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- [Bulletins](#)
- [News](#)
- [Events](#)
- [Glossary](#)
- [Links](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Support MID](#)
- [Benedict's Dharma](#)
- [Gethsemani I](#)
- [Gethsemani II](#)
- [Gethsemani III](#)
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Sr. Mary Collins's Presentation Suffering Caused by Personal and Structural Violence

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

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Mary Margaret Funk: It's my pleasure to introduce to talk on our theme of suffering caused by personal and structural violence Sister Mary Collins, a Benedictine from Atchison, Kansas. She has a distinguished background as a professor of liturgy. She was my teacher at Catholic University. The reason why we asked her to speak to us on this topic is she that she has a view of the church and monastics being a structure. Her community is a large one, and it's an old and established one. It is very prominent in our history. She has a sense of suffering by virtue of gathering everyone's sensibilities and being in liturgy, ritualizing real life events.

Mary Collins: My viewpoint as I enter this dialogue is to think of myself as participating in the dialogue of experience. So much of my method is empirical. I drew data depending on the empirical observations that I made about my own community and its dealing with suffering and transformation. My premise is that community living itself can be what we have been hearing our Buddhist friends talk about as a skillful means. Let me say something about my community. We are a community of wage-earners—that is to say, we live by our own labor, and that means we are very busy women, although we live in monastic community. My community was formed from a community in Bavaria. The sisters first came to the United States in 1853 to Pennsylvania, and moved to Kansas within ten years. The community in Bavaria had been suppressed at the beginning of the century, and in about 1840 the community was allowed to take novices again, provided that—and this was a decision of the Bavarian government—they do

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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

something useful. That something useful turned out to be teaching.

For all these many years, the community in Bavaria still runs the school, and our own sisters have been in education in a variety of ways for some 139 years. Because of the busyness of the schedule, the rigors of the frontier life, and the challenges of living with a growing community, I would have to say that my community suffered a certain kind of violence of deprivation. We were really deprived of or had very diminished opportunities for what we might think of as typical monastic practice. We took very seriously St. Benedict's saying that he wrote a Rule for beginners; and that if we followed this Rule it would be good for us. The advanced could read Cassian and the Conferences of other fathers. My community didn't read Cassian until thirty or forty years ago, because there was not even a copy of Cassian in the house.

Schoolteachers were doing other things—correcting papers and so on. I would like to suggest, nevertheless, that the wisdom of the Benedictine tradition is alive in the community and embodied in the life of the community. I've entitled my reflection, therefore, "Learning Obedience and Finding Salvation from Personal Suffering."

One of the great paradoxes of Benedictine living is that community living does not protect monastics from the suffering humans cause themselves and one another. In my community, I've used as an image with newcomers to the community, who are smarting from the conflicts that appear in human interaction, that we need to think of ourselves as thrown together in the tumbler of community, where we bump into one another repeatedly, and begin to break through one another's defenses and reach into the concealed places of our hearts. Our monasteries, despite our idealism, aspirations, and our rhetoric about peace and harmony, are not really completely violence-free zones.

Let me tell a story. We have a young community member, who recently was given encouragement to enter an essay contest on theology. She submitted her entry, and then in the appropriate time, a month or so after it was submitted, she learned that she had won first prize in the theological reflection essay. We were delighted, and so everyone in the community wanted to see a copy of her essay. It was posted on the bulletin board, and a group of sisters decided they would have a little

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party for her to celebrate and so on. I ran into her in the midst of this, and she was actually despondent. I said to her, "What's wrong?" Her response was, "Well, this was mine. This is something I did, and now you've all taken it away from me." Clearly, here was a kind of violent interaction that nobody intended, but she felt bereft, and she felt that somehow she had been invaded by the community's response to her work. What is important in thinking about this is to recognize that while a good part of the tradition of monastic living is mediated through texts and teachings, it is a fact that in communities it can also be transmitted through the living when the texts are not available or are not known—if there is an internalization of the life in the community.

Let me talk about my community and the way I see this operating. I'll give you an example. Meg Funk made a comment about the reality that the jewels of the Benedictine Rule in terms of our practice involved the chapters of the Rule on humility, silence, and obedience. Now, if I had said to my community that to be authentic Benedictines we have to focus on humility, obedience, and silence, there would be great resistance. My community doesn't like silence a whole lot, particularly when it feels it's imposed on them. They don't like obedience a whole lot when they feel it's imposed on them. And they probably scratch their heads at humility, because they understand themselves to be talented. The difficulty lies I think in that, in an earlier period, the way these jewels were presented to the community were distortions of the tradition. So the community has to enter through another path into the wisdom of the Rule. I think it is possible to enter the Rule by many different paths and to come to the same monastic reality.

Given the resistance to classical presentations of the Rule, the community has found its own way. While we have entered into the tumbler of community life, and find ourselves being polished but also abraded by the interactions among us, the community, through this interaction and the suffering we cause one another, has found their way through the suffering through genuine ability to reach out to others in love. There is a passage in Chapter 4 of the Rule of Benedict in which Benedict talks about never turning away from someone who needs your love. This is in fact the practice that is most prominent in my community. We may be the source of suffering to one another, but

I think it is also the case that the ultimate meaning of the Rule, which is the meaning of love, is what is mediated and carried forward.

There is a memory I have in my community of an elderly woman who came to a community meeting. She was in her nineties. She had never spoken to the community at any chapter, much less go to a microphone. She was an elderly woman, German-born, and still with a heavy German accent. We were trying to decide what we were going to do about something, and there was some contention in the voices and the interaction of ideas and so on. Surprisingly, she got up and worked her way to the microphone, looked out at the community, and said to us, "Sisters, God loves us. That is the reality." That was the truth of her life and the truth of the community's life. It was interesting because it shifted the discussion to a whole different tone. Now, Benedict, in his chapter on humility, his Chapter 7, when he talks about the fourth step of humility, observes that the monastic who is growing in humility is able to endure the difficulties that come from having to live under unfavorable or even unjust conditions. He says that the one who develops a monastic heart is able quietly to embrace that suffering, even enduring it without weakening or seeking escape.

This sounds almost magical, but I would like to insist that the theology underlying this, and the theology I see embodied in the community, is the awareness that the pain and suffering we see in one another—whether it's suffering we bring on ourselves by our own negativity, that we cause one another, or suffering a sister undergoes because she has been part of a very difficult situation perhaps before she ever came to community—are recognized, and the sisters in fact do go out to one another. They reach out, extend themselves. The mystery that operates the community, and I believe it is a mystery and a grace, is the mystery of embodiment. The sisters themselves, having internalized the mystery of Christ's suffering and compassion, find themselves going directly out to one another when there is pain. Because we are a large community, there is always someone whose spiritual maturity is such that she has the wisdom to reach out in that direction.

If we ask, How does a monastic community that finds itself interacting

in difficult ways and causing one another suffering find hope for relief from suffering, the answer may lie in Benedict's assurance to us of Christ's love, and Benedict's charge: "Never turn away when someone needs your love." It is my experience in community that it is very often those who are least among us—and we may identify them as those who are not prominent leaders in the community, those who are perhaps not even the best educated of the community, but women whose egos are small but their compassion great—who are able to reach out and make the gesture of unconditional love, no matter what the suffering is, whether the person brought it on herself, whether it is from something that has preceded her.

The experience, I think, is the experience that it is possible by suffering with and interacting in community, and that shows a way toward transformation, salvation, and healing.

Continued in **Sr. Mary Collins: Discussion (Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002)**

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