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Fr. James Wiseman's Presentation Suffering Caused by Greed and Consumerism

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

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Mary Margaret Funk: We are most honored this afternoon to have a further presentation on our topic of suffering caused by greed and consumerism. Father James Wiseman was born in Louisville and knows this area in his bones. He went to Georgetown, I think, and that got him in association with St. Anselm's Abbey in Washington, D.C., where he was a good monk and still is, and had an eight-year term as abbot and ten years as a novice master. Currently he teaches in their prep school. He is the acting chairman of the Department of Theology in the School of Theology at Catholic University, and is a professor there also. Most of all, he was our former chairman of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue before Father William Skudlarek.

James Wiseman: I'd like to begin by returning to the theme of the suffering brought on by a sense of unworthiness. I think I will honestly, and without too many acrobatics, be able to connect it with the theme of greed.

In my life, and I'm sure it's true in the lives of most of you, I've witnessed all kinds of suffering, and sometimes very severe. I was once awakened in the middle of the night to go help someone who was in such excruciating physical pain that all he could do was scream and howl as I tried frantically to get an ambulance to take him to the hospital. Another time, I was taken out of the monastery in the middle of the night to go to someone already in the hospital, facing imminent death and terrified at the thought of it, and in some way or another I had to try to allay the suffering of that person. I could go on, but of all

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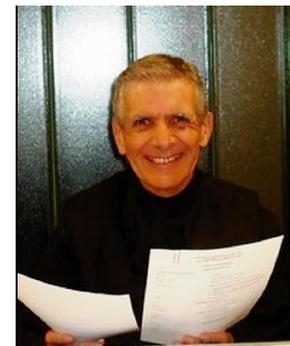
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of the kinds of suffering I've witnessed I think the saddest was something that was once said in a very matter-of-fact, even depressed tone of voice: "I feel that I'm no damn good."

That's an attitude that's very prevalent, especially I think among many young people. One of the preliminary papers for this conference, and I'm sorry to say at the moment I forget exactly who wrote it, said that many of the young do not even want to hear of what at least in our Christian tradition we often speak of as the distinction between the true self and the false self, because, the author of that paper said, all that so many of these young people know is their own inauthenticity, and get depressed and discouraged by even hearing mention of that distinction. It's something that can indeed lead to suicide, and statistics show that among teenagers suicide is one of the leading causes of death in this country.

To return to the person who said, "I feel I'm no damn good": What is the root of this? The person who said that is in fact a wonderful person, very much loved by those who know him. As far as I can see, what was wrong was that he was comparing himself with others, and noticed only that he didn't have their gifts. In other words, I would say, perhaps simplistically, that he was afflicted by what John Cassian many centuries ago would have called the thought of envy. We've already mentioned Cassian several times here at this conference. Both in his Institutes and his so-called Conferences, Cassian has some very penetrating reflections on the basic thoughts that Meg Funk deals with in her own wonderful book, *Thoughts Matter: Pride, vainglory, gluttony, lust, anger, dejection, sloth, and envy.*

Although we often hear that pride is the root of all evil, Cassian makes a very interesting remark. He says that in some ways envy is the worst of them all, because it is directed in a sense against God. It's a sense of regret at seeing the gifts that God has given someone else and wishing they were your own, or at least wishing they didn't belong to the other person. There is perhaps no easy corrective to that, but surely one is what was already mentioned earlier today, I think by Sister Kathy, to recognize that what really matters is not the separate individual but the community, the communion. We speak in Christian



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terms of the whole Christ, the body of Christ, head and members.

A wonderful insight into this reality was given by a recent saint whom Father Thomas mentioned earlier today, Thérèse of Lisieux. She is the most recent so-called doctor of the Church. There have been only thirty-three doctors of the Church named in twenty centuries of Christianity. It means a kind of official teacher. Thérèse recognized that she was not some brilliant intellectual. She hadn't even gone through what we would call high school. But she recognized the beauty of this notion of the full body of Christ in all of its variety, with all of the different gifts that St. Paul talks about. She used the marvelous image of flowers, and pointed out how boring and monotonous it would be if the only flowers in the world were the lilies and roses, the kind of glorious things that we put before the statues out here at Gethsemani in the corridor. God, she said, also loved the small violets and little wild flowers along the side of the road. It's that total variety that counts.

If any of us Christians or Buddhists (the latter in recognizing that we are as complete in ourselves as we can be and are only called to cultivate our own gifts), could recognize humbly and truthfully that no one of us can be all things to all people, that we can't do all things, then I think we would avoid that terrible kind of sense of unworthiness that "I'm no damn good" expresses.

To move now to the topic of today: I do think that this sentiment is a kind of greed. I would say greed is craving something or someone or some relationship that is not one's due, realistic, or appropriate. In the sad case I mentioned, it was a craving not for material objects, but for a certain unrealistic view of oneself. That's the first kind of greed that I'd like to talk about. Secondly, there is greed for things. It's this that we usually mean when we talk about greed and consumerism. In my paper, I spoke of the man in New York who had acquired this vast fortune of \$60 million, only to see it evaporate with the downturn in the stock market, and then went to an ashram in India in order, in his words, "to reconnect." I suggested that we, ourselves, in one way or another are constantly called to reconnect to the best of our own spiritual traditions, and to do so not only on a personal level but communally.

As celibates and as monastics, what we earn for our communities obviously does not go to our children, but to the monastery. In some ways that's laudable. But as Dan Ward pointed out today, it is one of the reasons why monasteries and monastic communities can so quickly become inordinately wealthy, because all the money comes right back to the community. It provokes constant breakaway movements of reform. It's one of the quickest ways for a community to go downhill, if it simply becomes overly wealthy. There is a call, in other words, for constant vigilance. We hear in Luke's Gospel [12:13-21] the parable of the rich fool, the fellow whose crops were so abundant in one year that he thought, "Now I'll build a second barn and store it up, and then the rest of my life will be easy." But the Lord said to him, "Thou fool, this very night your life will be taken from you, and to whom then will all this wealth go?" I think communities have to hear that as well as individuals. Don't cling to things. Don't crave. Don't hoard. That then is the second kind of greed that I'd like to talk about.

Then there is a third. I touched on that toward the end of my paper, and I'd actually like to just reread a couple of sentences from it. You might recall that I referred to this long-time best selling book by M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*. In his book, at one point Scott talks about a time when he was in a circle of married couples, trying to help them understand one another better. What he noticed to his dismay was that all of them saw the function and purpose of their spouses only in relation to themselves. In his words, all of them failed to perceive that their mates might have an existence separate from their own, or have any kind of destiny apart from their marriage. If that isn't recognized, whether in a marriage or in a friendship, then it becomes all too easy for the other person to be valued only for what he or she can give to oneself. This is a terrible kind of possessiveness. It's worse than that of things, because now two are being hurt—not only the greedy person, but the one who is having inordinate and unreasonable expectations placed on him and her.

I quote again the late Eknath Easwaran, whose works I think, to use a term of William Skudlarek's, are wonderful examples of haut vulgarization. In one of them he says, jealousy, or we might say envy,

comes into a relationship when we try to possess someone for ourselves. It's a very difficult secret to discover that when we do not want to possess another person selfishly, when we do not make demand upon demand, the relationship will grow and last. It's something we have to learn the hard way. To conclude on that very point, let me refer first to a Gospel passage that we're hearing often these days of Eastertide. Mary Magdalene, in the Garden of Gethsemane, has Jesus appear to her, and at first doesn't recognize him, doing so when he addresses her by name, "Mary." She says, "Rabboni." His response to her is, "Stop holding to me," or we might say, "Stop clinging to me" [John 20:16-17]

In our own lives, I think we have to hear that. To give an example of what can go wrong if one isn't cautious, I'd like to refer briefly to someone who is surely the best known monk of this community, Thomas Merton. As I think most of you know, toward the end of his life Merton fell in love with a young nurse. It was a cause of excruciating suffering for both of them. I picked up the volume in which he speaks about that in the guest library here. Let me just read a few sentences to illustrate what I'm talking about. He said: "She loves me totally and beautifully; and I'm so in love with her, it's almost impossible to do anything but think of her. It's an obsession, and that is bad. But I have never loved anyone so much, never wanted to give myself so much to anyone, and it's totally impossible."

As you would expect, or as you probably know, inevitably it got discovered. He was forbidden to have any more contact with her. He struggled with that directive, not totally successfully; but about a month after the discovery, he was still in deep suffering. At one point he had gone back to a surgeon's office for a checkup. "In the doctor's office I was almost visibly crying," he says. "I was so torn by loneliness and longing to talk with her, knowing it was hopeless. And it was worse still driving out on the turnpike, first passing near the hospital. I thought I was being slowly torn in half. And then several times while reciting the office, deep silent cries came slowly tearing and rending their way up out of the very ground of my being." As the weeks and months passed, and he came to get a little more perspective on what had really gone wrong, here is at least part of what he had come to

realize: "My overall impression, awareness of my own fantastic instability, complexity, frailty. Providentially we were saved from real danger. The Abbot Don James was more right than I was willing to admit, and after all was pretty kind and not unreasonable. In a word, what I see is this: That while I imagined I was functioning fairly successfully, I was living a sort of patched-up, crazy existence, a series of hopeless improvisations, a life of unreality in many ways, always underlain by a certain solid silence and presence, a faith clinging to the invisible God. And this clinging, or perhaps God's holding onto me, has been in the end the only thing that made sense. There is no longer anything to pride myself in, least of all being a monk or being anything, a writer or anything."

My reaction to that was, first of all, deep admiration for his honesty. I wonder how many of us would be able to speak so forthrightly about weaknesses that we've gone through. Secondly, I felt great sorrow for the suffering that he and the woman underwent. But I also see it as a cautionary tale for all celibates, because clearly what begins in exhilarating innocence can quickly become a painful and excruciating obsession, which is his own word for what was going on there. And I do think that even though some might say that he fell into lust, I would say it's just as appropriate and probably more so to say it was a matter of greed, in that sense of craving for something or someone or some relationship that was not one's due, not appropriate, and not realistic. One thing that could maybe help us, if we are ever facing that kind of inclination to greed, is to recall what Joseph Goldstein said is sometimes a mantra that he uses in other contexts, "Choose the difficult."

Continued in **Fr. James Wiseman: Discussion
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