



Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

Sponsored by North American Benedictine and Cistercian Monasteries of Men and Women

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Monks in the West

A Gathering of Buddhist and Catholic Monks

Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB

from **Bulletin 74, April 2005**

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Fr. William, who was then nearing the end of his term as chair of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, wrote this account of an important gathering that took place on October 13-14, 2004 in the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, in Ukiah, California, just prior to the annual meeting of the MID Board. Photos of the event taken by the Rev. Kusala can be see at [photo album](#).

A gathering of "Monks in the West" was first proposed at the annual meeting of the Board of Directors of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue in October 2003. At that meeting the Board received an enthusiastic report from five of its members who had participated in the first "Nuns in the West" meeting the previous May at the Hsi Lai Temple in Hacienda Heights, California. After hearing how beneficial it was for Buddhist and Catholic nuns to reflect together on what it means to be a nun in the United States today, the board appointed a committee to explore the possibility of sponsoring a similar meeting for monks. It suggested that the topic for such a gathering be the meaning and practice of celibacy in the monastic life.

Organizing the first meeting of "Monks in the West"

The committee began its work by seeking advice from the Board's advisors, one of whom suggested that it might be better to initiate an interreligious dialogue on monastic life with a somewhat "milder" topic: novice training, for example.

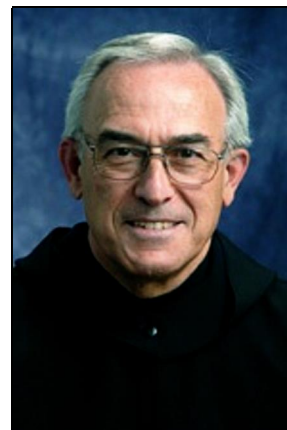
The committee then contacted the Buddhist monks who had participated in the second Gethsemani Encounter in 2002 to determine

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Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, has been the Secretary General of DIMMID since November 1, 2008. Prior to that he served as chair of the MID

whether or not they or someone from their respective sanghas would be interested in a meeting of this kind. The response was very positive. One of the Buddhist monks, the Reverend Heng Sure, an American Chan (Chinese Zen) monk, proposed that the meeting be held at his monastery, located at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas near Ukiah, California. He also offered to help plan for and organize the encounter.

We agreed that this first meeting would take place October 13-14, 2004, immediately prior to MID's annual board meeting, which was to be held at the New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur, California. We also decided that the gathering would be relatively small and that one of the items on the agenda would be to determine whether or not to plan for a future, larger gathering of Monks in the West.

Seven of the fourteen monks on MID's Board of Directors were able to participate in this first gathering: four Benedictines (Daniel Ward, Gregory Perron, Mark Serna, and William Skudlarek), two Cistercians (David Bock and James Connor), and one Camaldolese (Joseph Wong). Seven Buddhist monks also participated: Heng Lyu and Heng Sure (Chan); Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Sudanto (Thai forest tradition); Norbu Lama and Jang Chut Phelgyal (Tibetan); and the Reverend Kusala (Zen).

Two Buddhist settings

The Abbot of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, Master Heng Lyu, and the Reverend Heng Sure went out of their way to provide a gracious and hospitable setting for our dialogue. We were invited to join the monks and nuns (about 30 of the former and 70 of the latter) for their chanting services in the Buddha Hall. They had a huge cross placed in the Hall of Confucius, where we celebrated the Eucharist each day. Since the monks and nuns eat only at mid-day, breakfast and dinner were provided for us in the renowned vegetarian restaurant that is run by lay affiliates. We were given a special visit to the shrine in which are venerated the sharira of the Venerable Master Husan Hua, the Founder of the Dharma Realm Buddhism Association and the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, who died in 1995. Sharira, the gleaming crystals that sometimes are formed when a body is cremated, are regarded as a powerful sign that a person has entered Nirvana.

board from 2000 to 2005, and as Executive Director of MID until his appointment as Secretary General. He is a monk of St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, but resides at Sant'Anselmo in Rome.

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During our short two days we were also able to visit and conduct part of our dialogue at the near-by monastery of Abhayagiri, the first monastery in the United States to be established by followers of Ajahn Chah, a respected Buddhist Master of the ancient Thai forest tradition of Theravada Buddhism. We also took time to call on their next door neighbors, the Ukrainian Catholic monks of Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Mt. Tabor), founded by Archimandrite Boniface Luykx, a recognized theologian and liturgist who died in Belgium earlier this year.

Spiritual autobiographies

Our first day of dialogue was devoted to listening to the spiritual autobiography of each participant, and was characterized by a frankness that was both striking and refreshing. Each monk spoke of what drew him to—and keeps him faithful to—the monastic way of life. A list of possible topics for discussion, drawn up by the planning committee, suggested areas that might be explored: What are the changes in life-style, attitude, and expectations that are necessary for those who ask to be admitted into the monastic way of life? How much of the “world” (specifically the contemporary American world) can be brought into the monastery? What needs to be left at the door? What are the particular challenges faced by those who come to monastic life having been formed by contemporary American culture? How is authority or leadership exercised in the monastic community? Is there a place for individual initiative or personal independence in monastic life? Can monastic life be democratic? What are the function, importance, and place in monastic life of such externals as dress, diet, schedule, and the like? How different should monks be from those who are not monks? In what does this difference consist? What is the place of celibacy in the monastic life? Of poverty? Of obedience? How are the meaning and practice of celibacy—and of poverty and obedience—affected by cultural differences?

Some of the participants spoke of being attracted to the monastic life when they were still young boys; others only thought of becoming a monk later in life, after undergoing an existential crisis (“I am going to die”) or experiencing the bitter aftertaste of material success and

sensual pleasure.

For some becoming a monk meant going off to a distant land and embracing an entirely different culture; for others life in the monastery was not all that different from the life they had experienced growing up in a rather closed ethnic or religious community where all shared the same values and customs.

In some cases becoming a monk meant expanded opportunities for education, work, and travel; for others it demanded renunciation of success and advancement in a chosen profession.

Some came to the monastic life with a good deal of experience in the “ways of the world”; others confessed that they became monks so as not to have to deal with their sexuality or other personal issues, only to find that denial and repression made these same issues more difficult to deal with later in life.

There were stories of difficult relationships with superiors or confreres, some of which continue to cause pain and distrust. Others spoke of how superiors trusted and supported them during times of vocational crisis, thus helping them to trust themselves and to deepen their commitment to the way of life they had chosen.

Again and again one heard of the struggle to remain faithful to contemplative monastic practices while responding to the many demands that are made on monks – especially superiors—either by their own communities or by others. “How can we keep our best monks from burning out?” was a question that was asked repeatedly.

Similarities and differences

After listening to each other’s spiritual autobiography, we named some of the common questions or concerns that emerged, as well as differences we perceived between the Buddhist and Catholic expressions of the monastic life:

- How do we keep our life authentic? How do we integrate human happiness and development with a spiritual life?
- How can we articulate and witness to the monastic vocation as an alternative to the marketplace’s emphasis on pleasure and

possessions, showing that humans are more than the body and its appetites, that “Las Vegas is not the highpoint of a life well lived.”

- What does it mean to be in community in the new millennium? What happens to a community when women and children are removed from it?
- Are we dealing with two different understandings of monasticism based on different understandings of the human person?
- How does one balance the need for solitude and for community in human and monastic life?
- Does one become a monk to do something, or to be something? The former understanding seems more typical of Buddhists; the latter of Christians.
- When is suffering fruitful? What is the place of renunciation and abnegation in the monastic life?
- How do our different traditions relate to celibacy? What is the place of authentic celibacy in the modern world?
- What has happened personally or institutionally that has distanced us from a more heart-centered intimacy?

A Second “Monks in the West”

Finally, we took up the question of whether we would meet again, and if so, for what purpose. The rapport, friendship, and encouragement that we experienced left little doubt that we would want to continue our relationship and invite other monks to benefit from engaging a specifically monastic interreligious dialogue. Several of the participants remarked that they wished they could experience more often in their own communities the level of conversation we had with one another.

The topic for a follow-up meeting emerged quickly and was unanimously accepted: “Authentic Practices of Celibacy and Intimacy in Monastic Communities of Men.” We are looking at May 2006 as the time to bring together about thirty Buddhist and Catholic monks to examine the teaching of our monastic traditions on celibacy as well as to look into more contemporary insights into sexuality and human development, all for the purpose of helping one another live the monastic life more authentically.

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