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## Fr. Columba Stewart's Presentation Suffering Caused by a Sense of Unworthiness and Alienation

Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, Fr. Columba Stewart, OSB

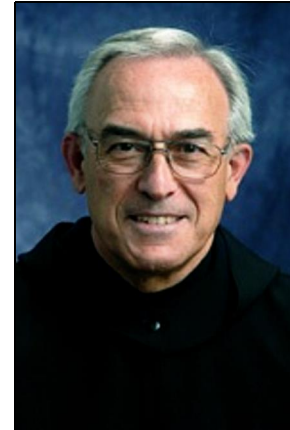
from [Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002](#)

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**William Skudlarek:** To continue our reflection on suffering caused by a sense of unworthiness and alienation is Father Columba Stewart. Fr. Columba is a confrere of mine from the same monastic community, St. John's in Collegeville, Minnesota. He has been a monk there for twenty-one years, and that led me to reflect that I had been there twenty-one years when he arrived. In these past twenty-one years he has completed his doctorate at Oxford University, and he has returned to the School of Theology at St. John's, where his specialties in teaching, writing, research, are early Christian monasticism. Father Columba is in frequent demand as a preacher of retreats in monastic communities throughout the world. He is also the formation director for our abbey, the person responsible for leading newcomers into the monastic life and the monastic practice. One of his most well-known books is entitled, *Cassian: The Monk*, a study of that fourth and fifth century monastic writer. And he has also done a more popular work on Benedictine practice and spirituality called, *Prayer and Community*. Personally, what I most admire about Columba is his ability to translate the results of his research into at times rather arcane and obscure early teachers of the Christian tradition and of Christian wisdom, and to make it accessible to people who have not had the experience of research and do not have the capacity with ancient languages. I always have liked the French expression, *haut vulgarization*, which literally translated is high vulgarity. But what it means is high-level popularization in the best sense of the word, taking the wisdom of past ages and making it accessible to seekers today.

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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.

**Columba Stewart:** Thank you, Father William. I'll try not to be too vulgar in these remarks. I think I would rather listen to the rain [that is pouring down outside] than to myself, so I will try to keep this brief. I would like to begin with a section of one of the psalms that was part of our morning prayer at St. John's yesterday. This is from Psalm 90. In the Psalter used here, it would be 89. "In the morning fill us with your love. We shall exult and rejoice all our days. Give us joy to balance our affliction for the years when we knew misfortune." In your packets, you have the essay that I prepared for this dialogue. I need to tell you that that essay was written before three dramatic events that have already entered into the conversation here: The event of September 11, the horrific destruction in the Middle East, and most recently the reappearance in an even more brutal form of the crisis of sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church, which as many of you know is not confined to the Roman Catholic Church. It's something many of us from various traditions have struggled with over the last few of years

Each of these crises, which represent a profound violation of the holy, often by those who are entrusted with the holy, or who violate in the name of the holy, seems to me to suggest that once again we have to say that at a profound level we are not facing the truth, and we are not telling the truth. As someone who comes from the Christian monastic tradition, I stand with my Buddhist brothers and sisters in knowing that the challenge of facing and telling the truth is one that must begin with each one of us. Part of the wisdom of the monastic tradition, both East and West, is the reminder that I must begin by looking here [points to his heart]. When every bit of conditioning I have suggests I look out there, I must resist that and look within.

One of the strongest principles of the teachings of Jesus, a principle taken up powerfully by the early Egyptian desert mothers and fathers of our [Christian] tradition, is "Do not judge." We know that from Jesus' teaching in terms of not judging others. One of the points I want to come back to in a minute is that the desert tradition also says, "Do not judge yourself." How do we hold that in tension with our imperative to look here [within], rather than out there? If we begin with ourselves, and we identify these various issues and feelings, passions—what in my

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essay I talk about in terms of desire and reaction, which is a classic Christian monastic anthropology, borrowed (the philosophers among you will know) from Plato, and like so many things, sort of shamelessly recrafted and baptized by early Christian writers; if we ask ourselves where those forces come from—forces we heard identified yesterday as the need for security, approval, or power, or identified as greed or ignorance of suffering—the suggestion I make in my essay is that one place we might look is an experience common to all of us: the experience of mortality.

I gave a version of that paper to the junior monks last September [2001] at a conference, and it was a real downer for them. They said, “We know that St. Benedict tells us to keep death daily before our eyes, but do you have to do it on a Saturday morning in a conference?” This was the week before September 11. As I went back to my text, I thought, should I be revising this dramatically in light of what’s happened, the three crises that I’ve named? Not a bit. I found myself instead drawn more deeply into the realities I was trying to evoke, and particularly the conclusion, which is a quotation from Starets Silouane, the great Eastern Christian monastic teacher, who said that what we must cultivate is the ability to hold our heart in hell and not despair. I think many of us have been holding our hearts in hell these last months, and I hope you are not despairing.

For Christians, of course, theologically, and we hope experientially, death is the great reality to be reckoned with. But it is also for us the key to life. That is precisely the mystery we celebrate in Easter season, and what we just experienced in the Eucharist [service that preceded this talk]. The problem, if I may borrow Bhante G.’s beautiful analogy of the onion, is that we forget where we have come from in terms of being created by God who loves us, and we forget where we are going to, which in Christian theological terms, of course, is eternal life with God. This is described sometimes as union, or contemplation, or the dance of the Trinitarian life into eternity. All we think about is the “I” in the middle; so we forget the stuff before and what comes after. If we focus entirely on the “I,” we have exactly the kinds of fears that our speakers have been addressing so far. We approach life believing that this is all we have. What is at play, of course, are the politics of scarcity—that there can’t possibly be enough for me. How do we deal

with this existential reality that so many experience and which I suspect each of us struggles with daily—that fear of scarcity, that there won't be enough of that security, or approval, or power to shape my own experience or that of others? How do we deal with it?

The part of my essay that is probably most crucial for the topic that we are considering is the final section on compunction. It was also suggested to me that this is an issue that may be one that we need to dialogue about, because it may be one that is not immediately evident to people who are not in the Christian tradition, or perhaps even to those who don't know this strand of the Christian tradition. If you read the Rule of St. Benedict, and I know that many of you have, Buddhists and Christians alike, because we had a wonderful dialogue on it last September, you may remember that in his chapter on humility, Benedict sketches a series of rather daunting steps to achieve that quality that for him is his preferred way of speaking of human integration and transformation. There are a couple of those steps that I think are crucial for this quality I call compunction. One is the seventh degree of humility, which is the one everybody remembers: To regard the self as worse than others, to be of no account, to be a worm and not a human being. To this is joined the twelfth step, the step that for Benedict really describes transformation, where one stands as if already at the fearful judgment of God, saying over and over in the heart, "I am a sinner, not worthy to look up to you," a stance of profound awareness of all of the alienation and unworthiness that one has ever felt, and also a profound awareness of where some of that might have come from.

The trick with compunction, if it is to be healthy, of course, is that it is not simply that business of dwelling upon the sense of alienation and unworthiness. That would be staying in the "I" in the middle of the onion again. The trick of compunction is always to place that profound awareness of suffering within the much broader context of God's love. That, as many of you know, is not the beginning point of monastic practice. That is a goal. It requires all of the disciplines of monastic life to achieve that equipoise to allow us to stand in that place, profoundly aware of all that we have done, all of the suffering that we have experienced or inflicted on others, and yet, to borrow from Starets

Silouane, "not to despair." The monastic that Benedict describes in that twelfth degree is standing as if already at the fearful judgment of God. But the beauty of it is that she or he is not afraid to stand there. So, speaking from a Christian monastic perspective, I would want to suggest that the perspective we offer on suffering caused by a sense of alienation or unworthiness is that those are feelings that we can never fully surrender, at least for most of us in our experience of this life. But we can, in the equipoise of compunction, put them in tension with that profound sense of where we have come from and where we are going. If we are able to do that, of course, the fruit of that experience is compassion.

I'd like to end with just a word on forgiveness. This is perhaps the part of my paper I would have to add to after the events of the last several months. I suggested in a homily I preached last Sunday that from a Christian, and of course for me a monastic, perspective, to forgive is never to forget, because we cannot in fact let go of the memories of the things that have happened to us, the wrongs that have been done, the suffering that we have experienced. But we can through love transform that memory so that it becomes like the bread and wine of the Eucharist we just celebrated: A door into something larger than itself. What compunction is is that awareness that the suffering I have inflicted on others and experienced myself can be for me that door into something vaster. Of course, the key to that door is love. Let me end with a second quote from the psalms, this one from Psalm 30 or 29: "For me, you have changed my mourning into dancing. You removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy."

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Continued in **Fr. Columba Stewart: Discussion  
(Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002)**

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