INTRODUCTION

The renewal of Christian monasticism is the great spiritual movement of our day. Imbued with a love for God and neighbor, and with a healthy self-love, people are going to monasteries to deepen their relationship with God, to pray, and to find peace. While some religious institutions are suffering a decline in traditional vocations, others are experiencing renewal. Christians are exploring new monastic lifestyles. Congregations are birthing new monasteries and monastic-like intentional communities. Like the wind from God that swept over the waters at the time of creation (Gen 1:2), the Holy Spirit is moving among individuals and institutions. We are riding the crest of a tsunami that has not yet broken.

Monastic vocations are open to an exciting future. Shane Claiborne, one of the founding members of The Simple Way in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, characterizes the phenomenon called the new monasticism as a revolution that begins inside little people, guerrilla peacemakers, and dancing prophets. Claiborne writes that these revolutionaries love, laugh, and, through acts of love, are making a huge difference in local communities throughout the western world. He invites ordinary people everywhere to "begin to be Christians again." Prayerfully, he concludes, "Jesus, give us the courage."[1]

In 1998, my wife Nancy and I journeyed to Melbourne in the State of Victoria, Australia. We resided at Whitley College of the Melbourne College of Divinity, where Athol Gill had taught from 1975 until his sudden death in 1992. Gill's writing and leadership in the House of the Gentle Bunyip, an ecumenical Christian community, had inspired

1. Claiborne, *Irresistible Revolution*, 356.

my initial desire to spend time in Australia. I was teaching a course on holistic witness, an introduction to the mission of the church, when I learned that the Bunyip was about to close. I discovered other intentional communities scattered in or near Melbourne. One, the Community of the Transfiguration, was located in Breakwater, a suburb of Geelong, fifty miles southwest of Melbourne.

Whitley colleague Merrill Kitchen invited us to accompany her to attend a liturgy at the Breakwater Community, as it is commonly called, or Holy Transfiguration Monastery (HTM). We went one Thursday. The beauty of the grounds, the welcome of Community members, and the powerful worship impressed us. We were at Breakwater but a few hours and regretted the brevity of this visit. At the time, we were unaware that God had opened up a new path on our journeys of faith, a road that still leads into the future.

In late 1999, I prepared to return to Melbourne for the Fourth International Baptist Peace Conference on "Hearing the Cry, Acting in Hope" and for meetings of the Baptist World Alliance. I was to continue on to an Aboriginal settlement and to India for other commitments. Nancy could not accompany me.

I shared plans with a friend who had lived in Australia for many years. The failure of her relationship with her partner had led to her separation from a teenager she had co-parented. This disruption contributed to problems the young person was experiencing. My friend had had no recent communication with her former partner, but she did know that her son and his birthmother lived in Geelong with a connection to some sort of community. She feared that, in his vulnerable state, her son had been sucked into an obscure cult. In those pre-Google days, she did not know that it was an innovative Baptist monastery.

I discovered that the Community was providing the young person counseling as well as other forms of support for him and his birthmother. With wide consultation, I facilitated a renewed relationship between my friend and her son.

The ability of this group to offer all the parties involved a genuinely real and radical love was truly extraordinary. I was impressed to see how members live with a remarkable degree of integrity, imagination, and Christ-likeness. I found myself being drawn to the Community and to the journey of members in Christian discipleship.

The Community invited me to spend a few days at the Cloister on retreat, and I spoke about one of the key monastic influences on the Community, Thomas Merton (1915–1968). Again in 2002, when I was able to return to Australia for a couple months, I sought out the Community. A way opened for me to spend three days on retreat at Breakwater. During my visit, members invited me to return with Nancy, conduct research, and write about the Community.

As part of the process of discernment, I questioned Community members whether they had considered possible implications of any publication or public presentation. For example, articles, a book, a video, or a keyword entered into an Internet search might elicit a deluge of requests for information or visits that the Community could not accommodate. Due to time constraints, limited resources, and other priorities, the Community cannot offer hospitality to large numbers of guests who might want to spend time in the Community. True to monastic tradition, the Community was already receiving an amazing number of visitors.

This was not the first time that the Community had considered sharing its life more widely. After a couple of false starts, it had chosen not to do so in part due to its desire to protect the privacy of persons, especially children and former members. Over the past thirty-five years, five persons have left the Community, and none of these departures were cordial or smooth. Community members expressed some concern about exposing these struggles in public.

Understanding that there is always grief and responsibility for the breakdown in relationships on both sides, I alerted Community members of my sensitivity to their concerns. They assured me they would be open, transparent, and vulnerable about their personal and collective journeys. I agreed to explore with Nancy if and when I might undertake this project. Without promise or expectation as to what would follow, Nancy and I spent two months at Breakwater in 2004, a month in 2005, and a month in 2006. I returned for a month in 2007.

We shared fully in the Community's rhythm of prayer, work, and study. Moved by the liturgies and daily offices, we often found ourselves down on our knees in grateful praise. Other aspects of the life of the Community were equally compelling: the power of the personal stories of members and Companions; the support the sisters and brothers offer one another in every aspect of living; the love of the brothers and sisters for the natural world, for youth, and for marginalized persons; the care

by which the grounds are maintained; and the rich use of the visual arts. At times we felt embarrassed by the generosity of the Community. For both of us, forty years of membership in Baptist congregations had not prepared us for this new thing, a Baptist monastery.

During these sojourns I conducted over a hundred interviews with members, companions, and friends. Through their life in the Community of the Transfiguration, many have found healing of deep wounds. In turn, some have claimed a role as a "wounded healer," a phrase I owe to spiritual writer Henri J. M. Nouwen (1932–1996).

HTM members and Companions have accompanied many people, especially the dechurched, on a journey from painful experiences in their Christian past to healing, from superficiality to their truest self, from darkness to light, and from fragmentation to wholeness. The radical love Community members have extended to lay people, pastors, denominational leaders, critics, and even enemies is perhaps its greatest gift. Many outside the Community confirm this judgment. For example, Dr. Tom Paterson, a registered psychologist with the Relationship Centre in Melbourne and a therapist for many Community members, describes the Community as an inspiring source of hope for the world. For Paterson, HTM offers not a panacea, but a pathway for those who can accept its challenges.[2]

In the First Testament,[3] we read that Abraham interceded before God on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, "What if ten righteous are there?" God answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it" (Gen 18:32). According to the legend of the *Lamed Vov*, transmitted through Hasidic tradition and absorbed by me from my Jewish roots, the story goes on to affirm that on earth at any time are Thirty-six Just. Unaware that their prayer and service are as pillars holding up the earth, these upright individuals allay the wrath of God and prevent earth's destruction.[4] Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn draws on this tradition in his story of Matryona, a proverbial grandmother, *babushka*.

2. Paterson, "Family Therapy and the Good Life," 8.

3. To identify Hebrew Scripture shared by Christians and Jews I use "First Testament" rather than "Old Testament." "Second Testament" refers to the "New Testament." In relationships among Jews and Christians, the words old and new can have negative connotations.

4. Scholem, *Messianic Idea in Judaism,* 251–56; Wiesel, *Legends of Our Time*, 125–29.

> Misunderstood and rejected by her husband, a stranger to her own family despite her happy, amiable temperament, comical, so foolish that she worked for others for no reward, this woman, who had buried all her six children, had stored up no earthly goods. Nothing but a dirty white goat, a lame cat, and a row of fig plants.
>
> None of us who lived close to her perceived that she was that one righteous person without whom, as the saying goes, no city can stand.
>
> Neither can the whole world.[5]

Mindful that we all bear the divine image and likeness, I believe anyone can be one of the righteous ones who are equal in dignity to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel. Yet, surely at Breakwater I have met some of the Thirty-Six Just. Through their prayers and service, Community members offer a holistic witness to God in contemporary society. Friends and members have centered their lives in Christ not as a doctrine, but as a person. They offer themselves as hands and feet by which the hospitality of God, the compassion of Jesus, and the dynamism of the Holy Spirit are manifest in the world.

Many titles dealing with monasticism and intentional communities already exist. One may ask whether there is a need for a book about this tiny seed of God's realm. For at least three reasons, my response is affirmative. First, in North America and around the world, both inside and outside the church, there are many who have lost a faith that they once valued or have left a body of believers deeply wounded or have never been part of any faith community. Without disparaging the validity of other expressions of Christian institutional life, HTM members seek to manifest the message of the Gospel in a way that promotes relationship with God first, then the creation of time and space for spiritual growth and personal liberation. With other new monastic communities, the Community of the Transfiguration offers a compelling vision of the in-breaking realm of God, an ancient yet fresh spirituality, and an invitation to all persons to experience of the Creator of life.

Second, the manifestations of Christianity one experiences or hears about are all too often negative. People need exemplars of a different and more positive expression of faith, one that stands out as a clear sign of the

5. Solzhenitsyn, *Stories and Prose Poems*, 41–42.

reign of God.[6] If readers gain a sense of meaning, direction, and support from reading this book, it will have realized two significant goals: to document how members of a local congregation and intentional community have been transfigured and enabled to transform their neighborhood in constructive ways; and to extrapolate from this case study principles and ideas that may inform the interest in community of others who are not necessarily called to such an expression of Christian monasticism.

Finally, we live in dangerous times. Amidst dark days of dashed hopes, in which people are prepared to take necessary, costly steps to end war, make affluence history, or mitigate adverse environmental consequences of global warming, HTM members offer a vocation of radical resistance to the secular, individualistic, and consumerist culture of which they are a part. After a generation of living according to the values and practices of "the dream of God," a phrase of Verna J. Dozier (1917–2006), Community members have shared the journey to which they believe they have been called. When asked if hope or authentic communities are possible in postmodern society, I point to the Community and the calling of its members to do justice, love with compassion, and walk humbly with God (Mic 6:8).

Of all themes that emerge from this study, the one that stands out for me is the radical nature of Christian community. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *radical* comes from the Latin *radix* for roots. The basic idea has to do with acting upon or touching what is basic or essential. As used in this book, the phrase *radical witness* or *radical love* suggests something inherent in Christian discipleship. In Antioch, early followers of the risen Christ lived in such a way that it was there that the disciples were first called "Christians" (Acts 11:26). In another usage of the word, rare in the earliest canonical writings, Christians glorified God by obeying the gospel (1 Pet 4:16). In Pauline thought, Christians were rooted and grounded in love (Eph 3:17). Elsewhere, Paul encouraged his faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae to continue to live their lives in Christ. Rooted and built up in Christ and established in the faith, they lived as they were taught and abounded in thanksgiving (Col 2:6–7).

The Community of the Transfiguration recalls for me the radical witness of early Christians and also an image in the novel, *The Last*

6. Langmead, *Reimagining God and Mission*, xxiii.

Western by Thomas S. Klise. The book tells the story of Willie, an Irish-Indian-Negro-Chinese boy who grows up in abject poverty but whose baseball skills are manifest in the slums and sandlots of Houston. Willie can pitch. Typical of so many of our athlete heroes, he makes a quick ascent to major league baseball. In his first game, he strikes out twenty-seven consecutive players. He becomes a national sensation, but quickly finds that the baseball executives are exploiting him.

When race riots strike his home area, Willie leaves his team and returns to Houston where his family and friends are dead and his home razed. Overcome by horror, he runs, eventually collapsing. Some people who call themselves the Silent Servants of the Used, Abused, and Utterly Screwed Up find him and nurse him back to health. Here is Thomas Klise's description of this radical community:

> The Servants will always choose the way of serving the poor, the lonely, the despised, the outcast, the miserable and the misfit. The mission of the Servants is to prove to the unloved that they are not abandoned, nor finally left alone. Hence, the natural home of the Servants is strife, misfortune, crisis, the falling apart of things. The Society cherishes failure for it is in failure, in trouble, in the general breaking up of classes, stations, usual conditions, normal routines that human hearts are open to the light of God's mercy.[7]

Willie subsequently joins the Silent Servants of the Used, Abused, and Utterly Screwed Up. Though very few of us are fully able to identify with Willie, there is a sense in which we are all Willies. We need to become part of healing communities. In our hedonistic, individualistic, and materialistic society, it is amongst trusted friends that we may experience forgiveness and healing on a journey that leads to freedom.

Writing is by nature intensely personal and ultimately autobiographical. Stephen Muecke, who teaches cultural studies at the University of Technology in Sydney, Australia, characterizes it as tracing a path that readers can follow into the space of the next creation.[8] I trust that the traces I present here, reflections on my own life journey and on the experience of HTM members and Companions, will help readers to find encouragement for the long journey ahead to human interdependence one with another, with creation, and with the God whom we adore.

7. Klise, *Last Western*, 150.
8. Muecke, *No Road (Bitumen All the Way)*, 231.

Outline

Having introduced very briefly how I came to be involved with the Community of the Transfiguration, I now turn to describing its life within the wider framework of monastic renewal. Among themes we will explore are principles that emerge from this study that are relevant to church and society at large.

Chapter 1 briefly summarizes the history of renewal movements within western monasticism through the latter decades of the twentieth century with the Catholic reforms of Vatican II and the emergence of new monastic movements. Chapter 2 has a brief summary of HTM's history, with a longer account for those interested. Chapter 3 describes the practices of Community members. Chapter 4 explores the theology of the Resolve. In Chapter 5, we assess HTM's monastic engagement in its context and gifts that are potentially life-giving for anyone, not just for readers called to the monastic life or even to Christian faith. An Appendix supplements prayers and liturgies scattered through the text, followed by a bibliography.

Convinced that the Earth is at great risk, I believe this story of HTM and the radical witness of the new monastics have implications for what is meant by the Hebrew expression *tikkun olam*—the repair of God's creation and of faith. Describing this idea, the seventeenth-century Jewish mystic Isaac Luria said that the Creator of the Universe, deciding to make a world, drew in the divine breath—contracted—in order to make room for the creation coming into being. In this enlarged space, the Creator then set vessels and poured into the vessels the radiance of the divine light. But the light was too brilliant for the vessels, which shattered and scattered all over the place. Since that time, the work of humans has been to pick up and to try to mend or refashion the shards of creation.

Contemporary scholars Emil Fackenheim, Maria Harris, Michael Lerner, and others have developed this concept in the aftermath of the *Shoah* (holocaust). In light of failure of moral action during this twentieth-century catastrophe, can twenty-first-century monastic spirituality prod us to a *tikkun*-sense of things: care, awe, appreciation of sacredness, and love?[9]

Throughout the text, I address possible concerns of some readers, especially those who are spiritual heirs of the sixteenth-century Protestant

9. Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*!, 15.

revolution. Their forebears rejected monasticism for several reasons. One was Biblical: nowhere did they read of a requirement that Christians should take vows such as obedience to a person or perpetual celibacy. Another was theological: they regarded monastic spirituality as a type of works-righteousness that contradicted the message of free grace. Finally, monasticism seemed to violate the priesthood of all believers by creating an elite at the apex of a spiritual hierarchy.

Language

In matters of contemporary English usage, the topic of this book poses particular challenges. Often, the word monk, derived from the Greek *monos*, meaning alone or solitary, refers to men only. The word nun refers to female monastics.

The Orthodox Christian tradition makes no distinction between a monastery for men and a monastery for women. The Catholic tradition distinguishes between the monasteries of male monks and convents of female nuns. Both groups take vows of stability, obedience, and conversion of life, which includes the ideas of poverty and chastity. As well, there are the third orders that the church recognizes as equal in every respect though called to live family life outside the monastery. And there are the "religious," including priests like the Jesuits or sisters like the Missionaries of Charity, the order of Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910–1997).

Some Protestant traditions, notably churches coming out of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist and eighteenth-century Pietist movements, have placed great emphasis on the common life and have spawned many intentional communities. Other traditions that arose during the sixteenth-century Reformation, notably the Anglican and Lutheran churches, have continued to have small monastic communities of men, women, or men and women.

In this book, the word *monastery* refers to communities of men, of women, or of men and women. In some new monastic communities, couples live in the community with their children. The word *monk* refers to male and female monastics. Among the special vows by which a monk commits herself or himself to a particular monastery is chastity, which is understood as sexual purity and, possibly but not necessarily, celibacy.

Monasteries provide for dispersed members called lay associates, companions or, in the case of Benedictines, *oblates*. Unlike Medieval

Europe, when *oblates* took vows and wore habits unique to particular monasteries, now lay monastics are life-professed and share to the best of their ability in the rhythm of prayer, study, and work of a specific community. They have responded to awareness that God has called them to serve God and neighbor.

Members of some monastic communities do not use their surnames and in some instances receive a new name. I refer to HTM members as brother or sister and their given name. I provide full names in footnotes only. When quoting authors who use male language to express inclusive ideas, I do not change the text. Otherwise, I try to write inclusively throughout the book. Unless indicated otherwise, all references to Scripture are from the New Revised Standard Version.

The Community of the Transfiguration refers to a dispersed community for which several names have been used. HTM refers mainly to the Cloister located at Breakwater until early 2008 when Community members begin to move to their new property at Teesdale. Around Victoria, people speak of the Community of the Transfiguration. I use HTM and Community of the Transfiguration interchangeably.

Words of Appreciation

This book has arisen from commitments I have made as a Christian, as a husband, father, and grandfather, and as a scholar. Many people have helped me along the way, especially Nancy. My wife for forty years, Nancy lives our prayers and prays our lives. She has participated fully in our journey with the Community of the Transfiguration.

This book is very much the outcome of a collegial process. Taking a great risk in sharing the most intimate aspects of their spiritual journeys with me, and now with readers, members of the Community of the Transfiguration have responded generously to requests for interviews, documents, and information. Cloister, Skete, and Greater Community members have read the entire manuscript in draft. Mike Dugdale, companion of the Community, took the photographs.

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