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Introduction and Welcome

Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, Abbot Damien Thompson, OCSO
from **Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002**

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William Skudlarek: First of all, to offer us all a word of welcome, I would like to introduce Abbot Damien Thompson, the abbot of the Gethsemani Monastery.

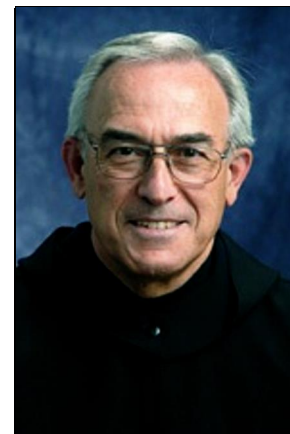
Damien Thompson: I would like to wish you all a very warm welcome from our community at Gethsemani, and to encourage you in the goal you have set out for yourselves—to dialogue over the topic of suffering. I also want to express my gratitude to all of you for coming here because of who you are.

You are an ecumenical people in the truest sense of the word, and it's helpful for all of us in this era to stretch ourselves to attain what you are expressing. You have a listening heart and are willing to extend yourselves over the walls that society has always used to exclude others for the sake of its own identity. The image of a listening heart is one that society needs today. We need people who are capable of stretching themselves beyond their own parameters, who realize there is something important in life beyond their boundaries. It is with a listening heart that we will attain the unity that the world so sorely needs.

During the last Gethsemani Encounter, there was an incident that happened in a private moment that was expressive of a listening heart. In one of those casual moments, when everyone was passing from the church into this chapter room for one of the discussions, and everyone was distracted with those that happened to be bumping against them, the Dalai Lama, with great respect and with no intention of impressing

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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 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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anyone, happened to pass in front of the Blessed Sacrament, which is central to our faith. He paused in the privacy of his own moment to bow respectfully to the Blessed Sacrament, and moved on. Although there was no intention at the time of impressing anyone, the Dalai Lama happened to be seen, and his gesture deepened the faith of another.

The ecumenical spirit moves where it will. I have the gift of a very close relationship with one of you that has widened my own horizons and taught me the impact of a listening heart. In our friendship we have discussed everything that touches our life, only to discover that while terms may distinguish us, they don't separate us. The relationship has taught me the richness of dialogue and what we expect of this week. We put a lot of stock in words, but it is relationship and the respect that develops that collapse the walls that separate.

In our conversations, communication reaches beyond labels. We touch a common reality in spite of the apparent difference of faith. But what is more interesting is that when we touch the common ground and revel in it, we also get a richer appreciation of our differences and a sharper definition of our own faith. It seems that the more we converse, the more inclusive are the language and thoughts, which are balanced by the exclusive character of our personal beliefs, which can in turn be taken for granted. We have a great need for more heart-to-heart talk. This is a faith-filled moment. Your very presence extends beyond the walls that divide us. I welcome your presence not only for the sake of expanding the horizons of my own community, but for the sake of the anonymous crowd beyond, whose lives are widened because of your capacity to listen to each other.

The Rule of Benedict states that we have to hear with the ears of the heart, and you are giving us a living example of that experience. The true ecumenical moment expresses to us that we are brothers and sisters in the truest sense of the word; and today what separates us will tomorrow be a memory. We belong to one family, and in that spirit I welcome you and encourage you to make this your home for the week.

**Fr. William Skudlarek,
OSB**

**Abbot Damien
Thompson, OCSO**, is the
Abbot of Gethsemani
Abbey, in Gethsemani,
Kentucky.

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William Skudlarek: Thank you very much, Abbot Damien, for your words of welcome and encouragement to us all.

We are here, as Abbot Damien so well said, to listen with the ears of the heart, to listen deeply and intently to one another. We begin our time together by listening to two teachers from our respective traditions to speak on suffering and its transformation.

We will hear first of all from Abbot Thomas Keating, a Cistercian monk, former abbot of St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, former president of the Temple of Understanding, founder of Contemplative Outreach and the Snowmass Interfaith Conference, and former chair of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue. He is the author of numerous books and articles on Christian contemplative practice and on dialogue with other religions.

Continued in **Introduction: Thomas Keating (Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002)**

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