



Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

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Leadership and Humility: Discussion

Sr. Johanna Becker, OSB, Karen Bissonette, Joanne Flynn, Patrick Henry, Ph.D., Sr. Rosemary Huber, MM, Elizabeth Padden-Lobue, Fr. Thomas Ryan, CSP, Sr. Sarah Schwartzberg, OSB, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, Br. David Steindl-Rast, OSB, Dr. Bonnie Thurston, Fr. Julian von Duerbeck, OSB, Ven. Yifa

from **Benedict's Dharma, September 2001**

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Sr. Johanna Becker: My reaction to this is that it's a much more widespread type of program than we're aware of. By and large it's not widely advertised and, unless your next door or right in the community, you may not know what's going on. I know that right now at St.

Benedict's Monastery in Minnesota, we have three different programs. One is called a Benedictine Live-in, in which a person can come for any length of time, a weekend, or we've had some people stay over a year. They come and they live the monastic community and they are given regular assignments. They're treated like the rest of the community, but their work program will be a half program so that if they have come to enrich their prayer life or to do certain kinds of research they are able to do that. One interesting case that we had a couple of years ago was Susan Smith who came and spent a whole year with us. She was a year away from her ordination as a Lutheran priest and so she spent the year with us and principally in prayer and discernment. She went back to her program and when she was ordained, a whole group of our nuns went to be present for her ordination. She is now an ordained Lutheran minister serving in Alaska.

The majority of course are Catholics and want to participate in the life but they are not interested in identifying with the life on a permanent basis. We do have another program that's called the welcoming



Sr. Johanna Becker, OSB, holds a PhD in art history. Although retired, she continues to teach Asian art history classes. She is a member of the Monastery of Saint Benedict, Saint Joseph, Minnesota.

All articles by or about Sr. Johanna Becker, OSB



Patrick Henry, Ph.D., (here on the left with Fr. Patrick Barry) recently

committee and we have a special house with a group of trained community members who live there. And these are for people who think they might be interested in joining a community but they're not sure, and they're sort of looking around. And again, the time that they can stay is unlimited but mostly it's for a week to a month. We had one woman who was really testing the waters and we were the seventh such place that she had been at [laughter] and she's been back. She's still looking, but you know the right thing has to hit her at the right time. She's serious, but doesn't know where.

Then we have another program which is really open to scholars. It's our studium program, which is a research center. People who are doing scholarly work can apply and come there. We give them an apartment and an office and they eat and pray with the religious community, But they pursue their own personal scholarly work at the same time. So these are just three things that are happening at one monastery and I know that many other places have all sorts of different permutations and combinations. So it's something that's in the air but you don't hear a lot about it unless you're on track or interested and trip across it somewhere or another.

Brother David Steindl-Rast: Sometimes I've noticed among those of us who are "permanent" members of a monastic community a sort of looking down on those who come for what we call temporary vocations as not being quite the right thing. But this is also a case of keeping death before one's eyes to remember that every vocation is temporary [much laughter and clapping from audience].

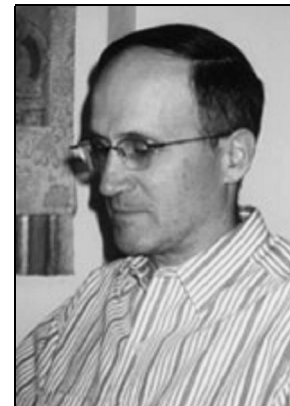
Joseph Wong: I would like to share something about the possibility of spending a time period in our community in Big Sur, CA where we have a hermitage. As Brother David mentioned, in a Camaldolese congregation, we have three different types of settings. We can have a normal cenobium monastery, an ordinary Benedictine monastery, where all the monks live under the same roof. And we can have a hermitage. Each monk lives in a small cottage with several central buildings—chapel, dining room, library—where we come together several times a day to pray and one meal together in the dining room. It doesn't mean we eat one meal a day, but one meal in common. Then

retired as executive director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at Saint John's Abbey and University, Collegeville, Minnesota. He was the editor of *Benedict's Dharma*.

All articles by or about Patrick Henry, Ph.D.

Sr. Rosemary Huber, MM, is a Maryknoll Sister whose ministry in hospital management brought her into dialogue with Buddhists in South Korea, with Muslims in Indonesia, and finally with Hindus in Nepal. She served as an advisor to MID and now resides in Monrovia CA where she is in charge of a retirement home for Maryknoll sisters.

All articles by or about Sr. Rosemary Huber, MM



Fr. Thomas Ryan, CSP, **Fr. Thomas Ryan** resides at the North American Paulist Center in

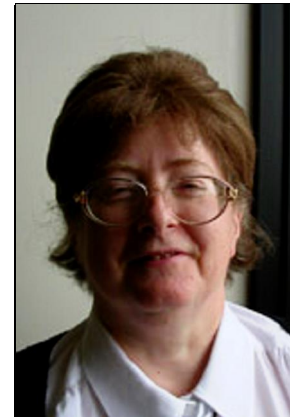
the third is what Brother David was saying and we can also call the third dimension of outreach. That's quite mysterious that David explained and I don't want to go into that. But now what I'm going to say is how we welcome our guests.

We have a retreat center for about 15 to 20 people, who can come for a retreat. But, in addition to that, we are also open to some long-term guests within the cloister, of course for men, as long term cloister guests. People who feel the need of spending a longer period of time in solitude and in a monastic atmosphere. They are welcome to participate in our prayer and they are also assigned work, but a half day's work so they have a half day left to themselves. We regularly have two or three of these kind of long-term guests who stay for six months or a year. In addition to that, we also have the so-called resident oblates. I think most people here are familiar with the Benedictine oblate program. It means lay people living in the society who are attracted by Benedictine monastic spirituality, so they have some spiritual bond with us and try to live monastic spirituality.

Mostly we have several hundred from our hermitage. They live in the world and they come to the monastery, to the hermitage, two or three times a year for retreats and for talks and so on. But we also have several residential oblates. That's something, I guess, quite special in our community. We have five or six residents in the monastery, but they're oblates, not monks. But they participate more in our prayer life than those long-term guests, who are more free to participate in our liturgy or our prayer. But these residential oblates participate more regularly in our prayer and liturgy. They take part in the work we have and they live there as long as they wish. So, that's something very special. And I think the oblate program in general will also be a way of, at least half way, meeting this idea of having a lay Benedictine community. Oblates are a way of answering to this need or this expectation. They form a kind of community, living in the society but at least they have a kind of spiritual bond with the monastery and among themselves and, actually, they also form small groups. I think that's a second step for some of those oblates. They form small groups and have group meetings and gatherings, sometimes once a month, sometimes once a week. Several, five or six or ten, oblates who live

Washington DC, and works for Christian unity and interfaith relations through a variety of formats: interreligious dialogue, retreats, on-line courses, graduate instruction, workshops, etc. He has served on MID's Board of Advisors.

**All articles by or about
Fr. Thomas Ryan, CSP**



Sr. Sarah Schwartzberg, OSB, is a member of the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. She contributed to the conference on Benedict's Dharma in September 2001 and participated in Nuns in the West I and II. She lives at the community's ashram, Osage Monastery in Sand Springs, Oklahoma, and is a member of the Board of Directors of MID.

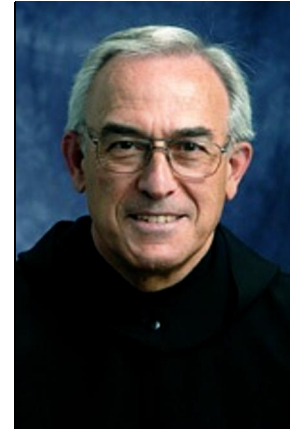
**All articles by or about
Sr. Sarah Schwartzberg,
OSB**

near by will meet together for bible sharing or for a prayer meeting and so on, once a month or once a week. I think that could be a kind of mid-way in responding to the hope of having a lay monastic community.

Patrick Henry: It's very exciting and encouraging to hear about all these things that are in fact happening. We can say this ought to be happening and we hear all these reports that it is happening. I'd like to recognize some hands that I haven't seen yet. If there is anyone who has something to say, there will not be this kind of opportunity tomorrow. So this is sort of the last chance to have something to say. So over here and then I see an unfamiliar hand here so we'll go there next.

Judith Miller: Just an observation on your comment that about 20 years ago one would not have expected to see some of the publications and some of the interest in monasticism and it might be interesting to consider it, the interest in monasticism, as sort of the emergence of a cultural shadow that is looking for its integration. I see it very much as what has happened since the 60s, 70s, 80s in our culture and our economic system, the shadow is coming out and looking now for integration.

Karen Bissonette: I really appreciate being a part of all this. The comment I wanted to make: I'm an oblate here at Our Lady of Grace Monastery and it's been a real blessing over the years and I'm just really appreciating it more now. I think the sisters here have been very open about sharing with the oblates. I am free to use their library and that's just been really wonderful. One of the things I think I've heard a couple of people say but I would really like is maybe coming and staying here for a week at a time without it being like a retreat experience. I would still have to go and do my work that I go and do everyday, but I would come here and share in the prayer life, which I'm welcome to do now. But it's one more thing I have to do, and then I have to go home etc. So I just think it would be neat to come and maybe stay for a couple of weeks at a time and realize there would be a cost involved in that. But I don't know how all that could be worked out, but I think it would be...I couldn't stay for six months because I



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 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.

All articles by or about Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB



Br. David Steindl-Rast,

have husband and he probably wouldn't like that [laughter], but I could come and stay a couple of weeks and I think that would probably be OK.

Rosemary Huber: Though not monastic, I do want to say at Maryknoll now, we've had the Maryknoll lay missionary program for 25 years. And some of those people have stayed on for 15, 20 and there are three who have been there for 25 years. But that takes working out of a lot of practicalities. Here in our USA society, Maryknoll has to pay for their social security and all of that and when their children are ready for education that has to be provided for. It starts out as a minimum of three years, they're contracted for that. But the practicalities are looming.

Patrick Henry: Yes, I'm struck with your reinforcing what Judith was saying earlier today about the need for resources for the practicalities for a monastic community to work. I was talking to somebody today and remembering that my dear friend, Father Thomas Stransky, Paulist, who retired head of Tantur, the Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem, told me that a few years ago he decided to live the simple life and he went somewhere up in Vermont and lived there for three months and came back and said, "It is very expensive to live simply" [laughter]. And the monastic life is a simple life but it is not cheap life; and I think that what you're saying is it takes a lot of dealing with practicalities.

Elizabeth Padden-Lobue: I am an oblate here at Our Lady of Grace. I live as a lay person probably about 20 minutes from here and I come over and I enjoy their swimming pool, their retreats, whatever is available. But I still have 12 of my own children out all over the place and I'm not about to join the monastery [laughter]

Patrick Henry: Oh, but probably sometimes you are about to join a monastery [laughter]

Elizabeth Padden-Lobue: Well, there was a time when all I could say was the Jesus prayer, Jesus, mercy! [laughter] One of my favorite books now as a mother and grandmother is the Tao of Pooh [laughter].

OSB, is a Benedictine monk at Mount Saviour Monastery in upstate New York. He is a writer and founder of gratefulness.org. He took part in the Benedict's Dharma conference in September 2001.

**All articles by or about
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Dr. Bonnie Thurston was the William F. Orr Professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. She is a Disciples of Christ minister and a founding member of the international Thomas Merton Society. Much of the year she lives a semi-eremitical life near Wheeling, West Virginia.

**All articles by or about
Dr. Bonnie Thurston**

If you've ever read that, I mean I can about handle that type of literature, as a former first grade teacher and special-ed teacher. But I really appreciate Our Lady of Grace just being here, and allowing me to live with one of my children about 20 miles from here and at a reasonable rent and whatever. I think we all have to figure out the practicalities of insurance, social security, and being on the waiting list at St. Paul's Hermitage which the sisters maintain. It's just great to know that Our Lady of Grace is here and has allowed all of this to be available right here in Indiana. I was glad to hear Father Hans mentioned out in Burlingame, because I have been able to do some traveling as a grandmother to visit my various children and relatives and I was able to go to his program there at Mercy Center. This has just been a great gift to come to this and be so close to enlightening. We did not know until last Sunday, some of us, when we met for our oblate meeting and they said there had been some cancellations and we were welcome to come. So we're here.

Patrick Henry: As you folks here are hearing all these testimonies from your appreciative oblates, you may be amused and perhaps heart-warmed by the most favorite letter I've ever received from the late beloved great Abbot Jerome Tison of St. John's, who became abbot primate and then died so untimely at age 64. But he wrote to me once after I had made a presentation to the community at St. John's. It said, "Dear Patrick, We appreciate your enthusiasm for the monastic life which often exceeds our own understanding of it." [laughter] I think some of you who live it all the time are hearing us all wax romantic and eloquent about it and you say, "What are they talking about? We don't understand it that way." [laughter] But I'm sure all these expressions of appreciation come from the heart because we are looking to you folks to help us figure things out. And we're putting a pretty big burden on you, but we figure you can carry it, you've been carrying it for 1500 years.

Sister Johanna, when you were talking about the Lutheran minister who was at your community for a while, when I hear stories like that, one of the things that I'm always reminded of is that the Benedictine tradition far antedates the divisions of the Church. So there is a sense in which her coming to you is not as Lutheran to Catholic, it is as 21st



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**All articles by or about
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and II.

**All articles by or about
Ven. Yifa**

Century Christian to a tradition that goes back to the 6th Century. And as Columba pointed out, really goes back even into the 4th Century. So I hope that as Benedictine monasteries think about themselves and their mission, they really think of themselves as prior to 1517, long before Luther tacked up the theses, prior to 1054, long before patriarchs of east and west excommunicated one another, it is a tradition common to the entire Christian community.

Julian von Duerbeck: In speaking about people coming and going to monasteries, I think we should be aware that, in these last years, both to monasteries and in seminaries, there are some young people that come wishing to live a very literal life of the Rule but it's really living the Rule right before Vatican Two. This really puts a lot of tensions and sometimes they're not willing to be educated, and I think in our houses we talk about discernment for people and for our house. It's very important who we have in formation. So it's just not easily walking in and walking out, there are repercussions from people's expectations.

Tom Price: Just a word of thanks for the book and the interreligious dialogue in the book and here at the conference. I'm Christian and 20 some years ago I read Alan Watts' *The Way of Zen*, and I traced my contemplative journey back to that book. It would be a few years later before I encountered mysticism in the Christian tradition. I was reminded today, listening to a friend of mine talking to one of the Buddhists about some introductory books. Alan Watts quoted one of the Buddhist masters' sayings about an ox. It goes like this: "You can't find an ox when you're riding it." I think he meant something slightly different than how I gave that meaning today, but for me it means that sometimes we have to get off the ox of our own tradition to see it anew, fresh. Whether it's been through reading from other traditions or in dialogue with other people from other traditions, it's always helped me to come back and plumb the depths of my tradition even more. So, thank you.

Chris Tebbe:

I'm listening to a series of tapes in my car, it's a book on tapes given on the confessions of Augustine, and I was taken by Columba's reference to Augustine today and how much the ideal of the Rule

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sounds like Augustine's City of God. The second thing I wanted to reflect on was a story that I heard last Sunday in the hours and hours of coverage that our wonderful TV and radio have been giving us about the disaster in New York. But this ties in with respecting other's traditions and true humility and how all Christians are Judeo-Christians at heart. The mass was going on at St. Patrick's Cathedral. They were interviewing folks as they came out of the church and I had just turned it off on TV so I was listening to it on National Public Radio and a young Jewish man came out of the cathedral with a picture in his hand (I might tear up talking about this. This even goes back to the forgiveness theme this morning that Sarah began with), and a reporter stopped him and asked him why he came to the mass and he was from a Jewish temple and they had all been talking about what they could do to contribute to this. They decided to go over to the center where they were collecting the names of missing people and, while they were there, they were so touched by the folks who lives had been tragically affected by the loss of their loved ones, that they took pictures off the wall of the individuals who were missing and went to their churches to participate in their Sunday worship service and pray with their families for them. I'm such a good Catholic girl, I'd have taken that picture back to mass and have Father sprinkle some holy water on it and leave it at, you know, doing our Catholic thing there. But he took that picture and went to mass because that was her faith and that's where her family was. Talk about getting outside yourself and really taking on. What a gift that was. To even do that with somebody we know and love that has died that's not of our faith, to attend their church and pray with the family members that are grieving.

Patrick Henry: They asked him, "When did you get here?" And he said, "I got here at noon for the 5:00 service." And they said, "What's your tradition?" And he said, "I'm Jewish." And then he said, "But St. Patrick's is New York's church, where else would I go?" It was this wonderful sense of the kind of symbolic significance of that place in this time. That to me is one of the most extraordinary instances of coming together and of boundaries just withering away that I think I've ever heard. Thank you for reminding us of that story.

Jacquelyn Miller: I'm going to register a few things that I wanted to

mention. One thing I find really valuable about the Benedictine Rule is that it makes living a holy life possible in daily life and it makes it attainable by normal people. I mean you don't have to be prophetic, you don't have to be highly spiritual, you don't have to have gone to a seminary or have received any kind of special calling or anything. It's just something that is attainable. It's simple if it's clear to you and you're ready to make that decision. Another thing, we were having a discussion in our triad today about individualism, and I think, in this country, we all can witness a certain type of individualism that doesn't represent individuality of the human being. It represents a collection of materials that the media and marketing and other companies and industries suggest can make you different from other people. And that takes the power of who you are outside of you and puts it in the hands of the Gap, Banana Republic, Mazda, and I have no doubt in my mind that there are as many individuals in this room, despite the fact that some of us wear the same thing every day or we wear the same thing as other people in our community. I have no doubt the individuality is just as present in here as it would be in any classroom or in any other group of people gathered.

One other thing I wanted to mention, I went to the oblate conference in Minnesota this year, and I think it was probably there that I heard this story. A lot of the oblates, and I would agree, say that they go to some of the monasteries and convents that they go to because they're such a presence of peace and sort of tranquility and that's kind of where you go as a refuge from daily life. And this one monk got up and spoke on behalf of this and he said this one woman came up to me and said, "I just really love coming here because everything is so peaceful and it just allows me a place to rest." And he said, "What are you talking about? The abbot just resigned." [laughter]

William Skudlarek: Patrick, your remark about St. Patrick's being the place where you went to in New York brought to my mind a number of things. You probably remember, maybe some other people have seen it, Coleman Berry's asking people to write about St. John's, entitling the book, *A Sense of Place*. And I remember in Japan, when we were beginning the process of discussing moving out of Tokyo to a monastery in the center of the Island, Honshu, one of the issues we

were dealing with was building a guest house as a part of the monastery in which retreatants could come. But we were also aware of the difficulty that we would have as Americans, most of us in the community, doing any kind of directed retreat work or preached retreat work for people who would come to do a retreat. And a sister, I believe she was religious of the Sacred Heart, who was acting as a kind of consultant for us said, "You know, one of the things I especially like about going on an individual retreat to the Trappist Monastery in Hokkaido is that they leave you alone. [laughter] They bring you some very nice meals three times a day and they leave you alone." So that encouraged us. In fact, people do come to our place simply because we leave them alone.

But it's a place to come to. It's a place to come to that has a community that is more or less stable, you see where I am now. But there's a community there that gathers in that church six times a day for prayer. They're free to join us if they want. They're not required to join us. But it is that place that in some ways is so important. A place that is not just geographical, it's a place that has been marked by a human presence, a presence of very ordinary people, by and large, with a few characters, always a few characters, but ordinary people. The more that that place has some continuity and some history to it, the more it seems to radiate something. It seems to me that one of the distinctive features of a monastery is always its cemetery. That says something very strong about this is where people have come and lived, and died. I know when I go back home, I always walk out to the cemetery, I always do. And I just walk around those stones and read those names and it somehow says that I'm home.

Joanne Flynn: I just want to thank the Maryknoll sister. I've known a lot of missionaries who, over the years, have worked with their program and it's been a wonderful example in the Catholic church of dialogue, because in all of us who served as lay people in Latin America or in any of the mission world, there were various stages of how we could do it and what happened when we came home. And that was one order that stuck with us. And as their numbers diminished, they put their hands on the lay person and ran with them. I'm just very proud of them. Just one other thing, I just can't say enough about being able to

go to a community mass and go back home and maybe do the quiet Zazen or Lectio Divina and walk through my own home, either early before the kids wake up or after they're asleep and feel the power of that community emanate into every part of my little abode.

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