The World Community for Christian Meditation

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Readings for 29/7/2012

An excerpt from Laurence Freeman, OSB, ?Frequent Flyer,?

The Tablet, August 10, 2004.

In the dry heavy heat of a Tuscan afternoon the bus drops off retreatants, from several continents. They now have to walk carefully down a steep path toward the guest house and monastery. The path is a parable, made of narrow, ancient terracotta bricks, many crumbling, missing or replaced with new ones. . .

Even as they watch their step down the beaten path they see the views over the wooded valleys and breathe in the pungent scent of ginestra. They are also worried about their bags, wondering what their rooms and food will be like. But they are already forgetting London, Houston, Singapore and Geneva and, to their surprise they have already begun to feel at home. They have arrived.

I have seen this for fifteen years now, the reactions of those coming for the first time to the annual silent Christian meditation retreat at Monte Oliveto Maggiore, the mother-house of the Olivetan Benedictine congregation. The sheer physical beauty of the place, just south of Siena, is disturbing at first, like being introduced to a very beautiful person. The peaceful is-ness, the self-confidence of the place and the at-homeness of the white habited monks who live here becomes more amazing as you get used to it. There are not many places in the modern world where there is such a combined sense of stability, harmony and hospitality. Your first thought might be that it is so much of a home to someone else that you are condemned to being an outsider. But it proves to be one of those rare places with the grace of making everyone feel at home ?meaning you feel you can let go, be yourself, remember who you are.

In an age of religious fundamentalism it is enlightening to find a deeply religious environment, which welcomes people of diverse views and cultures. That does not immediately pounce on differences or apply labels of approval or exclusion. That does not harshly judge and condemn or acquit in the name of Christ or Allah or Yahweh. I guess it is this, the friendship of the body with the mind in an environment of natural beauty, the wondrous friendship found in contemplation with strangers, the being together in a living stream of tradition that has not

been dammed and gone stagnant, that makes people feel at home.

God, as Aelred of Rievaulx bravely said, is not only love. God is friendship, with oneself, others and the environment. Those who are not in friendship can know nothing of God - even, and especially, in the most heartless certainty of the religious fundamentalist that they are defending God against his enemies. The anxious homelessness that characterizes our fragmented society, however, has engendered a contemplative homing instinct even deeper than fundamentalism. In a place like this, the homing instinct for God intensifies among human warmth, tolerance, hospitality and gentle religion. It is part of the spiritual search of our time to long for such a feeling of connexion and mutual trust, for a religion that nurtures community rather than division. And perhaps it is this inclusive, catholic sense of being at home with difference that is the meaning of the real presence.

When Bernardo Tolomei, a rich Sienese nobleman came here to seek God 700 years ago he was abandoning a comfortable home for what was then a dangerous wilderness. He lived in prayerful solitude and when companions joined him, adopted the Rule of St Benedict. St Catherine of Siena, a Joan Chittister of her day, berated him, as she lambasted bishops and clergy for their lukewarmness, for accepting too many monks from wealthy families, and he obediently widened his vocation base. . . .When plague struck Siena he left his new contemplative home and returned to care for the dying in his old city where he too soon fell sick and died. The cycle of his journey shows that the peaceful sense of being at home is not restricted to one place and that the more you let go of it the more you are at home. If you really are at home with the self in God you will find yourself at home, in peace and compassion, everywhere.

After meditation: an excerpt from Julian of Norwich, Chapter 67, REVELATIONS OF DIVINE LOVE (London: Penguin, 1966), p. 183.

Then our Lord opened my spiritual eyes and showed me the soul in the middle of my heart. The soul was as large as if it were an eternal world and a blessed kingdom as well. Its condition showed it to be a most glorious city. In the midst of it sat our Lord Jesus. . . most gloriously is he seated within the soul, in rightful peace and rest. . . .Nor will he quit the place he holds in our soul forever. . . .For in us is he completely at home. . . .

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