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Sr. Kathy Lyzotte's Presentation Suffering Caused by Greed and Consumerism

Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, Sr. Kathy Lyzotte, OCSO
from [Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002](#)

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Mary Margaret Funk: It's my pleasure to introduce a friend and a sister of mine, Sr. Kathy Lyzotte. She is a Trappistine nun from Our Lady of Mississippi Abbey in Dubuque, Iowa, a gorgeous place, located on the bluffs, overlooking the Mississippi River. Kathy was born to a Catholic family in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, was educated by the Sisters of Mercy, graduated from Mount Mercy College in Cedar Rapids, and then in 1970 she entered the Trappistine community in Dubuque and made solemn profession in 1979. Since 1988, she has been the accountant and treasurer. She has also studied the history, spirituality of the Cistercian order, and recently she translated an article, summarizing the work of Eva Carlota Rava, and the first three treatises of St. Bernard of Clairvaux in the Cistercian Studies Quarterly. Sister Kathy most values the ordinary life in the abbey where she is still finding out who she is.

Kathy Lyzotte: Preparing this talk itself has been a transforming experience for me. I try to find ways to enliven my own charism and to dip into it to sustain my practice. One way that I described in the paper is, following the teaching of the Rule of St. Benedict, to not consider myself above others or consider being a religious better than being a nonmonastic. Another way is not to judge, denounce, categorize, or condemn.

When I first started thinking about this topic, I thought that I should denounce capitalism. I have read in our Catholic papers about the evils of capitalism, and it's really obvious. But I had to think and pray how I

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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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would approach this subject, realizing that the monastic tradition teaches me not to judge or condemn, and then realizing from my own experience that the business people I deal with [as the accountant at my convent] are good people, that they are generous, and that they do many good things to improve the world. I really appreciate my relationship with the business people I deal with. That's one approach to this subject. Another particular practice that I've had to come to know is not to identify myself with either the job I'm doing or the funds that I manage. Instead I just let the cash flow; watch it come and watch it go. It's like water—it just flows. It does not belong to me and I don't need to identify myself with it or with either success or failure in business transactions. Those are some of the main things that came to me while writing this paper.

Religious life is supposed to be prophetic, and it's a call to leave everything behind in a radical following of Jesus in words and actions, pointing out the hidden presence of the divine. Our monastic institutions are prophetic when they witness a lifestyle of practicing the Gospel together and offering alternatives to the established order. A real thing to think about is how we can be prophetic if we are embedded in the current economic system.

The global marketplace is a reality. It seems to be here to stay. There doesn't really seem to be much we can do about it. It benefits some, but it certainly does not benefit everybody. In some instances, it is a really oppressive to certain groups, outside of the United States in particular. Looking at this issue, I feel emerging a vague sense of guilt, making me question my needs and priorities and reevaluate my situation in the light of my neighbors near and far on the globe. A sense of guilt might not be so bad, because it could be a wake-up call, an awakening of conscience. As Catholics, this has been very much a part of our training—to be aware of our sinful side and to acknowledge it. Historically, Catholics have often felt guilty about personal failings, as we talked about yesterday. However, in the area of wealth and goods and the use of material resources, perhaps we have not felt enough sense of guilt, or have been blinded to the greed that is operative in our lives, our circumstances, and in our institutions. Again, religious life is meant to be prophetic. But there needs to be some way



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that we can stand back a little bit and not simply be fully within the situation, to look at it from outside and get some perspective.

Simply eliminating global marketing will not automatically do away with the vices of greed and consumerism. A consumer is a shopper, a potential buyer. The vice of greed takes over when acquiring material goods has so much importance and takes so large a place that the personal human heart, mind, and spirit are starved and diminished. On the collective level, we call this consumer society. Buying becomes consumerism in a wasteful throw-away culture in overuse of energy and natural resources etc. One of the insidious dangers resulting from consumerism is the undermining of a person's identity. A consumer-oriented culture, with continuous advertising, tends to address the individual as no more than a potential customer, and so reduces the human person to being simply a consumer. This is what our marketing society is all about: Getting customers and making sales. The message is, "You are what you buy." People identify with certain brand names and form an attachment to them and then get their identity from that.

Meanwhile, forces of isolation are strong. A highly mobile society leads to a sense of rootlessness. In our identity as part of a local community, our sense of belonging and connectedness to people is greatly weakened. Figures portrayed in the media seem much more interesting and exciting than real people, virtual reality seems more exciting than daily life, facts and information seem to eclipse the loving knowledge derived from authentic human interactions. So the temptation is to purchase commodities in order to achieve a sense of belonging. Counteracting these dehumanizing forces, Christianity offers the human being a faith-based identity through baptism. This sacrament of Christian initiation signifies and brings about a person's living relationship with the triune God, which is actualized throughout the course of a human lifetime. Baptism also initiates the person into a Christian faith community, giving a person a new identity as a member of the church. We so often take this for granted, but this is the necessary foundation of a dedicated life.

Christianity affirms the dignity of the human person. My identity as a baptized Christian is that of a person who is loved and loved by God.

So Christian faith is most basically a faith in the love that God has for me, for each human being, and for all humanity. My faith in this gratuitous and redemptive love enables me to love God and love other people. This love is what gives me the strength to go in that direction. Love is understood as the deepest meaning of it all. That phrase is part of Gethsemani Abbey's liturgy at Vigils. During Holy Week we use Gethsemani Abbey's liturgy and the opening prayer on the morning of Good Friday: "Love is the deepest meaning of it all." Love as personal relationships, as communion, as mutual indwelling. In Catholic theology, there is a Greek word, perichoresis, for the indwelling. A line of the hymn at Benediction last night hit me as part of this: "The Holy Spirit, yet proceeding from two loves who breathe as one." That would be a description of the love between the persons of the Trinity. That love in communion is the very life of God; and our life as Christians is a participation in that mutual love.

Faith in a personal God is, of course, challenged greatly in our postmodern world. But Christian faith leads us to the realm of mystery, to a very fundamental truth: That the separate self is an illusion, that loving communion of persons is ultimate reality. Is that two truths? Or is that one truth? If it is one truth, it would affirm the transcendence of the single isolated individual. It would affirm the necessity that each person transcend being only a single individual and enter into loving communion. It would therefore lead to the overcoming of greed and selfishness. There would be no more need for greed and consumerism if a person really felt fulfilled, completed, and had everything because of participation in the depths of this mystery.

Continued in **Sr. Kathy Lyzotte: Discussion (Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002)**

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