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Fr. Donald Grabner's Presentation Suffering Caused by Sickness and Aging

Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, Fr. Donald Grabner, OSB
from [Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002](#)

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Mary Margaret Funk: In our last formal session it's my pleasure to introduce to you a monk, a brother, and a distinguished elder in the MID family. He was present at Holyoke along with Monsignor Felix Machado, Raimundo Panikkar, Pascaline Goff, and Theophane Boyd. He is a monk in Conception Abbey in Conception, Missouri. After finishing his theological studies at the International Benedictine Collegium of Sant' Anselmo, Rome, he has been a professor of religion and theology at Conception Seminary—that's their school of theology—and when the school of theology was closed in 1972, at Conception Seminary College. In recent years his studies and classes have been primarily in the area of world religions, with emphasis on East Asian religions. He has served as Conception Abbey's liaison with MID for many years. In 1999 he became a board member. In 1986 he was one of the first of the exchange programs that went to southern India and visited the Tibetan monasteries in exile.

Donald Grabner: Because I'm an elder, I've had to wonder how in the eternal scheme of things I end up in this place at this time. Somebody suggested I would witness best to the issue by just dropping dead, and I don't care to do that for now! But when I was asked to prepare this presentation on aging and sickness, I was a lot younger than I am now. The mandate was given to me at the time that it was supposed to be anecdotal, and for a person whose training has been in speculative theology, to be anecdotal is a challenge. What I want to do is explain a little bit my approach in dealing with questions of aging and sickness within a monastic context. I think I can best approach this by using an

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anecdote that was suggested to me this morning in John Daido Looi's presentation about the koan, because early in my monastic life I ran into a koan, although I didn't recognize it until about thirty years later. It was during my novitiate year in the monastery.

Toward the end of the novitiate year, Father Anselm, who was our novice master for most of the year, was replaced. The novice class was told that it wasn't their fault, but in the place of Abbot Anselm, Father Patrick Cummins became the novice master. Father Patrick was one of the elders of the community, a great biblical and Dante scholar, who was already recognized as a sage in our community. We looked at him, of course, with a great deal of awe. On the first couple of evenings that he appeared at the novitiate recreation, we listened to him, waiting for words of wisdom from his mouth. One evening when we were kind of joking and talking rather lightheartedly, he suddenly asked the question, "What happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object?" Maybe you've heard the riddle, but that kind of put a stop to the conversation. Finally, he smiled and said, "Unimaginable confusion."

I use that as a koan because I think if we approach the monastic life from the viewpoint of its problems, we are very likely to run into confusion—maybe not unimaginable, but lots of confusion. I would like to try to approach the question of the monastic life from the viewpoint of it being a mystery. I do this because one of the great influences on my academic life, of course, but also my spiritual life—because I try not to let the two diverge too much from one another—was the work of Rudolf Otto, particularly *The Idea of the Holy*. Otto says that if we want to look at the religious experience as it is in itself and not from the accumulations that very often surround it, we must speak of the experience of the holy. Yet we don't want to speak of the holy with the moral connotations it has especially in the Christian tradition. We want to look at the holy as something in itself. Therefore, we want to get a neutral phrase, and we talk about the idea of the numinous.

Further in the analysis he finally comes to the point that what we are talking about in religious experience is an experience of the *mysterium tremendum*. That became a very famous phrase, of course. The



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implications in that phrase in Latin aren't carried over when we simply translate it into English as "a tremendous mystery." The very phrase itself, *mysterium tremendum*, has kind of a mystery about it, which I think is part of Otto's intention. The *mysterium tremendum* is the way in which we somehow come into contact with Ultimate Reality, whoever we are. In the Christian dispensation, the *mysterium tremendum* is given flesh and blood in the notion of the paschal or passover mystery. It is the way in which we perceive the triune—God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to have revealed himself to us. Therefore, the paschal mystery is God's activity as he has made it known to us by his actions.

St. Paul speaks of the dispensation or plan of salvation, which is, of course, God revealing himself to us, loving us so much that he sends his only son into the world to die for us when we are sinners. The paschal mystery is I think at the heart of every Christian life. In a special way, the monastic attempts to live out his or her life within the context of the paschal or passover mystery. Several speakers have mentioned that this passover mystery is first of all seen as the prototype and cause of all other passovers—the passover of Christ himself, passing over through his passion, his suffering, and his death to resurrection. This passover, therefore, in Christ is a pledge or harbinger of what every follower of Jesus looks to in his own life. This passover is something that at this point in our existence we live out in faith. We live out in faith day by day that we are on the path of Christ here at this point in his suffering.

While we understand Christ's suffering to be vicarious, that he takes our sins upon himself and sacrifices himself as the paschal lamb who dies for us, his passion and death being redemptive, nevertheless we are to imitate Christ himself, to see our whole life as this same kind of a passing over from death to life and all that that implies. In the monastic tradition we find many ways where we give useful or skillful means to incarnate that paschal mystery in our own lives, in the life of the whole community and in the individual. It's the life of the individual that I want to concentrate on here because of the question of suffering, illness, and aging. What I have found in my monastic life to be most useful is the liturgy of the paschal mystery that we celebrate in a special way annually during the triduum—the three days of Good

Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday, where we celebrate annually in the most solemn fashion possible the passover of Christ, which is also celebrated in each Eucharist.

It's this passover mystery that the liturgy attempts to embed in our daily existence. This liturgy is one of the principal means I have found that helps me by way of ritual deal with the mystery, something that simply cannot be expressed in words and about which we can't be logical. There comes a certain point in which we have an experience that is ineffable because God is at work rather than any other finite element that we can talk about. This liturgical useful means is accompanied by many others: the practice, for instance, of *lectio divina*, reading the scriptures and the commentaries on the scriptures. What the mystery is all about finally is the plan of salvation that God has been working out from the first moment of creation and will continue into the future to the *parousia*, the second coming of Christ.

The mystery in many ways points to the future for us. We need to notice that there is in the Christian dispensation a very large place for the virtue of hope, because we are following Christ in the way of his passion and looking forward to our participating in the death of Christ in our own death. What precedes that, our suffering, is something we need to see in some way as fulfilled and perceived in the light of Christ's passion and what he accomplishes through his passion, his death, and glorified in his resurrection. The *lectio divina*, then, is accompanied by the example that is given to the monks in their own approach to the issues of suffering and death. Living in community, we have young and old, and the old have what our abbot sometimes calls "the apostolate of the suffering," manifesting or witnessing to other members of the community, and thus manifesting to others suffering and death.

It's a hard lesson. As people have said, we find many of the sick and elderly are often tried by impatience. As Saint Benedict says in his Rule and Sister Margaret mentioned this morning, they are the ones who really demand from the community patience and tolerance or patient endurance, whatever you want to call it. They are the ones who are most in need. However, there will always be those amongst the

elders—and I hope eventually I may be one of them—who are examples of patience, of being able to accept suffering and aging and to bring that to a manifestation within the community itself.

I determined earlier that what I would want to do in the last moments of my presentation would be to read the crucial text from St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians. We've heard snatches of it. But I would like to conclude by reading and noting how Paul, in speaking of the paschal mystery in terms of a very early liturgical hymn, says that the mystery is not only something that you believe in faith but that activates your life. "So, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation of the spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves; that each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others." Here is where he passes into quoting the hymn: "Have this mind among yourselves which you have found in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God did not count equality of God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name; that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father."

Continued in **Fr. Donald Grabner: Discussion
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