



# Monastic Musings

*Living in and Practicing the Presence of God*

Spring/Summer 2021

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## *Finding Spirituality in the Middle of a Pandemic*

*by: Right Rev. Barb Martzall*

The calendar says it is now Spring!!! Fortunately the winter for us here in the southern part of western Massachusetts was not really bad. One storm was 11 inches but the rest were below the 6 inch mark and mostly the fluffy type snow. Not bad actually. And given that we now live in a condo, it made it even easier to handle as I only had to think about the deck area to clean off and at my timing! What a pleasure it was for us.

We did have one really nasty wind storm in early March that knocked out our power for about 9 hours. Woke up to a cold home but fortunately about 2 hours after we got up, the power was restored and the home warmed up. To say the least, Star Brite, our monastery cat, was not too happy about the cold. She had never experienced loss of heat before. Hopefully that loss of power does not happen very often. Meanwhile Mother Nature has not decided whether it should be wet or dry, cold or hot. We all know, Mother Nature can be very fickle!

Within this newsletter, you will find we have a guest author! Archbishop Charles, the Archbishop/Metropolitan of our Jurisdiction (Ohio Orthodox Catholic Church) asked if he could write something for this newsletter. He is a person who has studied many different spiritual pathways and has been able to blend them in such a way to be meaningful not only to himself but to many around him. I am pleased to welcome him to our little newsletter and to the world!

So how have you survived the Covid-19 changes? Every state and every country have handled the spread of the virus differently. We here at the mother-house have been doing well with the limited exposure we have allowed ourselves. Yes we have missed the chance to go out to eat and visit with friends. But we also know it was important to stay secluded to protect our health. We are waiting to hear when we can get an appointment for our vaccines. Massachusetts changed their process after about 2 months of vaccinations. They finally realized that not everyone can sit on the phone or a computer for hours each day just trying to make an appointment. And also, not every one of the seniors have either a smartphone or a computer at home to use! Starting in the middle of March they moved us to a pre-registration process via phone or computer and then we are notified when there is an appointment available to us at one of the State run sites. Now it is a wait and see game for us but it is better than staying up all night just trying to be one of the first into the queue to sign up for an appointment and then when it is your turn, there are no appointments left. For example: one day there were 100.5k people in the queue for only 50K appointments. What a mess it has

been! Good news is that after being on the list for 10 days, both of us here were able to get our first dose at the end of March! Second dose was in the middle of April. The new process seems to work fairly well for getting appointments through the large State run sites.

Throughout all of this seclusion, we have been able to focus more on the rhythm of daily life. Mother Myrella and I have found what worked well for us as to prayer, reading, liturgy and even "play time". Both of us use the *Celtic Daily Prayer* (books 1 & 2) by the Northumbria Community as our daily guide. Both of us spend time throughout the day in thoughtful prayer. We have found that not setting actual times for everything throughout the day actually works well for us. The only thing set in "stone" is our meals, time for sleep, and caring for Star Brite (our 5.5 year old cat). The rest of the day is spent in constant prayer through the actions we take and the chores that we need to accomplish that day. Even our playing with Star Brite is a period of prayer!

We have come to realize more and more that spirituality needs to be more focused on an individualized way. Yes, a specific rhythm is necessary to help focus one on their spirituality, but one needs to look at each person's situation and see what would really work best to help that person grow. People need to be encouraged to explore what it means to be spiritual in their lives and then shown where to get the necessary tools to help them on their spiritual walk. We have to be willing to realize that not everyone's spiritual walk is the same. One has to be flexible in the type of daily rhythm to be able to accommodate the person's life as a whole. Some people do better living within a monastic house to "help them" into a spiritual rhythm while others are able to develop their own rhythm easily.

The Eastern Orthodox Elders teach that to start a spiritual journey, one must start by living within the monastic community and then slowly move toward living as a hermit. This is a good guide for those who are looking to grow in their spirituality but not always feasible to do. One also has to be flexible in one's spiritual path, knowing that one path does not necessarily fit



another person's needs and/or a change is necessary to help the person to progress on their spiritual path. I often tell people that a spiritual path is like the branches of a tree. All the branches intertwine and actually lead back to one trunk which is our Creator. So maybe you need to try different branches until you find the one that leads you to the gnosis/knowledge of our Creator. Think about it, would not this world be very boring if everyone believed and practiced the same spiritual walk! In our Creator you will find many paths to follow to grow! I ask each of you to take a chance and find a path you can walk to increase your knowledge of your Creator and have a more spirit-filled life. What you do each and every day is your spiritual walk. What can you do to make it more fulfilling for you and those around you? This should be

your guiding light for your personal life. Are you willing to take that first step? Remember, you do not have to be a priest, nun, or monk to be spiritual. You just have to be desiring to learn more about your Creator!

I want to close with a writing by a very dear friend and spiritual advisor from my days of living in the San Francisco Bay area of California and developing my spiritual path:

*"Once we think we have found a truth, we have arrived to a conclusion. We have closed our minds. We have stopped seeing the world afresh. We begin judging and evaluating every situation and event according to our conclusions, according to what we believe is true. We remain in the past. The mind loses its sharpness, because we think we have the answer. Exploration stops. There is no formula, no truth — no matter how high-minded and beautiful — that is true of everything and at all times. Once this happens, such truth owns us rather than sets us free."*

*by: Bishop Rosamonde Miller*

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### *The Tight Places*

*by: Fr. Ron Lahti*

The Jewish festival of Pesach or Passover celebrates the freeing of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. In Hebrew, Egypt is called Mitzrayim, which the Zohar (an ancient Jewish Mystical text) says comes from the word M'tzarim which means "a tight or narrow place" ([Liberating Ourselves From Narrowness](#), Lesli Koppelman-Ross, myjewishlearning.com). It certainly makes sense to think of slavery as being constricting. And, liberation from slavery would be seen as leaving that constricting state to know freedom and expansiveness. As Ms. Koppelman-Ross relates, and many other Jewish teachers down the ages have pointed out, while we might not experience actual slavery in the traditional definition, we each have those areas of our lives which tend to make us feel in bondage (addictions, compulsive behaviors) or closed-in (unhealthy relationships, unavoidable living situations, illness) or just "tight" (recurring emotions, attitudes, self-esteem issues). It is natural to "want out" from our "tight places".

St. John Chrysostom in his sermons on the Book of Hebrews counsels:

Affliction is a great good. *Narrow is the way* (Matthew 7:14), so that affliction thrusts us into the *narrow way*. He who is not pressed by affliction cannot enter. For he who afflicts himself while in the narrow way, is he who also enjoys ease; but he that spreads himself out, does not enter in, and suffers from being so to say, wedged in. See how Paul enters into this narrow way. He "keeps under his body (1 Cor. 9:27) so as to be able to enter". Therefore, in all his afflictions, he continued giving thanks unto God. Have you lost your property? This has lightened you from the most of your wideness. Have you fallen from glory? This is another sort of wideness.... Paul wished to be set free, and oftentimes entreated God, and did not obtain. For the "thrice for this I besought the Lord" is often times; "and He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." (2 Cor. 12:8-9). By "weakness" he here means "afflictions". What then? When he heard this he received it thankfully, and says, "Wherefore I take pleasure in infirmities" (2 Cor. 12:10); that is, I am pleased, I rest in my afflictions. For all things then let us give thanks, both for comfort, and for affliction. Let us not murmur; let us not be unthankful. (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First

Series, Vol.14, tr. Frederic Gardiner, ed. Philip Schaff, Buffalo, NY; Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1889)

Following the example of the Apostle Paul, St. John realized that first when confronted with affliction, one “afflicts himself” in the affliction and thereby finds ease, as contrasted with those who choose instead to “spread out” in the affliction and only experience feeling tighter and more afflicted. I interpret this to mean that when confronted with affliction we can choose to simply experience the pain/discomfort/tightness, recognizing that we are in G-d's will and plan; thereby we feel a sense of ease, of letting go. Or, we can choose to fight the affliction, spreading our attention outside ourselves in the vain struggle to find relief, only to experience even greater pain. This is not to say we are entirely passive sufferers. No, we have an active response to the suffering and that is found again in Biblical examples.

We can see the Hebrews experienced their afflictions, their tightness, as the precursor to their liberation and freedom. Further, it was G-d who brought about the freedom from their



tightness, but they had to walk into the freedom G-d created. The people “went out” from Mitzrayim rejoicing and giving thanks to G-d as they saw His liberating power and were led by G-d step by step (Exodus 15:1-21, 13:18-22). Paul also found the afflictions, the tight places, were the precursors and means G-d used to perfect and demonstrate G-d's power. Further, Paul found the way to deal with the “narrow” places, the afflictions was to offer thanks to G-d for them as he knew that ultimately G-d would

reveal his liberating power from them (Ephesians 5:20, I Thess. 5:18). Thanksgiving and praise were the secret weapons to overcome and grow through affliction (I will, G-d willing, share thoughts on this last idea in another article).

In the past year especially, we have all experienced tight places as our lives became confined to our homes, away from people we love and cherish. Some of us, myself included, have experienced the dark, tight place of grief over the loss of a loved one. Some have lost their jobs and know the narrowness of trying to pay bills and provide for the necessities of life. We can all find strength in the example of the Hebrews in their Exodus from Mitzrayim, and from the example of Paul in his afflictions, as well as countless other examples of people, Biblical and not, who found the path to liberation from afflictions, from narrow and tight places, through resting in the darkness and pain, and continuing to give G-d thanks for the tight places (though I'm sure through gritted teeth) knowing G-d is still present there and continues to promise a plan.

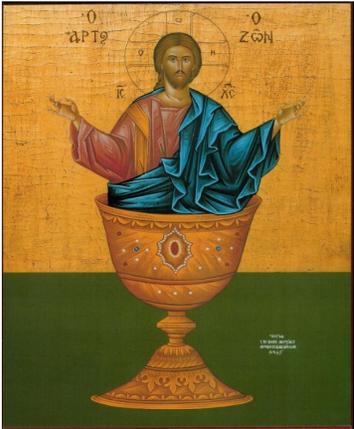
Please understand that the above is not meant to imply that Covid-19, or any of the other tragedies and sufferings we experience are “G-d's will”. I do not believe that G-d wills for us to suffer. No, the suffering comes as part of life in this world – why, I wish I had an answer to that. Neither is suffering abuse, persecution or oppression to be simply endured. But in the midst of our "tight places" we can rely on G-d's promise to walk through the suffering with us while G-d shows us how we are to be liberated. Sometimes the liberation comes miraculously and immediately, but usually our liberation comes slowly through a combination of our own efforts and cooperation with our brothers and sisters while guided by G-d's loving Presence.

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*A Living Relic*  
*by: Fr. Ron Lahti*

This past Holy Friday I spent some time in prayer and meditation with a small piece of cloth which had been touched to a piece of the Cross of Christ – a relic of the Holy Cross. I also had a small particle of cloth which had been touched to the Holy Stairs in Rome which purportedly were the stairs which Jesus stood upon in Pilate’s palace, and where He was condemned to death. These are relics which I cherish. A relic is considered to be anything which came from the holy person/object (bone, blood, a piece of the original) or which came in contact with the holy person/object (a piece of clothing, a piece of cloth touched to the holy person/object). Relics have been a regular part of devotion in Christianity from the beginning. The first relics to be revered were those of the martyrs. Also, pieces of cloth touched to the Apostles were held to be a channel of blessing and healing (Acts 19:11-12). Under St. Helen the relics of Jesus’ Passion and Resurrection were brought forth for the faithful to reverence, including the Holy Stairs, True Cross and empty Tomb. Through the years, some people had a special relationship with G-d (we call them saints) and, as Jesus before them, spoke G-d's Word and manifested healing, deliverance and redemption. After their deaths their relics continued to act as channels of the blessings they brought forth in life.

As humans, we need physical objects to touch and hold, to feel the things we hold dear. G-d, thankfully, has acknowledged this need through the Incarnation of Jesus who showed us G-d (Colossians 1:15) touching humanity. Then through the countless relics of Jesus, His Mother Mary and of all the saints we have tangible things to see, to kiss and to hold reminding us of the Incarnation and those holy people who are channels of blessing. Relics remind us that G-d's Presence is in our world and continues to manifest G-d's Love and Healing.



On Easter Sunday, as I celebrated the Resurrection of Jesus, I still meditated on relics. We, of course, have the empty tomb, and the Holy Paschal Fire which emerges from that tomb as relics of the Resurrection. But even more importantly we have the Eucharist in which the Risen Lord comes to us physically, albeit under the appearance of Bread and Wine, in His Resurrected Presence. We see and touch and even take into ourselves this Holy Substance. It then dawned on me that through our consuming of the Holy Substance we become relics of Christ’s Resurrection. We become living relics of Christ Himself, channels of blessing to all who we contact in the world.



*Surrounded By God's Love*  
*by: Rev. Mother Myrella LeClair*

What a year 2021 has been! In January, our democracy was attacked by insurrectionists who attempted to overthrow our democracy and the presidential election results, Darkness and



Take time throughout the day as often as you can to rest in God's presence and allow Him to dwell within you. Allow His Light to shine in you and through you and allow your light to shine on all fellow creatures.

Peace be with you!



*Floating on the Wind*  
*by Archbishop Charles Smith, OSF*

"Peace be with you!"

"Floating on the Wind" is based on the title, "Walk on the Wind" a title I borrowed from Michael Garrett about native Tsalagi or Cherokee spirituality.

*Mitakuye-Oyasin* is a Lakota word for "All My Relations"

In using this term *Mitakuye-Oyasin*, we not only speak of our relations currently but of relations past and those yet to come. Now notice the word relations and not relatives. The word relations means our relationship to all of creation to the Native American (which should be the same with us) that we are all related in creation with the trees, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea and all the animals wild and tame as well as to all of human creation.

I think that when we look at Pentecost, for example, we believe it's a private gift that God gave to just Christians. If we research our scriptures, we can find something very interesting. The Jewish feast of Pentecost (Shavuot) was primarily a thanksgiving for the first fruits of the wheat harvest, but it was later associated with a remembrance of the Law given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. In the early church, the first Christians often referred to the entire 50-day period beginning with Easter as Pentecost. In Scripture we find only 5 mentions on the word Pentecost. Three in the Christian's cannon and two in the Jewish Scriptures:

- 1 Acts 2:1  
When the day of **Pentecost** had come, they were all together in one place.
- 2 Acts 20:16  
For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia; he was eager to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of **Pentecost**.
- 3 1 Corinthians 16:8  
But I will stay in Ephesus until **Pentecost**,
- 4 Tobit 2:1  
Then during the reign of Esar-haddon I returned home, and my wife Anna and my son Tobias were restored to me. At our festival of **Pentecost**, which is the sacred festival of weeks, a good dinner was prepared for me and I reclined to eat.
- 5 2 Maccabees 12:32

After the festival called **Pentecost**, they hurried against Gorgias, the governor of Idumea.

We proclaim that the feast of Pentecost is the birthday of the Christian Church and while I don't dispute this, I believe it's much more. Jesus proclaimed, "Receive the Holy Spirit"! Was this just for the ones in the room with him or was it for others as well?

As Ohio Orthodox Catholics our bishops proclaim "Receive the Holy Spirit" at confirmation, ordination and it is also proclaimed at Chrismation. When we look at the sacred icons or paintings of Pentecost we notice sometime we find Mary the Holy Theotokos with the apostles receiving the power of the Holy Spirit and with others present as well. Some only show the disciples receiving the Holy Spirit (the discussion on this topic will be reserved for later).



Some think of fire while others think of doves when they speak of the Holy Spirit as imagery. I like to think of the fall wind that blows ever so gently as it picks up an armful of leaves and blows them around and round or the wind that catches that single leaf or feather and it floats in the sky seamlessly forever. We can feel the breeze on our skin, and we can almost imagine that we too are riding on the wind. So if this be true then, Pentecost is not an event that we recall once a year but it is an experience that we relive time and time again.

As those who experienced the magic of the first Christian Pentecost of hearing the proclamation in their own language, it's important to remember that it's not just about the speaking, but in the hearing. So then, I believe, that everyone can experience Pentecost, if they let themselves go to float on the wind.

It's time for us as Christians to take our spirituality outside of the box, to allow ourselves the freedom to dream of the possibilities of what can be. Time to feel that gentle breeze blowing on our face as we imagine the Holy Spirit hovering over us and carrying us on the wind empowering us to go forward to take the message of Christ's love and forgiveness to everyone we meet, and especially to ourselves.



*Shavuot – Pentecost*  
*by: Fr. Ron Lahti*

Fifty days after Easter the Church celebrates Pentecost (Acts Chapter 2). During this celebration we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles and disciples ten days after the Ascension of Jesus into the Heavens. This feast, however, actually is a carry-over from Judaism which likewise celebrates a feast fifty days after Passover and which was called in Hebrew Shavuot (literally “Weeks” in reference to the seven weeks of seven days plus one day which were ordered to be counted following Passover to mark this holiday) or by Hellenistic Greeks, Pentecost (literally “Fifty” marking the fifty days counted to this holiday). This was a biblical feast in that the counting of the days and marking of the festival are commanded in the Torah (Deut. 16:9-12). Originally, this was observed



as marking the beginning of the winter wheat harvest, but then it took on the observance of the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai following the Exodus from Egypt. It is one of the days in which the Jewish people are reminded again of their "Choseness" to receive G-d's Word. The day is observed as being free from any work, the Ten Commandments are read in Synagogue (representing the entire Torah), as is the Book of Ruth, and festive meals are shared which have an emphasis on dairy foods – read as blintzes and cheesecake!! - because the Torah is like sweet milk and is nourishing to the soul. The Book of Ruth is read on Shavuot, some sages say, because much of the story takes place at harvest and this is a harvest festival. But many rabbis teach the book is read because it ends with the genealogy of King David who was the descendant of Ruth (MyJewishLearning.com), and who tradition says died on Shavuot.

Now, in Christianity Pentecost is considered the birth of the Church as the Apostles receive the power to preach the Gospel with the infilling of the Holy Spirit. The similarities between Jewish Shavuot and Christian Pentecost cannot be ignored. Jesus was said to have died/rose again during Passover; Easter and Passover frequently occur near each other and the counting leading to Shavuot/Pentecost begins for both religious traditions on their respective holidays, ending fifty days later. The Torah was given to Moses as he ascended Mt. Sinai into a cloud of fire, the Holy Spirit is given to the Apostles who are gathered in “the upper room” with a great wind and tongues of fire which appeared over each believer present. Moses descended the mountain and delivered the Torah to the Hebrews gathered below, Peter and the other Apostles descend from the upper room and deliver the first fiery sermon to the crowds gathered below and which resulted in 3,000 being converted in one day.

The differences between Shavuot and the Christian Pentecost also cannot be ignored. Moses was one man chosen to ascend to G-d and receive the Torah. In the Christian Pentecost there were at least 120, though probably more, believers who received the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:15) and they all began to proclaim the Gospel. Moses delivered the Torah in Hebrew to the gathered Hebrews who had come out as one people from Egypt. The Acts of Apostles emphasizes that the crowds had come from all nations and that they each heard the Gospel in their own languages emphasizing a diversity of people who are gathered into one people –the Church - by the action of the Holy Spirit.

What can we take away from these holidays? First, the message is clear that G-d brings us the Teaching which can give us life – Torah and Gospel – and for our part we just have to be open to G-d's gifts and walk in them. Second, those who accept G-d's Torah/Gospel become one people, one family. In a world so fractured and divided, we can remind ourselves that we all are loved, and belong, and we are the “chosen” by G-d. Third, we can all ask for the same infilling of the Spirit, and know the intimacy and illumination that this brings. So, enjoy either or both of these holidays...and enjoy some cheesecake, I know I will!

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