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## Fr. Leo LeFebure's Reflection

Fr. Leo Lefebure, Fr. William Skudlarek, OSB

from **Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002**

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**Leo Lefebure:** If we asked what happened this week, I agree with Norman Fischer completely—the most important development has been the deepening and forming of friendships. Relationships that existed before have become deeper; people who didn't know each other have come into relationships. A sangha has arisen, a community has been shaped.

What the New Testament calls koinonia, communion, holding things in common, has occurred. We've eaten and drunk together. We've laughed and protested and mourned together. We've pondered and probed and chanted together. We've become neighbors and friends. We heard from Bhante G. that beautiful term "unconditional friendship," coming from the heart of the Buddhist tradition. Julian reminded us that one of the early great Cistercian writers, Aelred of Rievaulx, wrote on friendship, and even said the very strong term, "Deus amicitia est. 'God is friendship.'" He wrote, "Christ is the third between two friends." So, in a very literal sense when Christians encounter Buddhists as friends, we encounter God and Christ. The Buddhist tradition teaches us that we are all intimately interconnected. There is no north or south, east or west in the Buddha nature. It's not a monopoly of Buddhists. The Letter to the Colossians in the New Testament tells us that all things hold together in Christ; that Christ has reconciled all things, whether in heaven and on earth. That gift of reconciliation is not a monopoly of Christians.

From our different paths, I think we have realized the teachings this week in a twofold sense; the first becoming conscious of them in a new

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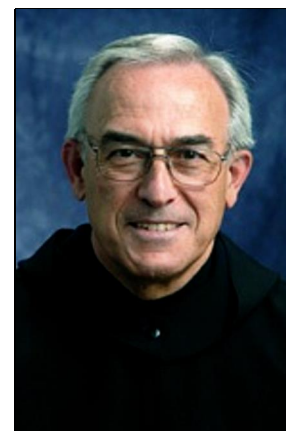
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way, and the second in making them real, of realizing how deep the connections between us are. These relationships may well be the most important contribution of this encounter, and I agree completely with Norman on the power of friendship. Just think for a moment of the power of the friendship between two men formed some thirty-five years ago—Thomas Merton and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. That encounter has shaped the lives of every one of us here. If properly nurtured and fostered, these relationships can help shape the broader community of religions that our country and world so desperately need.

I'd like to start by reflecting a bit on the Catholic side of this encounter. Catholic monastics encounter Buddhist monastics at a time of both profound spiritual renewal and also deep questioning, even crisis. The future of Catholic religious life and Catholic monastic life is very much in question. Sister Margaret Michaud told us the mean age of her community was seventy-one. But the middle of the 20th Century saw profound renewal of Catholic monastic life and profound contributions by monastics to the broader renewal—especially in the liturgical life of the Catholic Church, and the knowledge of the scriptures and the early Church fathers of monastic history. Much of the drive in the renewal was to cut through the encrustations of the centuries, to get back to the original impulses, to hear the words of the Gospel and the other Biblical writers, and to understand the original impulse of the desert monks, the early monastic leaders.

The motto of Bernard of Clairvaux, one of the great Cistercian teachers, was *credo ut experiat*, "I believe in order to experience." That at its core was not different from the program of the great Benedictine theologian, Anselm: "I believe so that I may understand." For both, the whole point of all the outward forms—the thoughts and practices of Catholic monastic life—was to taste and see the goodness of the Lord, to experience in our own lives the meaning of the Gospel. It's precisely in light of this concern that the contact with Buddhists can be so powerful. At times the Catholic Church and the Catholic monastic community risk getting stuck. Certain impulses seem to play themselves out over time, and the outward forms become rigid and hardened. It's a danger for any institution and any tradition. In this context, the teaching of the vipassana teachers—"acknowledge,

#### Fr. Leo Lefebure



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acknowledge, acknowledge"—and the challenge of Zen teachers —"experience this in your own mind"—often came as a breath of fresh air. I think for Merton, precisely his frustrations with his own Church and his own monastic community were part of the impulse in reaching out to others and then a renewed sense of appreciation for his own.

There are so many gifts that the Buddhist tradition offers to Catholics. For myself, and I know for many others, the practice of Buddhist meditation has been a profound blessing in our lives. We heard most movingly from Mary Margaret Funk how, after going through life and death, she needed to explore practice in a new way. The practices, the poetry, the art, the calligraphy, the narratives, and the rock gardens of Buddhism come as so many gifts to Catholic monastics and the broader Catholic community. One of the gifts is the questions that Buddhists ask. This is one of the most helpful things in these types of exchanges—when someone doesn't take things for granted that I think are obvious. Like Judith Simmer-Brown's question on love. Doesn't love often mean attachment and end up being unhealthy? This pushes us Catholics back to look at our whole tradition: What do we mean by the word, "love?" What do we mean by the word, "God?" The best of our traditions knows God is not a supreme being "out there." God is variously named as the active, to be, a verb, in which all of us are. Or sometimes God is nonbeing. But in light of the challenge from Buddhists, we can come to a fresh sense of our own tradition.

One of the thoughts that struck me was after we were talking about the cry of Jesus from the cross—"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me"—was that we could take the logic of the prajnaparamita sutras, which is radically negating. A bodhisattva is not a bodhisattva; therefore, there is a bodhisattva. And straight out of the Gospel of Mark, we could frame the development: "The son of God dies abandoned by God; therefore, he is truly the son of God." As a type of Christian koan, it prods us beyond linear sequential thought; not for some type of intellectual resolution, but to sit with it, be present to it, and allow it to transform our consciousness. This to me is a great gift from the Buddhist side.

As Felix Machado has reminded us, Christians believe God created us

and the whole universe. Often, Buddhists reject the notion of creation and don't use the term, "God," which I think doesn't end the conversation. It poses a question for us Christians to probe more deeply. What do we mean by this unique mysterious relationship we name creation? After all, Thomas Aquinas himself warns us that if we understand creation on any model of inner worldly causality, we get it wrong. It is not something we understand.

One of the most exciting things for me is the to and fro, the attempt to enter into the mind of another tradition and its perspectives, as well as the effort to see our own tradition in a new light. There is wonderful precedent in the earlier monastic tradition for this. When monks from the church of the East arrived in China in 643, they were welcomed by the Chinese emperor. Sometime later, the emperor even built a Christian monastery near one of the main Daoist monasteries of the time. Together, they probed deeply into Buddhist and Daoist images, and wrote a series of works—the Jesus sutras they are called—that tried to present the teaching of Jesus in a way that would make contact with the deepest impulses of Buddhism and Daoism. In one of the sutras they described how the Messiah, surrounded by the arhats, looked down on the world, saw it suffering, was filled with compassion, and came down and began to teach. They take up the dialogues of Jesus in the Gospels with the Pharisees. In the Gospels, the Pharisees often represent a type of religious leadership that's gone rigid and hard, and the Jesus Sutras present Jesus' teaching in light of the logic of the Mahayana, in light of the Daoist teaching of wu wei, nonaction, beyond the alternative of acting or not acting, and have Jesus teach "no piety."

This to and fro movement is one of the most important gifts that monastics can bring to this world. One of the things we learn is that our boundaries are not impermeable and solid. We have never been isolated from other religions. From early Israel through early Christianity, through the whole history, our tradition has been a critical dialogue—rejecting aspects of other religions, but also taking aspects of other religions into the deepest images, symbols, and beliefs of Judaism and Christianity. On behalf of all the Catholic participants, I'd like to thank our Buddhist friends for the countless ways that you have

enriched our lives and helped us to understand not only your tradition but our own in new ways as well.

When I look at the Buddhist participation in this encounter, I see a sampling of the rich diversity of Buddhism in America, a new inculturation of Buddhism in a fresh culture. We know that throughout its history, when Buddhism has moved into new cultures, it has often been very creative, innovative, and bold in taking on new forms, in adapting to new circumstances, and in drawing upon the resources of the culture already there. In this gathering we welcome the presence of venerable Asian teachers, many of whom have lived in this country for decades and have come to know American culture very well and have learned how to present the Dharma to American students. I also hear an increasingly mature Euro-American Buddhist voice emerging in these discussions, transcending the traditional distinctions within the Buddhist tradition and finding, in a sense, an identity of its own, deeply respectful of the Asian forms of Buddhism, but also sinking deep roots in American culture. I think there is something of great importance going on here.

Often, I hear a willingness to look at traditional Buddhist teachings in a new light in relation to Judaism and Christianity, at times even a playfulness in experimenting with terminology and an openness to comparisons. Often, Euro-American Buddhists bring a distinct relationship to Judaism or Christianity to this encounter, which I think is a positive resource we have not yet fully exploited. This may be one point to explore in future dialogues. What happens when Jews or Christians become Buddhists, or when people from a traditional Jewish or Christian culture become Buddhists? A few years ago Robert Aitken Roshi told me that he is still a Christian. He has written this in print. He told me that when he was young, he attended Protestant churches and was so bored out of his mind he thought nothing ever stuck. He thought it made no difference. Years later, decades later, as he as a Zen teacher was guiding his students, he found the stories and images of Jesus and other passages within the Bible rising up within him and shaping the way he gave guidance to his own Zen students. He mentioned that his own interest in social justice came in part from his Christian background. In our own midst, Norman Fischer's fresh

translation and interpretations of the psalms are splendid examples of interpenetration. What happens when a Zen teacher from a Jewish background who has an intimate relationship with another Jew, Jesus, turns to the psalms? His translation of the word we usually take as "sin" as "heedlessness" is for me like a pebble thrown in the water. It starts a ripple effect.

Meg had asked me to talk about the monastic challenge and the contribution for the future. I'd like to begin by saying that I think it's an impossible situation. You know better than I the many challenges. To try to present a life based on poverty, chastity, obedience, humility, and silence, to our culture? It's completely impossible. If we broaden our spectrum, I think we find that the world itself is in an impossible situation, as Stephanie has reminded us. The problems are completely overwhelming. According to some UN statistics, 30,000 children a day under the age of five die from malnutrition and dehydration. We know massive poverty, structural injustice, and the threat of massive ecological destruction. On top of it all, we have a war on terrorism that preoccupies much of the attention of our leaders. To a large degree, the world is not conscious of what an impossible situation it is in.

My own thought is that monastics belong in an impossible situation and have always belonged there. Certainly, the Benedictine history began in impossible times. The sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries in Europe was completely impossible. Life had fallen apart altogether. Even when it began to get pulled back together, it fell apart even worse. It was the Benedictine monastics, precisely by being monastics, by remaining in an impossible situation and bearing witness, who shaped and formed Western culture. Benedictines remember why the Cistercian community was first ordered. It was because Benedictine life had become too possible, too comfortable. And, right at a time when Europe was getting its act together, the Cistercians went to the places where it was impossible to live. They took the land that nobody else wanted and thought they could live, and lived there. We've heard from our Buddhist friends that it is impossible to fulfill the vows of the bodhisattva. On both sides we have a wisdom of remaining in impossible situations, of bearing witness and not worrying about the outward results, but of doing what we can in the moment.

One of the questions raised this week was on population growth. Some recent studies suggest that already in the developing world the rate of population increase is dramatically being lowered. The main factor, according to these studies, is the greater education of women. How do we make an impact in this impossible world? One way is a classic, Catholic monastic practice: Teach the girls to read. Provide young women with the best education possible, and from that all kinds of other things will flow. A movie I saw some years ago about a Korean Zen teacher juxtaposed images of the hectic life of Seoul and the monastic in solitude with just a few followers. One of the images from the movie was a lighthouse very bright, very high up, and very far away. That by itself can be a tremendous power. We have been reminded of basic Buddhist teachings on this. Courage is the valor of being present. Much of the problem comes from pulling away in fear. When we remain present and mindful, through that attention the situation can transform itself. The values of interiority, of the direct exploration of reality, of service to others are more important and more needed than ever before in the history of the human community—or arguably in the history of life on this planet. Monastics can help broaden and deepen our awareness.

Monastics can broaden our awareness by reminding us we are all part of an international network of relations; that our perspective should not be dominated simply by the U.S. national interest. Monastics can help us deepen our awareness by remaining in the present moment. Where are we? Right here. One of the quotes in the beautiful music with which we began was from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the "Ode to Joy" of Schiller, in which the chorus thunders out over and over again, *Alle menschen werden brueder*, "all humans will be sisters and brothers." Or, more broadly, "all forms of life on this planet will be brothers and sisters." That remains as a challenge for us. The final thought I'd like to take away is from John Daido Looi, which moved me very deeply. In the critical moments of life and death, we transcend traditions. Whatever we do, regardless of method, it is the heart behind it that matters.

**William Skudlarek:** Now we will listen to Norman and Leo as the two

of them continue their conversation.

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Continued in **Norman Fischer and Fr. Leo LeFebure:  
Discussion (Gethsemani Encounter II, April 2002)**

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