



Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

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Fr. Donald Grabner: Discussion Suffering Caused by Sickness and Aging

Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, Joseph Goldstein, Fr. Donald Grabner, OSB, Gray Henry, Rev. Heng Sure, Ph.D., Fr. Julian von Duerbeck, OSB, Fr. Joseph Wong, OSB Cam

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

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Dialogue after Donald Grabner's Presentation

Julian von Duerbeck: Donald, I was so happy to hear you quote from Philippians, because when we go back to the time of the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1993, when we first thought of having Gethsemani Encounters, the topic was kenosis and sunyata, a point of contact in our traditions. To me this has come full circle. Our community has a couple of practices that came to mind as you were talking. One is that on the eve of someone dying, their life story is read in the refectory—all the humorous and sorrowful things, their successes and aspects of their lives. Their joys and sufferings are never forgotten in the community; it's part of the unity that gives encouragement to others. At the time of All Souls, we all go to the cemetery, and everyone's name is chanted who is buried there. As St. Aelred of Rievaulx speaks about someone who has passed on in the community, he'll say, "The memory of that person, their merry voice, their joyful continence, their words of inspiration are always with me." That I think is the acting out of that paschal mystery. We are continually dying and rising and seeing that in the lives of confreres and sisters.

Joseph Goldstein: As I was listening, I was wondering whether the aim of the contemplative practice in Christianity is the embodiment of the paschal mystery and/or is the experience of the mysterium tremendum?

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- [Fr. Donald Grabner's Presentation \(Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002\)](#)
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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 . . .*

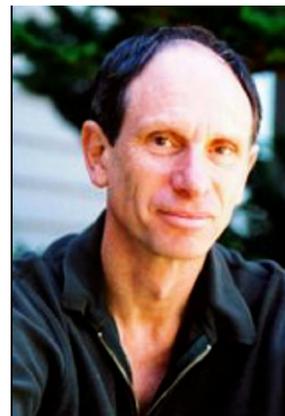
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Donald Grabner: I would say it's both. This is the way I think we Christians articulate the *mysterium tremendum*. We put the spin of redemption on it—the salvation history. But I think it's the *mysterium tremendum* as we perceive it.

Mary Margaret Funk: At the break, several people asked if I would tell my story of Bolivia. I will do that, briefly, with your permission. It does embody this *tremendum*. I went to Bolivia in 1984, after I had failed my comprehensives at Catholic University and I was trying to figure out what to do. I went to visit a good sister friend of mine, Sister Gilchrist, who I had worked with in the education office for about nine or ten years. We were traveling to a town up in the Andes Mountains and there was a flash flood. In our Jeep was a driver, a priest, myself in the middle, and Sister Gilchrist. In the back, there were two other nuns and a little boy, Juanito, whom they had adopted. It started raining, and we started getting stuck. Then we got stuck really good, and the priest got out and left. As we were sitting there, I could see the water rising. I said to everybody that it would be a good idea to get out of the Jeep.

I went out the open door, but couldn't reach dry land. I climbed on top of the Jeep and tried to reach in. The little boy, Juanito, was deaf and dumb and retarded. I heard the nuns in the car saying: "I'll take Juanito." "No, I'll take Juanito." I screamed, "I'll take Juanito." I had a flashlight in my hand. The Jeep was rocking back and forth. There I was standing on the Jeep and we began sailing down the stream. The rocking became so bad that I jumped, thinking they would be okay. I thought I would be crushed by the Jeep when it turned over. I thought I would go down, because we weren't in a stream yet. It was just an acequia or a little tributary. I went down, but soon came back up and looked around and found myself in a terrible, rushing water stream. I grabbed a branch, which almost yanked off my arm. I crashed into one of the trees at the side of the stream, and lost consciousness.

When I came to again, I saw stars, and found myself sailing down a river on my back. "I've got to think," I said to myself. I submerged myself and started thinking. I was down there for a while, roiling in the rapids. I ended up in some pampas grass, which twirled me over and over, down and down until I fell over a waterfall into a huge river, the Rio Roche. I looked around and saw huge mountains—perhaps ten



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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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thousand feet—all around me. It was night, and raining and cold. The river increased in strength and depth. I decided to go back down beneath the river again, because I needed to think. I needed to be present. Once submerged again, I arrived at perfect, absolute stillness, and, literally died. I can't quite reconstruct it all, but I was down there a very long time. It was very still and very quiet.

I got to this place where there was a big, soft, white light, like a tunnel but with nothing dark on the edges. It was an inviting shaft of light—so soft, so still, so beautiful, and so present. And the question when it came was free and an invitation: "Now? Now? Now?" I knew then that it was a free question and it would have been okay to have answered either way. There was no fear and no discernment, either. But, just as Julian von Duerbeck was saying, in those moments you think about the people you care about, and I thought, "Oh, they are not going to like this." So I kicked up and up through what turned out to be a hundred feet of water, and there I was, on a vast expanse of river, with islands dotted in the middle. I angled myself over to the islands, and climbed off and on a few. I was out there five hours.

I finally ran out of any ability to walk. I sat down and insects began to eat my skin and blood. I became irritated and expressed my anger. I thought this it was bad enough not to feel good, but to have them eating me alive was insulting! I kept hitting them, and every once in a while I put some mud on. Then the insects really did me a service because vultures started circling overhead. I connected with those insects: "Ah, they want me." So I covered myself entirely with mud, which again saved my life because of the danger of hypothermia. I was finally brought to safety by three Bolivian men, who jumped in the water and came over to me. I was totally waiting to die. I had said all the psalms, I had forgiven everybody, and I was as pure as an angel. Two rose out of the water, and we embraced with total humanness. I can't tell you the feeling of that skin. It was just wonderful.

One man kept wanting to know who I was as he unpacked the mud. They weren't even speaking Spanish. It was Aymara or Quechua. All of a sudden we knew we had to jump back in the water and go across, and so we did. We tried to keep together, and we lost one of them once, and we went and got him. The three of us were linked together, crossing the river. When we reached the bank, Bolivian women lifted

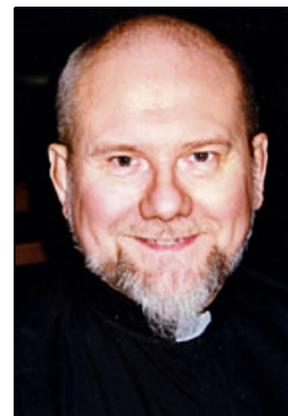
Gray Henry is founder and trustee of the Islamic Texts Society and former director of Quinta Essentia Publications. She currently directs Fons Vitae Press and is a consulting editor for Parabola.

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me out of the water, took all my clothes off, and clothed me with Bolivian clothes. It was a baptism, really—full of light and innocence. They carried me back to where the truck had been. Of course, they were all dead. We pulled them from the Jeep and put them in the truck we were driving and took them to the nearest town.

I was very sick. The priest who was present asked the doctor who was there, "Is she going to live?" Well, I was the only living one there, because the others were all laying out dead. And the doctor said, "No, she isn't going to make it." That was insulting and debilitating and annoyed me. However, when I experienced that I wasn't going to live, I got out of my sleeping bag, and got up. A friend of mine asked me to bring down to Bolivia some bourbon and Manhattan mix, and a Maryknoll nun who was kind of the medical person, and I sat up—my friend Sister Gilbert laid out on the table—and had Manhattans and said the psalms. Believe me, those Manhattans didn't even touch me. And the sun rose.

That experience was the birth of needing practice. I had such a radical immersion, a crossing over. For my thick karma, I had to experience it physically; so that when I saw light or anything, I was too awake, too awake. I was far too vulnerable for everything, every bad thought. That's where my book *Thoughts Matter* comes in. I knew I needed practice, and I saw in the Christian tradition that I couldn't find somebody to help me practice with my thoughts. Nobody could help me on the inside with healing in the way that a deep practice would.

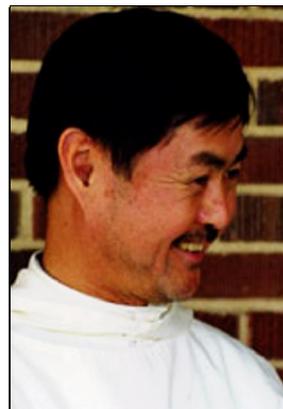
Heng Sure: What happened to Juanito, the child?

Mary Margaret Funk: Juanito died. You could tell by the way her arm was broken which nun had got hold of him. He had a beautiful funeral. It was high up in the Andes. There were, as far as my eyes could see, little children lined up at his funeral. So he died, and he is, as he was, a little saint.

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