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Sr. Mary Margaret Funk's Presentation Suffering Caused by a Sense of Unworthiness and Alienation

Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, Fr. Columba Stewart, OSB

from **Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002**

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William Skudlarek: Those of us who were involved in the planning for this encounter met over lunch, and one of the suggestions that was made, which we have decided to go with, is that at the end of each session we will ask the presenter if he or she would like to respond to the discussion. So we'll begin this afternoon's session by asking Father Columba if he would like to respond to our discussion this morning.

Columba Stewart: I felt the question about transformation was critical, and for a couple of reasons. First of all, with respect to the experience of Jesus, I think we heard some good reflections on the content of some of the Biblical narratives. But I think it's also worth remembering that in the accounts of Jesus' passion and resurrection, there is a definite hiatus in the story between when Jesus was placed in the tomb and when the tomb was empty and he started appearing to people. In other words, you won't find an explanation in the Christian tradition for exactly what happened or how it happened beyond some later traditions about where he may have gone during the time he spent in the tomb. I would want to work with that in terms of how we apply it to our current experience to say that many of us can at times find ourselves in that period of hiatus between the cross and the evidence of the resurrection; that we don't have a lot of explicit clues from the Christian tradition to say what's happening in the inner workings of that transformation. The key point is to say that it does happen. That's what keeps us going.

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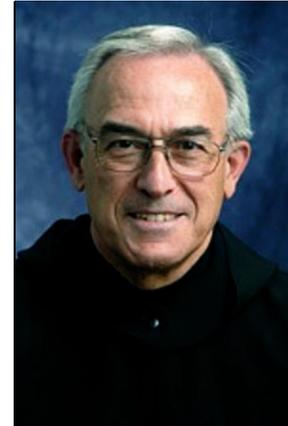


Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, was the executive director of the MID board from 1989-2004. She was prioress at Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove, Indiana and is the author of a number of books, including *Thoughts Matter* and *Islam Is . . .*

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The other point I would want to make is with respect to the practical question of what you tell people in terms of their practice. I think it is fair to say that Christian monastic tradition has been very reticent in making particular claims about what can happen through faithful practice of prayer or contemplation. There are exceptions to that, like Evagrius Ponticus, a fourth century Egyptian monk, whom I've studied. But you find Christian teaching more generally reticent than Buddhist teaching about what happens if you stick with a path. I don't know if that's a problem or a virtue. I was talking to somebody after lunch who thought it was a problem. I tend to think it's perhaps okay that we don't say what will happen. Instead there is that experience of the hiatus, at least in this life, and leaving a promise of transformation for later. Those of you who study the Rule of Benedict know that Benedict does allow experiences of transformation in this life, but he, too, is cautious about confusing what can happen here with the promise of eternal life and the experience of heaven. That might be a very interesting conversation in terms of what we tell people who begin practice and how the different traditions would talk about the goal.

William Skudlarek: Now to continue our consideration of suffering caused by a sense of unworthiness and alienation, we will have as our presenter Sister Mary Margaret Funk of the order of St. Benedict. Meg, as she is more usually called, is a member of Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove, Indiana, one of the parts of the greater Indianapolis area. She has been a member of that community for forty years and was its prioress from 1985 to 1993. Since 1994, she has been executive director of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue. In 1995, she traveled to India and Tibet on the Spiritual Exchange Program at the invitation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and in 1996, it was she who coordinated the first Gethsemani Encounter. She has engaged in formal dialogue with members of Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Taoist traditions. She was a participant in the Purity of Heart Conference in Big Sur at Fr. Joseph Wong's New Camaldoli Monastery in June 2000. She has also contributed to the book *Benedict's Dharma*, which was published by Riverhead. She is the author of two books on Christian monastic practice, rooted in the teaching of the early monastic teachers, John Cassian especially. The title of those books are *Thoughts*



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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Fr. Columba Stewart,

Matter: The Practice of the Spiritual Life and Tools Matter for the Christian Spiritual Life.

Mary Margaret Funk: I thought I would tell you how I particularly said "yes" to this role [of being part of MID]. It was a sweet moment for me. After Catholic University, and I was a prioress, I went to Mary Collins and said, "I need monastic studies." Do you remember that, Mary? You said, "Read John Cassian and go see Abbot Thomas Keating." So I went to see Abbot Thomas Keating in Snowmass, looking for *lectio divina*, and got centering prayer. From there Father Keating put me on the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue board. I met Pascaline Goff and Katherine Howard. At that time, we were very much engaged in the Parliament of World Religions, and about twenty of us in this room were at the Parliament. And I saw Julian von Duerbeck do his liturgies, and I saw the importance of it. After I read a book by Don Mitchell on emptiness, I said, "If that's what this is about, then I would love to put my heart to the role." So when I was asked to be the executive director, I said "yes." That's my story. I'm standing on the shoulders of giants.

[Plays kyrie eleison on the flute.] I had trouble writing this talk on suffering caused by a sense of unworthiness and alienation. I've worn out twenty-five versions of it, and I have a new one today. This one builds on the others, but I think it stands alone, so let me try it with you. I went back to the Rule myself, saying that that's my core teaching. In rereading *Benedict's Dharma*, I noted that Norman Fischer had this to say about the Rule of Benedict on page 87: "This beautiful loving quality comes, I think, from the warm relationship that a Christian has to God, to Jesus, who is a person, with all of the pathos that implies—a person who loves and can be loved, who suffered and will suffer, a person who cares. One has a clear sense that Benedict himself has a warm human love of the monastics that come to him as a consequence of his love of God. One senses that Benedict truly feels that God loves him and all monastics, and that he wrote his Rule entirely out of that spirit." Norman, I would d to have written that. That's a warm invitation to the Rule of Benedict.

This is the chapter, number seven, that you keep hearing us

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[Benedictines] talk about. I'd like to come at it from my forty years experience of having lived it. The chapter concerns humility, and that seems to respond to the sense of unworthiness and alienation. As you know, Benedict's Triple Jewels were the three virtues of silence, humility, and obedience. I envision the three virtues in a total circle, much like this room. In the middle of it is silence, humility, and obedience, but all around it is good zeal. To zero in on humility, you need to show humility through obedience and silence. If you are obedient, you show humility and silence. If you have the virtue of silence, you show it through obedience and humility. So, you see how there are three doors into God. The entrance may be one of fear, but, once inside, you dwell in love. We can look at it from any of these virtues, but let's take the one on humility. Father Columba has twelve steps, and there is a logical or even visceral progression to it.

The first step concerns whether we have a sense of God's presence, whether we have a sense that God knows and cares about our thoughts, and that we are in his mind's eye at all times. It is truly that sense of God looking at me while I'm looking at God. We are looking at each other in a loving dwelling. Then, if that is the case, there is this enormous response that wells up from within to surrender, to not live apart, to come toward God— not to do my own will, but to throw myself on this experience of God's presence. A way to formalize that is to be under an abbot and to be obedient. If obedience has any teeth in it at all, we actually do what we are asked to do. One of those things could be manual labor. Manual labor is the preferred monastic way because it is a way to do and stay at hard things and to take our whole body, mind, and soul and do things wholeheartedly, without attachment, and interchangeably with any other labor. So we Benedictines expect to be given hard work, and we refrain from dropping out when the going gets tough. We want to be under this Rule, we want to be under this abbot, and we want to get under the labor of obedience.

In doing that, the other quality that emerges is that we do it humbly and in silence. There is a way of working humbly that we receive what it is to be done. Silence is shown through two ways. One is in our thoughts. Doing manual labor is a good way to watch our thoughts. We

see what rises and we lay aside the thoughts that are obstacles to the constant presence of God. In this presence of God, we are aware of our thoughts and turn them back into prayer. The second way the silence is shown is through the way we speak. One is not to speak much and to receive more than to presume to give. That's the meaning of being receptive. Our speech should have the evidence of reverence, and certainly not the other direction of sarcasm, haughtiness, bragging, or untruthfulness. Speech is integral to our practice of silence as is our refraining from speaking even good things so that we may listen to God's will coming up as a thought. Again, this is because we are in God's presence.

If we have silence, humility should show. Just as arrogance and pride show through haughtiness, strutting, and overlording, so humility shows by our decorum, speech, reverence, and our being present to the needs of another. All of this is if, through God's mercy, we can put on the mind of Christ, become like Christ, and do things as Christ would do them. We play this out in the monastery in order to both be the Church in our setting and extend to it to others by example. We do it by sending forth prayer and doing whatever the spirit tells us we should do in obedience through the blessing of the abbot. Chapter Seven of the Rule pulls all that together.

What I'd like to do is play you the Kyrie again, because it's only God's mercy that gives us the ability to practice these virtues. For on the other side of these virtues is incredible peace and blessing. Before I play the Kyrie, however, I have an example of one of the sisters in my own community. Her name is Sister Mary Gerald, and she retired from our St. Paul Hermitage, which is a facility for the elderly. It has about 115 residents and is part of our monastic complex. Sister Mary was the supervisor of the kitchen and had twenty-five workers that reported to her. She was there for twenty-six years and was a very gifted cook herself. Now, she returned to the monastery, and I had the happy opportunity to assign her to the kitchen. In the monastic kitchen, she reported to a woman younger than herself, with a reading disability, another woman who had multiple handicaps—hearing, sight, and probably cooking wasn't her strength—and another cook who had no experience. Sister Mary Gerald and I met once a month, and she

reported inadequacies in the food preparation, the cleanliness, nutrition, presentation, and purchasing of the food. In short, nothing in the monastery kitchen was up to Mary Gerald's ability and her experience. Her former way of life, as we might call it.

One day I was walking out of church, as usual, and was on my way to my office. Sister Mary Gerald came right beside me, and said, "I got it. I got it." And I said, "Well, what did you get?" Her voice became softer and softer, rather than screaming. "I got that the kitchen is not about food. It's about love."

[Kyrie Eleison is played]

Continued in **Sr. Mary Margaret Funk: Discussion
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