



# Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

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[Bulletins](#)
[News](#)
[Events](#)
[Glossary](#)
[Links](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[Support MID](#)
[Benedict's Dharma](#)
[Gethsemani I](#)
[Gethsemani II](#)
[Gethsemani III](#)
[Abhishiktananda Society Bulletins](#)

 [Help](#)

## Fr. Dan Ward: Discussion

### Suffering Caused by Personal and Structural Violence

Ven. Ajahn Amaro, Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron, Sr. Mary Collins, OSB, Sangeetha Ekambaram, Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, Paul Gailey, Fr. Donald Grabner, OSB, Henepole Gunaratana, Zenkei Blanche Hartman, Fr. Kevin Hunt, OCSO, Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO, Fr. Leo Lefebure, Eric Marcoux, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB, Geshe Sopa, Ajahn Sundara, Geshe Lobsang Tenzin, Fr. Dan Ward, OSB, Fr. James Wiseman, OSB

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

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Page 1 of 2

#### Dialogue after Fr. Dan Ward's Presentation

**James Wiseman:** Dan, you rightly said that monasteries can be places of healing or hiding and are probably a little of both. I think that you could perhaps help us answer Chodron's question from the first session this morning, in one respect, at least. I very much admired your own community, because when sexual abuse scandals hit St. John's about ten years ago your abbot and your community did not sweep it under the rug, but started an institute to help people deal with this abuse. Could you say a little bit about the work and how helpful and effective you have found it to be?

**Dan Ward:** It's called the Interfaith Sexual Trauma Institute (ISTI). It was a teaching institute to help people become aware. I think the major change that took place was when we got over the shame of the institution. So much of what holds us back in discussing this issue is because it is sexual abuse and not merely a scandal. It's a real thing that happens to real people. When you deal with it is when you can admit the shame, and not worry it's going to kill the institution. Because all institutions, it seems to me, including monasteries, are in

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**Ven. Ajahn Amaro** is a bhikku in the forest-tradition of Buddhism. He lives Abhayagiri Monastery in England. He took part in Gethsemani Encounter II. He is the author of *Silent Rain*.

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**Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron** received novice vows in 1977 and full ordination in 1986. A student of H. H. the Dalai

danger of making their only reason for existence to keep the institutions going. It was a gradual process of Abbot Jerome Tyson and myself meeting with victims and dealing with them and finally then saying, "We can no longer hide this," and informing the community.

I think probably the greatest event that happened was that we cancelled regular evening prayer and the monks met together in a room to have a prayer service over sexual abuse, and to have the persons who were known to be abusers ask forgiveness of the community, and the community to deal with the situation. At that time, persons who were not known to the community, and only to the abbot or myself, got up and were free enough to say, "I am also an abuser. I ask for forgiveness." That was important. The other important thing for the community was healing. We brought therapists in and had community discussions and said, "It is honest for people to be able to freely say how they feel in these situations."

The same thing was with the victims. In the scandal that hit our community, the lawyers were all talking about the settlement that was made, and the young man who had been abused all of a sudden just shouted out, "All my years of pain, and this is all it is, money?" From that point on, I always insisted when I went to a settlement conference that part of the settlement had to be the meeting of the victim and the abuser. The abuser had to be able to listen to the pain that was caused, because it has to be that we face our shame. We get over it. There has been progress we have made as a community and as an institution. But we still have to deal with it.

**William Skudlarek:** The Interfaith Sexual Trauma Institute (ISTI), will no longer exist as a separate organization, but its programs will be taken over by the School of Theology at St. John's.

**Leo Lefebure:** A few years ago, before the year 2000, Pope John Paul II challenged Catholics to prepare for the third millennium of Christian faith through a purification of memory, acknowledging that terrible things had been done by Catholics in the name of Christ and asking God's forgiveness so we could move forward. I think that challenge probably goes even deeper and broader than the Pope himself ever intended. On the one hand, there have been some dramatic signs of progress there, but I think we are also stuck. Probably the most

Lama, Tsenzhap Serkong Rinpoche, and Zopa Rinpoche, she has been resident teacher at Amitabha Buddhist Centre in Singapore and Dharma Friendship Foundation in Seattle. She is active in Jewish-Buddhist and Catholic-Buddhist dialogue, including the MID-sponsored Gethseman... [[Read full biography](#)]

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**Sr. Mary Collins, OSB,** is a liturgist and former prioress at Mt. Saint Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas.

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**Sangeetha Ekambaram** was a religious studies major at Emory University in Atlanta at the time of the 2002 Gethsemani Abbey.

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dramatic hopeful sign was when the Pope went to Jerusalem and put a prayer into the Western Wall, the most sacred site for Jews, asking forgiveness for the terrible sins of Catholics against Jews. That gesture went right to the very central moments and symbols of the Catholic tradition.

The crucifixion was for centuries used as a weapon to beat up Jews. Our own scriptures, as traditionally understood, feed right into this. The Gospel passion in Matthew and some of the language of Jesus in the Gospel of John is radically problematic. Part of this whole purification of memory goes right to the most central moment of our faith. There, ironically, we've been more willing to be honest to talk about our failings than we have about sexual abuse. In the linking of governance, authority, and teachings on sexuality and women in the church, in a certain sense we can't talk about it. The culture of dialogue that Felix noted the Pope has called for often means that it is easier for Catholics to talk to Buddhists about things, than it is for Catholics to talk internally about a whole nexus of issues. That's a tremendous tragedy.

**Ajahn Sundara:** From my experience, living in a mixed community, I feel there is a part missing from what you were talking about. The missing part we've had to discover in our own group is the whole realm of emotions and feelings, which I have said earlier is "messy." No one wants to enter into that realm because anyone who meditates knows that dealing with thoughts, bodily sensations, perceptions is not as difficult as dealing with emotions. Emotions are slow, confused, confusing, and bewildering and can linger for days. They really test our patience to its limit. We don't want to enter that experience.

Yet, to me, violence is the outcome of fear—fear of losing the five states or the five conditions that Father Thomas was talking about yesterday: losing control, losing power, losing affection from others, losing security, etc. It's easy to talk about these things; but when we come down to the actual pain of it, it's a very long process. In our community we have been through the pain of having to deal with the challenges of men and women living together, and the violence we can do to each other subconsciously or consciously, mostly without knowing it. We entered a period in our community when we had to meet endlessly, talking about ways of addressing those issues and coming to a place of understanding, acceptance and appreciation of each other's



**Zoketsu Norman Fischer** is a Soto Zen practitioner, teacher at the San Francisco Zen Center, and founder of The Everyday Zen Foundation. He took part in both Gethsemani Encounters and was a contributor to *Benedict's Dharma*.

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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

differences.

Men usually are reluctant to talk about feelings, and women start crying sometimes when they talk about feelings, which can irritate the men extremely. For some time we've had to go through this horrible process, seeing women becoming more emotional, men becoming more standoffish and not wanting to deal with their emotions, the women getting more upset, and the men getting more upset about the women getting upset! Finally, after about fifteen years, I feel that we have arrived at a point where we can say: vive la difference! But it is a "vive la difference" through freedom rather than through repression or denial. I think what is really at the heart of structural violence is our lack of interest in entering that difficult conversation of the heart and mind on the level of feelings and emotions, which is where the pain lies.

**Mary Collins:** We've been talking about the question of concealment in our institutions. I think that the context for the issues of sexual abuse in the Church is still not being dealt with at a significant level. That is to say, we are understanding and dealing with issues case by case. What I came to understand as I was working in Washington and working around a lot of people associated with the institution of Catholic University and the Catholic Bishops Conference and so on, is that there is a phenomenon that those of us who aren't part of it can recognize, and that is clerical culture. There is a subculture within the Catholic Church that is distinctive, and it carries a lot of unexamined assumptions and presuppositions. I'm not sure seminaries or monasteries are dealing with the bias and the burden that is on the rest of the Church. I'd be happy if anybody who participates in a clerical culture would like to speak to that, and anyone else who wants to speak to it, too.

For those of you who aren't part of the clerical culture, it has to do with an experience of exclusion of women and of women's sensibilities and sensitivities. I experienced it—since we are talking freely—in the summer of 1976. I was at St. John's Abbey. There was a growing awareness of women's concerns in liturgical language etc. and the women who were there wanted to get students and faculty into this conversation. What we got instead was a very childish retaliation in the form of the young man, who was one of the monks involved in leading

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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**Paul Gailey** is a physicist who works for the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

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**Fr. Donald Grabner, OSB,** is professor of theology at Conception Seminary College and a member of Conception Abbey, Conception, Missouri. He contributed to both Gethsemani Encounters.

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music, choosing all the hymns he could that spoke to men in the church. It was a kind of a refusal to hear, and a kind of power that says, "We are in charge here. We don't have to listen to you, and we don't have to attend to you."

That's a great burden on the Church. I think it plays itself out in what's happening right now in Boston. Cardinal Law has a group around him who are protecting him and simply saying, "We don't have to hear what the people have to say. We are who we are." What's happening right now in priestly formation in seminaries is an attempt to maintain the clerical culture. It's talked about in terms of maintaining priestly identity, but I think priestly identity becomes identified with clerical culture. It's very hierarchical. It is a system that is built on ascending to positions of power in a patronage system. If you are involved in association with the right people and do the right things the time will come when you receive more power in the institution. Those who choose not to participate—and there are certainly ordained priests who choose not to participate in that system—remain nobody in the system. There are bishops who have tried to block the clerical culture, and they become bishops of Small Town Nowhere and stay there the rest of their lives because they have not actually participated.

**William Skudlarek:** I think clerical culture is a culture of power, privilege, and exclusion, and it comes by virtue of being ordained and being male, being obedient, not questioning authority, doing what you are told, and not asking questions that you are told not to ask. De facto, one becomes a bishop in the Roman Catholic Church today by promising not to ask certain questions—regarding the ordination of women, for example.

**Donald Grabner:** I think I'm a cleric who largely agrees with Sister Mary Collins. At the Second Vatican Council, I think it was a Belgian cardinal who got up and said that the three major problems that the church was facing then, and apparently still is now, was triumphalism, juridicalism, and clericalism. It's been recognized that clericalism has its temptations, and that a lot of clerics are accepting those temptations. Perhaps the question of authority and the abuse of authority is something that is manifested particularly in these areas just mentioned—in the question of married priests, consultation, and centralization. All of these are characteristics in the church today that I



**Henepola Gunaratana (Bhante G.)** is president of the Bhavana Society and abbot of its monastery in West Virginia.

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**Zenkei Blanche Hartman** is the abbess of the San Francisco Zen Center.

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think include and are aggravated by clericalism. I don't think that in one sense that is the root question. It may be the question that needs immediately to be addressed. Perhaps in some way the happy outcome of what's going on today is the real questioning of the abuse of the clerical culture, how it is to be reassessed, and a genuine reformation hopefully within the confines of the church today will be carried out. I think it's a major for the church.

**Ajahn Amaro:** I would like to make it clear that the Buddhist world is not exempt from very similar problems. I particularly would like to ask Venerable Chodron to speak about the monastic foundation that she and Ajahn Santikaro are establishing in Missouri, because the full ordination for women in the Buddhist monastic orders is a major issue these days. Like many of the priests here, perhaps, I didn't actually become a monk in order to subjugate women. I wandered into a monastery in Thailand and thought, "Hey, this is okay," and discovered what the institution embodied over decades. Venerable Chodron's experiment is a great example of how some very significant and thoughtful changes can be introduced.

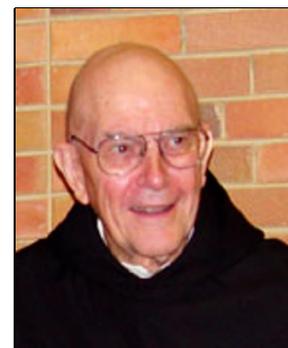
**Thubten Chodron:** I wasn't planning on talking about this, but the subject of higher ordination in Buddhism is a very thorny one. There are various levels of ordination. There is novice ordination. There is full ordination. To become fully ordained as a women, one needs, technically speaking, to be ordained by a group of fully ordained women and fully ordained men. Although there have been certain provisions made in the vinaya—our monastic discipline—where the men can ordain the woman, it's very important that the lineage of ordination be traced back to the Buddha. The lineage of full ordination did not spread to Tibet or Thailand for women. It spread to Sri Lanka, but it was wiped out during a war. It did spread to Korea and Vietnam and China. With more contact nowadays between Buddhist traditions, some of the women in the traditions where the full ordination doesn't exist are arguing that there is the possibility for full ordination. But it's creating a lot of waves in the system.

The doubts are always phrased in terms of doctrine, that we have to make sure that the lineage can be traced back to the time of the Buddha. With all due respect to Tibetan monks, they say that their monks' lineage can be traced back to the time of the Buddha, but



**Fr. Kevin Hunt, OCSO**, is a former member of the MID board, a monk of St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, and a Zen teacher (sensei).

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**Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO**, has written many books on contemplative prayer, especially *Centering Prayer*, which he is credited with popularizing in the United States. Among these are *Open Mind, Open Heart, The Mystery of Christ*, and *Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit*. He lives at St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, and

question whether the Chinese lineage for nuns' full ordination can be traced back to the Buddha's time. This offends the Chinese because they feel, of course, that they can be. Then there are the different vinaya schools: and the debate is phrased in terms of whether the women's ordaining sangha can be of one school and the men's ordaining sangha of another. In other words, the whole discussion stays on the level of trying to make it all kosher. (I grew up Jewish!)

People are afraid to look at the underlying things that are going on. In the Tibetan tradition, full ordination for women would mean taking something from Chinese Buddhism. With the situation between Tibet and China, I think that's something that the Tibetans don't want to do, but it's hard to bring that to the surface. I'm sure that some people would say that that wasn't the real issue, but I think it plays a part in it. Another issue is that if women were fully ordained, they might get a reasonable amount of offerings to sustain themselves, which might mean that the monks wouldn't get as many. Currently, nuns are not abbesses of their own nunneries. There is a monk who is the abbot of the nunnery, and it's a very low status position in the Tibetan community (which I'm speaking about mostly here).

If women became fully ordained, they would take charge of their own nunneries and train their own nuns and become a little bit more independent. For an exiled culture, this might rock things a little bit, where people are trying to keep the culture together because they are in exile.

So there are all kinds of issues coming up, which are not addressed, because in the structure of Buddhism we are taught—and I think it's similar in Catholicism—to respect our elders and teachers. We are not taught explicitly, "Do not ask these questions." But as you are trained, you learn what questions you are not supposed to ask. You learn them very clearly because when you start to ask them, you get certain looks or responses. I'd like to pass the microphone to Ajahn Sundara, because it exists in her Buddhist tradition, and have her speak to this and then maybe hear some of the Catholic sisters as well.

**Ajahn Sundara:** The nuns of the Theravada tradition are in the same situation as the Tibetan nuns. We do not have the higher ordination of Bhikkhuni. The Bhikkhuni order died some 1100 years ago. At present,

serves as an advisor to ...  
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OCSO**



**Fr. Leo Lefebure** is the Matteo Ricci, SJ, Professor of Theology at Georgetown University. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies and also of the new Center for Religious Understanding, Acceptance, and Tolerance. He serves as an advisor to the Board of Directors of MID and participated in the first two Gethsemani Encounters.

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**Eric Marcoux** is affiliated with the Dharma Rain Zen Center in Portland, Oregon.

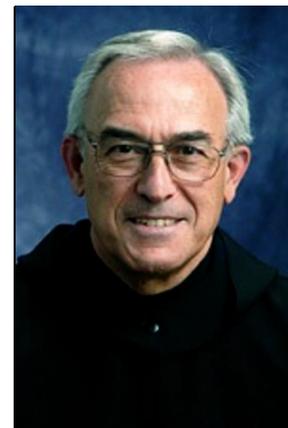
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there is an interest in reviving this order. In fact, one of our senior monks has already written several articles on this matter, asking why there are so many obstacles to reviving this order. He has suggested that it might not be so difficult to start it again. At one of our last meetings of senior monks and nuns in England, this topic was touched on again. There is a definitely a growing wish to see it come back.

As Thubten Chodron mentioned, the institution makes it quite difficult to get things started. In our tradition, I feel it is very important that if we were to establish again such a momentous thing as the Bhikkhuni order, it should be with blessings, rather than curses and struggles. And the blessings, of course, have to come from the Elders of the Bhikkhu Sangha. So it's a Catch 22 situation. The nuns in the meantime have to look friendly, patient and not mind other people thinking you are submissive. Yet things are moving and changing below the surface. As for myself and, I think, for other nuns in our community, there is not a burning desire to revive this tradition. Even though we all think that on the conventional level, it would be an important step, there is much more of an interest in liberating the heart. That's really the forefront of our life—the actual liberation of one's heart. That's more important than anything else.

However, the conventional reality is also extremely important as we live in a society that is run by institutions, conventions, rules and laws, and so on. That is also an aspect that in our community has perhaps overlooked at times. Because of a great emphasis on the ultimate goal of the path of liberation, the world of conventional reality can easily seem unimportant. Nonetheless, we have come to bow down to the fact that conventional reality is actually a very essential aspect of our life, and the evolution of this order in the West is very much dependent on changes being carried through.

**Thomas Keating:** It was Sister Mary Collins, if I'm not mistaken, who invited monks to respond to her observations, which I thought were very good. There is something severely lacking in Catholic monasteries. Having been an abbot myself for twenty-three years or so, I know my own deficiencies here. There seems to be an excessive dependency on the divine office and ritual. Now, this is certainly a path to perfection, but it seems to me it takes an awfully long time. What is missing is a practice such as is offered in the Eastern traditions. At least in my



**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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OSB**

**Geshe Sopa** is one of the few Tibetan scholars to hold a regular position at a Western institution of higher learning: at the University of Wisconsin. He founded the Deer Park Buddhist Center in 1979.

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observation or experience, without a practice, it doesn't do you much good to enter a monastery. The structure is not a sufficient discipline. It's a framework. But in addition, the framework needs a practice. St. Benedict suggested *lectio divina*, but he doesn't offer much in the way of a method of practicing it.

I mention this in the course of discussing violence because without the awareness of our own unconscious motivation, the monastic life, as has been amply hinted at in the recent discussion, has all the worldliness—with a somewhat more devout front—that you find in business or other places. In other words, if you spent your life drinking people under the table, you would have the same disposition in a monastery, only now you fast people under the table. But nothing has changed. The false self has simply changed its address, perhaps its uniform and its hairdo, and a few other minor things. The external observances don't correct this. I think that one of the blights on monasticism has been the clericalism that has justified maintaining a culture that nobody is going to want to join in the near future. We now see an enormous lack of vocations.

In the wonderful talk that Dan Ward gave, I noticed he mentioned patriarchy as one of the chief problems of our sources of violence, and we've heard ample development of that here. Monasteries are in great danger of going out of business in the Christian tradition unless they do something serious about furthering the formation of the young. I've heard Cistercian young people say they come into a monastery but they don't know what to do. There is no practice, no conceptual background, such as for their practice. Chanting the office doesn't do it. I imagine the same problem may occur with nuns. But these are issues, it seems to me, that need to be openly discussed. Spirituality and sexuality are probably the two most important subjects to discuss in a novitiate or in a seminary, and until very recently neither has been discussed. Mundelein, as far as I know, is the only seminary that is even trying to do it. It will take ten years to know whether they've made any progress.

**Mary Margaret Funk:** Speaking personally of when I was prioress and even now, Dan has been probably our most helpful cleric to help us in the clerical world through structures. I'd like to remind us of three things. One is, structures are just us. It's you and me and how we fit



**Ajahn Sundara** is a Theravada Buddhist nun who was ordained in England in 1979 in the Thai Forest Tradition of Ajan Chah. She was a participant in Gethsemani Encounter II in 2002.

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Ajahn Sundara**

**Geshe Lobsang Tenzin** holds a Geshe Lharam degree from Drepung Loseling Monastery in India, and a Ph.D. from Emory University in the U.S. He is the founder and director of Drepung Loseling Institute.

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together for functional ways. It's not some force out there. Structures are just configurations of people, and people change and structures change. So it's really possible. I'd like to speak for a positive attitude toward this moment, because if there is anything really great about this, it's that the clerical culture is being called. You know, Mary [Collins], when is the last time somebody asked you, "What is it," and you got to say? So I think it's a very hopeful moment, and we are learning more about sexual misconduct and sexual disorders and more of our own thoughts.

The second thing I want to raise is in the Christian or Catholic experience. I've been on the board of St. Meinrad for fourteen years. I have one more board meeting and I'm going to tell you what I'm going to tell them. St. Meinrad is another large seminary in this area, and I pain with them. They are my brothers, and I've listened, and this is a very difficult area, to all the forces at work in training seminarians in this clerical culture, this church culture, and this world culture. From that experience, I would say that we need to relink holiness with formation and ordination. It really is more than functional training, and it is more than just absence of problems or addictions or counseling or whatever. The area of formation is this liberation of heart. We need more of what you have in the Buddhist tradition, and we need ways in which we are heard. Spiritual direction would be an ongoing dealing with thoughts, feelings, passions, and a really sustained culture of dialogue of our thoughts, feelings, and passions as a whole monastery or abbey and as an individual. Finally, I would just say again that I feel very positive about that. I think the monastic practices are being heard for the first time.

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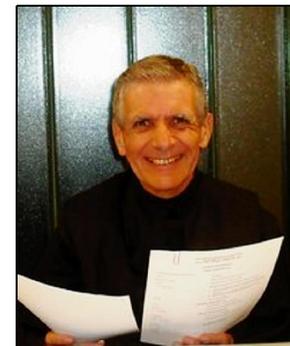
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**Fr. Dan Ward, OSB**, is a monk and a priest of St. John's Abbey, Collegeville MN and a member of the MID board. He is currently director of the office of legal affairs for Catholic religious orders in the United States. He contributed to the second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

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**Fr. James Wiseman, OSB**, is a monk of Saint Anselm's Abbey in Washington, DC, and teaches theology at the Abbey School and at Catholic University. He served as Chair of the Board and President of MID, has been editor of

the MID bulletin since 1998, and again serves as a member of the Board of Directors of MID.

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