearts that we can really know God and experience Him. That then becomes the presence of God!

“What people want to hear is not God’s lawyers presenting logical arguments for His existence but God’s witnesses sharing from personal experience what God has done for them.” (page vii)

To bring the presence of God into our personal lives, we have to be willing to communicate with God constantly no matter what we are doing. Notice I did not say pray or prayer. In using the term pray or prayer, you are actually putting God into cubical to talk with only when you feel you



have time to talk with Him. Ouch, as we should be talking with God twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. That is even when we are talking with other people! So I am trying to help you redefine the word pray/prayer and change it to communicate/communications as it will help you have a much better understanding. Yes, at times when I am quoting an author, the word pray/prayer will be used, but in your mind, see it in its true form – communicate/communications with God and God’s creations.

Communication is the “tool” that can help us learn who God is and how God wants our lives to evolve. And what is communications you might ask? To put it in the simplest form, it is “talking with”, “thinking of”, and even whenever you are writing something, you are communicating with God about everything around you! God is a great listener and always has time for each of us. He answers us through many different methods. He may bring another person to tell us something, He may have the Holy Spirit knock in your heart. He may give you an answer in a dream, etc. But in all of this talk with God, He does answer you as is needed and when needed. We have to be very willing to listen to the answer and follow through. And yes, there will seem to be times that God is not even present to us, but in that time, we need to learn to reach even deeper into our “talking” and not try to hide anything from God. Remember, God already knows your situations, life actions, etc., but He wants to hear it from you so that He learns how you are seeing things. His perspective could be very different from yours! And when you “talk” with God, don’t just ask for things or constantly complain, really take the time to share yourself with God and God will share Himself with you! In case you forgot, God is always with you no matter what is going on in your life. All you have to do is call out.

Communications is the foundation of our churches along with being the foundation of our lives. Without communications, we are empty and wandering this earth without any purpose. Talking with God will bring you such wonderful feelings! Try it, you just might like it.....

In this newsletter, I just covered the Preface of Anthony M. Coniaris’ Book. In the next newsletter, I will continue to discuss/share more of the book with you. There is just so much information in the book to share with you that I am just going to give you little bits at a time.

Good Example of Living in the Presence of God

Henri Nouwen in his L’Arche journal ‘The Road to Daybreak’ gives a really helpful example of this by quoting a summarized version of ‘The Three Hermits’ story written by Leo Tolstoy in the 19th century

“Three Russian monks lived on a faraway island. Nobody ever went there, but one day their bishop decided to make a pastoral visit. When he arrived, he discovered that the monks didn’t even know the Lord’s Prayer. So he spent all his time and energy teaching them the “Our Father” and then left, satisfied with his pastoral work. But when his ship had left the island and was back in the open sea, he suddenly noticed the three hermits walking on the water – in fact, they were running after the ship! When they reached it, they cried, “Dear Father, we have forgotten the prayer you taught us.” The bishop overwhelmed by what he was seeing and hearing, said, “But, dear brothers, how then do you pray?” They answered, “Well, we just say, ‘Dear God, there are three of us and there are three of you, have mercy on us!’” The bishop, awestruck by their sanctity and simplicity, said, “Go back to your land and be at peace.”

Walking the Path of Interspirituality

By Fr. Ron Lahti

The idea of interspirituality appears, at first look, to make great sense given our pluralistic culture. However, I'm also seeing the drawbacks. Kind of like that country western song line "you've got to stand something or you'll fall for anything". Recognizing the common themes across spiritual traditions isn't the same as living them. The mystic encounter with Other might be common to many, if not all, spiritual traditions, but reaching that encounter is based on practical "steps" which vary, sometimes contradict, across the traditions. My fear is that people easily accept the realization of the sameness of traditions as the encounter with Other...lulling themselves into a self-complacent dream that they've "arrived". I think we've seen much of this kind of thing in the "New Age" movement with its "Be Enlightened/a Healer/a Shaman/ fill in the blank in a Weekend" mentality.

Further, being offered a smorgasbord of spiritual practices, picking and choosing according one's whims, based on the realization of the sameness in spiritual traditions, minimizes each tradition's uniqueness and specialness. Like we've seen with the "wannabe indians" holding sweat lodges and pipe ceremonies. For those who are of Native American heritage, it riles them to see sacred objects/ceremonies bandied about like this week's lunch special. I know I experienced it in connection to my family's Saami heritage. It bothered me to see non-Saami people pounding on hoop drums with Saami deities/symbols painted on them at a weekend workshop I attended in Boston several years ago. The workshop was given by a real Saami *Tietaja* (Wise Man), Ailo Gaup was his name, and even he seemed surprised to see that I was the only one in about 30 attending who was of Saami blood. Following the weekend, I saw a few of the attendees advertising "Saami Shamanism" as part of their offering of "services" in local New Age papers. In my conversation with Ailo outside of the workshop, he indicated he came to the US for this series of workshops with the understanding that he was sharing his spiritual gifts in healing with the participants while also sharing Saami culture and understanding of the Universe. He did not conceive of it as a "Be a Shaman" training. He admitted he was taken back by seeing some participants with Saami symbols painted on drums when they obviously had no knowledge or context of what the symbols mean, who the Deities were, or even the significance of the drum to Saami. Running from one to another of the latest spiritual fads can be not only insulting to the cultures which gave birth to them, but is ineffective, and even dangerous, to the individual.

The Dalai Lama has urged westerners coming to him for "initiation" into Tibetan Buddhism to stay in their spiritual traditions first and follow them completely before journeying to other paths. because they will get one to the desired Goal. Spiritual traditions form as ways of reaching Deity/Enlightenment, while avoiding the very real dangers of self-deception, spiritual pride and outright delusion. I'm seeing more and more the need of following the daily path of spiritual walking. Working through the periods of boredom, or monotony, while also relishing the periods of Encounter. It is in the daily round of spiritual practice, within one tradition, that one will find the Encounter - indeed I think one realizes the daily walk is the Encounter. The Christian "Practice of the Presence of God" (as shared by Mother Myrella in the last Monastic Newsletter) embodies this idea: keeping oneself in the Presence, while going through daily routines, whether work, family obligations, liturgy, whatever. I think the Prayer Rule of monastics in orthodoxy - the daily requirement of prayers set by one's spiritual mother/father - helps likewise to keep one on one path, not flitting from devotion to devotion, path to path. An old Buddhist story: a disciple asked his master what the master did to reach enlightenment. The master replied "Chop Wood, Carry Water". The disciple asked the master what one does after Enlightenment. The master replied, "Chop Wood, Carry Water". I pray we all find our paths while we continue to "Chop wood. Carry Water".

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and are meant to challenge your thinking so as to help you grow in
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