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Fr. Dan Ward's Presentation Suffering Caused by Personal and Structural Violence

Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, Fr. Dan Ward, OSB

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

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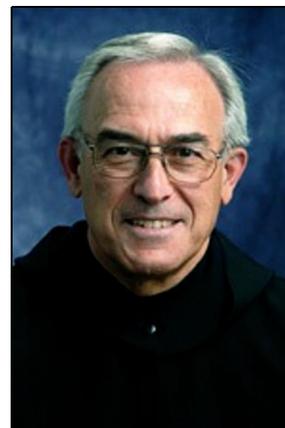
William Skudlarek: I had a sense during our first session this morning that a change was beginning to happen among us. We weren't so much teaching or preaching, but speaking to one another. And I think that that's probably an evolution that always has to happen when a group comes together for the first time—teaching as a way of identifying who we are and what tradition we represent. It is good to respect that, but then we need to move simply to speaking quite naturally and spontaneously out of that tradition that each of us has received to engage in real conversation with one another, a real sharing of not only our thoughts but our hearts. I think that's a good way in which to move.

To help us continue that conversation on the suffering caused by personal and structural violence, is Father Dan Ward. Dan Ward is a priest and monk of St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. His training is in both civil law and also in the Roman Catholic Church law, which we refer to as canon law. He taught for years in our university in Minnesota and in our School of Theology, teaching in the department of government or political science, and then in the School of Theology in the area of canon law. He is presently the executive director of the Legal Resource Center for Religious, which means that he is on call by communities of men and women religious in the Roman Catholic Church to offer legal advice, both in the civil area as well as in the area of church law.

Dan Ward: Sister Kathy Lyzotte yesterday said that being a treasurer

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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.

and a monastic has caused her great conflict. You can imagine what being a monastic and a lawyer does to a person. And if you got a chance to read my paper, you'll know that it's more anecdotal and commonplace than theoretical. Years ago, when I started teaching theology, William and I and another monk team-taught a course together. Another monk, Jerome, and William talked on the theoretical level, about what being a Christian and a Catholic was. Then a student asked a question, and they turned it over to me because the student wanted to know how much he didn't have to do and still be a Catholic.

This paper was written quite a long time before any of the present sexual abuse issues of the Roman Catholic Church arose. It was written more as anecdotal experiences of my work and my experience in my own life and with other people. The paper at least shed some light on the present issue, because the stories in the paper are different stories than today. The names have changed, but it doesn't seem the scenarios have changed. When we look at issues within society, we see them and they become multiplied. That's what it seems to me violence is. When violence is systemic, it just keeps multiplying and multiplying because of the institutions.

In the paper I cited three things that we learned from the Rule of Benedict that eventually helped leadership and me in our community to deal with some situations about twelve years ago. Benedict says to, "Listen with the ear of one's heart. If monastics commit a fault . . . they of their own accord should admit their fault and make satisfaction." And he says that we should "support with the greatest of patience one another's weaknesses of body and behavior." The paper discusses two aspects of this violence. The first is violence caused by structures or institutions and the second violence by ourselves to others. While they are separate issues, oftentimes it is the pain caused by the institution or its representative that ends up being held within the person.

Those of us who have lived in Benedictine Cistercian monastic communities know from our own experience or from our brother or sister monastics that people hold their hurts for a long time within themselves—whether it is what a superior has done to them, or they

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Fr. Dan Ward, OSB, is a monk and a priest of St. John's Abbey, Collegeville MN and a member of the MID board. He is currently director of the office of legal affairs for Catholic religious orders in the United States. He contributed to the second Gethsemani Encounter in 2002.

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didn't get the education or the right job. It never lifts from their heart. It's not unusual for that to be even within the monastic community. And that is caused by the structure of the institutions. It seems to me that we should begin by looking at structural violence caused by systems, organizations, institutions, and, yes, religious teachings. I believe we need to look at the world and our society. But, for the moment, what we need to do is look at our own institutions, structures, and teachings. We are the microcosm of society. As an old song in the Catholic Church goes, "Peace, let it begin with me." Since the issues of violence are systemic, we must begin with our own systemic problems in our institutions, structures, systems, and teachings.

As a good law professor, I don't have the answers. But what I do have is some questions. When I would teach in the law profession, I asked the questions of the students; because unless the answers started emerging from them, they were memorized answers that meant nothing. But it's difficult for us to do that because it's always easier, whether we are an individual or a system or institution, to talk about "out there." The hardest thing—and we see this in the Catholic Church today—is to talk about ourselves and our own problems and how we contribute to the issues of violence and suffering. So I'd ask you to look at these questions and not turn to saying "out there" or making some general statement, but to take the questions to heart and ask ourselves about ourselves, our monastery, our temple, our teachings, our system.

The first question about institutions I think differs a little from what was discussed this morning, when it was said that hatred is the basic issue in violence. Structurally speaking, it's probably patriarchy. My question is: How do patriarchal structures and their worldview dominate our institutions, systems, and teachings to the detriment of persons in all creation? These are structures of domination and control, systems of exclusion, practices of ownership of land and creatures and things, and divinizing teachings and structures are really time- and gender-based. My second question is: How much of our structures and systems and teachings alienate? For instance, these are systems or teachings that create barriers of righteousness and divisions, teachings or attitudes that cause competition or a need to appear better, more

correct, or have the better way or the better teaching. How have we felt this in our own discussions?

Other questions are: Has the monastic or religious institution, the system or teaching become more important than the people within and outside of them? Has the monastic or religious institution or system become more important than the journey of the seekers? Has the monastic or religious institution or system become so dominant and important as to destroy the harmony of creation? What need we change in our structures, systems, or teachings so that, as microcosms of our world, we are transforming institutions, who hold out not only a way but a hope and a reality to the rest of our world? I believe many of the issues facing the Catholic Church today are caused by a refusal to ask and seek answers to these and similar questions because the institution has become more important. Perhaps the same is with some of the various Buddhist traditions. I do not know.

To look for a brief minute at suffering caused by personal violence. This topic was addressed in the first full day when we discussed alienation, and it has continued. But I'm not sure that we've looked at the issue from the viewpoint of the harboring of pain within us; that when we harden our hearts, cover them with fear, we, too, contribute to our own pain and victimization. The monastery or the temple can be a place of either healing or hiding, and it's probably a little of both. I suspect when I first came to the monastery, it was more about hiding than healing. But it has been the teachings and the monastic way that have led to the journey of healing, and in my paper I talk about the ladder of nine steps. The braces of the ladder are prayer, silence, and reading. The wall that the ladder leans on is a guide or a soul friend. The ground on which the ladder stands is patient endurance.

Both of these components of suffering—that caused by the institution and that we cause ourselves—are important aspects for our discussion today. If I have to favor one, it is the first, because we are not only dialoguing with ourselves, but hoping as monasteries, societies, and temples to present something from this dialogue to the rest of the world. It is for us to openly and honestly ask the questions that I first asked about our institutions, our ways of life as communities, and as

places of spiritual guidance. This is one of the hardest dialogues, since it's so much easier to talk about "out there" than within. But it's so important to talk about this, for those who come to us to lift their own pain may never be able to do so if institutionally, structurally, and in our teachings we crush the bruised reed. Benedict's teaching in Chapter Two for the spiritual guide is that the spiritual guide for the seeker shall never crush the bruised reed.

Continued in **Fr. Dan Ward: Discussion (Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002)**

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