

# spiritual life/Online

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## **Adoration of the Shepherds by Gerard van Honthorst 1590 – 1656**

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**H**OW CAN WE GIVE EXPRESSION to the beauty of Christmas? We sing! We sing of the great gift of the Incarnation: "Jesus Christ is Born Today. Alleluia!"

The songs we hear during the Christmas season tell us of our joy that God has become a human being, that Jesus has come to us as our Savior and friend, that we no longer need feel alone because Jesus is always with us. Incarnation, Salvation, Abiding Presence. These are the enduring gifts we celebrate at this season and throughout the year.

Perhaps the words of St. John Chrysostom, in a homily dated from the year 386, can increase our joy in the Incarnation of the Son of God:

"Behold a new and wondrous mystery. My ears resound to the Shepherd's song, piping no soft melody, but chanting full forth a heavenly hymn. The Angels sing. The Archangels blend their voice in harmony. The Cherubim hymn their joyful praise. The Seraphim exalt His glory. All join to praise this holy feast, beholding the Godhead here on earth, and man in heaven. He Who is above, now for our redemption dwells here below, and he that was lowly is by divine mercy raised."

So let us celebrate the birth of Jesus, let us open our hearts to his joyful message of joy and peace. Let us once again sing, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her King."

*Edward O'Donnell*

## **CHRISTMAS MESSAGE OF POPE FRANCIS**

**Dear brothers and sisters, Happy Christmas!**

Christ is born for us, let us rejoice in the day of our salvation!

Let us open our hearts to receive the grace of this day, which is Christ himself. Jesus is the radiant “day” which has dawned on the horizon of humanity. A day of mercy, in which God our Father has revealed his great tenderness to the entire world. A day of light, which dispels the darkness of fear and anxiety. A day of peace, which makes for encounter, dialogue and, above all, reconciliation. A day of joy: a “great joy” for the poor, the lowly and for all the people (cf. Lk 2:10).

On this day, Jesus, the Saviour is born of the Virgin Mary. The Crib makes us see the “sign” which God has given us: “a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger” (Lk 2:12). Like the shepherds of Bethlehem, may we too set out to see this sign, this event which is renewed yearly in the Church. Christmas is an event which is renewed in every family, parish, and community which receives the love of God made incarnate in Jesus Christ. Like Mary, the Church shows to everyone the “sign” of God: the Child whom she bore in her womb and to whom she gave birth, yet who is the Son of the Most High, since he “is of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 1:20). He is truly the Saviour, for he is the Lamb of God who takes upon himself the sin of the world (cf.

## Pope Francis

Jn 1:29). With the shepherds, let us bow down before the Lamb, let us worship God's goodness made flesh, and let us allow tears of repentance to fill our eyes and cleanse our hearts. This is something we all need!

He alone, he alone can save us. Only God's mercy can free humanity from the many forms of evil, at times monstrous evil, which selfishness spawns in our midst. The grace of God can convert hearts and offer mankind a way out of humanly insoluble situations.

**Where God is born, hope is born.** He brings hope. Where God is born, peace is born. And where peace is born, there is no longer room for hatred and for war. Yet precisely where the incarnate Son of God came into the world, tensions and violence persist, and peace remains a gift to be implored and built. May Israelis and Palestinians resume direct dialogue and reach an agreement which will enable the two peoples to live together in harmony, ending a conflict which has long set them at odds, with grave repercussions for the entire region.

...To our brothers and sisters who in many parts of the world are being persecuted for their faith, may the Child Jesus grant consolation and strength. They are our martyrs of today.

...Where God is born, hope is born; and where hope is born, persons regain their dignity. Yet even today great numbers of men and woman are deprived of their human dignity and, like the child Jesus, suffer cold, poverty, and rejection. May our closeness today be felt by those who are most vulnerable....

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Nor may our encouragement be lacking to all those fleeing extreme poverty or war, travelling all too often in inhumane conditions and not infrequently at the risk of their lives. May God repay all those, both individuals and states, who generously work to provide assistance and welcome to the numerous migrants and refugees, helping them to build a dignified future for themselves and for their dear ones, and to be integrated in the societies which receive them.

On this festal day may the Lord grant renewed hope to all those who lack employment – and they are so many! ay he sustain the commitment of those with public responsibilities in political and economic life, that they may work to pursue the common good and to protect the dignity of every human life.

**Where God is born, mercy flourishes.** Mercy is the most precious gift which God gives us, which we are called to discover that tender love of our heavenly Father for each of us. May the Lord enable prisoners in particular to experience his merciful love, which heals wounds and triumphs over evil.

Today, then, let us together rejoice in the day of our salvation. As we contemplate the Crib, let us gaze on the open arms of Jesus, which show us the merciful embrace of God, as we hear the cries of the Child who whispers to us: “For my brethren and companions’ sake, I will say: Peace be within you” (Ps 121[122]:8).



## **Winter Retreat**

**I**T WAS A FEBRUARY MORNING AT 7:00 A.M. One moment I was sitting on the end of my bed in the dark, having put on a robe and slippers, leaning back a bit on my right hand for support for rising—so I thought. The next second I was on the floor in great pain. I had misjudged the location of the side of the bed.

I don't know if I cried out. I did know right away I needed help. I remembered having programmed the phone next to the bed for my condo neighbor. After catching my breath, I managed to crawl a few feet to it and punch, "Toni." After that, memory fails.

### **Retreat Begins**

We've all heard about senior citizens who fall and break hips, arms, or legs, but mostly hips. That was what I thought had happened to me. Not so. My fall had ruptured a pelvic blood vessel and needed emergency care. Suffice it to say Toni and her hus-

## Winter Retreat

band Steve rushed to the rescue, found the key to my place, called 911, my nearest son, and other neighbors to alert them while I was whisked away in an ambulance.

Toni had also found the things she thought I would need, packed them in a bag, answered the questions of the emergency crew, and fielded calls. Then she had to go upstairs and take care of her small children so Steve could go to work. That's when my winter retreat began.

Well known at my community hospital—having worked there as a counselor for years—I felt sure that my stay, however grim, would be accompanied by visits from old buddies bringing sufficient comfort to see me through the sea of pain. I was wrong.

## Alien Setting

After the evaluations were done, it was judged that my condition was too serious and complicated for that facility. I could die. I had to be transferred to a university hospital miles away, where there were specialists who could do a certain dangerous procedure should it become necessary. So I was taken there to be cared for by strangers in an alien setting. Alien setting, alien attendants, white ceiling, and white lights glaring down all elevated my sense of abandonment, even as I was being cared for gently. Hours later it was determined emergen-

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cy surgery might not be necessary but that several days in the trauma unit would be required. More strangers. More living in the midst of the hanging gardens of such scenes: IV poles, blood transfusions, catheters, and oxygen tanks on standby.

In the midst of this, though mercifully sedated, I had a nightmare. In it, I watched relentless black waters from multiple rivers rushing into a bottomless abyss, oblivious of my fear. An impersonal force, it felt not so much malignant to the dreamer as unheeding of her. It was overwhelming.

As I lay there for several days, one reality of the crucifixion was borne in on me for the first time: the Lord of the Universe, stripped and tormented, willing to be helplessly open to whatever fate was in store. **All the years of living as a Christian had not taught me of Christ's ultimate, willing, humiliating vulnerability.** Even then, one option was left open to me; I was asked to sign a paper if I would give permission for either a male or female attendant to sponge-bathe me. This was a teaching institution. I signed.

## Healing Environment

A week later, feeble and unable to walk or function on my own, I was transferred to a rehabilitation facility. There I would have the time to meditate on all of this and more, much more. Blessedly, a cous-

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in had told me of this “wonderful” institution, she, who had always hated anything to do with medical issues. Having visited her there, I named it when the social worker asked my preference among several. No space, they said, but a space opened up just before I gave up. It was everything my cousin said, and more. It healed me, body and soul.

The nuns who had developed the hospital a century ago couldn't have dreamt how their work would prosper. The window next to my bed in a private room overlooked earlier structures now used for outpatient work as well as quarters for the dwindling religious community. Their forebears had been wise enough in their foresight to purchase acres of property, inexpensive at the time, which ensured vistas of trees, shrubs, and winding roads leading to the first hospital itself. My own snow-covered vista included the early buildings, almost quaint now compared with the current rehabilitation facility. I was to meditate long on the grounds, the work, the mission, the staff.

My voice almost gone, I discouraged visitors. When not in physical therapy I slept a lot. Normally a tireless reader, I dropped off after a few pages. At age eighty-five, I had been unaware of how much I needed relief from responsibilities for even older members of my family. My new “family” consisted of physical therapists, wheelchair jockeys, nurses,

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dieticians, and social workers. They took care of my most personal needs in a cheery, friendly way, needs I never expected to have. They were angels to the patients, multicultural caretakers with the multiple specialties required.

I realized suddenly that the dark waters rushing into an abyss could be the “melting pot” of America. The facility itself was the structure eventually built by Franciscan nuns who emigrated from Germany in 1872. The doctors and nurses caring for me were white Americans, black Americans, Asians, Latinos, and Europeans. There was certainly a flood of them! But why were the dream waters dark and threatening? Perhaps because uninvited crises invite feelings of being out of control.

The sense I had was that there is an inexorable surge in human history that is playing out and will continue to play out to teach us that we are each small bits of the whole, that we need each other and are to appreciate all that we each bring to the situation we are in. The German Franciscans, unappreciated in the politics of their country, came to the United States, just three of them, to begin the work that eventuated in the facility now restoring me to health, 140 years later.

Just the same, I felt overly privileged when I considered the wretched circumstances of millions who are ill and uncared for both here and in the Third

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World. The problem of suffering persists, even as the suffering itself is relieved. Only the Book of Job brings some kind of comfort in this mystery, a joy that I believe can only be realized when God speaks to us as he did to Job. God's voice itself will heal us.

Meanwhile, other voices speak of triumph over tragedy, rising from the depth of suffering and degradation. Steve, a Minnesota nephew, wrote of his return to Vietnam to find a South Vietnamese POW, Div. Major Le Tan Tai, who had suffered years in a "reeducation camp." Steve had met and admired Tai in 1967 when he was a soldier there. He and his wife had revisited Vietnam in search of this man and others in order to heal the painful past and reconnect with the good that was in it. Unable to find Tai but still searching him out, Steve found that the man lived and thrived in San Jose, California, with his wife and children! They all had dinner together there months later and exchanged histories and photos soon afterwards.

Then at my bedside there was Thao, an efficient, cheerful nineteen-year-old Vietnamese immigrant, a nurse's aide, who was studying for entrance into an RN nursing program. Her plan was to get an RN, then a BSN. I loved seeing her come into my room, like a beam of sunlight. One day I rasped in my strained voice, "Thao, sometimes I just want to

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give you a hug!” She looked at me from the side of the bed where the rail was up, ran around to the other side, leaned over to me and said, “O.K.!” Her generation knows little of the war. I couldn’t help but compare her experience with that of Kim Phuc, that Vietnamese child etched in our memories from the photo of her naked flight from napalm bombing. Thao’s plan is to become a teacher of nurses. She was much loved by the staff. She matter-of-factly gave me my first tub bath since I was a toddler when my parents had the task. Tai and Thao, our former Asian allies, were now embracing opportunity in our nation.

Then there was Christian, a physical therapist, who took me limping over the jumps over time, up and down stairs, into and out of the driver’s seat of a therapeutic automobile shell without a motor, persuading me that yes, I would be driving again. I couldn’t believe it. I could hardly walk or get in the car. He was about thirty and had just bought a home large enough to accommodate his parents as they aged. Such was the expectation in the Philippines, from whence he came, as he explained to me.

When I could stand for a bit, Lynn, as American as women’s lib, tricked me into standing longer than I thought I could by setting a jigsaw puzzle that I couldn’t resist on a high table. I was not allowed to sit down to play with it. And there was

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Ryan, the transporter, who rounded us up, two at a time, jockeying our wheelchairs to deliver us to the ministrations of therapists in what they called the gymnasium. We were not shooting baskets. Our coaches were still training us to walk. Later there was a nun in mufti, Sister Del Ray, who led our wheelchair crowd in exercises to remind us of all the good things in our lives as far back as we could remember. Her sessions and her humor were much appreciated as she helped us put our present situation in the perspective of a lifetime of many good things.

And the Hispanic cleaner of the floors and halls told me she loved coming to work every day. Gloria, the morning nurses' aide who talked me out of bed and got me ready to work, was an immigrant as well. Pretty and efficient, she told me of her little boy and her life away from work as I gratefully accepted her help. The RN staff brought medicine and checked my pain level at the usual "one to ten" intensity. Before long it was only five as ministrations continued.

## Grateful

When I was discharged to the care of home-health providers, I promised myself I would soon return with home-baked cake as a thank-you to a staff unwilling to accept gratuities. However, though

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physical therapist Christian was right in saying I would drive again, I remained unable to independently drive that far. The treat awaited the energy for me to both bake and drive the distance.

The answer to my dilemma came when my thoughtful and even older brother sent me two boxes of chocolates: one for me and one for the person of my choice. Maybe I should give up both baking and taking? I chose my hospital caretakers and made the trip nearly a year later. To my astonishment, the very caretakers mentioned knew me on sight, greeted me warmly. I was able to thank them and personally show them that their work is effective both in relieving suffering and renewing lives. I don't know how many other grateful patients would be physically able to do this. The box of Fannie May candy went to the democratic break room for all staff members to sample as thanks for help on a difficult journey.

Normally very independent, thus it was that I learned through dependence how much I received from them and the blessed nuns who came from another continent to care for thousands of people like me. My winter retreat brought this pilgrim both peace and gratitude for the family of man.

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**Sally Leighton** was a Social Worker in Illinois and a frequent contributor to ***Spiritual Life*** magazine.

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## **Committed to Memory**

**A**S A YOUNG GIRL, St. Thérèse practically memorized *The Imitation of Christ*:

“I knew almost all the chapters of my beloved *Imitation* by heart. This little book never parted company with me, for in summer I carried it in my pocket, in winter, in my muff.”

Thérèse prevented the deep spiritual truths of faith from slipping from her conscious mind by committing texts to memory.

Her practice was simple and effective. She carried a text with her, read it many times during the day and repeated it to herself: “I copied out several passages...and *I repeated them over and over*, the words of love burning in my heart” (italics added).

If we compare the feverish pace of daily life to a turbulent ocean, Thérèse’s practice is like resting on small islands of time interspersed throughout the day. All that is required is a moment. Take out of your pocket or purse a short passage that you have written down. Let it refresh your memory with the spiritual truths that nourish your soul.

## Committed to Memory

### Spiritual Practices

One of the great advantages of Thérèse's method is that it doesn't require that we set aside a specific period of time during the day. This is an important aspect of her practice. Thérèse once cautioned her sister Céline about the danger of adding practices to her spiritual life.

The extra obligation you have assumed might prove a burden when the fervor of inspiration begins to wane. In the matter of voluntary practices, therefore, it is wise to take only those duties which we can carry out perseveringly.

One reason why so many spiritual practices that we decide to incorporate into our daily schedules quickly fade is that our lives are so busy. In a time crunch, additional spiritual practices are usually the first things that fall by the wayside. Thérèse's practice doesn't add any task or duty to our lives. Instead, it invites us to use any moment in our day as time for spiritual nourishment.

If we persevere in this habit, it will no longer be necessary to retrieve the written text from pocket or purse, for we will be able to recall it from memory at will. In consequence, new "islands" in our sea of activity will be established. Then it will be possible for a text to become a source of nourishment during those "on the way" times, whether it

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is while driving or walking up a flight of stairs. In consequence, our awareness of God's presence is sustained throughout the day.

Thérèse knew that no matter how deeply we are touched by a truth that we have read, we need to commit it to memory for it to be efficacious. This is the advice that Beatrice imparts to Dante as she reveals a divine truth to him: "Open your mind to what I now explain and *fix it in your memory*, for to hear and not remember does not lead to knowledge" (*Paradiso* 5. 40-42; italics added).

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**Marc Foley, OCD**, is the Publisher of *ICS Publications* and the Director of Students in Washington, DC.

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### NOTES

1. St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, trans. John Clarke, OCD (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1976), p. 102. It is worth noting that in *Story of a Soul*, after the Bible, *The Imitation of Christ* is the most frequently quoted book.
2. St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, Ibid., pp. 102-103.
3. Sr. Geneviève of the Holy Face (Céline Martin), *A Memoir of My Sister St. Thérèse*, trans. Carmelite Sisters of New York (New York: P.J. Kenedy & Sons, 1959), p. 159



**Carolyn Humphreys, OCDS**

## **A Precious Gift**

*I wonder as I wander out under the sky.  
How Jesus our Savior did come for to die.  
For poor ordinary people like you and like I.  
I wonder as I wander, out under the sky.*

**T**HIS HAUNTINGLY BEAUTIFUL Appalachian Christmas carol stirs within us the realization that a sense of wonder is an exquisite gift from God. At a high level, wonder is experienced in the worship of God. It keeps us in awe of him and keeps us respectful of ourselves and of others. How are we influenced by wonder? How are we uniquely wonderful? How do we see our surroundings as wonder-filled? How often do we think of the wonder and wonderful aspects of our lives?

### **Enkindling Wonder**

A line of poetry can easily enkindle wonder. There is more gazing at the play of words than cogitating about what they mean. If we think we know all the interpretations in a line of poetry, all we need do is wait; someone will come up with a new meaning in that line. We have no great need to grasp its intel-

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lectual properties but find contentment in resting in the gentleness of its flow. This is a bit similar to experiencing God with a confidence in his love rather than with a certitude of knowledge about him. We are not so much interested in detailed theological explanations but are directed more to the mysterious journey to the unknown God. We stay with mystery because knowledge can fall short.

Despite all the knowledge that is available, there are more unknowns than that which is known in this life. No matter how much we understand, something is still missing. This suggests that we do not need to answer all the questions, fill in all the blanks, or have activities in all the time slots in our daily planner. There is a limit to our understanding. All knowledge reaches its end in mystery. We do not stand outside the events in our lives, and describe them with precise terminology and astute observation, but enter within as a wayfarer on an unknown journey. When all is said and done, the ultimately known element in God, and in us, is mystery.

### **New Vision**

Wonder touches that which lies unknown in the heart. Although we are unable to put this into words, it changes the way we look at things. We experience a deeper realm through eyes washed

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clear and hearts renewed in love. Something unsightly to us becomes uniquely beautiful. We look at something we have seen a thousand times and it glows with new meaning. We place that which makes us weep in the love of God. In time, eyes cleansed by tears can sparkle with delight. It is said that tears in the eyes cause rainbows in the soul. **Wonder is a movement of the soul.** We are attentive to the wordlessness, the stillness, and the simplicity in our lives.

They reflect a bit of the mysterious wisdom of God. We delight in our inward journey to him. Jesus is at our center. Jesus is our God and he is all good. We are reflections of his goodness when we see it in ourselves and in others. God created us, he lives in us, and he delights in us. How do we find delight in us?

“Each of us needs an opportunity to be alone and silent to find space in the day or in the week just to reflect and to listen to the voice of God that speaks deep within us. Our search for God is only our response to his search for us. He knocks at our door, but for many people their lives are too preoccupied for them to be able to hear.” (*Basil Hume*)

When we are alone and silent we discover many things. Wonder is a far cry from a lazy, laid-back, or unmotivated orientation toward life. Actually, it

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is a call to be more alert, more vigilant, and fully awake. We are fully awake because of inner peace. There cannot be peace in a family if there is no inner peace within the members of a family. When people start yelling at each other, the ability to think things through shuts down and is replaced by primitive combat behaviors. Shouting gets us nowhere. Arguing does not put out fires; it only adds fuel to them. Mindless spoken words do much damage. In families where there are frequent shouting matches, the members need to stop reacting and start reflecting before they act. Reflective thoughts stop impulsive, hurtful words. **To think before we speak can become a beneficial habit.** A deep breath, or counting to ten before responding, has much value. When we feel anger toward someone, we need to step back and ponder each person as a wonderful mystery, a mystery to learn about slowly; reverently; with care, tenderness, prayer, and pain, and who is never learned completely. Only in quiet waters do things mirror themselves undistorted.

## Inner Cloister

Where do we find authentic inner peace? The only true peace is the peace of Christ. Jesus is our anchor at the still point within ourselves. When we are in the inner space that surrounds our anchor, we are silent and wait. Jesus, the God-man, is someone far

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beyond anything we have known or can imagine. Yet, he is very present at the center of our inner cloistered space. We ponder him with great awe. We pray to him with great love. Everything in our lives flows in and out of prayer at our inner cloister. Praying brings positive energy to our living and also balances that which is light and dark in our days and years. Amid all which flows in and out of our lives, our inner cloister remains silent and calm, free of the world's rabble. Our inner cloister is preserved for God alone. It is a refuge where nothing comes between Christ and us.

“I have a need of such a clearance as the Saviour effected in the temple of Jerusalem, a riddance of the clutter of what is secondary that blocks the way to the all important central emptiness which is filled with the presence of God alone.”

*(Jean Danielou)*

We pass through the door of our inner cloister in silent wonder and focus on Jesus. What is he saying to us? How is he saying it? Our inner cloister is our personal sacred place. How do we visualize it? What are its attributes? Each person has a few of his or her special treasures that speak of God there. What are they? How do they lead us to Jesus? Within our inner cloister we see how the various finite satisfactions we seek are fleeting and how we ache for the infinite. Finite satisfactions are good, but we

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are amiss if we expect too much from them. They are pleasant in their time and place but cannot quench our longing for something more. When we realize finite goods do not fully satisfy us, we know

*Today, I have a different perspective of why I am here on this earth*

that more of the same is not the answer. It is only a delusion. There is much more to life than living on

Pleasure Lane or cruising down Clutter Road. If we are too much into the trends of today, we won't notice the warnings. We will pass danger signs, make wrong turns, and end up lost. Our inner cloister is where we return to our authentic center.

Jesus gives us an interior stability of mind and heart. To enjoy God's presence in the present moment, as if the moment stands alone, is a rare grace. Ah, how often does our mind dwell on what has happened in the past or on what we think might happen in the future? What do such thoughts do to our inner peace? Living in the present moment is inwardly contemplative and outwardly expressed by the way we love and live in our current circumstances. By being in the here and now, we do not withdraw into a world of what we should have done or dwell on daydreams or flights of fancy. We are attentive to time beyond the busy bee flurry of doing many things to make up for the past or to make sure we will be on God's good side.

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Living in a “be it done unto me according to your word” mode widens our sense of wonder. We slow down and gently learn that which we do not particularly want to know. How often do hurry, noise, or crowds stifle our soul’s health? A slow walk is healthier and more rewarding than a “pedal to the metal” mentality. Blessings from a walk with life are much greater than blessings from a race with life. Indeed, the speed that is commonplace today starves creativity, starves beauty, and starves the soul.

There is great value in walking slow but sure. It sustains an inner calm and invites us to see the harmonious beauty of things around and within us. A quiet, wonder-filled kind of being enriches us. For instance, when we look at a beautiful object, we are drawn into its beauty. We do not want to own or get anything from the object; we just want to gaze at it. We look without judging and see detail without analyzing. To delight in ordinary daily things such as shapes of, and designs on, cups, coins, stamps, lamps, fabrics and flowers is a gift. As we enjoy the beauty of these gifts, spiritual refreshment takes place. **A quote from Hagia Sophia tells us:**

“There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a hidden wholeness.... There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fountain of action and of joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows

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out to me from the unseen roots of all created being.”

Indeed, we witness to God’s gifts to us when we treat them as sacred.

### **Seeing the Extraordinary**

Indeed, “God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform” (William Cowper). To wonder is to look at our ordinary lives and see the extraordinary. We find God in the midst of our routines. Our experience of God can also resemble all or nothing. At times he seems very close, at other times he seems a thousand miles away. So be it. In truth, he is closer to us than we are to ourselves.

A viable connection exists between our interior life of prayer and our external environment. If we find beauty inside ourselves, it becomes part of our living and working environments. If we live an inner life of integrity, it influences our outer deportment. Our good thoughts, verbalized with few considerate and helpful words, can be channels of grace for others. Having a solid sense of divine truth and being guided by that truth are not easy in our society. We must hold our sacred reins tightly so that we are not pulled off the spiritual trail. We look beyond superficial and distracting elements that can tear our souls apart and focus on that which strengthens and sustains soul unity.

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If we touch our truest, deepest self, we find God. To let go of our inner loneliness is to find ourselves to be God's friends. It is no longer I, but someone other than I. We are taken beyond our self-centeredness because God is at the very center of ourselves. We are in awe of the holy wonder we experience in being with him in loving stillness. And in that quiet stillness we begin to discover how much we are loved.

### **Wonder Rooted in Prayer**

Wonder flows from a way of being and a way of living that have their roots in prayer. Prayer keeps our lives headed toward God and is the measure by which we are transformed in Christ. Transformation is measured by changes in behavior toward the good. With God's grace, sickness and other vicissitudes are taken in stride. When we are afflicted, perplexed, or bewildered, we are not overwhelmed because Jesus is truly with us. Because of him we do not lose hope. Ambiguity, ambivalence, and unanswered questions about serious illnesses do not disturb our inner peace. A desert mother wrote: "A great deal is gained spiritually by bearing illness quietly and giving thanks to God."

To wonder is to begin to understand the deepest yearning of the human heart: to know God. Wonder leads to contemplative moments that briefly

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quench our thirst for him. Contemplative moments are gifts from God by which we enter more deeply into the mystery of his divine life. His grace works in us, visibly and invisibly. In silence we open up to the Holy Spirit and let him be our guide. The Holy Spirit is not confined to the times and places we think grace should work in us. This can happen anytime and anywhere.

Wonder directs us to the beautiful “Ahs” of life. The wrap of silent wonder holds Jesus at the center of our lives. Jesus helps us experience a new and fresh outlook: we love more fully and wholeheartedly. Liberation from many things that do not matter is marvelous.

We look at children and see the world from their eyes. Innocence reveals easy forgiveness and the simple truths of life. We look at old folks and learn the value of slowing down. Endured suffering blesses us with patience and perseverance. Wisdom comes from the heart. Despite our age, our hearts are light and our spirits are playful. **The holy is found in everything.** God, who is so beyond us, is within us, within others, and within the contours of everyday.

We are content with the plateaus of life. Although nothing seems to be happening, there is movement toward God. He is a vast and silent mystery. Jesus points us to that mystery. True wonder and true

## A Precious Gift

wisdom assure us that Jesus is within us and everywhere around us:

I see his blood upon the rose  
And in the stars the glory of his eyes  
His body gleams amid eternal snows,  
His tears fall from the skies.  
I see his face in every flower.  
The thunder and the singing of the birds  
Are but his voice—and carven by his power  
Rocks are his written words.

All pathways by his feet are worn,  
His strong heart stirs the ever beating sea, His  
crown of thorns is twined with every thorn.  
His crown in every tree. (Joseph M. Plunkett)

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**Carolyn Humphreys, OCDS**, is the author of *From Ash to Fire: A Contemporary Journey through the Interior Castle of Teresa of Avila* (Gracewing) and *Carmel, Land of the Soul: Living Contemplatively in Today's World* (Alba House). She produces *Mary's Garden*, a four-page Catholic Christian quarterly.



## Book Notices

### *A Sacred Voice Is Calling*

By John Neafsey

Orbis Books

Paper \$22.00

What does it mean to find and follow our personal calling? How do we distinguish between the “still, small voice” of our authentic vocation and all of the other competing counterfeit voices in ourselves and in our culture? Specifically, how do we balance the inward listening to our hearts and the need to listen with our hearts to the realities and needs of our world? Drawing widely on the wisdom of saints, sages, and the traditions of spiritual direction, Neafsey describes a path to living in the place, as Frederick Buechner has put it, “where our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

### *A New Heaven, A New Earth*

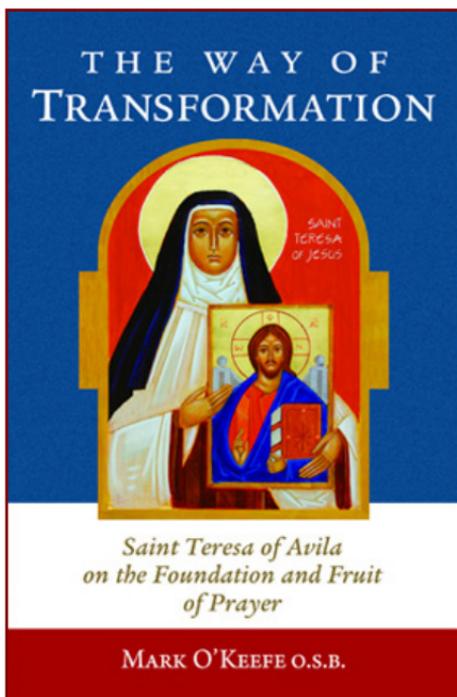
By Dianne Bergant, C.S.A.,

Orbis Books

Softcover \$25.00

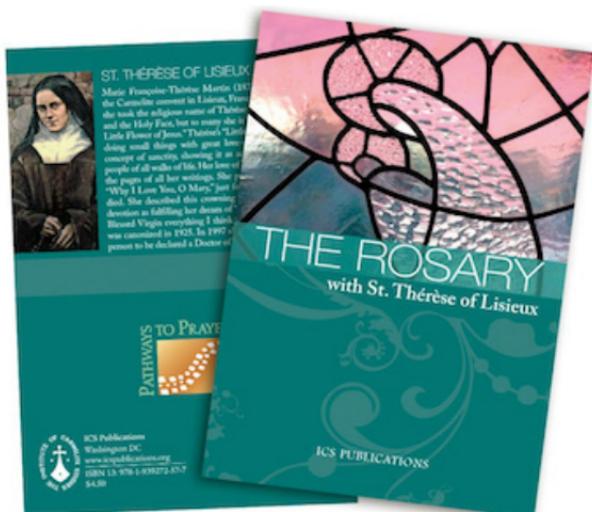
This groundbreaking book is an experiment in reading the Bible through the lens of catholicity: a consciousness of the wholeness that pervades all life. Each chapter examines an aspect of the natural world (determined by the biblical text itself) from the perspective of the principle(s) of evolution and ecojustice. *A New Heaven, A New Earth* thus leads to new ways of understanding and talking about the Bible, God, creation, and humankind.

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