

THREE

Practices of Holy Transfiguration Monastery

INTRODUCTION

While the cultural context of HTM is quite different than that of the new monastic communities in the United States and elsewhere, each of the marks of the new monasticism mentioned earlier are evident at HTM. In this chapter, we highlight several of the practices manifest in the lives of HTM members. In chapter 4, we explore the theological foundations for these and other practices. A notice board and words outside the Cloister in Breakwater introduce key practices:

Here some of the People of GOD from many Christian Commu-
nions live together as an intentional Monastic Community. In an
age of growing fear and terrorism, we search for peace and unity
in a profound union with GOD. We have found it is the human
heart that must first be disarmed. We strive to pray our life and to
live our prayer, to be conscious, honest, simple and merciful to-
wards all people and the earth. Here the “Prayer of the Heart”—of
compassion and gratitude—has not failed. We share our life with
any in need.

PRACTICES OF THE CHURCH

HTM describes itself as an intentional monastic community. As well, it is a Baptist congregation of the Baptist Union of Victoria. How intentionally Baptist is HTM? As successors of the sixteenth-century

continental Anabaptists, the seventeenth-century Puritans, and the eighteenth-century Brethren, Baptists around the world share a legacy that has inspired democracy and the championing of religious freedom, promoting justice through struggles for the abolition of slavery, against colonialism, for women's rights or for human rights.

HTM recognizes its Baptist identity in many ways. It emphasizes such distinctive aspects of Baptist polity as separation of church and state, commitment to the teachings of the Bible, the importance of a personal knowledge of God and relationship with Christ, the priesthood of all believers, the centrality of the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, and congregational polity. It is a member of the Baptist Union of Victoria. It pays its full share of fees per member to the denomination. Three successive superintendents of the Baptist Union of Victoria have served as advisors. Members attend Baptist Union of Victoria gatherings, occasionally as leaders of workshops. Every month, Baptist Union of Victoria leaders spend a quiet day at HTM, as do several Baptist pastors.

The denomination holds title to the Community's property. At its own expense and effort, the Community of the Transfiguration has quadrupled the value of the original Breakwater Baptist Church property. Having acquired four adjoining properties, the Community has transferred these titles to the name of the Baptist Union of Victoria with provisions that protect the interests of both parties. Lawyers have drawn up similar deeds for the Teesdale property. Community members see this as an act of identity and solidarity with the Baptist Union of Victoria and their mutual welfare.

How intentionally ecumenical is HTM? HTM members recognize a unity that transcends denominational particularity. Their ecumenism is relational, not official or structural. Members overcome differences by living in community, praying together, and struggling with the pain of a common humanity. The Community celebrates the Eucharist each Thursday and on other feast days. Each Holy Week, members renew their commitment to live out of their baptism.

The celebration of each of these rituals is a time of giving thanks, in Greek *eucharisteo*, from which the name of the Eucharistic liturgy derives. The liturgies mediate the powerful and experienced reality of Community members that they are one with God, with one another, and with the entire cosmos. The liturgies are not sources of division or exclu-

sion. To quote the *Testament and Pastoral Rule*, it is the praxis of HTM members to share in the sacraments courageously.

Baptism. By baptism we are made “one family” in Christ. By baptism we transcend all political, ethnic, gender, social, sexual, cultural, intellectual, hierarchical, denominational, academic differences.

Eucharist. Being many, we are One bread, One body.
Eucharist is the perpetuation and sustaining of baptismal life.
We will have an open table, open to all the people of God to preside, participate, and receive.

The Community goes on to refer to a World Council of Churches consultation held in 1994 at Iasi, Romania, on “Christian Spirituality for Our Times.” It quotes the final report as follows, “Christian spirituality rooted in the suffering, reconciling, and uniting love of God in the world, is affronted and even astonished by broken bread and poured out wine that cannot be fully shared. It should be understood, then, that a genuine ecumenical commitment to deepen Christian spirituality for our times is likely to further provoke an ecumenical crisis over the unfulfilled expectation of Eucharistic hospitality. And so it should!”¹

Community of the Transfiguration members seek advice from many sources. They freely make themselves accountable to authorities of all the communions represented in the monastery. They have consulted with representatives of two Anglican (Episcopalian) monasteries: St. Mark’s Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in Camperdown, and the Community of the Holy Name in Melbourne. It also has relations with members of Tarrawarra Abbey, a Cistercian monastery located near Yarra Glen in the valley of the Yarra River, and with the Little Brothers of St. Francis, an eremitical community located at Tabulam in northern New South Wales.²

For over thirty-five years, members of the Community of the Transfiguration have explored and lived out of traditional monastic spirituality. This has made the Community somewhat of a working model, or

1. HTM, “Testament and Pastoral Rule,” 16–17; *Mid-Stream* 33, 4 (October 1994): 473–81 for a text of the report.

2. Michael Casey, OCSO, interview by Paul Dekar, June 18, 2004; Michael King, OSB, interview by Paul Dekar, June 10, 2004; Philippa Pickering, CHN, interview by Paul Dekar, June 23, 2004.

bridge, between past and contemporary forms of monastic religious life. As a result, traditional as well as new monastic communities are seeking out the Community of the Transfiguration.

For example, in March and April 2006, Brothers Graeme, Steve, and Os visited the United Kingdom and the United States. They met with seminarians and with members of several intentional communities.

In October 2006, Brothers Stephen and Neil traveled to a village on the Thai side of the border between Burma (Myanmar) and Thailand. Because of her prior experience with the Karen refugees, the Reverend Ann Lock, HTM Chaplain and pastor of Brunswick Baptist Church in Brunswick, Melbourne, accompanied them. Consultants on a building project, they also offered pastoral care and listened as victims of the corrupt regime in their homeland pleaded, "Do not forget us."

In January 2007, Brothers Steve and Stephen and Sister Anna were in New Zealand for ten days. They participated in several gatherings involving hundreds of people from many groups on aspects of monastic spirituality, sustainability of intentional community, and how to deal with the dark side of one's personal and corporate self.

In mid-2007, Brother Wayne of the Franciscan hermitage in New South Wales and Bishop Graeme Rutherford of the House of Bishops took the initiative to invite HTM to be present as observers at meetings of the Anglican Religious Advisory Board in Australia for the next two years. They felt that HTM needed to experience these meetings to see if they could be of any help to HTM, and vice versa.³ Such a move to involve a non-Anglican community in what is currently a purely Anglican Religious Advisory Board answerable to the House of Bishops is courageous and fraught with possibilities for future ecumenical and inter-monastic cooperation in Australia and worldwide.

Sister Miriam represents the Uniting Church in a formal dialogue process with the Lutheran Church in Australia. HTM regularly hosts the dialogue team. Without sacrificing their core values, HTM members exchange ideas with visitors and inter-faith delegations from a number of denominations and teaching centers.

As these varied invitations and contexts suggest, HTM members move easily and in an unthreatening way across many boundaries within Christianity and outside it. In ecumenical and inter-faith contexts, they

3. Bishop Rutherford, e-mail to Paul Dekar, April 22, 2007.

offer a depth of experience of monastic spirituality, of wisdom in dealing with crises that inevitably erupt in community living, and of sensitivity to varied practices among different communions. They have discovered as true what Jesuit theologian William Johnston described of his experience when Christians and Buddhists came together in Japan. He wrote, "We found that dialogue based on theology and philosophy did not achieve much; but when we talked from experience we suddenly discovered how closely united we really were."⁴

In the past, the Baptist Union of Victoria has often been perceived as anti-ecumenical. HTM has played a crucial role in involving Victorian Baptists in wider ecumenical activities through hospitality, relationship building, living together, and participation in inter-monastic and inter-denominational dialogue. HTM has modeled grass roots ecumenism in non-threatening, practical, and relational ways. One can neither measure nor disparage the breadth, depth, and practical impact of this little group's hospitality.⁵

To offer an example, in 1993 the Reverend Robert W. Gribben, then General Secretary of the Victorian Council of Churches (1989–1995) and now Professor of Worship and Mission at the Melbourne College of Divinity, approached HTM to assist an Ethiopian Orthodox congregation made up largely of immigrants fleeing famine in Ethiopia. This led the community to aid the priest of the church to settle into Melbourne with financial and material assistance. Then, the brothers and sisters renovated the inside of their church so that the congregation could celebrate their liturgies as in Ethiopia. This included building their iconostasis, altar, and lavabo, and securing their sanctuary vestments and curtaining for the celebration of their rites according to their rubrics.

Archbishop Nicodemus came from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, for the consecration of the new church. He visited Breakwater and gifted the Community of the Transfiguration with an ancient Ethiopian cross. HTM also assisted in uniting Ethiopian families who have been separated

4. Johnson, *Silent Music*, 9.

5. John Simpson, immediate past General Superintendent, Baptist Union of Victoria and pastor in Portland, interview by Paul Dekar, June 21, 2004; Alan Marr, current Director of Ministries, interview by Paul Dekar, June 24, 2004; Mark G. Brett of Whitley College, Melbourne, interview by Paul Dekar, July 16, 2004.

by the refugee crisis. Members of the two congregations continue to pray and worship together.⁶

How intentionally monastic is HTM? HTM members believe that monasticism is a universal gift to the Church. Its spirit has been expressed in nearly all traditions of the Christian faith. To visit HTM is to recognize Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant influences. However, these have not been intentionally developed, but are organic similarities that have spontaneously emerged as the community searched for the truth that harmonized with the needs of their collective identity.

Mount Athos, near Thessalonika, Greece, is one of the centers of Orthodox monastic spirituality visited by HTM members. In its heyday, the monastic republic numbered forty thousand monks and hermits, but the population fell sharply after World War I. During the 1980s, when I visited, there were signs of renewal. Fueled by a growing questioning of modern society on the part of Greeks, and others shaped by Orthodoxy, and since the 1990s by the collapse of the former Soviet Union, the number of vocations and of visitors has increased dramatically.

HTM members have also visited many Catholic and Anabaptist communities, as well as new experimental intentional communities. HTM members study together and draw on both classic monastic sources and contemporary writers such as James Alison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Joan Chittister, Rene Girard, Donald B. Kraybill, Thomas Merton, Evelyn Underhill, Jean Vanier, J. Denny Weaver, Walter Wink, and others. They have found inspiration in Baptist antecedents, including communal forms of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist and eighteenth-century Pietist movements, as well as monastic expressions in contemporary Baptist life in Africa and Europe.

HTM members believe they are called to re-plant and nurture monastic life in the midst of an exploitative, consumer-oriented, individualistic society. By their observance of monastic practices such as obedience and stability and the common purse, they seek to live lives that are congruent with commitments in the Resolve such as gratitude, love, prayer, hospitality, and truth-telling. They seek to manifest “the same mind as was in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5). Offering radical love, HTM members challenge the domination and reign of evil, first within their own hearts, and then in the world.

6. *Victorian Baptist Witness*, March 1994; Robert W. Gribben, interview by Paul Dekar, July 1, 2004.



Community during silent meditation in Oratory

THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER

Silence, stillness, and solitude dominate the rhythm of prayer for HTM every day. By “The Prayer of the Heart,” HTM refers to the innermost core of the person, the True Self where God indwells. In Orthodoxy, the phrase “prayer of the heart” refers to the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Traditionally, saying the Jesus Prayer sustains friendship with Jesus and fulfills the injunction of Paul to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17). For HTM members, life at the

Cloister does not contain or limit one's practice of monastic living. To pray without ceasing means to pray wherever one finds oneself and to recognize God in that place and in the people there. This can only be sustained by the establishment and maintaining of an "inner silence" and solitude, which is realized "within" through the daily rhythm of personal and communal silence, stillness, and liturgical prayer.

Jesus provided a model for prayer. Jesus began and ended his model prayer (Matt 5:9–13; Luke 11:2–4) by acknowledging the holiness of God. He offered God adoration and prayed that God's realm be established on earth as in heaven. Jesus then petitioned God to nourish, to forgive, to protect from temptation, and to deliver from evil. In a few brief phrases, Jesus was making a crucial point. Prayer did not insulate him from the world. He wanted people to know that, as they responded to the gracious call to follow him, prayer should shape their spirituality for life in the here-and-now, as well as in the realm to come.

The Lord's Prayer includes these words, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." This phrase establishes a crucial connection between one's eternal relationship with Jesus and one's ordinary life in the world. God reigns on earth as in heaven. The prayer of the heart connects the one who prays with concerns in the real world.

Through the prayer of the heart, HTM members open their hearts to the world in which God took flesh and seek to live with loving kindness, justice, and compassion. They cite thoughts of Staretz Silouan (1866–1938), a monk of Mount Athos whose spiritual journey gave him wisdom and insight he imparted to others. Just before he died, he said that monasticism had to come down from the mountain and be in the world because the need of the world was so great.⁷

The first call of the day is to be alone with God. Going to the Oratory during the early hours of the morning, members gather in silence, stillness, and solitude, generally at least fifteen minutes before the Office. Morning Prayer begins at 7:30 a.m. This corporate time of prayer has a simple structure punctuated with silence and the reading of the Scriptures, including the Psalms, intercessions, and the commitment of life and work to the glory of God for the day. The brothers and sisters maintain silence for thirty minutes after the Morning Office and meet briefly around 8:30 to review the work of the day. Those able gather again at the Oratory for

7. Sophrony, *Monk of Mount Athos*, 46–49, 73.



Sister praying before an icon



Sister meditating along cloister walk



Transfiguration of Christ; glass etching

the Midday Office and at 7 p.m. for compline, which is preceded by thirty minutes of corporate silence and stillness. Compline is followed by silence or spiritual reading. At 8:30 p.m., households meet to be with each other and relax. Curfew is at 10 p.m., after which Community members maintain silence until Morning Prayer the next day.

The beauty, simplicity, and holiness of the Cloister, both the buildings, the icons, stained glass, and other artistic features make it possible for members to pray anywhere. The Community has

benefited from the gifts of members who are trained as architects, as artists, and in several crafts. Masters in their respective media, they have designed and built or renovated three buildings used for corporate prayer, *lectio divina*, and personal, contemplative prayer.

Many Community members use the Jesus Prayer, the Lord's Prayer, and other set prayers, as well as praying before icons as an aid to prayer. While the use of icons is uncommon in Protestant circles, the practice has served as a point of connection with Christ and the community of saints and thereby enlivened the prayer life of Community members.

Two icons are especially prominent in activity of prayer at HTM. One is the icon of the Holy Trinity by Andrei Rublev. Written for the monastery of the Trinity and St. Sergius between 1408 and 1425, it is now housed in the Tretiakof Gallery in Moscow. The icon depicts the story in Gen 18:1–15, wherein God appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre. Abraham looked up, saw three men standing near him, and asked his wife to prepare food. During the meal, Sarah and Abraham learned that, despite their advanced age, they would have a son.

In interviews with HTM members, I learned that they focus on the icon not for its depiction of the Biblical event, or for its theology of the Trinity. Rather, many Community members are drawn to the icon by its invitation to dwell with joy in the presence of the Holy One who receives everyone in love and forgiveness.

Another Biblical image especially meaningful to many HTM members is that of Christ Pantokrator, the triumphant Christ in whom all things hold together (Col 1:17). One artistic rendering of this idea is found in a mosaic over the central door of the narthex at Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. The scene depicts Pope Leo VI prostrate before Christ enthroned. In a detail crucial for community members, the icon depicts the Lord's left foot as cloven. In this way, the icon portrays the Risen One as holding all opposites together in a creative tension, both the good and the sin of our lives.⁸

There is an ancient Christian tradition holding that, as Jesus entered the waters of baptism, the Jordan River suddenly burst into flames. So was seen the coming together of the opposites that, against their natures, did not cancel each other out. Rather, by the presence of the Creator and Redeemer, they co-existed in a harmony that gave birth to new life in Fire

8. Weitzmann, *Icon*, 25.

and Water, Babylon and Jerusalem, Gentile and Jew, Slave and Free, Male and Female, Good and Evil. In community, HTM members affirm that they owe their existence to the Holy One who is able to hold all opposites in tension so that new life can come.

Members use prayers and liturgies that are informed by ancient traditions. However, the language is contemporary, dynamic, meditative, poetic, and socially attuned. Singing is central, and HTM has again benefited from the gifts of Community members and Companions.

The Community of the Transfiguration follows the Christian year with liturgies unique to Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, and Transfiguration (August 6). Since antiquity, the western churches have observed the Transfiguration at the time of Lent. However, HTM follows the tradition by which Anglican and Orthodox communions observe the Feast of the Transfiguration on August 6.⁹ HTM marks its origins in 1972 around September 14, Feast Day of the Holy Cross.



Ringling bells at start of daily offices

9. Ouspensky and Lossky, *Meaning of Icons*, 211.



Community members at rehearsal



Community members remove shoes when entering places of worship,
including during Wednesday rehearsals

HTM members meditate on key events in the life of Jesus in a weekly rhythm. On Mondays, they focus on the incarnation. At noon they con-

nect their lives with the One who embraced pain and redeemed suffering from meaninglessness and despair. The liturgy recalls the uncreated Light who came into the world as “pain-bearer.”¹⁰ HTM members believe, but pray for courage in unbelief (Mark 9:24). They know that, “just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ . . . and salvation” (2 Cor 1:5–6).

Tuesdays, they recall the baptism of Jesus. In words at noon, members recall that as Jesus descended into the Jordan River and experienced intensely the blessing of the presence of the Holy Spirit, so he descended into the depths of the waters of the unconscious in order to bring liberation, salvation, and redemption to the human psyche. He now speaks in the unconscious of the believer as he was empowered by the divine voice in tones of acceptance and joy.

Wednesdays, members focus on the transfiguration, a *theophany* of divine and human disclosure from which HTM has taken its name. Peter, James, and John were witnesses to the transfiguration (Mark 9:2–8 and parallels; 2 Pet 1:16–21). They came to understand that a new dimension of God’s realm had broken in. They were witnesses to the glory of a human being fully alive, the first of their own kind, which the *shekinah* (glory) of God validated and accepted.

At noon on Wednesdays members contemplate an icon of Jesus enveloped by the *shekinah* of God. They reflect on this insight: each person is to come into perpetual union with the Divine. This indeed is the calling of every person. “The light and glory of His flesh and His clothing on the mountain is what happens to any part of creation raised to its fulfillment in union with the Divine. Both the saints and the earth itself have manifested this glory at times in the history of salvation.”

Wednesday evenings, the Community’s prayers are brief. In preparation for the Thursday liturgy, or any other special liturgies being planned, Community members review the worship and practice the music. Members discuss any issues that have arisen or decisions that need to be made. Sometimes, a Community member or invited guest teaches. Over a number of years, Brother Graeme has lectured on Dante and the *Divine Comedy*, as well as on contemplative prayer, dreams, and other subjects related to the psychological dimensions of the spirituality of the Community. These talks have brought many friends to the Community.

10. *Evening Prayer and Testimony for the Season of the Transfiguration of Our Lord.* For this language, HTM members refer to Brueggemann, “Gospel Language of Pain and Possibility” and “Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain.”