

Turn of the Jubilee Year:

A Conversion Song

in Two Parts –

I. Christmas in Medugorje 2000!

II. Five Days in the Desert

and a Third...

III. Morning

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I

Christmas in Medugorje 2000!

Message of December 25, 2000

“Dear children! Today when God granted to me that I can be with you, with little Jesus in my arms, I rejoice with you and I give thanks to God for everything He has done in this Jubilee year. I thank God especially for all the vocations of those who said ‘yes’ to God completely. I bless you all with my blessing and the blessing of the newborn Jesus. I pray for all of you for joy to be born in your hearts so that in joy you too carry the joy I have today. In this Child I bring to you the Savior of your hearts and the One who calls you to the holiness of life. Thank you for having responded to my call.”

Our Lady of Medugorje

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Hand to the plow. Here is my “yes”.
Trusting completely in the Spirit, I write,
without revision, without looking back –
without making provision for the journey.
And nothing do I lack, for all is in Him.

Dear Blessed Mother,
Pray for me along this way.

[Note: brackets mark information added in afterward;
otherwise, only mechanical changes, grammatical corrections,
and repetition eliminations have been made.]

Prelude

Suffering. Not a word one would associate with Christmas, and yet the source of great joy. My pilgrimage to Medugorje was one of suffering from beginning to end, yet the time was ever blessed. In a final lesson to my college students before departure for the holidays, I spoke of the suffering of life, its inevitability, and the importance of accepting and transcending it. The lesson was confirmed in my pilgrimage.

In the airport parking lot furthest removed from the terminal, I waited half an hour in the bitter cold for a shuttle which was to come every ten minutes. A first driver told us he wasn't to pick us up. A second said the same, then finally relented. When finally I arrived at the check-in line, an attendant informed the persons immediately behind me that there might not be seats for them on the plane – I was barely safe.

The first of three plane flights was to Brussels, Belgium, and was to take better than seven hours. The less-than-usual legroom and relatively hard seats provided little comfort for the overnight flight. (We left Newark at 11:30 p.m. and were to arrive in Europe at about 12:30 the next afternoon, having lost six hours.) On this flight I found sitting next to me the couple who would be my pilgrimage companions, especially for what would prove to be “adventurous” travel. The few others on this tour we would not meet until arriving in Medugorje – though we should have met them in Dubrovnik.

The couple were middle-aged: he originally from the rolling hills of Iowa, though having spent most of his adult life in Los Angeles, and still connected to the Air Force; she a Korean woman whose struggles with English (though having lived in the U.S. at least twenty-five years) provided some amusing exchanges. She was Catholic and hoping her husband would agree to be baptized by the end of our pilgrimage. He was a rather devout secular humanist. (Even showed me its creed in the front of a magazine at the start of our flight.)

I took what opportunity I found to speak of the faith and its place, which could not be preempted by science. He seemed to listen

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patiently to my responses to humanism's tenets and my thoughts on the need for moral imperatives, as well as balance of faith and reason. But most of the flight was spent struggling to sleep and eating the food laid before us.

My first epiphany came as we descended to Belgium. Over the years I have developed major difficulties with change in pressure and almost always experience severe ear pain when landing on a plane (and even taking off). I had found earplugs made for flights some time ago (though they did not always help entirely) and bought two sets for this journey. But I did not use or need them. When my fellow pilgrim told me of his technique – holding nose and blowing out the pressure – it made me question my dependence on my earplugs... me, who am supposed to be so devoutly Christian and who depend on God for everything (rarely taking medicine, for example). I recalled my belief that one must accept suffering/sickness first, and offer it to God, or any cure would be useless. And so I prayed.

And I found that the silent WORD that is God's NAME (YHWH) not only focuses one on the awe and wonder of God's presence, but its leaving the mouth agape and the throat open even physically allowed the pressure to pass through me. I faced this impending suffering, this death, with patience and in prayer, and remaining in His WORD was kept free of the pain. (Such faith must we have in facing trials. May I remember His WORD in all things.)

Arriving in Brussels in the early afternoon, having gotten maybe three hours sleep, I sought the airport chapel, since we had an hour and a half before our next flight. I didn't happen upon a Mass, but the chapel provided a quiet place – with the Blessed Sacrament – to offer prayer. (There was also a spare Protestant chapel and an icon-filled Orthodox chapel.) I said my Daytime Prayer, prayed a decade of the Rosary, and knelt in silence before the Sacrament for a while... then made my way to the gate, not wanting to be late. I could have stayed another hour. On my way I noticed the plane was listed as delayed. Now the "adventure," as my fellow traveler called it, was to begin.

Against his own warning (in bold letters) to those needing to take an extra plane to the departure city – to leave three hours between planes – our tour coordinator had left less than two, not only here, but before our next connection in Rome. Making that flight was in jeopardy that grew more serious as this flight was continually pushed

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back further, and, of course, contrary to the tour coordinator's assurance that someone would be there if we had a problem, there was no one to speak for us. So the scramble was on. We spoke with the airline representative in Belgium and learned yet another trick had been played on us: since we had a split ticket, they were responsible for getting us to Rome, but not responsible for our making our connection – as neither would the next airline be. It began to look more and more as if we'd be hung out to dry.

The plane took off about two hours late, but there was still a slim chance we could make our connecting flight (which was on time). The flight attendant assured us someone would meet us at the gate to take us to the plane. During this time there was certainly recognition that Rome might not be a bad place to get stranded. In fact, I had very much wanted to come to Rome for the Jubilee Year (and had looked into it), and my fellow traveler would have much preferred it to Medugorje, where to him there would be "nothing to do." But I could not afford to foot the bill and wanted to be in beloved Medugorje for Christmas.

When we got off the plane, just at the departure time for the next flight, no one was there to meet us. As my companion veered off momentarily to check if his luggage would be here or on the next plane... his wife and I hurried along to find the gate. Of course, it was a half mile away, so I left his wife at one checkpoint in order to run ahead to find the plane. (The departure sign had a little figure of a man moving quickly toward a plane.) By the time my sweaty body arrived, there was absolutely no one at or around the gate. I found a helpful worker at a nearby store who led me to an airline counter, where I discovered the plane had indeed gone and we couldn't fly out until the next evening. I booked seats for myself and my fellow travelers, who eventually caught up with me at the counter, and realized we'd be in Rome for a day. [Though I was unable to contact our travel representative, it did seem this airline would cover the cost of the flight.]

I had hopes of getting into the city that night, but that was not to be, for the adventure was not yet over. First of all, my luggage had been lost, and it took a couple of hours of running from counter to counter, told it would be here and then there, before I was told to return the next day to look for it. After that chaos – and lines and

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waiting... we searched for a place to check my companions' bags overnight. While there, they became inclined to take a taxi to the city [to find a hotel], but I wanted to check with the airline which had delayed us to see if they could help.

On my last legs, I found one woman remaining amongst a line of empty agent counters. She said to bring all the tickets, so I ran back downstairs and across the airport to get my friends, but when we'd finally trudged up to her, she reiterated the airline's lack of culpability for our problem. I begged her to allow me to call our tour coordinator, but she said she didn't know the prefix for the States (?!). Finally, upon hearing us snap at one another, and seeing my companion's wife was about to collapse from exhaustion, she relented and offered us motel rooms for the night.

We had to walk another three-quarters of a mile to the airport hotel, and when we got there the check-in person said he'd gotten no fax from the airline. He assured us all would be OK, but I believed nothing at this point – though I relented and went to eat, at my fellow pilgrims' urging. We did finally get the rooms, and the nightmare was soon over. It was after midnight by the time my exhausted body got to rest.

Introit: Christmas Eve

I slept perhaps four hours before I woke and offered prayer at length for my anxious yesterday. How lacking in faith and patience I had been, running around like a chicken with its head cut off. I determined in my prayer and intercession to trust in the Lord this day and keep my composure.

Breakfast at six was a veritable feast: a buffet including every imaginable item. I stocked up for a day which would be the reward for the suffering of yesterday – a day which would show the way the sure hand of God operates. For today we would visit Rome and, most importantly, step through the Holy Year Door and hear Mass at St. Peter's Basilica. Virtually every day this year I'd made pilgrimage to our local church designated for plenary indulgence and said my prayers for the Church and the world, the Pope, my soul, and the souls in purgatory. And here was a special gift from the Lord to top off a year of prayer. Now in the basilica I could pray the Pope's prayers for a new evangelization, unity amongst Christians, and release of the Third World from debt. Here perhaps my prayers would be complete.

After a train and a bus ride, we came to St. Peter's Square. It was raining lightly, and the square was set up for the momentous Midnight Mass, which would occur outside that night. It was packed with chairs and everywhere were volunteers to help direct tourists like me. I just wanted to know when Mass was. I seemed to overhear that it was every hour, and made my way toward the doors.

At about 9:30 we entered the basilica. What an absolutely immense, awe-inspiring building. Just to stand within it evoked such reverence and wonder. The massive walls and ceilings and statues... a church or a cathedral could have fit into a section of it. But making Mass remained my guiding intent. One was going on at the far end of the basilica, but another altar was at its center, and the faithful were beginning to gather in the rows of chairs. Thinking Mass would begin at 10:00, we made our way toward the front of "church". The Mass, however, was not to begin until 10:30 – we lost some time we might have spent looking around at the basilica, but had plenty of time to

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pray. (I was beginning to wonder at the patience of my fellow pilgrim, who really had no appreciation for things religious, but would accompany his wife to many and long Mass and prayer services throughout our pilgrimage.)

The Mass, of course, was in Italian, and was celebrated by a bishop, though I know not whom. The makeshift church, though sparsely populated when we sat down, was now packed with people front to back and all around the altar. (Afterward I would see that the basilica, relatively empty when we arrived, had become teeming with people.) My dream of attending Mass at St. Peter's this Jubilee Year was somehow coming true before my eyes. Such is the will of God. Faithful is He in answering our prayers, though we may not recognize His ways. I can only hope that the poverty of prayer I offer to Him with a wavering heart might somehow be made whole in His divine will. For even standing in the majesty of the basilica I was a bit sleepy and not sharp and clear in prayer as I ought to have been. (How we humans struggle to find you, Lord.)

And so my gift was received, and so I was now satisfied. As we made our way out of the makeshift church toward the back of the basilica, I would have liked to have walked around inside more, but there were large crowds now and my companions seemed ready to leave. They had accompanied me to my desired destination, so I thought to go with them where they would. However, before making our exit we spotted the Pieta to one side of the doorway.

I made my way to the very front of the people (there wasn't a large crowd), and gazed through the protective glass at the most marvelous work of art I had ever beheld. Oh the face of Mary! How like an angel's. And how she held Him in her arms, His lifeless body. Always we see pictures and statues of the Lord in death upon the cross or elsewhere, His head somehow held up – but here there was no life in the corpus. What genius wrought such a thing! His sacred head hanging back absolutely limp and lifeless; His blessed legs bent, dangling in her arms. And she holding Him up, one arm under His breathless torso, the other hand seeming to offer Him to us... And yes, that angelic face.

I turned from my tearful gaze to join my partners on this pilgrimage. We would climb the 320 stairs to the cupola and look out upon the eternal city from our mile-high perch, and later walk briefly

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around the ancient ruins, but nothing else could compare with what I had already experienced. (Unfortunately, the Sistine Chapel was closed for the Christmas celebration – this would have been special.)

Speaking of ruins, I could not help but sense a certain ruination to Rome itself. Perhaps it was the dark and rainy day, but there seemed little joy in the city. Here it was Christmas Eve and I could barely find a sign of the season, either in decorations or in people's faces. Perhaps such emptiness is characteristic of our age, for how often do we hear, and think and say so ourselves – "It doesn't feel like Christmas." This I heard from a fellow pilgrim even in Medugorje.

Soon we had to be back at the airport. We made our way through the rain and a subway ride to the train station for our half-hour return trip (following some cold pizza). I still had a suitcase to locate, so after picking up a couple of bags from where they'd been reserved and checking in at the airline counter (no problem), I headed for lost and found while my companions went looking for a place to eat. Fortunately (how unlike yesterday today was), my bag was waiting for me, and in a few minutes or so I'd gone through customs and checked the suitcase back at the airline counter. I located the airport chapel and stopped in to thank God for His blessings, then traced my companions' trail.

After a few relaxing moments in a pleasant restaurant, we were off to an on-time plane and a short flight to Split, Croatia. Here would come a real test of the previous day's epiphany, for the cabin pressure always goes wild on this short jaunt. My friend confirmed that his ears bothered him and he had to utilize his technique, and I could feel the pressure, too. But in prayer in the WORD (YHWH), with mouth agape, miraculously, I avoided the pain. The three return flights would be fine as well. (He is faithful.)

Once on the ground, we still had a three-hour van ride ahead of us – driven by a Croatian who spoke no English and accidentally smacked me in the face while trying to motion me away from the side door, which was jostling about and threatening to open up at any moment. (He seemed pleased I took his poke in the jaw without batting an eye.) At the beginning of our journey the headlights wouldn't stay on, but they righted themselves before we got to the winding roads in the high mountains [of beautiful white rock, overlooking the Adriatic Sea].

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We arrived in the blessed village of Medugorje at about 10:30 p.m. and waited along the main street near St. James Church for our guide to come by. Here I missed a great opportunity, for there were two hours of adoration before Midnight Mass but I did not think to jump out and have the others take my bags to the house. I figured I'd have time to drop off the bags and maybe get a quick bite to eat before hurrying back, but instead of the house being three-quarters of a mile from the church, as advertised, it was closer to two miles away, and I had little choice but to eat and wait for the van to take us back for Mass.

Arriving only shortly before Mass, we were lucky to get just barely inside the doors. Standing shoulder to shoulder with the natives and other pilgrims, still in the vestibule, we could do little but listen to the Mass, unable even to see the altar. Yet the scripture is true which states that it is better to lie at the threshold of the Lord's temple than to rest in the comfort of the houses of this world.

My dramatic moment came at Communion time. I had figured there would be no way for me to receive. The people were absolutely packed into the church – standing in the main aisle, the side aisles, the back... It would take a miracle. Then I spotted Father Svetozar in a back corner of the church. Two young ladies began winding their way through the crowd, and I decided at once to follow in their wake. Soon we were in the back of the church. First they went right, and I followed. The priest seemed distant, so they turned left to go toward the middle aisle, and I followed. But it then seemed to clear away back toward the right, so I struck out on my own and managed, with perseverance (and a little fear), to find my way to the priest and the blessed Body of Christ he patiently held. The impossible mission had been accomplished.

At the end of Mass the choir sang some traditional Croatian Christmas songs, which several people carried into the light rain of the night. (I hummed along to myself.) As we waited outside for the kind owner of our house to pick us up and I met the brother and family of my Korean companion – he, his wife, and six children were in Medugorje for a month – and later as we rode home in the back of the van... I was not at all tired. I felt thoroughly energized.

Morning Mass at St. Peter's Basilica, Midnight Mass in Medugorje – this poor pilgrim could ask nothing more from a Christmas Eve start to a special time with the Lord and His Blessed Mother.

1. Christmas Day

I suppose it may have been Gospa's wish that I stop in at the center of Christendom and make my Jubilee prayers there before coming to see her in Medugorje. But now I was at the edge of heaven again here in this small village. My first pilgrimage three years before had been filled with miracles morning, noon, and night of each day, and it could not but be again in a place where the Mother and the Holy Spirit are so present. And it would be – though the appearances might have easily deceived.

I did manage to get about six hours sleep before waking for breakfast and meeting my fellow pilgrims – only eight in all – on Christmas morning. On my previous pilgrimage we were a group of seventy, twenty or thirty in a house, with a couple of priests and Wayne Weible [whose book had done much to stir my interest in this blessed place] along as well. Now there was but one English-speaking priest in the whole village. Where before there were nine or ten priests squeezed onto the altar for English Mass, this week a lone Irishman wouldn't have to fight anyone for the privilege of being the main celebrant. This made the Sacrament of Penance harder to come by as well. I thought to confess my sins for Christmas Day, but, again unlike my previous trip – when priests were lined up inside and outside of the church to hear Confessions – during this holiday time I could find but one booth occupied before the main evening Croatian Mass, and its sign read "Italian". I'd have to wait till the next evening to catch our Irish priest.

Although I'm a weekly penitent and wasn't conscious of mortal sin, I had certainly detected a number of instances in the past couple of days wherein I simply lacked of generosity and Christian caring for others – this selfishness despite (or perhaps noticed because of) being on pilgrimage. Though I had made effort to rectify my shortcomings, they were but piecemeal. Holiness was far from me.

And the sky was crying. It rained on Christmas Day and would each day of our pilgrimage. One could not help but think such lack of sun was due to the so-recent death of Father Slavko – upon Mt.

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Krizevic after leading the Way of the Cross on a Friday afternoon. A central figure in Medugorje and so beloved, it would be difficult not to be sad for this holiday. (Though our guide told us Vicka said to others of the visionaries shortly after his death that they should not cry – all must die. And besides, the Blessed Mother had said the next day in her message that he was in heaven.)

My strong memory of Fr. Slavko, which I shall relate later, had to do with my other struggle for the day: trying to find time for adoration. Going to the adoration chapel before the English Mass I found no exposed Sacrament. The chapel was so busy with Masses in various languages it was open for adoration only in the late afternoon. I would not discover this fact until the next day, after again attempting to stop in before noon English Mass. All this made me kick myself more for missing adoration in the church on Christmas Eve.

During Mass I could begin to feel the deprivation of sleep and the chaos of travel starting to catch up with me. Before Mass I had noticed the Irish priest and Father Svet showing rather great concern as they came into and out of the sanctuary, looking about. Instead of showing compassion for the difficulties I noticed, I remained to myself. Because of this lack of love and failure to recognize the prompting of the Lord, I missed what could have been an opportunity to lector (as I do back home). The Irish priest came forward just before Mass and humbly begged a favor from a young lady, who seemed to hesitate to answer, since he asked twice. She lectored.

Now the point is not so much the missed grace of lectoring at St. James Church, but rather this failure to respond to the prompting of the Spirit. Throughout this day I began to realize how God is continually calling us to serve Him, and how repeatedly I am not ready, not listening.

The converse side of this same coin was how to follow the Spirit when others were reluctant to join. Though sinning in selfishness, I also felt the compunction to join with my fellow pilgrims in activity. However, though they would come through remarkably in the end, they seemed decidedly uninspired to step out in faith as the circumstance called. (This also was unlike my previous pilgrimage, when my roommate was ready to go at all times.) Being such a small group didn't help, and neither did our guide's informing us – contrary to what our tour agency had stated – that this was the worst time to

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come to Medugorje, since, as he said was so for that day, there was little happening. (It also must be said that all but one of the others had never been to Medugorje, and so were not as comfortable as I.) That afternoon as everyone was being driven back to the house, I asked to be dropped off at Podbrdo Hill, alone, despite the rain.

I might've thought to take my poncho or umbrella, but I hadn't, and it really didn't matter. It was raining, but not hard, and I had a hood on my winter jacket. The rain seemed only to add to the blessing of being on Podbrdo Hill on Christmas Day. There were few other people walking the hill, and as I said my Joyful Mysteries at each station I was completely alone for long stretches of time. This solitude, along with the suffering, was a special blessing throughout the pilgrimage. The holiday season and the rain kept people away, especially from the hill and mountain, and made for poignant moments.

Perhaps the most special moment of this prayer climb was the distinct attraction I felt towards the brass bas-relief of the Finding of Jesus in the Temple. (There is a sculpture set in stone along the path for each decade of the Joyful – and Sorrowful – Mysteries.) The boy Jesus sat, scroll in hand, before several elders of the temple, explicating the Word; their expressions of astonishment and question and understanding were wonderful. I had come on this pilgrimage seeking direction regarding vocation, and the art and its attraction seemed to be telling me something about my teaching and writing... Though the message was not clear, the prompting was undeniable.

I walked gradually through the Sorrowful Mysteries, not saying the Rosary (I wanted to be home for dinner, and evening Rosary and Mass), and sat awhile near the cross which marks the apparition site [of the first several months]. I'll never get over how the rocks as you near the site seem to be reaching up toward heaven, as if in praise of God, and also how rocks seem to form a natural amphitheater around the site. Marvelous, marvelous place of peace and light. I was able to remain in stillness, alone, even as the rain fell harder.

Coming down from the hill I had a long walk ahead of me – forty minutes at a brisk pace – but it gave me a chance to see something of the village as I made a semicircle around its edges. I love even the houses and yards of Medugorje... so simple and so wonderful. On this trip, especially on walks like this, I would notice the

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imperfections of the people and the place, yet that deterred not my love for it, but only made it more real.

Along today's walk there was a group of kids lighting firecrackers and jumping about on an abandoned car in a secluded area. (The firecrackers is a Christmas custom, much as for Independence Day in the States.) They calmed down as I walked by, and a few left the antics of the day, preceding me down the road. It was apparent to me the children had a rather clear sense of right and wrong, as well as respect for elders, something we sadly lack in the cultural void of the United States.

Anyway, I arrived at the house and ducked into my room to change out of my wet clothes before going down to dinner, about ten minutes late. I apologized to the understanding cook and felt at once exhilarated by my trek and guilty before my fellow pilgrims for having partaken of the special fruits of pilgrimage which perhaps they'd missed. I tried not to speak too much of the blessings of my experience, and to engage others' conversation.

The food was good and filling, and we were soon in the van again on our way to the church. Coming into church for five o'clock Rosary, as mentioned earlier, I was able to find only an Italian priest hearing Confession. I sat down to the side, repeatedly looking back in hopes of finding someone to hear my Confession, but no priest would come... and I soon realized the futility of my anxious glances. I had my Croatian/English prayer book with me and tried to follow along with the Hail Mary and Our Father in Hrvatsky, but I had lost whatever proficiency I had found in my previous pilgrimage. I suppose it might have been wiser and more prayerful to simply respond in English, but I persisted in my relatively fruitless struggle.

As apparition time (5:40) came, we all knelt in silence, of course, to focus upon and receive the Mother's nightly blessing. So many blessings are upon this place, one would not be able to number them – and should not be as David to the people, trying to do so. The key is to believe, and allow the Lord's grace to work in you. Then miracles abound in all the circumstances of your day, or rather your eyes are opened to see them.

I tried to follow the Mass in my Croatian/English prayer book, but again fell short of success, and though I couldn't say I was ever bored at the Croatian Mass (though this night I was a little tired and in need

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of rest), since I do so relish participation in the songs and responses, it did seem to lack the full effect of prayerfulness this source and summit of our Catholic faith ordinarily holds for me. During the Liturgy of the Word, and especially the sermon (and sometimes during the Rosary), I would take the opportunity to say my Evening Prayer, which is not really appropriate for a communal celebration like the Mass. However, when I did simply focus my attention, despite the language barrier, I could keep myself an integral part of the celebration.

Another sort of difficulty I encountered, though it was a blessing as well, was the remarkable number of people at the Croatian Mass. Each one was standing room only – and, again, that standing room included every area of the church: the main aisle, the side aisles, near the side doors, the entire back, outside... This would be banned as a fire hazard in the States, but here it was regular practice. I happened to get one of the last seats this night, but I felt so guilty as the people started to crowd the aisles, I had to relinquish it to a young lady anyway. So I was ever crouched in a corner, sitting on the floor, or huddled near the door each evening. This lack of accommodation did not help my attention to Mass, of course (it was more often on not encroaching upon anyone else's floor or wall space), yet the sheer numbers coupled with the obvious faith of the general congregation could not help but automatically elevate one's consciousness to the sacred in the proceedings. It was a blessed place with devout people, and the Holy Mass was being celebrated – this remained clear.

During Mass, and throughout the pilgrimage, I tried my best to remember all the people in my life and bring them before the Lord and the Blessed Mother, in particular the special intentions recommended to me. I felt this to be the calling of any pilgrim – to pray for those who cannot be where you are. I was graced by God with the blessing of coming to this holy place, and to whom more is given more is expected, so it was my responsibility to intercede for family, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances... the Church and the world. We come to pray, and we cannot only pray for ourselves or our journey will be futile. All Christians must carry the Heart of Christ and His love for all, but in this special circumstance and with this special blessing, all the more must we be aware of our need to be concerned for others. I wish this selfish soul could have done a better

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job, for infrequently did I make strong petition for those back home, though I pray somehow I always carried them with me.

After Mass a cloud of smoke filled the square as many, especially kids, lit firecrackers all around. [Actually, this occurred after morning Croatian Mass. I remember now because English Mass, which was to follow immediately, was held up fifteen minutes while the explosions died down.] These explosions, along with blank gunshots, were heard throughout the day as traditional signs of celebration. I was surprised to see children so freely lighting these large firecrackers, a dangerous activity against the law in the States. In fact, just as we arrived back at the house, a couple of boys had firecrackers explode in their hands and were running back and forth in pain. (I saw the blood from a distinct cut on the finger of one of the boys.)

I turned in early after doing some writing and saying my prayers, hoping to get some much-needed rest and suffering from a splitting headache.

Sretan Bozic!

2. St. Stephen

I woke early on the Feast of St. Stephen, the first martyr, still with a splitting headache, the rain pouring down outside. We were to visit Vicka first thing, leaving at 8:00, and then climb Mt. Krizevic. None of us, including me, had any inclination to climb Krizevic in such a storm, but our guide let us know that Vicka would still be on her parents' porch speaking to pilgrims, so we all piled into the van to head for her house. This morning I was both wearing a poncho and carrying an umbrella, feeling a bit under the weather and more reticent about braving the elements.

When we arrived, Vicka (pronounced "Vitska") was already speaking to a crowd of pilgrims and being translated into French. Thankfully there was a little overhang which had space open beneath it, and most of us crowded there for covering from the rain. It was difficult to see Vicka from this vantage, but at this point that was secondary to me.

Vicka stood on the steps of her parents' house, an umbrella held over her head, and spoke of the Blessed Mother's messages to her children. Dozens of people stood in the rain, sopping wet, yet unconcerned about the circumstances. My concern was for Vicka. I believe that by the time of my first pilgrimage a few years ago, she had already developed a brain tumor. Our guide had let me know that she had gotten very sickly since. She had lost a serious amount of weight and had had an operation on her throat. Her doctor had told her she shouldn't be speaking. But there she was in the pouring rain straining her voice to proclaim the Mother's blessed messages. And, of course, all the time smiling.

Most pilgrims I overhear consistently state how wonderful Vicka's smile is, how she glows like an angel. And I could not deny this. But even on my last pilgrimage I could not look into her face long, for the pain I couldn't help but see in her eyes. And now the pain was so much more severe. As the water off the overhang poured upon my uncovered pant leg and the intensity of the rain drowned out the sound of both visionary and interpreter's voices, I could not but

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look to heaven and ask if this were not too much. The question I had upon my soul was – “Can someone suffer too much, and if so, is she suffering too much?” Or was my heartache only from a lack of faith and a fear of sacrifice?

Vicka’s time with the French-speaking pilgrims was abbreviated somewhat to begin her addressing of the English speakers. Our guide went up to translate, and I tried to listen and look attentively as possible, but my attention was distracted by the wet circumstances and my questions regarding Vicka. And it seemed I had already heard (and been living) most of what she said anyway. A vain thought indeed, induced by the situation, but, even so, I did come away strengthened and convicted about having tempered my bread and water fast on Wednesday and Friday in the past year or so, and not saying the full Rosary of late.

As the next group of pilgrims made their way to the fore, we headed to the van, a (relatively) warm house, and dry clothes. During the ride I evoked the ire of one older Italian man when I tried to arrange amongst us pilgrims to leave for the church an hour early. He ended up being quite right: Mass in the adoration chapel precluded the exposition of the Sacrament again this morning. And I would indeed be disappointed again as I stepped in fifteen minutes before Mass.

Back at the house, though, I took some time to read a few chapters from the Bible (the only time I had to do so during my pilgrimage) before taking a much-needed hour nap before Mass. I happened to be at 2 Kings (17-19) in my continuous reading, so I read of the great prophet Elijah – his raising the widow’s son, defeating the prophets of Baal... and his vision on Mount Horeb. How appropriate to read of Elijah upon coming from the house of a visionary, and especially to hear of knowing God in the still, small voice – a sign and proof of the silent NAME of God (YHWH) upon which my own faith and vision are based, as indeed is all faith. (The Lord speaks in silence and His voice quiets our tongue.)

At Mass the sermon of our Irish priest piqued my desire for Confession. He spoke of how the Lord writes straight with crooked lines, and I certainly had several crooked lines which needed a straightening. As I had stated in my spiritual diary: “How can I expect to find the Lord’s will for my life if I am so preoccupied with my own will and concerned with fulfilling my own expectations, my own

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beliefs of what should be?” This I began to notice even in my moment to moment dealings with people, even in the small things. (As I write now, a few weeks later, I find the Blessed Mother very much with me, guiding me in all I ask of her, and I am learning to ask of her continually.)

The priest’s sermons in general were very instructive and very inspiring. This day he elaborated well on how Stephen’s death led to Saul’s conversion, and so the birth of the greatest evangelizer the Church has known. (Yes, the martyrs’ blood serves to nourish the Church’s growth.) At the end of the Mass, the song leader asked the priest if he’d be available for Confession at 5 p.m. and he replied positively. I made a quick inquiry afterward to see if he would like to get me out of the way then, but he was quite occupied. (In fact, he was to meet with a woman in our group to give spiritual consolation and direction.) He was very much in demand.

Following Mass our group of pilgrims was to visit a Cenacle group of young men recovering from addiction. It is led by a feisty little old Italian nun who uses prayer (and “friendly” persuasion) rather than drugs to heal the brokenness of the members of the community. They also are very dependent on one another for support. I had been there on my last pilgrimage, and though the place is special, I really wanted to make a Holy Hour in the adoration chapel – which I found out was open in the afternoon. So I stayed behind.

While waiting for exposition to begin I decided to pick up the rosary beads a woman from church had asked me to find. She had been in Medugorje the week just before me three years ago (in November), leaving the day before I arrived, and though I had had beautiful weather during my week, her week had been filled with rain. Ironically, as I milled about the little shop looking for her beads, it was pouring rain, and I overheard someone say there was no end to the rain in sight. I had suspicion that such might be the case this time, even before departing.

I bought the beads and a postcard for my parents, but didn’t spend a lot of time looking about. Though there were some nice things, aside from being cheap, I’m also not much on shopping. I had picked up a few little things at another shop earlier in the day – including a rosary and a key chain, both of which broke shortly after my arrival home. (I had gone into the wrong store.) But that was the extent of my

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consumerism, save for a special tape of Fr. Slavko leading a Holy Hour with the Franciscan musical group. I much prefer to pick up stones at special places; these to me are truer reminders of the pilgrimage.

I still had some time before adoration, so I decided to tramp through the rain towards the place I had stayed my last time, a few blocks from the church. I did my best to avoid the huge puddles along the path, walking along a low stone wall and fence in front of one house (stretching around the bushes in the way), but I could not keep my shoes from becoming soaking wet. I had an umbrella, but that was not much help; the rain was just too strong.

I picked up a business card from the place I'd stayed before (which appeared to have new owners), standing like a wet cat at the doorstep as the dining Korean pilgrims stared at me in wonder... and also from the place next door. I had decided that if I should come again, I would make my own arrangements – paying what I figured would be half the cost – particularly since the tour company had done so little for us anyway.

I trudged back through the rain to the chapel in time for adoration. Finally I had made it to the Lord exposed in the Blessed Sacrament – my joy, my peace, my love. I knelt in the pews, praying in silence, then after a while decided to move off to the side of the altar, where there was no one praying. Eventually I found the courage to move forward and prostrate myself on the carpet behind and beside the altar (the Sacrament is in a tabernacle at the wall behind the altar), in a place I could not easily be seen for the Christmas tree and other decorations (as well as the altar)... and there I rested in peace.

Eternity was upon me. No time I noticed passing, and I would have remained forever. As I lay there, a woman particularly in love actually came up behind the altar and stood before the Lord. She brought a chair in front of the tabernacle to kneel upon in order, it seemed, to draw as close as possible to Him. She would have gone inside and rested with Jesus, so taken was she. I found her tender love quite remarkable.

Oh Jesus! What a blessing to come before you and adore you! To rest in your presence and be with you, becoming one with you. All else passes away in your surpassing peace and love. We enter into eternity and remain in awe and wonder, crying out in silence to You

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whom our hearts love... O my Lord and my God, thank you for this special gift.

As I left the chapel after an hour or so, I had found the peace I had been lacking: I had my faith restored. I had needed so to spend time with Him whom my heart loves. And as I exited the chapel, what did I find but that the sun was shining brightly, clearly, uninterrupted by clouds! It would be the only time of real sunshine we would have all week, in this hour or so before it set.

I had been told there was a path behind the church which led more directly up to our house, and now I set forth to find it. I had seen it in the midst of the fields looking out from near the house, and had a general idea where it was situated. I began at a gravel path a ways behind the church and walked in faith and in joy. It was not long before I came to a cemetery. I had been told of its existence, but had not seen it before. I had also been told Fr. Slavko was buried there. I came straight to his grave, which was made the clearer by the devotional gifts and candles upon it. A young lady prayed in silence there, and I stopped for a time to offer my own recollection. Here lay a truly holy man.

Making my way quietly through the remainder of the small graveyard, coming down stairs and through a gate I arrived at a path which went left to right. A woman ahead of me turned left, which seemed the more traveled path, but I turned right to pick up the path in that direction, which seemed closer to my destination. As I walked through the fields, I turned in every direction, gazing at the simple yet wonderful beauty of this blessed land. The sunshine made all seem otherworldly, so clear, as all is after the rain. I passed a young lady sitting upon a large stone and sketching the marvelous scenery. I smiled to her and continued on my way, though curious to look at her work. Unfortunately, as I neared the mountains and came amongst the houses in their foothills, shade began to cover the path. I frequently turned to look back upon the sky and the fields in sunshine as I made my way through these simple streets.

I came to another fork in the road and decided to turn left. I chose incorrectly this time, for the path brought me to the foot of Mt. Krizevic; the house was about a ten-minute walk back to the right. But I had barely come to the path along the base of the mountains and begun to walk toward the house, when I turned and saw our guide

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driving along behind me. He stopped to pick me up on his way to the house, and this gave me a graced opportunity to speak with him about that which had been on my heart. (I had been hoping for just such an opportunity.)

I expressed to him my concern for Vicka, and even with tears in my eyes presented the question which had been troubling me – is she suffering too much? He understood my concern and didn't really have an answer himself, except to say that she had taken it upon herself to pray for the sick and so she was suffering with them, and also to remind me of faith and its power.

I wiped my eyes and hurried up the stairs – taking them two at a time, a melody coming from my lips – and headed into my room to change my clothes, which was a regular occurrence throughout my stay. It was quite a juggling act to deem priority of items to be placed upon and around the small, lukewarm radiator in my room. Shoes and socks, of course, took first place. I had a decent pair of heavy shoes/boots, which my landlord had given me (used) several months prior and I had not worn until a week before my pilgrimage (to break them in). I also had a decent pair of sneakers, also given to me, through a friend's father. (Most of my clothes, including both pair of jeans I brought, have been given to me, usually secondhand.) I had to give a set of underclothes to the only man my age amongst us pilgrims, since he had lost his suitcase. I still had enough shorts and undershirts, but socks were becoming a premium with all the tramping through the rain.

My winter jacket took second place in the vying for radiator space. It was soaked at this point, and I would wear a thermal vest I'd brought, over a thicker sweater, this evening to church. I had several sweaters and a couple of shirts, so these mostly took the hooks near the door. But my jeans, especially from the knee down, needed to be squeezed upon the heated surface. (I had brought one other pair of pants, which had gotten rather devastated by water and dirt the day before, but I would throw them on again the next day to climb Mt. Krizevic.) All in all I did an admirable job of balancing my clothes and keeping a dry wardrobe available. (Oh yes, this night I did have to wear my sweat pants I intended only for in the room to the church, having exhausted all other dry leg wear.)

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At dinner that night, another delicious and filling fare, our guide informed us we would climb Krisevic the next morning and probably visit Fr. Jozo's (pastor of St. James at the beginning of the visions) parish in the afternoon. It sounded good. And as I gazed out the window while enjoying my meal and conversing with the others, I thought perhaps we'd seen the last of the rain and could now really get into our pilgrimage.

Confession was my first stop at the church this evening, as I longed to bring my crooked lines to the Lord. While I stood in line at the outdoor confessionals – which were no longer old wooden boxes but nice, modern, enclosed little rooms (with heaters even!) – I happened to get into a conversation with the young woman behind me. She was from Texas, so I asked her about George Bush (our president-elect), and it turned out she had voted for Al Gore (a notorious pro-abortion candidate). I called upon all my reserves of politeness to query how, seriously, as a Catholic she could vote for him. She talked about not liking Bush's education policy and a couple of other matters, and said that she was not a single-issue voter. I made the point as strongly and lovingly as I could that the killing of millions of unborn babies – even some partially born – was not just another issue, but more like genocide... She didn't seem to listen, so I let it go with an apology (if I'd bothered her) and a joke that perhaps I now had something else to confess. (Even in Medugorje such sad ignorance of abortion as the central player in the culture of death. If a mother's womb is not sacred, what will be?)

In Confession I brought before the Lord my failing to follow His will and the concurrent lack of generosity and love. Father spoke of walking in the divine way – the “way of perfection” St. Teresa (of Avila) would call it – and recommended I meditate on the words of the Lord's Prayer which ask for the kingdom to come “on earth,” in other words, in my life. Yes, just such a channel for His graces must we be, such an instrument of His will. And as I die to self in patience now, and let Him live in me, I know that at every moment He is alive, and so must we be. (It is not always easy to listen to His voice, and do what it says.)

I had finally satisfied this second deferred desire, and felt I was ready to begin my pilgrimage in earnest. I floated into church well into the Rosary – by now it was certainly standing room only. I had

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had time to say Evening Prayer back at the house, so I could focus more on the Croatian prayers and songs this evening. Usually the lyrics to the songs of the Mass were cast upon a screen at the front of the church, and I enjoyed following along with the words and melody. The songs were not difficult for me to sing when the lyrics were presented, and they provided a means to participation and a greater spiritual benefit, as well as enjoyment, from the Mass. (We must participate in the holy sacrifice!) Tonight as I stood just inside the door at the back of the church, I had sufficient space to feel comfortable and did manage to become part of the celebration.

At these Masses the communicants do not go in lines to the front of the church; that would be impossible (and impassable). The dozen or so priests fan out to all parts of the building and move among the crowd to bring them the Lord. (They even go outside to those listening to the loudspeakers, I would later learn.) There is a degree of tension created among the communicants, I found, as they wait and make their way to the hands of the priest. I repeatedly found myself worrying, needlessly, that perhaps I might not make it through the throng. But the priests were ever calm, and no one was passed over. (I certainly do not mean to suggest that there was any disorder or chaos among the people; the tension I speak of was of an inner nature. I didn't see anyone push anyone else out of the way, though I suppose it may happen at times in more subtle ways.)

After Mass, the fellow male pilgrim my age came up to me and asked if I wanted to walk home. I had told him earlier about the path, and he was curious to find it. Here was a breakthrough of sorts, because he had been a little reticent to *do* things previously. I agreed, though, ironically, only if it was not raining. (I was conscious of my depleted wardrobe.) It had actually rained during the Mass – the ground was very wet – but it was not raining at the time, so we told the others of our plans and headed into the night to find the path.

I passed again through the cemetery, pointing out Fr. Slavko's grave, and we enjoyed the night air and the pleasant path. My partner was quite edified to have found this shortcut he could walk, and would be an instrument to bring it to the others. (He estimated it was about a mile and a quarter.) It must be remembered – as our guide would tell everyone the next day – that “pilgrimage” means literally

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“to walk for the glory of God,” and though it is not simply the physical action, to remove it is to put one’s pilgrimage in jeopardy.

My friend was a bit excited upon our return to the house and was already letting the others know of the path. I soon moved to turn in for the night, after giving him the set of underclothes. I had writing to do and my night prayers to say, and, of course, my shower to take.

I had finally figured out how to prop up the hand-held shower head on the hook I had not noticed in my previous pilgrimage. No longer did I have to struggle and shiver as I wet myself down, lathered up, and rinsed off... repeatedly turning off the water and laying the nozzle down. Now I could bathe as normal – in a bathroom without a shower curtain.

As I lay down, hearing the prayers of the wife of the couple in the next room, I could not but enter into prayer myself. Though my headache was gone, yet my heart was concerned for the suffering of Vicka, and all those who are martyrs for the Lord.

3. **St. John the Evangelist**

Waking on the feast of St. John, I took a little more time to say my prayers, coming down later for breakfast since it was Wednesday and I would be fasting (at least until evening). I had risen in the middle of the night to say Vigils – as had become my habit since a visit to a hermitage the month before – and waking time I reserved for Morning Prayer and intercessions for the various people in my life, the Church, and the world, as well as for going through the coming day and placing all events in the hands of the Lord. I had gotten a good night's rest (unlike the night before when I was so overtired I snored throughout the night – so I was told by my next-door neighbor) and felt refreshed and invigorated. Unfortunately, if that is the word (for there was good fortune in it, and I am learning not to judge such matters), it was raining again.

Coming down to table for my bread and water, there was some question among the pilgrims what would occur today. Our guide soon called and said the group would not climb Mt. Krizevic this morning, but that we would go to Fr. Jozo's parish after noon Mass. I decided without hesitation that I could not wait any longer to climb Krizevic, and that I had better be going if I were to make it back before Mass. I rose from the table, asked if anyone would like to join me – my friend seemed almost ready but then declined – excused myself, and hastened merrily upstairs to change into my climbing clothes. Since it was raining anyway, it didn't matter that my boots and jacket and pants were rather wet and dirty. I took my umbrella and headed out the door for the ten-minute walk to the mountain. I had my poncho on as well, but since it was only raining lightly, I took it off and stuffed it in the pouch of my jacket before beginning my climb. (I would, however, need it during one particularly strong downpour.)

The mountain was beautiful and the climb was inspiring, even, or perhaps especially, in the rain. There were a few individuals making the climb, and I passed one large group of French-speakers. There were children and a few more elderly folk... and several people walking barefoot. (I began to be ashamed of my own group's

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reticence.) For those unfamiliar with the mountain, it is not an easy climb for anyone but the hale and hearty. The path is very rocky and the elevation is quite intense. One does not need to use one's hands at all – though a staff can be useful – but each step must be taken with care, and one must have faith.

I'll never forget on my first climb seeing a line of blind people just floating down the mountain, each with a hand on the shoulder of a broadly-smiling nun before them. They walked along the treacherous path without hesitation. (It reminded me of a dream I'd had of my late godfather riding a bicycle down a steep and rocky mountain, my godmother on the handlebars, both of them just smiling without a care. I cringed a little, but they passed me and came around a hill safe as a baby in his mother's arms.)

On our way up the mountain that time, an artist was near the bottom working on some drawings. I had judged him in my mind, thinking he was just trying to make a profit. (Feeling good about my own not trying to sell my art.) As we came down the mountain, much later, I wanted to try what we'd seen of the blind people with my roommate. So I put my hand on his shoulder and closed my eyes, and let him guide me down the rocky mountain path. It was amazing how easy it was. Trusting in him and in the Lord, I found myself just floating along, my feet ever placed correctly.

As we were practicing this, the artist I had seen before came up to me without a word and handed me one of his drawings, a beautiful rendition of the crucified Christ – torso and head, and arms and legs up to the elbows and knees – which still hangs on my wall. (I'm looking at it now.) After handing it to me he simply walked away and sat down. (I think there was a second picture I gave to my friend.) When I began to question him, he motioned to me that it was mine. Quite a remarkable occurrence (would one use the word "miracle"?) and a lesson for my pride...

Also, for those unfamiliar, along the craggy way are secured in the stone brass bas-reliefs of the fifteen Stations of the Cross, made by the same artist who'd done the Rosary mysteries on Podbrdo Hill. So as I made my way up the mountain, I stopped periodically to say my prayers before each of the stations, as is the custom of the Church. (I'm told it was before the station representing the Resurrection that Fr. Slavko died.) The women of the village constructed a huge

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concrete cross at the top of the mountain in 1933 (well before the visions began in 1981), and this is the focal point of the journey, the Way of the Cross (put in more recently) serving to lead the pilgrim to this summit.

As I made my pilgrim way up the mountain, I noticed that the rocks did not seem at all slippery, despite all the water, and the climb went along smoothly. It made me regret even more that my fellow pilgrims were not with me, especially when I saw children running along happily. (One did slip a little, but was unhurt.) Most of the way I was in solitude, and such was the case when I came to the top. (The French group would not arrive until I was ready to leave, and this after a special mission had been accomplished.) I prayed by the cross, then went off to the side to sit at the high point of the mountain. Here the wind blew strongly, seeming to speak to the pilgrim in the Spirit. I remembered writing here my last pilgrimage [see Bridge] – I have a photograph my roommate took of me on my wall, in a nice display he'd sent me – and it was here I felt most comfortable.

The last time also I had stayed behind, alone, and prayed at sunset in tears and in tongues for peace to come to this region of the world which had seen so much hatred and bloodshed. As I knelt and cried I noticed another mountain across the way [in whose landscape I'd seen a figure of the crucified Christ], and thought to place a cross upon it for peace. So, upon coming down I took the staff I had used and a two by four I found, and nailed them together with a hammer I borrowed from our host. I carried it up the mountain in a sunrise climb with my roommate and two young ladies in our group, and crossed the valley to place it on that mountain. Now I wanted to see if it was still there.

In my previous climb across, faith and grace (and a guiding dog) had made the journey seem easy. I'd remembered only two short segments at either end in which I had to do real climbing – using hands, sitting, jumping, etc. Now not only did the way seem more difficult, my poncho fluttering in the wind, but I had less certainty about the path to follow, and turned this way and that a couple of times. On our sunrise climb a couple of dogs followed us up, and one, a German shepherd, actually crossed all the way over with me. He was unable to make it up the final few yards, and waited for me to come back, but this time that final few yards seemed endless.

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I'd come up in a different area, and not only did I have to seriously climb, but upon arrival at the top, thick bushes were all about. I finally found a spot where the bushes were thinner, and pushed my way through – at the very spot of my cross. It was still there, standing strong in the rocks into which I'd fixed it. I prayed a short while then started to make my way back, having even more difficulty with the climbing. The last time the dog had actually led me all the way back (with my roommate standing on Krizevic calling "Don Bosco"), even up a path behind the cross which required no climbing at all. (I'd forgotten about it upon coming down this time.)

Well, I made my winding way to that path behind the cross, though not with the same confidence, and sat myself down on the summit again to recollect myself. The French pilgrims soon arrived, and so, having at least accomplished my little goal and not wanting to be late for Mass, I began to head back down the mountain. I touched the figure of Jesus at each station on the way down, as a kind of penance for any anxiety I'd allowed into my heart, saying my Rosary as I went along. I also tried to make note of the twists and turns in the path, in order to secure knowledge of the way.

Soon I came to the foot of the mountain and began walking toward home. This time the van driven by our host came up from behind, and I stuck out my thumb (in play) to hitch a ride. I was wet and dirty and rather exuberant, and had just enough time to change before he was to ride us back on the way to church. (A curious note is that the more I stepped out in faith and did these pilgrim exercises in the rain, instead of becoming ill as I had feared, I actually became stronger, both spiritually and physically.)

Coming into my room I noticed the light wasn't working, so after changing I brought the bulb downstairs to get a new one. Our hosts pointed out that although some lights were on, the electricity was cut on several circuits, so it wasn't a new bulb I needed. The flood had gotten to the lights. (Even in the morning, I'd noticed the light was much weaker.)

Most of the group had gone into town earlier – walking the path through the fields (!) – so there were just a couple of us to be driven to church: a very friendly woman from down South and me. I sheltered her from the rain with my umbrella as we came from the van, and went with her to the information building (on church

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grounds) so she could purchase phone cards to call her children back in the States. Though she said not to worry, I thought I'd wait for her to make her three-minute call, and shelter her again for the remainder of the walk. (While waiting I picked up a small card with a picture of Fr. Slavko holding up the monstrance containing our Lord.) But she took a bit longer and I went along, for Mass was about to begin.

I sat beside my fellow single male pilgrim and his camera equipment. He was happy now, having finally received his suitcase the night before and, so, being better outfitted for his pilgrimage. I hadn't been the only one experiencing difficulties. In fact, I had the sense everyone in the group was undergoing some kind of trial. I know the married man whom I'd flown with was concerned about having to return from California to New York for cancer treatment shortly after our pilgrimage – and I shall speak of the woman just mentioned above shortly – but even those who did not talk much of particulars seemed searching for answers... This is not a bad place to look.

It was nice to sing Christmas songs at Mass throughout the week, and our Irish priest continued to preach well, today exploring John's believing upon seeing the empty tomb, and the very specific detail in the account. (I always notice in this gospel John's deference to Peter, that though he arrives first, he allows Peter to enter first – ever a good, humble example of the respect that should be given the Pope, I think.)

After the edifying Mass we went back out into the rain to head for the bus to take us to Father Jozo's parish. Actually, there were two bus loads of English-speaking pilgrims making the forty-minute journey. Along the way our guide spoke to the passengers (using a microphone) about Fr. Jozo, and gave us a little history lesson about the area. Here is where he told us also of the meaning of pilgrimage (walking for the glory of God) while informing us of the all-day walk so many hundreds of young people make along the path we were driving in order to go to a special youth conference/festival each year. Such a place of faith!

Much of that faith now has to do with Medugorje, of course, and our guide explicated the trials Fr. Jozo had to undergo for *his* faith. The visions had begun just a few months after he'd become pastor of St. James, and he was a skeptic at first. But soon he would find

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himself living two years in prison for his commitment to protecting the children from the Communist regime. And the entire area has had a history of struggle to maintain practice of the faith in the face of oppressive forces. We were told specifically of the twenty or thirty Franciscan priests and seminarians thrown in a tomb and burned by the Communists (some fifty years prior) for their adherence to Christ and the Church. That tomb was at Fr. Jozo's current parish (the one with the unpronounceable name).

The swaying bus ride in the rain along narrow, curving roads was a little more than the stomach of one woman in our group could take, but she rested a bit after we'd stopped, and recovered. I was particularly excited about this journey because the church had been designated as a pilgrimage church for plenary indulgence for the Jubilee Year. I had been making daily pilgrimage to the designated church in my area back home and missed this prayerful devotion since coming to Medugorje.

I moved with alacrity (for the talk we'd hear was not to be in the church) across the expansive courtyard and over the threshold of the church, and was drawn in quiet piety to pray before the Blessed Sacrament. My prayers were deep and warm in that cavernous, cold and damp stone structure, and clear purpose was upon me. I heeded not our guide's entreaty to join the pilgrims in the hall across the way, knowing what took precedence and that he understood. I did not want to leave even after my prayers were complete, but I went along as the guide came to lead our almost-deaf member to the hall.

About fifty pilgrims were seated in the small auditorium waiting for Fr. Jozo. He did not keep us waiting long, but spoke long (something I'm told the young people especially disliked when he first came to Medugorje, but later greatly appreciated), though on serious subjects. He pulled no punches regarding America and the rest of the Western nations leading the world to moral decay, professing the truth and passionately – even close to tears at times. He and his (American) interpreter impressed most very deeply, yet, though I concurred wholeheartedly with all his words and have professed the ideas myself, I must confess a rather gnawing unease throughout the time, stemming from their mode of delivery. It seemed to me to smack of the overly dramatic emotionalism I had come to know as the bane of the Charismatic movement. Though a principal force in the

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renewal of the Church (and in my own life, bringing me truly to the Church), its great gifts I've found require the vigilance of reason to temper their fruits. Though a candid simplicity came through at times, I generally feared a lack of proper balance in the presentation.

This rather suspicious attitude carried over into the church, as we lined up around its perimeter (actually, there must have been at least a hundred people) to be prayed over by Father. As we stood in line in this freezing cavern, the young Korean woman next to me was shivering terribly. She had no coat, so I removed mine and draped it over her shoulders. After a moment, she put it on, and I noticed that, though I had been shivering myself before, now I was able to stand quite still and comfortable – the cold having faded away. And I was not just joking when I said to the young lady some ten minutes later that Jesus was keeping me warm.

The time approached for Father to pray over me. I had been saying to myself that I would resist falling to the ground – being “slain in the Spirit” as it is termed in Charismatic circles – though ordinarily this does occur for me. As he drew closer I knew in my heart that I could not stifle the Spirit and that I had to be simple and open and honest, and ask for whatever would be. Father prayed and placed his hand on my head, and the weightlessness came upon me again. I lay on the floor for several minutes, I suppose, resting in the Spirit. After I'd sat up, the Korean woman came over with my coat, unable to bear my being on the cold, hard floor and saying, “It's more than I can take.” She was away quickly after leaving the coat, but later as I was standing in a hallway and people were getting ready to leave, she appeared and gave me a blessed kiss on the cheek, thanking me for my kindness.

Before we left there was one more adventure waiting in the wings. As pilgrims milled about the small bookstore (whose proceeds benefit the parish orphanage), a young seminarian asked our guide about the tomb of the Franciscan martyrs. We were now quite late and it had gotten dark, so the group would not be visiting there; but as I said I was interested too, a young woman spoke up who knew the way (it was right on church grounds) and offered to take us. The guide said not to be long for we were about to leave, so we hastened down the hall (another young woman in tow) and she led us outside, and down

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stairs and along a path beside a wall. We came to the tomb and I was drawn to go down the steep steps immediately.

As a light rain fell, I stood on the dirt landing at the bottom of the stone steps, staring into the darkness and moving my umbrella about inside to feel where the entrance led. Our guide said the cave was not deep and there was a shaft just ahead. The four of us stood and prayed together, the seminarian (near tears) especially for his vocation. He then told us each to take a stone (which we did) and began to climb out. I stood in silent stillness for a moment, and there was somehow a spirit of joy. I joined the seminarian up the stairs, telling him of my own inclination [to religious life], and allowing our guide a moment to herself at the mouth of the cave. The other two walked along and I waited for her to arise. At one point she motioned as if she would walk further in, and I excitedly asked where she was going (wanting to follow). She laughed, bemused at the thought of her going into the cave in the dark, and soon climbed up the steps. I sheltered her from the rain, and as we walked along she marveled at the speechless wonder upon her soul, quite overtaken with her inability to express its sense.

We were all soon in our places and the bus was on its way into the night back to Medugorje. Our guide regaled us along the way with description and example of traditional Croatian wedding customs. He really was quite a natural speaker, and entertainer. He would sing, at least briefly, whenever he had the chance, so I asked him later if he wanted to be a “rock ‘n’ roll star”. He confessed that he had had ambitions in his teenage years, but had sobered them over time. I confided my own musical leanings, and having had similar aspirations. (Perhaps it was the stunting of such musical/performance fruits that led to my judging of Fr. Jozo as I did.)

Anyway, his courting and wedding tales were quite amusing, and the adherence to tradition quite engaging, especially considering again the lack of such culture in American society. He told us with apology at one point of the Croatians’ traditional views of the man’s and woman’s roles. The man is the head, yes. But the woman is the neck, and wherever the neck moves, the head follows along. (In the culture, especially pertaining to spiritual matters.)

The ride was not so enjoyable for the female member of our group with the weak stomach, who had more difficulty, despite sitting at the

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front of the bus. I sat with her on the final leg of our journey, from St. James to our house, trying poorly to help keep her mind off her sickness (as she seemed about ready to vomit). My male pilgrim friend sitting next to me throughout the ride had not fared much better. He said that the bus was top-heavy and this caused a dizzying sway.

Before heading to the house we stopped at the church to let some brave pilgrims not in our group off and into the now-pouring rain. One of the young ladies I overheard sadly stating that she had petitions she hadn't gotten to Vicka. I stepped in and suggested that if she gave them to me I would at least make sure they got into the petition box at the information office, or else to our guide. (She was leaving early the next morning.) She didn't have them with her but agreed to meet me at the front of church after the adoration hour (for which I had so dearly been waiting) this night, and where I would certainly be.

Back at the house all the lights were out, so we ate our late dinner by dim candlelight. For three or four years I had fasted on bread and water through the entire day on Wednesday and Friday, but over the past year I had begun to eat an evening meal, making up the missing fast time on other days. [The guide later alleviated any guilt I might have felt by informing me that the fast was not applicable to feast days, which I did not know and which this certainly was.] So, though I'd fasted till now, I had a full dinner with my companions.

Our guide gave us a rundown of the next day's events as we sat and ate in the dark. The lights flickered on a couple of times, but soon went back off again. We noticed there were extra places set, five in all, which bode the arrival of additional pilgrims, and had my fellow single male pilgrim and me on edge a bit – since we'd been blessed to have our own rooms due to the paucity of pilgrims, but now had to question if that situation would last. A young lady would arrive that night and, fortunately, the four who arrived the next day were a family (mother, father, and two sons), who naturally shared two rooms, leaving us just enough space.

After dinner my friend and I spoke across the hallway, standing in our doorways, joined by an older woman in our group. We had missed the evening Rosary and Croatian Mass and were awaiting the hour of adoration at 9:00. I was inclined to say my Evening Prayer but

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was trying to learn not to be rude and selfish, and was engrossed in the topics. We talked about the Protestant misunderstandings of the role of Mary in the Catholic Church and the Church's role in salvation. Though all may enter heaven by the unfathomable will of God, we appreciated the special graces we'd been privileged to receive through the ministry and sacraments of Holy Church, and also our greater responsibilities thereby, including condemnation should we willfully sin. Eventually I did find time to say my prayers and prepare myself for the evening. (Note: A few lights were working here and there upstairs, though not the heat and hot water.)

The van left a little early for church, partly due, I'm sure, to my influence, and I was soon making my way across the courtyard, heading for a place at the front of the church in the open area before the altar. It was on this night and at this Holy Hour I'd had the most precious blessing of my last pilgrimage. Earlier I had been waiting on line for Confession with Fr. Slavko for the better part of the Rosary hour. (There were a number of penitents in line, but it was more the time he took with each individual that caused the wait.) This gave me much opportunity to do as thorough an investigation of conscience as I have done. And I saw all too clearly the pride which afflicted my soul. As I reached the confessional, the Spirit burning in my heart, Father came out and apologized – it was 6:00 and he had to celebrate Mass.

I was disappointed, but my mind soon turned to finding another priest. I went immediately back to the house to search for the priest of our group. He was not feeling well and resting, having fallen and cut his nose toward the bottom of Krizevic that afternoon, but I knocked on his door anyway. He was most gracious, a truly humble man, and asked me to give him ten minutes. That ten minutes in my room went by slowly, as I anxiously bode my time.

Returning to his room, he was most welcoming and understanding. I sat in the dark in a chair before him as he sat at the edge of the bed, and in tears confessed the pride and judgment of others I saw wrought into my soul. Father took time to speak with me and give me humble instructions, and I left having been made clean of breast.

That night during Holy Hour, still quite conscious of my sin and absolution, I knelt on the floor at the front of the church before our

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Eucharistic Lord. There was a flash of light which seemed to have no source, and it fixed my attention and gaze on Jesus. At benediction as Fr. Slavko raised the monstrance to bless the people (in three directions, slowly), he seemed to point it directly at me. My head went immediately down. I could not look up at the Lord. I tried several times, but each time my head bowed immediately down. It was physically impossible. And I never saw the Lord again that night.

Afterward, I lingered around in a kind of wonder till almost no one but the young Franciscan musicians were left. Father Slavko came out to lock the church and kindly asked if I'd gotten to Confession. I told him yes and sort of stammeringly related my experience during benediction. He walked away, his hands in the air, exclaiming, "Praise you, Jesus!" It was a special moment I shall never forget – particularly now that he is in heaven – and brings tears to my eyes as I recall it here. (Such pure, humble joy in the Lord.)

The adoration hour is still a remarkably beautiful and moving time. One yet feels Fr. Slavko's spirit strongly there, well-remembered by all who participate. The Franciscan Youth Group still play the most tender and loving refrains, singing as always in several languages, and they have also taken Father's role of speaking the short prayers throughout. I shall not forget Fr. Slavko on his knees, face to the ground behind the altar, but the Holy Spirit was not grieved at his absence. Still this time touches heaven as no other. And to find so many hundreds of young people crowded in the church and around the altar singing the loving praises of the Lord – it cannot but stir hope in the most fearful heart. The young priest's blessing after benediction I think mimicked Father's own, and left the hearts of especially the young people he touched so much with a smile of warm recognition. My tears are all over this page. (Note: Since writing this passage yesterday, I have been to Eucharistic adoration and been again encouraged with hope that the springtime of our Church is upon us after a century of absolute darkness. As I sit on the floor at the front of church, to the side leaning back against the front pew, a teenage girl comes up to pay her respects to Jesus. As she leaves, she turns and gives me the warmest and widest smile.)

After benediction I stood at the front of church in quiet contemplation, waiting for the young lady who would bring her petitions. She was not long in coming. She handed me a bulging

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manila envelope, which made me feel a little guilty about having written out no petitions myself, and we exchanged addresses and phone numbers. I assured her I would take good care of the petitions, and we walked to the back of the church with my pilgrim friend and a couple of others we'd just met. My friend wanted to walk again, as did the woman in our group with two children back home. The young lady stood at the back of church smiling as we prepared to leave, and I gave her a warm kiss on the cheek and said good-bye. (How I had become so loving I don't know. St. John must have been praying for me.)

Heading out of church and back towards the path, I kept myself a little aloof from my companions, lagging behind to seek contemplation. Again the sky was clear after adoration, and I turned about looking at the stars all around. My fellow pilgrims spoke very animatedly, the Southern woman immediately confiding that she wished our advice about the divorce she was going through. I was concerned but a little perturbed by their tone, in fact, having to chastise them strongly when they continued talking loudly through the cemetery – showing no respect for the dead or those praying quietly for them.

They calmed a little and a short while after leaving the cemetery, and having listened to the woman's story, the Lord put it on my heart to finally speak up. She seemed to be blaming herself for her husband's anxiety and lack of communication with her. I asked her pointedly if he had had an affair, and when she said yes he was but that she didn't mind, I lovingly lit into her – letting her know that it was he who had the problem, lost in the guilt which was gnawing at him, and that he was taking it out on her.

She seemed genuinely appreciative that we had listened to her and spoken honestly with her, from "a man's point of view." Though I wasn't really happy with her separation of the points of view of the sexes, I was very happy to share with her my thoughts and feelings, and pleased they seemed to help her. (I encouraged her to be strong.)

Back at the house I didn't linger long in the hall, late as it was and with things to do. The electricity was back on, so we had heat and hot water for a shower. And after my shower I prepared some petitions, including a special one for Vicka – that she not suffer too much – and wrote out two postcards for my parents (from Rome and Medugorje).

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I also set aside all the religious objects I had bought (and stones I had picked up from the ground), for I had not yet remembered to get them blessed. After saying my prayers I lay down at the end of a long day in the love of the Lord, considering the cross that leads to resurrection glory.

4. Holy Innocents

Upon waking I prayed my intercessions and Morning Prayer – having prayed the Office in the middle of the night – and dressed for breakfast. I had not shaved since leaving home (though I do have a cropped beard, I decided to let the hair on my neck and cheeks grow as well during my pilgrimage, particularly since I only use an electric razor and I'd have needed a converter in Europe anyway), which made getting ready that much simpler, and my face that much more unkempt.

Our pilgrim family had arrived and joined us downstairs for breakfast. Curiously, the same subject we'd discussed the night before, the Church's role in salvation, was brought up by the wife and mother of the family. I'm afraid I took exception to some statements she made and especially what I perceived as a condescending tone toward those of other faiths. I am a devout Catholic and avid defender of the faith, but (or perhaps "so") I believe strongly the ultimate fate of any individual soul is in the hands of the Lord, and His power cannot be curtailed. If it is true that the Church teaches no one of another faith may go straight to heaven, I would believe it (though I certainly have never heard it), but ever we must be diligent not to supplant the will of God or speak with derision of others, no matter their attitude toward us.

I felt a little bad about having gotten rather cross at the table, and sought forgiveness from the Lord throughout the day, but there would be a subtle barrier between the woman and me until the morning of my departure. We would speak again at table the next evening, she inquiring about Biblical substantiation for the bread and water fast recommended by the Blessed Mother. She was upset that a leading Charismatic priest in her area refused to believe the visions of Medugorje because of the lack of this literal proof. Trying to be composed and caring, yet speaking forthrightly, I told her I didn't think she'd find such proof and that the priest was being unreasonably stubborn to seek it. The call to fast on Wednesday and Friday in such manner was merely an intensification of fasts that exist in the Church.

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She woke at 2:00 the next morning, as we original pilgrims prepared to leave, to tell me that she'd thought about what I'd said – specifically, the example that the Catholic Church requires Confession but once a year but many in authority suggest going monthly (or even weekly) – and to thank me because it made sense to her and was something she could bring to her priest. I was humbled and it was a warm moment of reconciliation. (Praise God!)

After breakfast we were back out into the rain and off in the van to the Oasis of Peace community. The van was now crowded with the addition of five people, but we all managed to squeeze in upon the seats that ran either side. (A small carpeted square near the door soon became my squatting place.) When we arrived and had walked back along the silent path to the community chapel, we found it filled with Korean pilgrims being lectured by one of the sisters. Our guide asked us why we hadn't arrived at 9:00 (it was now about 9:20), though I'm not sure whose responsibility it was to have seen to that. (I thought he was going to be at the house to get us together and lead us.)

Well, the language was fine for one of our troupe, and the rest of us admired the inside of the chapel awhile [especially the most graphic crucified Christ many had ever seen]. I myself had been there before, so I wasn't concerned about missing anything. In fact, I had walked back to the road to see if the van was still there, and then back again to the chapel, in the rain. I knew Mass was soon (10:00, as usual, today), and for seeing that we all made it on time I would take responsibility (though I set my heart at rest with the realization that we still had Croatian Mass in the evening).

The Oasis of Peace is a small, contemplative community of brothers and sisters where silence is strictly observed and adoration is a charism. Its motherhouse is in Italy, but I believe it was founded in Medugorje by those seeking to live more completely the message and call of Our Lady. (It is set at the foot of Apparition Hill, next to Cenacle.) When I last visited I was quite taken with the simple spirit of this narrow place and considered joining – but was disappointed to hear that I might not be in Medugorje if I did join.

Now in my life I am looking seriously into monastic and eremitic life, and have visited a few communities. Though the wife and mother of our pilgrim family said she didn't see how that life could be for me, since I like to talk so much, yet I am seeking along this way. (Though

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this particular day she did put some question in my heart, calling me to address the silence within.)

Well, my worrying was for naught because my new friend did yeoman's work of fishing everyone out of the chapel and making sure we got to the van (and so church) on time. As we came from the chapel, it was raining quite hard, so once again I found myself wet – at least from the knees down, where the umbrella provided little protection. I'd long ago learned to accept this circumstantial inconvenience, but I would be wet the rest of the day, including at Mass. But the wonderful thing about Medugorje is that it seems to lend itself to such states of pilgrim decorum.

I recall coming from climbing Krizevic to evening Rosary and Mass during my last pilgrimage. I walked into the back of church, staff in hand and dirt covering my shoes and pants (stones in my pockets). I leaned the staff in a corner by the confessional and squatted near the wall. I did not feel the least inhibited, nor did anyone give me a sideways glance. In fact, an elderly gentleman offered me a seat next to him in an empty confessional. The people are so down-to-earth, of the earth – truly humble.

Today Father spoke primarily of Herod and how he could not accept Christ's coming into the world, but instead felt it a threat to his authority. (No John the Baptist was he: "He must increase, but I must decrease.") And of course I could not help but think of the genocide against the unborn children in this time, this terrible scourge at the heart and soul of the culture of death. In our own country abortion has been legal for twenty-eight years and has signaled and summed the most precipitous of moral declines, which pervades our absolutely selfish society bent on what is convenient and profitable for "me", without a thought for repercussions on others and its effect on our souls. "The poorest country," Mother Teresa termed us. (We pray now with a new leader possessing a semblance of decency we have hope for rebirth.)

Fr. Svetozar was to have given a talk after Mass, but unfortunately the talk was cancelled, so our guide said we were on our own for the afternoon. (He'd had a large group of English pilgrims who'd come in that he had to tend to.) I had already decided to say my Joyful Mysteries on Podbrdo this afternoon, so I now would go without rushing. Several others expressed interest in going, but some wanted

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to eat and others to shop before going... so I took off on my own again. (Again, am I selfish, or moving as Joseph when the Lord calls?)

Into the rain again, I sought the path which led through the fields to the hill. I had known it well my last pilgrimage, but got myself turned around among the twisting village streets and had to stop in a shop to ask directions. The way they pointed out did not lead through the fields but remained on the road along the edge of the town, completing the semicircle I'd walked from Podbrdo to the house on Christmas. It was longer but took me to areas I had not been before, and so served again to familiarize me a bit with the village... and provided a pleasant view of the fields (where crops such as tobacco and figs are grown), though now all was quite bare.

As I said my Joyful Mysteries [on the hill], I found a rock at each station to sit upon. I stood for a moment to find just the right place near the bas-reliefs, and then sat comfortably with my umbrella perched near the top of my head, forming a protective domicile. Once again there were very few people upon the hill (I remember only one or two while I was climbing), so a peaceful solitude was easily achieved. I again found myself particularly drawn to the bas-relief for the Finding of Jesus in the Temple, and sat very near it as I said my Rosary. As I prayed there, it began to rain very hard, pouring down upon the roof of my domicile. (I was kept dry and warm inside.) But before I'd risen to walk over to the cross – which is directly to the side of this station – it had subsided and did not return again.

At the cross I had hoped to find special peace and quiet, but there was a large group of vocal pilgrims at the site of the apparitions. They prayed on for some time (in Italian, I think), which was fine, but I wanted to enter the silence. As I sat there hoping they might finish soon, I noticed clearly the path that led through the fields to the church and made a note of it in my mind. Time was passing and I was struggling to recollect myself, so I eventually decided I would return early the next morning to say my Sorrowful Mysteries and find the peace I sought. It was getting near adoration time in the chapel (2:00), so I made my way directly down the hill, stopping only to pick up a stone at the fifth joyful station.

Coming from the foot of the hill I very soon passed Vicka's parents' house (she was not speaking – she does so in the morning),

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and, almost immediately after, entered upon the fields. There were two paths, and I started down one (going straight)... but turned around after a few feet, thinking I'd seen a sign. I thought to ask directions of the few middle-aged farmers who were standing and talking there, but noticed the sign and that it pretty clearly pointed the other way. And so I was off, past a cabin with a large pile of firewood and into the open fields.

I suppose the walk took twenty minutes or so, and as I went I did my best to avoid the puddles and mud, edging into the grass at a few spots. I tried to stay on the path, not wanting to walk upon the fields too much – although the people here don't seem to have the word “trespassing” in their Croatian dictionary – but the final leg of puddle-filled dirt required the common sense of traversing the grass. I kept the steeples of St. James before me at all times, especially as I entered the winding streets of the village. It was not far to the road which led to the church, but I must have turned a half-dozen times. I arrived successfully, however, and without a wrong turn, and now had the path fixed in my mind.

I stepped into the chapel in my muddy shoes and kneeled for a short time in the pews. But I had my sights on my more secluded place to the right of the altar, and soon found the courage to step over there. It should be noted that though I am sort of a loner by nature, I was especially desirous of solitude on this pilgrimage because of my hope of discerning vocation. As mentioned, for six months I had been speaking with and visiting various religious communities, seeking the way the Lord had for me and being obedient to the counsel of wise men. Here at the end of the Jubilee Year, a year in which I'd made daily pilgrimages – and in the midst of which I'd celebrated my fortieth birthday – I believed the time of decision must be upon me. And so I came to Medugorje now as a final prayer for resolution.

And there is no better place to pray and to listen to the voice of the Lord than in His presence before the Blessed Sacrament. Here where it is so easy to touch Him, here where He reaches out and touches us, here where the silence which is His NAME comes to us as we wait with Him (an hour or so) – here we can find peace, and here we can find His voice leading us.

I again lay prostrate before the Lord, after kneeling awhile, but this time on the cold ground of the chapel and not the carpet in the

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sanctuary. And though perhaps today I was a bit tired and somewhat distracted in my prayer and in my silence, yet the Lord was there; and I found myself continuing to renew the commitment I had made to Him some three weeks before, and continuing to seek the way in which my “yes” would work itself out as a vocation in His Church.

Even before I entered the chapel the sun had been struggling to show itself, and now as I exited over an hour later it yet searched for an opening through the clouds which had been present virtually all week. And again this third time [the second being stars on a cloudless night], though not so completely (but perhaps more intently), the sun pierced the clouds upon my leaving adoration.

As I entered upon the path behind the church, not having yet reached the graveyard, the sun shone through a break in the sky – directly in front of me and directly upon me. I could not help but get a little tearful and particularly joyous, as I had expected this thrice blessing upon adoration. (Indeed the sun seemed like a huge host in the sky.) It made me think of the hermits I had most recently visited, whose life is framed by adoration – an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening – in the personal chapels (!) in their small hermitages. Perhaps it was there I was being led. (The sequel to this work will be *Five Days in the Desert*, about my experience at Bethlehem Hermitage a week after returning from Medugorje.)

Even as the sun still shone, I veered off to look at the statue of the crucified Christ which had been erected here behind the church since my last visit. It is a very tall and very flat metal sculpture, whose base extends back and has a recessed space in its cross shape in the form of the sculpture – giving the impression of the sculpture rising out of this kind of tomb. As I circled round, three people were taking turns lying in the cross form of the base, their arms spread wide open like Christ Himself. They each remarked about the special sense it provided them; I smiled as I went along, knowing this sense of sacrifice deep in my soul.

I cut through the field to the path past the cemetery and continued my journey home. The sun did not stay long, but its message had been received, and so the clouds could return. Coming into the house (about a half hour or so before dinner), I noticed several of us pilgrims congregated near the couches and table at the end of the hall. I changed out of my wet and dirty clothes and soon joined the

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gathering. Several of them had climbed Podbrdo Hill and there was increased excitement in their hearts. Two of them had in fact arrived at the apparition site and sat apart as I made my way incrementally to the cross where the pilgrims were praying. And the married couple whom I'd traveled with also made their way up the hill. He had purchased a couple of crosses near the base of the hill. The \$200 gold one to be worn around the neck did not impress me – though I couldn't deny to his wife at table later that buying such a thing for himself did seem to indicate a softening to faith – but the \$15 one he'd bought for the neighbor who was watching his dog did catch my eye and attention. I don't remember it now in detail, but I do recall its graphic sense of strength, much like a Benedictine.

At dinner this evening I was overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of my fellow pilgrims. Led by the California man from Iowa who supposedly cared not for religion, they each chimed in that they wanted to climb Mt. Krizevic the next day in the early morning. I couldn't believe it. I asked one and then the next, and each was serious in his desire. (Tomorrow, Friday, was our final day, and no one else had climbed Krizevic yet.) As the meal went on some of that intensity waned, and my humanist friend reasoned it would be better for him and his wife to go later... since he might have to help her up the mountain. Still, two or three were committed to going. The person I could not believe was dead set on getting up to the top of the mountain before sunrise was the sixty-seven-year-old Italian man. He insisted we must, to get the Mother's blessing at the foot of the cross at sunrise. I threw up my hands and could only go along, flabbergasted at such sudden inspiration to act – rain or shine.

In the van on the way to church there was continued discussion (except from the Italian man and me) as to whether and, mostly, when to climb Krizevic the next day. We had thought before to go as a group at 2:00, the time of the church-led Way of the Cross (always guided by Fr. Slavko and, of course, at the end of which on the fourth Friday in November he'd died), but our guide had told us Marija (the visionary who gets the message published monthly to the world – which I read every day, and one of which serves as the cover quote of this book) was to speak at 3:00 in the (what used to be a) tent behind the church. I certainly wouldn't want to miss this, and it was another factor to be considered in tomorrow's scheduling.

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On the way to church I stopped off to mail the postcards to my parents, placing them in the yellow box in front of the Franciscan bookstore (where I'd bought a tape of Fr. Slavko leading adoration hour earlier in the afternoon), then made my way into the church and over to a little corner by a side door, where I had staked out a place two evenings before and found it comfortable. This time it was a bit more crowded, and the woman (with a small child) in the pew beside me had placed a bag in the area, so I had to maneuver around to stand and lean, and especially to squat against the wall or sit (and kneel) on the floor.

I had remembered to bring my religious items with me, though, and at 5:40 I poured them out of the little white bag into my hand (fumbling with some difficulty, since I had picked up several small stones on Apparition Hill to go with the small medals, rosary beads, and larger stones), knelt down in silence with everyone else, and held the objects aloft for the Mother's blessing. I removed them from the bag and held them aloft for the priest's blessing at the end of Mass as well. Though the first blessing may be special, the second is the necessary one, of course, for we know that even – or perhaps especially – the Blessed Mother recognizes and celebrates the special role of the priests in the Church of which she is Queen.

At Communion I lined up with everyone else as the dozen or so priests as usual came down the aisles to distribute the hosts to the people at the edge of the pews. I tried to be patient as I could, allowing others to pass before me, working to calm my anxiety and find trust in the Lord – and I was of course soon ministered to. Then after Mass and the blessings it was time to adore the same Lord we had just received in the exposition of the Sacrament. Fortunately, several people left after Mass, and I was able to stake out a place to sit and kneel in the side aisle a little way up from the musicians. Others soon replaced those who had left, and the church became packed to capacity (and beyond).

I found myself kneeling behind the sister who had given the talk to the Korean pilgrims at the Oasis of Peace that morning. There was another sister of the community beside me and one of the brothers a couple of people behind, so I was surrounded by peace. And how very appropriate that was, because indeed I felt Christ's peace very strongly in this Hour – at one interval closing my eyes, listening to the

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music and singing, and believing myself within heaven's gates... I had to smile at another point, as I saw myself and all these people packed together and kneeling so close to one another and considered how certain Christian sects accuse us of idol worship in adoring the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. If this were idol worship, there would be an orgy going on, but as it is, here in the Presence of the Lord that thought does not even enter in.

Of peace and the NAME of God (YHWH) I must say a few words. I believe I have mentioned in this work the NAME's being a silent Word – when one speaks it, it stills the tongue. But it is also pure breath, pure breathing in the Spirit, because it allows the passage of spirit, of breath, without interference from the human instrument. And in this wordless breathing is peace, is release from any anxiety and cares, from all human thoughts and concerns... and is the Presence of the Lord speaking in us. Here in this WORD, here in His NAME, we find an oasis of true peace. And that WORD is made flesh in Jesus the Christ; and that WORD was present before us. And finding that WORD we were at peace, in Life itself, which is not of this world but heaven. (Live in His NAME.)

I floated out the back of the church after Holy Hour, picking up one of the magazines with the photograph of Fr. Slavko holding up the monstrance for benediction on the cover (as I said before, these lined the racks in the vestibule) and I placed it inside my coat, not because I was stealing it but because, of course, it was raining again and I, thinking optimistically, had left my umbrella at the house. We made our way quickly, but happily, to the van waiting for us on the street beside church grounds – there was no thought of walking – and were soon on the road home.

Back at the house some discussion continued as to who would be going early to Krizevic. The married couple now said they might and asked me to wake them in the morning. In fact, virtually everyone was now a possibility. I spoke with the other young single man and told him I would like him to go because the older woman expected to go – in addition to the older Italian man – and I felt I could use his support. He understood and agreed to go. And even the young woman from California, who'd had the stomach trouble on the bus, thought she might go... We would see in the morning.

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Before I could get into my room and to sleep, the young (teenage?) lady who'd recently joined us (who had time later to go to Krizevic) began asking me about my experience in the Charismatic Movement, a discussion of which had come up at dinner in relation to our afternoon with Fr. Jozo. She soon asked me if I would pray over her. I said sure, and we went to the end of the hall, she seated on a chair and I seated on the table, looking out the glass doors to outside. She wouldn't share her specific ailment, but I prayed over her for healing, and after a short while noticed my (right) hand, which was over her head, began shaking rather uncontrollably. I was not sure what it meant – perhaps nothing – and left it to God. I soon concluded my prayer and headed to my room. (At times I have thought I might have a gift for healing – often I have felt the wounds of Christ in the palms of my hands – but have never seriously pursued or investigated this possible gift.)

The day was drawing quickly to a close: I showered, prayed a little while, and got a few things ready for tomorrow. Our last day promised to be an eventful one, and it would begin early.

5. St. Thomas Becket

In all our discussions the day before, we had calculated that in order to be to the top of the mountain by sunrise, and back down to hear Vicka speak – which was another event our guide had added to our schedule – we needed to get out of the house by 4:45. I began knocking on doors a little before 4:30.

First, the married couple said they had decided to go together later in the day (which they did). Then I found my partner across the hall wavering. Next, the older woman said she thought the rain would make the rocks too slippery. (Did I need to tell you it was raining again?) She would happily tell me later in the day how patient my fellow young male (if 40 is young) was in helping her up the mountain – in the early afternoon. Finally, in order to get his attention I had to speak loudly at the Italian man's door, since he was nearly deaf. (Two hearing aids helped a little.) The Southern woman [later] thanked me, ironically, for waking her. (I told her I was trying to get her to go. She was the only one of our group who did not climb Krizevic, taking advantage of quiet time to compose her life. The family and the young lady who arrived later had said they would climb another day.) It looked like it might be just my brave elder and me, but the woman from California came out and said she was going, too.

We got our gear together – they each had a flashlight and an umbrella; I had an umbrella and a poncho, but no flashlight – and after my fumbling with trying to lock the front door for a few minutes (I finally just left it ajar), we were out on the road to Krizevic, in a light rain. We seemed an odd trio to me, and I found myself slightly concerned for my partners' fragility... but my faith that the Lord and the Blessed Mother would watch over us did not waver. At the foot of the mountain we said a short prayer together, invoking God's blessing, and started on our Way of the Cross (at 5:00).

It was not long before the booklet of station prayers the elder woman had lent to me became damp from the rain, and it also did not take long before I found myself noticing some shortness of breath...

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which caused me to wonder about the others. I tried to lead us as gradually as I could – my elder friend reminded me once or twice he was not my age – and at around the third station I found myself a little unsure of the correct path, so I borrowed a flashlight to go ahead and scout out the way. The one I had chosen was the right one, and as I started back to get my partners I found they had followed behind me. A couple of times I went ahead a short way, and all along the way I tried to pick the path of rocks that would be easiest to pass along. (In my previous climb I had hoped I might climb barefoot this next time, but thought it unwise now, considering my responsibility to my fellow pilgrims.)

Around the fourth or fifth station it started to rain very hard, and we were soon soaking wet. Our elder pilgrim needed to stop a couple of times to catch his breath, relating a feeling of dizziness, and I began at this point to doubt the intelligence of our venture – blaming myself especially for seconding it. I kept these thoughts to myself, of course, and continued on with a hopeful attitude... and the turning point came when I gave my poncho to the Italian man. His overcoat had become quite heavy, and caused him to struggle along. With the virtually weightless poncho he was able to move more freely, as well as stay a bit drier. (Ridding himself of the overcoat also kept him from sweating.) I wrapped my backpack in my friend's coat – hoping to keep dry my Liturgy of the Hours and the envelope of petitions the young lady had entrusted to me, which were contained within – and made my way up the mountain with this package in my arms. My elder remarked that it was my cross to carry, a thought which had already been in my mind.

There were some treacherous areas we still had to traverse, but the hard rain did not stay with us, and my friend became increasingly stronger. (The woman from California proved a stalwart companion.) I tried to keep my mind on the prayers of the now soaking book, whose pages were therefore difficult to turn, and noticed the recurring theme of giving oneself to God. (More and more we must certainly do this, and here was a test of the faith needed to hand over one's will to the Lord.) My female friend shone her flashlight on the pages as I read the prayers aloud [she joined me for the response], and we made our way from station to station.

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Along the way our elder's flashlight had waned in power, so we had but the one as we found our path through the dark. But, so beautifully, so blessedly, as we arrived at the top of the mountain, the rain subsided... and the sun began to rise! The path to the final two stations (The Entombment of Jesus and His Resurrection) near the cross which rules over this mountain (and village) is flat and easy to pass, so I thought it O.K. to hasten ahead of my friends. But they were a little slow to follow and our elder needed his overcoat here at the top of the mountain, where a cool wind was blowing strongly, as well as a sip of water from the California woman's bottle (which thankfully she had brought along; it had helped him a couple of times along the way). We climbed the last path of rocks together and knelt quietly at the foot of the huge cross. A young Croatian couple were praying there, too – she in bare feet climbed the mountain like it was a simple stairway. We had also seen a Korean group pass us, with little children in tow, but no others were here at the summit.

While my partners remained near the cross, praying, I walked over to the high point of the mountain, sat in my place upon the rocks, and read my Morning Prayer in the wind. In ten or fifteen minutes I noticed that my traveling companions had begun to walk down from the cross toward the trail. I signaled that they could start to walk and I would follow soon – but they seemed to hesitate. I checked the time, 6:50, and realized I should get going anyway. The climb down shouldn't have taken nearly as long, but we did need to be at the road by 8:00 to catch the van on its way to Vicka's house. I sat in quiet a moment, walked over to and knelt at the cross... then went to catch up with my friends.

The climb down was indeed much easier; in fact, for the first part of it our Italian elder led us down at a rather brisk pace. Eventually, I stepped ahead to choose and guide us along the safer paths, but really, now that we could see, there wasn't a lot of need for my directing. The woman from California slipped a little at one point, but was unhurt and quickly back to climbing at a pace. At another point, when I had gotten a little ahead of the others, I noticed a branch with thorns coming into the side of the path, and broke off a piece and stuck it in the pouch of my sweatshirt as a memento (which now is slipped into the top of the drawing of the crucified Christ given me by the artist on the mountain three years ago).

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It did not rain at all on our way down – and would not for the remainder of the daytime hours – so I had my poncho and umbrella safely stashed into my little backpack. We passed a number of people making their climb up now, having to step aside for groups to go by a couple of times, and I imagined their ranks would increase as the day wore on (including four members of our own group). But it had been a special blessing to meet the difficulties of rain and darkness in the early morning hours, and overcome them with the grace of God. When we reached the bottom safely, a sincere prayer rose in my lungs as we held hands facing the mountain: We who have gone forth in sorrow into the darkness, have come back in joy in the light of the Lord. This sense seemed to characterize well my own and each of our pilgrimages – and we were thankful to God for His faithfulness to us. (There is hope, brothers and sisters.)

As we came to the road it was nearly eight, and my tired legs would have assumed wait for the van to come by, but our female member kept striding along, heading back toward the house. The Italian man and I walked along together at a more leisurely pace, dropping back further and further from our energized companion. We spoke particularly of the generous blessing it was to be able to receive plenary indulgences for church pilgrimages this year – he also had done this daily – though I wasn't entirely sure my fellow pilgrim was catching everything I was shouting toward his ears. We were nearly back to the house when the van drove up, with our fellow climber already aboard. I ambled on, but my companion continued to the house to rest (having already visited Vicka once). The next part of my day – indeed, the entire day – would be no less eventful than this auspicious start.

As we arrived at the house of Vicka's parents, pilgrims were gathering around the front porch, waiting for the visionary. This group of pilgrims would be addressed in another language (actually, two other languages), so we would have to wait our turn. I milled about the narrow road before the house, which at this point was about empty. After a couple of minutes, Vicka (with another young woman) rushed past me toward the porch. Catching sight of her smile, my own face immediately lit up and I nodded a greeting. She was soon at her perch halfway down the steps of the porch and praying with, then speaking to the crowd about the Blessed Mother's messages.

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As I stood about in the road, more and more people gathered. (There would be two groups following as well, including our English one.) As the crowd filled the road and the surrounding area, it became quite a chore for cars, taxis (a garbage truck at one point)... to pass. The road as it was only provided room for one car at a time – it was customary for one to pull to the side when two cars met – and now with all these people gathered, the scene became almost comical.

Taxis would pull up several yards away, let people off, then back away and return whence they came – but cars which were passing through had no such choice. Some drivers became impatient, and a few horns were beeped, but through it all Vicka kept speaking... and eventually everyone made it through. One time a series of cars had lined up on both sides at a seeming impasse. But the four or five cars to my left all backed out, and the other line was allowed to pass. (I didn't think the garbage truck would get through, but it managed.)

During this sequence, our guide had arrived, climbed up to the roof of the garage next to Vicka's house, and walked a plank from there to her porch. He stood about on the porch motioning to several people (greeting me, too) and came back across the plank once to get something from the leader of the new group of English pilgrims (FIAT, I think), while standing on the roof of the garage. I had hoped to get him to translate my message for Vicka (a prayer that she not suffer too much, but that all her work be fruitful), so after a few minutes of internal debate, I motioned him back over to the garage roof, slipped the paper with the message into the cap of this pen, and threw them up to him – communicating to him that I wanted him to “translate” the words for me. He took it and went back to Vicka's porch and read the message. I had to motion again to him to translate... I meant in writing, but after she had finished with the current groups, he spoke the prayer to her verbally. I thought I'd noticed a reaction but wasn't sure. (My intention had been that she read the prayer privately.)

Soon the other groups had pulled out from around the porch – we were to enter at the left of the wall in front and exit to the right through the neighbor's front yard (where I had stood the other day) – and we waiting pilgrims began to flow in. I had found space about ten feet from the porch, and there was a young priest beside me leaning against the house. He told me he was a vocations director at Notre

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Dame, and I mentioned the search I was going through. He gave me the name and number of a teaching monastery before Vicka began again to speak. [In this time, too, as I hesitated, the head of the other group of pilgrims took the manila envelope of petitions from my hand and confidently passed it up over the heads and through the hands of those in front of me to Vicka.]

As she spoke the beautiful messages of Our Lady – prayer with the heart, fasting, Mass, Confession, concern for young people... I tried, with difficulty, to smile and look into her eyes. I found myself praying intensely for her. I asked the Lord to let my right arm wither, if only it would relieve some of her suffering. I was very aware of her martyrdom and desired sincerely to share in it, for I felt it too much for her alone.

I continued my prayer till the end of her talk. As the time came to leave, I had the prompting to touch her cheek and bless her, but was resolved to move along with the others past her porch and away. However, she walked down to the bottom of the stairs and began to speak with and then pray over a few people, laying her hands on their heads. People crowded near the foot of the stairs looking for her prayers, and it became difficult to pass. I stood about and sort of gradually moved, or was moved, toward the steps. Behind me were two French pilgrims (who were to be spoken to next) in wheelchairs. I thought they were just trying to move to the front, but I guess they were seeking prayers for healing, as Vicka continued to pray over the people two at a time – a hand on either head.

As I approached the bottom of the steps, she was in front of me. I reached up my left arm to join in the healing prayers, and Vicka nodded her encouragement. But I placed my left hand on hers, and as she prayed for the souls before her, I prayed for her – begging that I might take some of her suffering. When she'd finished with this pair of people, I removed my hand and left immediately, without looking up or back, satisfied I had accomplished what the Lord had prompted in my spirit.

On the street I walked up a short way, but there was no van waiting. I ran into the young lady who'd recently joined our group; she asked me if I'd seen that Vicka had prayed over her (remarking about the strength of her hand on her head). I walked back toward the house to see if the van was the other way, and ran into our guide. On

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the road in front of her gate, he told me he had given Vicka my message and that she had almost cried. I put my left arm around his waist and walked up the road with him, happily discussing this. He let me know that I needed to catch a cab to church (Mass was soon to begin), as he got in a car with members of his new group. I met up with my married travel mates and the young lady again, and we got into a cab together.

But the road past Vicka's house seemed nearly impenetrable and Mass was only twenty minutes from starting, so I thought for a moment to get out and walk through the fields – noticing the path outside the window... However, after waiting patiently a moment or two, we made our way through the crowd of people in the street. As we drove along, the young lady repeated with some wonder her experience with Vicka (as she would a time or two more). Before getting out of the cab I collected some money from my fellow passengers to pay the \$4 fare (flat rate anywhere in the village), as well as a small tip. (This was my first and only taxi ride this trip.) We then headed for the church, where Mass was about to begin.

Even during the taxi ride, and now very clearly at Mass, I had felt a pain in my left arm, a kind of dull ache, especially behind my bicep. One might say it probably derived from my climb up the mountain, considering I carried a coat and a pack – but why had I felt nothing until just after praying for Vicka? The pain would last well into the next day (and the day after as I recall), and here at Mass it was very strong. I was continually conscious of it and, rather than distracting me, it served to focus my attention on the holy sacrifice at hand.

There were now three priests on the altar, including the one I'd met in Vicka's yard, as things began to get back to normal as we moved away from Christmas Day – but the Irish priest remained the main celebrant and homilist. He celebrated the Mass for the feast of St. Thomas Becket, and told us in his homily of Thomas' martyrdom, which was the central cause of Canterbury becoming such a great place of pilgrimage. The comparison was almost too obvious – though the priest did not make it – between Thomas and these visionaries in Medugorje (especially Vicka, I suppose, being as present to the pilgrims as she is). And the celebration of this feast seemed most appropriate for this pilgrimage, and particularly this most pilgrim day.

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After Mass I knelt before the expansive nativity scene set up in front of the altar, showing all the creatures who had come to see Jesus in the surrounding natural setting. Then, as several others of us headed toward Krizevic, I made my way to the path through the fields to visit Apparition Hill one final time.

Along the road near the church I met the friendly old Croatian man I had bought figs from three years before, in the same place. I had only about a dollar's worth of kuna (Croatian money) on me, but he made me a generous bag for what I could give him – and insisted on throwing in a kiwi. I thanked him and put the bag in my backpack for when I'd ended my fast, then made my winding way through the streets to the field... passing the stone buildings, chickens and pigeons, and scattered old storefronts selling religious articles.

Along the path through the fields today (and as usual) there were women selling handmade clothing and other knitted articles, hoping to catch a tourist's eye. (Not this poor one, I'm afraid.) Walking in this area with my roommate three years earlier, I'd seen two aged peasant women carrying absolutely enormous bundles of leaves on their backs – and I could imagine how the women of this hardy village carried concrete up the trail of Krizevic to build the cross atop it in 1933.

This afternoon on Podbrdo Hill I walked gradually past the Joyful Mysteries to sit and pray in front of the stations for the Sorrowful (this being Friday). Though it was not raining, there were not a lot of people climbing and praying, especially near the Sorrowful Mysteries. These mysteries begin after the entrance to the apparition site – which is the main attraction of the hill – so not everyone makes their way to them. (They arc around and lead to entry of the apparition site on the other side.) So I again had much-treasured solitude in which to pray my Rosary and commune with the sufferings of the Lord.

Coming around to the apparition site, I found few pilgrims there as well. A priest stood with two women praying what seemed like the Hours – chanting psalms back and forth in French. I sat near the cross and was better able to pray today, and to find the stillness this place holds. As a group of pilgrims came by, I made my way to a path just in front of the cross, which I had seen a woman climb down on Christmas Day. I had actually ventured a ways down it on my first pilgrimage, being told by our guide the site of the first apparition was

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“down in that area somewhere” [the cross above marks the site of the second and the regular apparitions for the first few months], but had never climbed all the way down the hill on this alternate path, and wasn’t even sure it led that far.

As I made my way down I thought of my sister and her death, another reason this place holds special meaning for me. She was five years younger than I and died when only fifteen (about the age of these visionaries at the time of the first apparitions), accidentally falling from a secluded cliff in my hometown. The date of the very first apparition (June 24, 1981) – at which the Blessed Mother gave no message – was one year and one day after the date of my sister’s death (June 23, 1980). I thought of her because I was here near the site, but also because I was a little fearful about joining her now in this secluded place. (As indeed I was even more so while crossing back to Krizevic from the further mountain on Wednesday.)

But the path was not too bad and I made it down safely, and came upon the site of the Blue Cross at the bottom of the hill. First I came upon makeshift stone fortress walls, which I’d been told previously were erected as places for the young people to pray, hidden from the Communists who occupied the area at the time of the visions’ beginning. Then I arrived at the Blue Cross shrine, also surrounded by stone (I recall here my fellow (Iowan) pilgrim’s insightful comment: “They grow stones here.”), and now equipped with a tier of benches. A woman was praying there and I felt a very sacred silence present, so I bent over and picked up a stone for a woman who’s been as a spiritual mother to me, and herself has a special devotion to Mary. (There was also another shrine with a statue of Mary adjoining this sanctuary.)

Having drunk in this unexpected blessing, I walked along the road back to the field, again wanting to make Holy Hour at 2:00. But this time as I passed Vicka’s house (I didn’t find out till later it was actually her parents’ house), I found a strong attraction to knock on her door. There were, of course, no pilgrims about now, and I, of course, had been thinking about her since the morning – my arm still aching at my side – and I stood for a moment looking at the house... Common sense took over and, not wishing to disturb her (though I don’t think there’s much that disturbs this most open and

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direct/honest race of humble people), I moved along toward the fields – looking back once or twice, noticed I think by a few neighbors.

Making my way through the fields, I again passed the merchants of this pilgrim path. To these I can give a smile of greeting, but to the two sellers who'd perched themselves along the path of Podbrdo Hill today (first time I'd seen such a thing), I could only offer a frown of indignation. The same was so for the woman who'd come into the adoration chapel this afternoon begging for money. Begging can be a noble work, but it and buying and selling have no place in sacred spaces. Walking through the fields I also began to fear for the building of motels, which I noticed in all my walks but now witnessed encroaching into these open spaces. Thus far it seems to me the commercialism has been kept under control; I can only pray the blessed spirit of the place is preserved from the greedy tentacles of consumerism, that Medugorje [where the people so long gave their beds to pilgrims, at no fee, themselves sleeping on floors] may remain a true delight for pilgrim feet.

As I came from the fields I ran into my fellow single male pilgrim – who bought me a bottle of water – and together we entered the adoration chapel. I went over to my place to the side of the altar while he went to kneel in a pew, and prayed (what I thought would be) a final time before my exposed Lord.

In yesterday's entry I spoke much about the NAME of God (YHWH) and silence; I need now to add two notes to this exposition. The first is that there are two kinds of silence. One is the mere absence of sound, which can be dark and empty – as with the footsteps and laughter of aborted babies missing from my neighborhood. The second is pregnant with light and gives rise to joy and praise of the Lord in angelic tongues – it is a spoken silence, for God speaks to us clearly in it and it inspires our speech. The second point is that the NAME of God is most clearly expressed in Christ's presence upon the cross, for His NAME is love and here we find the absolute embodiment of love of God and neighbor the WORD desires to speak to our hearts.

The Holy Hour had to be cut somewhat short because Marija (the visionary) was speaking in the hall behind the church [at 3:00]. I arrived a little early and found an empty seat toward the front, next to the older woman in our group (a teacher, also from California). Here

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she told me how kind my pilgrim partner had been in helping her climb Mt. Krizevic, and we waited together for Marija, who was punctual in arriving.

Here I got to see another pair of eyes that had seen the Blessed Mother, and the visionary through whom Our Lady's message to the world, which I read every morning, comes every 25th of the month. Her husband, an Italian man, was with her. (They live in Italy and I assume were visiting for the holidays.) She had a similar blessed intensity about her eyes (as also I noticed in Mirjana in my previous pilgrimage) – yet I couldn't help notice a distinct difference as well. She, as are the other visionaries, is married with a family, and that family serves as a kind of distraction, easing, I think, some of the weight of her call. With Vicka, who is unmarried, there is no such other life. I think this accounts greatly for the almost unbearable pain I continually detect in her eyes. Family is a blessing and a burden of its own, but one quite different from that of a visionary.

Marija spoke strongly of the messages of the Blessed Mother and also expressed sadness at the death of Father Slavko. She stated it was difficult to be happy this Christmas season, but said, with hope and a touch of humor, that if we live Our Lady's messages well, we can expect to see him again in heaven. (It was she who received the message – the day after his death on the 24th of November – that he had been born into heaven.)

In a half hour or so we had to make room for the next set of pilgrims – but it would not be the last we would be hearing of Marija. I came outside into the day, met up with a couple of other members of my group, and headed toward the spot the van was to pick us up. Only about half of us went back to the house for dinner, the others staying in town this last day, so there were a lot of empty places at the table.

During dinner our host gave us his card, and I asked what it might cost if I came on my own, which I certainly would do my next trip. He gave me a very reasonable price and said he would pick me up at the airport in Split or Dubrovnik. (Before I'd left, a student of mine who visits his grandmother in Dubrovnik each year told me how inexpensive the plane fares can be.) Our host and his whole family really had been quite nice. (Even when I stole, or actually the Korean woman stole for me – I would not have had the familial ease I always detect in my immigrant friends and acquaintances – an extra piece of

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delicious cake one night). He was such a decent, kind man, and very genuine in his ways. Though his house is rather far from the church, I probably would stay with him again.

Also during dinner, we received an unexpected phone call from our guide. The phone was handed to me (only the teenage daughter of the house spoke English fairly well), and he told me he had a special surprise. My mind immediately went to the idea of witnessing Vicka's vision, and I wasn't far off. He said our host would drive us to the Oasis of Peace at five o'clock. I said we'd already been there and wanted to go to the church. He said Marija would be in the chapel this evening at the time of her vision (5:40). He made it sound as if it were a private thing for our group, and we were all quite excited. We should have had the common sense to leave immediately though, because by the time we arrived, a little before five, the chapel was already filled. (Obviously, the word overheard by our guide had been overheard by others.)

I found myself standing again – as at the beginning of the pilgrimage so at the end – just outside the threshold of the chapel, in the night air. From my vantage point I could see nothing of the chapel except, appropriately, the exposed Blessed Sacrament, which was raised above the altar (in the back wall, I think). There was Jesus directly before me, though at a slight distance, and I couldn't help but realize what a blessed vision this was... and what a great gift to be able to look upon Him and be in His presence. A great provision He makes for us.

As 5:30 approached, Marija and her family and friends arrived and made their way, somehow, single file through the sea of pilgrims. It was a little disappointing not being able to see her at the front of the chapel, but it was a special blessing just to be there – and the Mother would provide me a humble miracle.

Before the apparition time it had begun to rain lightly, and I felt the drops fall upon my head. It stopped shortly, but during the apparition had begun again. This time I felt no rain. I looked up twice to see if someone had placed an umbrella (or something) over my head, but nothing was there. After the apparition Marija said Our Lady had blessed us all, and I knew this was my blessing. She was telling me she would protect me from the rains of the world. (The

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Southern woman had also apparently received great blessing because I turned around and saw her crying her eyes out.)

There was not much more to be said or heard, so I moved to leave the area, the rain now wetting me down. I noticed my Iowan travel mate peering through a stained glass side window – he'd found a spot from which to view Marija's vision, and had photographed it through the glass. I walked along with my old Italian friend, crouching under his umbrella (I'd not brought my own) trying to stay dry until we got to the van. Though the group had hoped to be nearer to the vision, most felt blessed to have been there. (A couple of us had arrived early and actually gotten good seats in the chapel.) I realized proximity was not so important after all in a spiritual matter such as this.

We arrived at the church at about the start of Mass, but I hurried over to the outdoor confessionals to see if I could still find a priest available. I had planned to come at 5:00 when Confessions generally start, but obviously found something more pressing, and now hoped I wasn't too late for a final Confession in Medugorje. I found a stall which had "French" and "English" signs outside the door, and waited on line, protected from the rain by the overhang. I had planned to speak with Fr. Svetozar yesterday after his talk to see if I could set up a time for Confession, but his talk was cancelled and it was now very late (Croatian Mass going on), so I'd given up hope of fulfilling that desire. But as I stood in line collecting my thoughts, Fr. Svet passed directly before me (!), looking at the confessionals as if trying to decide to go in or not.

I stepped out of the line and approached him with the question, "Are you hearing Confessions, Father?" He decided, "Yes, for a short time," and asked me to replace the "Polish" sign he'd taken from one confessional, as he slid the "Hrvatsky" and "English" signs in. I was so anxious I almost didn't want to walk the few feet to where the signs were kept, but kept my patience, and came directly back. As I entered, Father reached across to turn on the light – which he'd forgotten to do – and I kneeled down before him and said I would like to speak with him a moment, as well as to confess.

I told him I had spoken with him in the rectory three years earlier – interrupting his dinner at that time – about not wanting to leave Medugorje, and said I felt much the same again. At that time he suggested visiting the Franciscans in New York City (I am from

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across the river in Jersey City), and though I had been somewhat remiss for a while, I recently had revisited the Friars of the Renewal, who'd directed me to the Trappists... and then I'd gone to Bethlehem Hermitage. I also told him of my empathy for Vicka and how I wanted to touch her face and take her pain from her (didn't mention specifics of the day), and he leaned back a moment and asked me my profession, actually seeming to consider my staying in this blessed place.

I never know what to answer to the question of my profession (I'd like to say "writer and brother"), so I gave a sort of standard response reflecting what I had been doing as a job: English teacher. He thought for a moment, but then suddenly and strongly came out of his short reverie, saying, "No. No. No. This is not about Medugorje or Vicka – it's you seeing what you have always dreamed of, and wanting it." I noted I felt like a kid in a candy store, and he concurred and told me that there are many choices for us (either in marriage or vocation), but once we choose, that is it. I certainly agreed, but still feel there is a place the Lord leads us to.

I confessed my sins and begged the Lord's guidance and my obedience, and this kindest of priests granted me absolution. I thanked him, and as I was about to exit, turned and said, "Father, I'm sorry for the loss of your friend." He bowed his head in grateful and humble appreciation, and seemed about to cry. (There is none more sincere than Fr. Svet.)

I sat carefully on one of the wet benches between the confessionals and the church and prayed my penance – 7 Hail Mary's, Our Father's, and Glory Be's (a familiar devotion for the Croatians) – listening to the Mass broadcast over the loudspeakers outside the church. (As it is also broadcast on radio here.) The rain had abated and I was able to say Evening Prayer after finishing my penance. I had not considered going to Communion, and perhaps I shouldn't have (since I wasn't paying close attention to the Mass), but as the priests made their way up and down the long line of communicants standing along the side of the church, I eventually decided to rise and join the line... in time to receive.

After Mass I waited a few moments for the exits to clear, then looked for a way into the church – for veneration of the cross was to follow. The side doors were clogged, and my effort to find space in

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the balcony (which I had visited one night about the time a sister came to lock the door) proved fruitless. Entering through the main door, I managed to find fairly comfortable standing space all the way at the back center of the church (not in the vestibule). From there I could see well the crucifix upon the altar, and also the lyrics of the songs projected on the screen. I sang along, in every language, as I contemplated my Lord's sacrifice.

Here in the Lord's sacrifice on the cross we indeed find the greatest love and the NAME of God spoken most clearly. Many might ask, Why did He have to die? or be troubled by the sight of Him so humiliated. It occurs to me (even in contemplation of the crucifix this morning) that He did this only because He loves us. He came among us and suffered of His own free will, compelled only to show us the love God has for us. And so I realize, too, that indeed, God loves me – He loves me before I love Him and without my loving Him, desiring always only that I accept His love... and then I cannot but love in return.

We all know this, but the Blessed Mother asks me this morning if I really do know His love, if I, so to speak, swallow Him and His cross and make Him part of me. Indeed, I receive Him so every day in Communion, but do I really “commune” with Him, become one with Him? If so, it would show in my love for others, whom He loves as greatly as He loves me. But I find myself lacking in this love. I find myself empty in my religious exercises, vain in my prayers – where is His heart?

My mother teaches me these things and leads me to grow (even as a rose does with drops of water: prayer from the heart, as she has said through Vicka), to recognize Jesus in prayer, in the sacraments, and especially in others – to truly allow Him to make His home in me and live through me in this world. This is hard. It is hard to look upon His corpus upon the cross and see what great love He has, and how little have we. But He loves us, above all things, and desires our love, so He helps us always to swallow His sacrificial Body and Blood and draw ever closer to His majesty, His humble love... His cross. (Jesus, thank you for loving me. Help me to love.)

Through the rain we rushed to the van, and back at the house I was overcome by a lighthearted spirit as we packed our bags and prepared for departure early (2:30) the next morning. The Southern

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woman joked that I was happy because I was leaving my fellow pilgrims. Earlier she had said she didn't know I had a sense of humor, thinking that when she first met me... I cut her short, knowing what she would say. It is something my students often say when looking back at my first appearance in class – how strict and humorless they expect me to be. But I do usually disappoint these dour expectations. (Not to say that I'm human after all, for it is the curse of the writer ever to keep a certain objective distance as he measures all situations in his soul.)

But tonight I was perfectly giddy – as frequently I can be – playing with all my fellow pilgrims. I even invited them all into my room when they were looking for a well lit place to take pictures of the group... though, of course, I pretended to be bothered by it all. I was pleased, I suppose, with the exhilarating success of the pilgrimage and particularly the day, and very proud that my fellows had come through so well here at the end. I also found myself terribly hungry, lightheartedly devouring two Snickers bars my Italian cohort offered me, as well as the figs (which I suddenly realized I had) stuffed in my bag, sharing them and the kiwi with the others.

It took some time, but we all eventually made it to bed for what would be a short rest (maybe three hours). This day had been the marvelous culmination of a blessed pilgrimage. Now if I could only remember to serve and to love.

6. The Travel Odyssey (December 30)

I had learned patient endurance during the course of my pilgrimage and found the joy that comes through suffering (the reason for my acting like Scrooge at the end of *A Christmas Carol* the night before), and now that lesson would be tested severely and proven true in me – now refined like silver in fire, the twenty-eight hours of trouble-filled travel home (far surpassing that experienced in coming) would not shake my faith, or my composure.

I am reminded of a line to a song (“The Humbled and the Exalted”) I wrote some seventeen years ago in reflection on my sister’s death and the tears I later cried: “When the sorrow’s so deep / You feel nothing but joy / The humbled are exalted.” I had suffered and accepted the suffering, and was now joyful at conquering it and having to fear it no more.

Breakfast was at 2:00 and departure at 2:30, so we were up and milling about early. At 1:30 I was out in the hall checking to see if my coat was dry. (*Everything* had gotten wet yesterday and I needed to expand my clothes-drying spread to the radiator in the hall.) Even my brave heart Italian fellow was out in the hall in his pajamas, although he would not be leaving till later in the day – which left seven of us scurrying toward departure. He gave our guide a bit of a chastisement, for not being the closest of shepherds, but handed him his (I’m sure) generous tip anyway... as well as a warm hug good-bye. And, as mentioned earlier, the mother and wife of the family was also awake, relating her thanks to me for helping her find words to answer her suspicious priest back home.

At breakfast I ate a few pieces of bread and cheese and meat to fortify myself for the journey, and soon we were out in the pouring rain (what did you expect?) packing our bags into the back of a van and finding our seats for the three-hour ride ahead. Before getting in I mentioned the ache in my arm and its possible origin to my guide, but didn’t really wait for a response. As we made our way down the road, he led us along a distance, then stopped and got out of his car (in the

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rain) to wave good-bye one final time. We were gone from Medugorje, but the adventure was just beginning.

The ride to the airport in Split went along fairly smoothly despite the rain. A couple of people recited the Rosary; a couple of others and myself – though I was still in something of a jovial mood – tried to catch some sleep, while the woman from California and my fellow young male pilgrim (sitting beside me, eyes wide open) tried to keep their stomachs composed. I was glad I'd prayed my Hours at the house because there really wasn't any light for reading in the van. [And, as when we came – and unlike my last pilgrimage, when a bus load of us waited outside in the cold about an hour – we passed the Bosnian/Croatian border with just a quick check of passports. Also, it was on this initial leg of travel that I received a personal message from the Blessed Mother (see Ch. 8).]

Arriving at the airport in the still dark, everyone seemed intact, and we sat around inside waiting for the place to officially open at six. I was very thirsty and took a walk upstairs to see if I could get a drink at the café. But when it opened I was told they didn't take American money. I waited for the bank downstairs to open – unlike me... I really was quite desperate for a drink (I hadn't realized, but I had deprived myself of fluids during the pilgrimage) – but the workers were late and the passengers were checking in, so I finally gave up and went to join the others. The airline (Croatian) was very punctual. And so, after a short wait in a rather small glass room beyond the gate (during which time I canvassed my fellow passengers for kuna for the drink machine – no luck), we were walking out onto the tarmac to climb aboard our plane... which would be off into the air by our 7:00 departure time.

There was plenty of room on the plane, so I spread myself out across three of the seats, as did the others. The flight was less than an hour, but we were served (another) cheese sandwich – my second of what would be four such meals for the day – as well as a piece of chocolate (from which wrapping I had learned “Merry Christmas” in Croatian on the trip in). My ears would challenge me again, but again I escaped pain from the extreme pressure, and soon we were waiting on a lengthy line to check in for our transfer.

As we – my Iowan travel mate, his Korean wife, and I (we'd gotten separated from the other four) – came up to the counter, we

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received the first sign of things to come. They asked for me by name and told the three of us there was a message waiting at our next airline. Well, when we got over there, the representatives were ready with word that our flight from Geneva to Newark had been cancelled, and started offering us options. First they seemed to be encouraging us to stay in Zagreb at their expense. I wasn't at all keen on this idea (why didn't they let us know in Medugorje? – there I would have gladly stayed), but my partners didn't mind. They had a day to kill before flying from Newark back to California anyway. However, when the woman came back from checking to see if there were any other connections, she said she wasn't sure, and rescinded the offer to put us up. I suppose they were trying in some confused way to cut us off at the pass and keep us from the back-up of problems flying into the New York area (due to a heavy snowstorm). But now there was no point to our staying here, and we had to rush through check-in to make our connection to Switzerland on time.

As we were running to our gate we passed our fellow pilgrims and bid them a fond, if quick, adieu. (I turned and bowed while running by, apologizing for our hurry.) We made it through passport control and baggage check – though, of course, this would be the only time they'd notice the scissors in my bag and make me open it for inspection – and then to the gate at the tail end of boarding. Airports, it seems, had become my exercise halls, and I sat in my seat in a sweat, peeling off my coat and scarf and stuffing them into the overhead. This would be another short (an hour or so) flight, and we would spend it laughing through our tears, wondering what might be in store for us now.

There happened to be a young female employee of the airline sitting next to us, who was also from Geneva, so I drilled her with questions about airline policy – as well as what there was to see in Geneva should we get stuck. (Do they have Catholic churches in Switzerland?) She informed us of the severe snowstorm in New York and the many cancellations, and told us the airline should be responsible. (She wasn't much on sites to visit, though.) Well, we'd just have to wait and see.

The breakfast served (it was still only 9:00 or so and this was my third meal) was quite good, and it was a very special treat to see the majesty of the Swiss Alps from 30,000 feet. They just went on

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endlessly, spread in white before my eyes and wreathed by the clouds. Very impressive. It reminded me of one of my Four Corners of the Universe, a personal philosophy: “The White Man of the North is of Strength...” For here was strength embodied.

On the ground we went immediately to the airline counter to find out our status. We discovered that our flight had indeed been cancelled, but that we were now booked on an earlier flight to John F. Kennedy airport (in New York). This would mean a bus ride from JFK to Newark – maybe an hour or two – but we’d be getting in earlier, so it didn’t sound too bad. We gave the attendant our baggage tickets, and she dutifully assured us our luggage would be on the proper plane.

Things seemed fairly rosy and I decided to try to get to the airport chapel, which the attendant had told me was through passport control and customs. Instead of nearly a six-hour layover, we now had only about two, but I separated from my travel mates and went toward the exits. I had thought there might be time to actually go into the city to find a church (with a six-hour wait), and was now a bit disappointed that it looked as though I’d miss Mass again on a travel day. (In my previous pilgrimage, a priest in the group said Mass in the airport chapel... all was arranged well.) I soon left off my attempt to salvage prayer, however, when I saw the long lines into and out of the terminal. I waited in line a few minutes, but then decided it would be wiser to head to the gate and secure a seat. (We hadn’t gotten our seating assignments yet.)

I actually arrived at the gate ahead of my partners, and proceeded to the counter to inquire about the situation of the employee milling about. He was not assigned to my flight (he was left over from the previous scheduled flight), but told me that there had been four planes supposed to fly into the New York area, and all four had been cancelled – the weather was terrible. This, of course, did not bode well for our flight, but we’d have to wait and see when the next crew arrived in a half hour or so.

My travel partners soon joined me among the empty seats surrounding the gates at this far end of the airport. I wanted to stick close to the counter at our gate, but had moved my things across the way to where a TV was broadcasting news (CNN), in hopes of hearing a word about the weather in New York. I’m not a fan of

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television – which is a virtual wasteland in America – so I very quickly grew tired of staring at its images (I was especially sensitive to its vapidness here, just come from Medugorje) and moved down the row of seats to where I could find some relative peace to say my Rosary. I tried my best to meditate in calm while yet watching out for the workers' arrival, for there was still some question as to whether there would be room on the plane for us.

When a worker arrived, we wandered over to inquire about the situation. He informed us that as of then the plane was still scheduled to fly at 12:30 (about an hour away), stamped our tickets... and told us we had to go through a passport booth which would be setting up in the concourse shortly, before he could give us our seats. We stood around a little anxious for fifteen minutes or so, and when the official came, managed to be first in line at his booth. First he told us we had to go to the counter. I told him the man there sent us here. He discussed the confusion with the airline representative (in another language) – then stamped our tickets for us. Back at the counter the representative held our tickets to the side and told us to wait until we were called.

In a half hour the plane actually started boarding, and it wasn't long before our names were called. The airline representative told us they weren't sure if the plane was going to fly into New York or not; they were going to take off and see. It was a nine-hour flight, so I guess they were hoping for a change in the weather. (There was some talk also of flying into another city – maybe Montreal or Washington.) I suppose there was some solace to be taken in the fact that we were at least heading in the direction of our destination.

We were soon on board what seemed just an immense airplane and heading for our seats. Unbelievably, and completely out of character, I found myself in a front seat of one of the large cabins, which meant I had tremendous legroom. As I settled in and drank from the bottle of water provided for each passenger at his seat, I thought to myself, "This is too good to be true." I felt a little guilty and questioned whether it might not be better to suffer in a poorer seat...

Well, after a few minutes I noticed a man looking quizzically for his seat; soon the stewardess asked to see my boarding pass. It turned out I should have been one row back. Due to an extraordinarily odd

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configuration, the rows of seats were not even. I had looked at the sign for seats A, B, and C of row 21 to the right by the window and gone directly across the aisle to seat E on the other side. My partners had done similarly and were sitting a row directly behind me. But my row continued a seat further back, as did all the rows in the cabin. So I, as well as my partners, had to get up and move back one row – to a place with the usual cramped space – for my nine-hour flight.

Well, I settled into my seat between two young women and tried to find a quiet, meditative air. I read my Daytime Prayer, then my National Catholic Register newspaper... and after a pleasant lunch settled in to close my eyes and take a nap. The two women either side of me fell asleep as well. I never did have a chance to speak to the young woman to my right. With the woman to my left I exchanged cordial greetings and a few comments about the odd setup of the rows of seats. After one of my periodic trips to the bathroom to stretch my legs, however (I always had to pass her seat in order to get out), I struck up a lengthy conversation with this woman to my left.

She told me she worked for a nongovernmental organization whose purpose was to help especially homeless and abused children of the Third World. She was going to New York to lobby for children's rights at a meeting at the United Nations later next month. I was very interested in her work and asked her about the things her group did to help the children, speaking about some groups and individuals I had heard of that strove to do similar things. As we talked, I mentioned that the Vatican must be an ally in her lobbying attempts. She sort of hesitated, seeming to agree generally, but obviously having some difficulties with this idea. The Vatican was not supportive of some of her group's goals, such as setting up safe and clean places for young women forced into prostitution to practice their "work".

I could understand the Vatican's not wanting to encourage what it recognized as demeaning abuse in any circumstance, and we discussed that a little. We soon came, however, to what would be our main topic of conversation. Somehow we turned to a discussion of homosexuality – perhaps as something else the Church sees as clearly wrong – and she soon stated that she herself was a lesbian and didn't understand why the Catholic Church makes it its business to judge how people choose to love. This would be the most in-depth

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conversation I have ever had on the topic with a person who was a practicing homosexual.

She was a very kind person, and the discussion remained ever very civil and respectful. The situation challenged me to present the Church's views in a loving yet honest fashion. I did feel her pain as she talked about the persecution she experienced because of the Church's stance against her and her lifestyle. I tried to help her understand that, though I knew she did not agree, the Church believed that it held these beliefs for the good of the person practicing homosexual acts, in homosexual relationships. I needed to apologize (much as the Pope has done this Jubilee Year) for all the sins of those who self-righteously persecute and condemn in the name of the Lord, telling her these individuals were not true Christians (not Christians at all) – that they violate Christ's law of *love*.

I never gave her justification for her acts – telling her of how many times I thought I “loved” someone but was sadly mistaken (and, really, true love exists only in marriage) – but I did say that we are all sinners and that she who is perhaps constantly reminded of her sin, might, as the prostitutes and tax collectors of Jesus' day, be accepted in heaven before those who, like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, sit in judgment. (My own sin might be worse than hers.) I was reduced to tears toward the end of the conversation, crying for the failure of the Church to truly represent Christ, and stating that “It's gonna change.” Later, toward the end of the flight, the Lord put it on my heart to simply say, “The important thing is to forgive.”

I don't know how much good we accomplished or if she understood my tears, but a certain friendship was struck up, and we would interact some more as we waited a couple of hours for our bags in Washington. Yes, I said Washington, for while standing around staring out the window during one of my extended trips to the bathroom, the announcement came that JFK was closed and that the open airport closest to our destination was in our nation's capital. There was, of course, much conversation and commiseration about this amongst the passengers (I stood and spoke with my travel partners for several minutes about our continuing saga of travel difficulties), but, overall, everyone seemed to be taking the news in stride. The stewards and stewardesses were very mum about what might happen once we hit terra firma, saying they didn't know, so

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several conjectures were passed around. A four- or five-hour bus ride seemed most likely.

The change in destination added another hour to the flight, but we all seemed to make it not too the worse for wear, and were apparently ready for our waiting adventure at Dulles Airport. I think the pilot announced prior to our deplaning we would indeed be bused to New York, but before we made it to the terminal proper, there was a bus ride needed from the plane. We were crammed into the shuttle and waited there (I think for the airline employees, who originally remained on board, to join us in our new mode of transport) for a good half an hour. While doing my best to keep patience as several others lost theirs, I overheard our driver ask the plane if the luggage should be removed – implying that after a wait we could get back on and fly to New York – but the decision was made to unload it.

At the baggage claim area, a rather grueling trial awaited us. After waiting a while at one carousel, we were instructed to move to another, and told our bags would be about another thirty minutes. Thirty minutes came and went and still we waited, doing our best to keep smiling. I was curious about our bus situation, and since there were no airline employees about, I thought to take a walk to get some information. The customs agents wouldn't let me pass, but assured me the airline reps were out there. They also informed me that, the last they'd heard, there was sixteen inches of snow on the ground in New York, and still falling. They couldn't see how we'd make it up the New Jersey Turnpike on a bus. (An interesting note about this conversation was that it made me realize I was back in the States. For the last week or so all my conversations with official persons had been in a kind of labored English, trying to speak so others with limited capacity could understand. Now I was able to speak comfortably and colloquially, without measuring my words.)

After another half hour of waiting, I began to think that they had decided to keep our bags on the plane and have us fly up to New York. I noticed that I was not anxious at all during this time, though perhaps a little punch drunk. I had really taken in the suffering and it no more phased me in the least. I felt strong and steady and composed. My only occupation was trying to guess what might happen and discussing the possibility with others. I'd sort of pass around the area periodically, speaking with my Swiss friend and a few

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other people I'd met, then return to home base seated on a carousel with my travel partners.

Eventually, bags began to flow out (killing my theory), though in a piecemeal fashion. One set would come through, then we'd wait another twenty minutes for another load to arrive. This went on for an hour or so, and eventually my partners had all their bags and were headed through customs and out toward the waiting buses. I continued waiting with a number of other passengers. At one point I returned to customs and an airline rep assured me the buses were still there... so I went back to finish out another hour of waiting.

During this period I spoke with a man my age who was waiting with his wife and two small children (one a baby). Unlike the woman I'd sat with, he was not from Switzerland, but had been living there for a few years because of business. He was now in the process of returning to America. Our conversation soon turned to Medugorje and he, somewhat surprising to me since he was a Presbyterian (and active in his church), was very interested in knowing about the Blessed Mother's messages, the visionaries, etc. (Usually I am having to defend anything Marian amongst my Protestant brethren.) He also asked a number of questions about the Catholic Church – the priests, the saints, the sacraments... and I was more than pleased to oblige with answers. Finally, we spoke of the contemplative life. He had read some St. John of the Cross; I recommended *The Cloud of Unknowing* (the foundational work of all contemplative writing). His daughter offered me a couple of crackers, which I was happy to accept, and we passed the time quite well.

I think he and his family got their bags, but my old (forty years?) gray hard-shell suitcase never made its way around the carousel. Actually, I do remember wishing him well (and praying for his conversion) as he walked away with his luggage; he was planning to rent a car to drive up toward New England. I walked over to the guy with the walkie-talkie, who seemed to be in charge of things, and asked him if any more bags were to come. He said he was checking, and several minutes later indicated that that was it. There was no announcement yet, but I began to head through customs to the airline counter – looking back periodically to be sure – to see what would be done.

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At the counter a representative began asking me the standard questions, and was preparing to write a report when a man in a suit – apparently her supervisor and generally in charge of handling this whole debacle – came by and rushed me along, saying just to call the airline when I got home. So the several of us who'd lost our luggage moved on toward the waiting buses. (None of the buses had yet departed; I think I was the lucky one to be waiting inside.)

Arriving outside I asked the man if there was a bus to Newark (as I had previously been told there would be), and after a moment it was confirmed that a bus to that airport would be leaving shortly. The Korean half of my travel company came off one of the buses to New York to bid me good-bye (and tell me about the bus to Newark), and we exchanged phone numbers and hugs. I went over to the bus to shake hands with her husband (sitting in the second row) and wished him God's blessing. (It is with the pen he gave me on our very first day of travel that I write this book, if God wills, as a sort of prayer for his conversion.) Soon we were away from one another, and I headed back into the terminal.

Told it would be another half hour before departing, I headed back toward the airline counter to be sure I'd done everything I should about my bag. But I was stopped by another representative, who assured me all was fine and gave me a phone number to call. Satisfied, I moved over toward a food shop nearby and picked up a muffin and a large orange juice, for I was beginning to feel a bit weary. As soon as I returned, the bus began boarding, and I climbed on with food and drink in hand.

Fortunately, I got a pair of seats to myself toward the front of the bus, and waited for the workers to load up the luggage, which had to also occupy the aisle. (I would later be able to use the sets of skis in the aisle beside me to rest my feet upon as I struggled to lie down and sleep.) We'd arrived in Washington at approximately 4:30 p.m. [after gaining six hours changing time zones] and it was now after 8:00, but at least we were on our way to Newark.

It was on this four-and-a-half-hour bus ride that I began to feel ill. The bus was quite cold, especially with the wind coming up from the front door to where I was trying to rest, and my exhaustion had begun to make me susceptible to the elements. I found it very difficult to get comfortable – despite having two seats and an aisle to stretch myself

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upon, and the dark and quiet (except for the repeated cell phone calls to the guy behind me) of the bus. I slept very little, but tried to remain reclined, attempting to find a suitable position and to cover all shivering areas of my body. (I did not have the energy to ask the bus driver about turning up the heat.)

There was no snow on the ground in Washington, and I didn't see any in my occasional peeks out the window along our early way. On the Turnpike I began to see snow, but nothing that seemed extraordinary (certainly nothing to hinder the drive markedly). It would turn out that there had been fourteen inches of snow in the New York City area, but that it had stopped some time in the afternoon – thus all the main roads were relatively clear. In fact, I would be told by the driver of the shuttle bus taking me to my car that he drove a woman, about 7:30, who landed at Newark Airport (meaning that she set down earlier than that, and that we quite possibly could have waited and flown into Newark from Washington). [And that my original flight, which was due to land in Newark at 7:30, might have been fine!]

The painful bus ride was finally over, and I found myself now waiting in the freezing cold for the shuttle to take me from the terminal to the far, economy parking lot. An initial bus driver said that wasn't his lot, and he wasn't sure where it was, but that he would drive me if I was still there when he returned. After another ten or fifteen minutes another bus came by, whose driver told me to hop on board. (It was about 1 a.m. at this point.) He dropped others off at their lot, then seemed a little perturbed at having to take me to the far one... but he got me to my car and asked the worker at the gate to come by with a shovel (at his suggestion and my request) as he exited.

It was only a few feet in the back of the car which needed shoveling, so it didn't take long for the worker to do that and me to clear away the mounds of snow upon the car. Amazingly, the car started right up, and after giving my shoveler friend a tip, I backed out and headed for the exits. I had to drive slowly and carefully, especially considering my tiredness, but the roads were not too treacherous, and in another half hour I was home. There would, however, be one more obstacle to overcome before I could lay my weary body down to sleep. (I'm sure you can guess what it was.)

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Arriving on my snow-laden street, of course there was no open parking space. Fortunately, there was no car in front of my house, but major shoveling would be required of me. I went into the house to get the shovel, then started to work. During the forty-five minutes it took me to clear the fourteen inches of snow, I feared a few times my body might not survive. I recalled so many stories of people having heart attacks while shoveling, and thought this would be a reasonable situation for one. However, I did survive, and after several vain attempts at trying to get my car into the space – and having to go back and shovel some more – I managed to achieve my goal.

The end of this grueling day was now in sight. I dropped down my bags, said hello to the cat – I had to still put out the bag of feces my landlord had left in the bathroom and clean up the puddle of urine from the floor where the cat had clearly missed the box several times – took a quick shower, and climbed (just about literally) into bed... leaving off the writing of my spiritual diary until morning. And it was over. (And I could still smile.)

7. Holy Family

I may have been able to smile, but I was barely able to talk the next day. I woke up exhausted, dehydrated, very much without strength – sick. Despite getting to bed after 3:00, I did manage to make it to 10:30 Mass. The church at which I've been attending Mass is a mile from my house, but rather than risk having to shovel out another parking spot, I decided to walk instead of taking the car. The walk was not too strenuous, but my sickness made it difficult to focus well on the Mass. My mouth kept watering with saliva, and rather than swallow these germs I preferred to continually spit. Fortunately, there was a bathroom in the vestibule just outside the doors, so once again – as ever in Medugorje – I found myself standing in back of church (to allow me to go quietly back and forth to the restroom sink at opportune times).

After Mass I was to meet a young woman from the choir to see if she might help with taking care of my cat when the time came for me to possibly join a religious community. I waited at the back of church for her to come down, and noticed another young lady who looked just like her. I also noticed a Korean woman and American man together, and realized this must be her family (visiting her from another state). When my friend came down, she introduced me briefly to her parents and brother and sister, then told me that she would be leaving to live in Korea in two months. Any hopes I'd had of her caring for my cat left. I would have to trust in the Lord that He would take care of this sort of nagging question when the time came.

Walking home I thought to take a path along the route of a bus that would carry me to my area's pilgrimage church. It was still the Jubilee Year and I would have liked to continue my daily pilgrimages today, but after walking several blocks without the bus coming, and then hitting a road block which would have detoured the bus I knew not where... I decided just to head home. My sickness was now beginning to get to me and I thought it wise to first care for myself.

After trudging home through the piles of snow, I sought rest. It was my throat in particular which ached (I could not sing or say the

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responses at Mass), but I realized the principal cause of my exhaustion was dehydration. Throughout my pilgrimage I really had neglected to drink fluids properly. I ate only in the morning and evening, which wasn't too bad, but all through the day I rarely drank anything, either – walking place to place without giving it a thought. I had run myself down.

Fortunately, I had received a special gift the evening I'd left for Medugorje. Though we'd been volunteering at a local nursing home for four or five years (performing a communion service once a month), this was the first time they sent me something at Christmas... and it was a lifesaver. When the basket of fruit arrived, I wasn't sure what to do with it. I gave some to my landlord, and he suggested wrapping the rest in a sweater and jacket and putting it in the refrigerator. This worked very well, for now the fruit was ready to eat – and I ate it. I had never eaten so much fruit (and tea), and barely had anything else these days. But it really helped to rehydrate my body. Of course, I rested virtually the whole day as well, not even having the energy to say my prayers.

A friend called at one point to invite me to eat with him and his wife and child, but when he heard my voice, he said: "You sound like you're dying." And indeed that is the way I felt. But I was still smiling inside, and thought for a moment to push my faith and join them... however, again wisdom and common sense took over.

There was not much else to this day but recuperation. I didn't call my parents, unable to tax my voice so, but I did leave a brief message about my lost suitcase at the number the airline rep had given me. Other than that I simply wondered what would become of me now. I knew I had to write this book – and that I had the Bethlehem Hermits to visit in another week – and I was seriously considering not working (teaching and tutoring) this coming semester, to give the time to the Lord and really focus on seeking religious vocation and writing. The door had been opened for such a decision before I left (there being some question about my adjunct teaching jobs anyway), and now I was trying to determine whether or not to walk through that door... and wondering where it might take me.

But for now, Medugorje was still very much with me, in body and in soul.

8. Octave of Christmas: Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God

It is most appropriate that the Octave of Christmas comes and this writing ends on a day dedicated to our Blessed Mother (and to Peace), for it is she to whom the Pope has entrusted this new millenium and she to whom I find myself trusting my own life. Mary, Queen of Peace, is, of course, at the heart of Medugorje, and Medugorje is at the heart of the preparation and call for a new springtime in our Church and in our lives. And it shall come.

Waking this morning I managed, despite my continuing illness, to find the strength and inspiration to make both morning Mass and pilgrimage to the designated neighboring church following. I resumed the saying of my prayers, then came out of the house and decided to take my car (which I had to do if I expected to make my pilgrimage), despite the warnings of my landlord that I would lose my parking spot. It was New Year's Day and so everyone was home and there was a good possibility of this – but I was resolved to take that chance (and said a little prayer).

At Mass today I was able to sit in the pews, with only a couple of trips to the bathroom (to expectorate), though my voice was still not capable of joining in the prayers, and the church seemed rather cold. (It might be noted here that by now my left arm – aching since praying with and for Vicka on Friday – no longer hurt, somewhat to my disappointment, for it was pleasing to think of sharing her pain so.) But I made it through well, and soon was on the road to the neighboring town to resume my pilgrimage devotion.

Coming into the pilgrimage church felt particularly glorious after obtaining and now possessing the graces and blessings of Medugorje. The light seemed almost otherworldly, and with what ease and peace I settled into my place before the Blessed Sacrament and prayed my devotion for the souls in purgatory, the Church, the Pope, the world – and my soul. The graces had been gathering in me throughout the year and now seemed quite palpable. I had feared the ending of this Jubilee

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Year before the coming of Advent, but now I was becoming ready, beginning to realize how these graces would remain with me and buoy me up through the coming year and years... that this was but a beginning and not an end.

Ordinarily in my visits to the pilgrimage churches I would pray one of the Hours and at least one decade of the Rosary (often being present for Mass as well). I would pray an Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be for the Pope and his intentions, and, finally, the required Our Father, Marian prayer (Hail Holy Queen), and Creed. I had been going to Confession at least once a week for quite some time already, and would frequently drop a dollar in the poor box on my way out of church. How well I held myself to acts of penance and charity during each day varied, of course, and I'm sure I fell short in this respect many times. But what a blessing this special practice had been since I first tried it last January. I'd never performed an indulgence before, and after the initial experience decided to make it a novena. These nine days continued through the year on a very regular basis. (Praise you, God, for the gifts you provide through your Church!)

Now in a few days the Jubilee Year would be ended and this privilege would be no more. Also ending was the time I'd set for the writing of my spiritual diary reflecting on the daily readings of Mass. This practice – my daily bread – I'd held to for the past five years set aside by the Holy Father (years dedicated to Penance, the Son, the Spirit, the Father, and the Great Jubilee), but now it, too, would end in a few days. And I was deciding not to return to teaching... It was a time of change.

Before I get ahead of myself, telling of how I was coming from being inhabited by sin to the conversion of my life, I must first tell of the message I received from the Blessed Mother on the van ride from Medugorje to the airport in Split. Before that, allow me to share with you the blessed message the Mother had spoken to me three years earlier on the first plane home from Medugorje. I had been, as still in many ways I yet was, very much seeking answers about work, love, whether to go back to school... and generally what to do with my life. And she addressed these matters:

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“You should not be anxious.
If the Lord wishes to produce your fruit,
He will do so at any time.
Keep working, yes, always keep working (... praying),
but do not be anxious.
You are in His hands
and He loves you.

As for your love,
what can He tell you –
 You must love; you must love all
 and your holy love will guide you.
He will move you (re work...).

To school –
 Yes, always do.
Learn His way.
(Be patient, James.)

Your call is with Him.
There is no other way.
Go with Him.”

The message was very strong, but not as clear as it is now. Indeed, it is only in the past year that I have begun reading it on a daily basis. (I had put it on a shelf as a kind of display before this time, rarely actually reading it.) Its interpretation I will save for a later time, for it would not be until after my five days in the desert that such clarity would come.

The present message was not unrelated, and indeed perhaps mines its heart. There were no specific words addressed to me, but rather a Scripture passage and its application to my life. (As I gaze over at the statue of the Blessed Mother while writing this in an open church, I can only say, “I love you, Mother.”) The scripture was that in which Jesus tells His disciples to make no provision for the mission journey He is sending them out on, and it was made evident to me that taking nothing for the journey applies to my writing and the way I’d developed it over the years. As indicated in the epigraph of this work,

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I have in the past eight years – and tested now in this writing – composed all my works without revision, trusting in the Holy Spirit for that which I must speak. Though this grace had been given me so many years before (initially after struggling with writing and rewriting a basic philosophy, *Four Corners of the Universe*), now the Mother was making clear to me that this is my call.

Again, I do not wish to get ahead of myself (for I *would* need to complete my five days in the desert before the utter closeness of the Blessed Mother and her guiding hand upon my life and work would be with me), so I will return to the day at hand.

Returning home from my pilgrimage I found the parking spot I'd pulled out of in front of my house still waiting for me (as I would each day of this week after pilgrimage), so I didn't have to fear further shoveling. Before I'd gone out I'd called the airline about my bag, and was told – after being upbraided for not filing a claim at the airport and having to explain the situation and how two representatives had informed me it was not necessary – that, surprisingly, my bag would be delivered that afternoon.

I spent the day waiting for the delivery person and eating fruit – remarkably a second fruit basket arrived this day, through a neighbor (so I couldn't tell the company they had probably made a mistake) – resting and nursing myself back to health. Indeed, the whole week would be a period of recuperation in preparation for my stay at Bethlehem Hermitage beginning a week from this day. I would begin writing this account of my pilgrimage on the day following the present one, and also complete the writing (and typing and proofreading) of my final year of *Days*. But mostly my sights were set on the hermitage with the question and hope of this being the place the Lord was leading me.

The day passed and no bag came. Calling again in the evening, I found that it was still at the airport and only now would they have it picked up by the delivery company (obviously, my pilgrimage was not yet at an end)... but it did arrive the next day. And the pilgrimage was at an end.

Christmas in Medugorje turned out to be a time of suffering and trial, and a time of great blessing. I would set out seeking to culminate this Great Jubilee Year with a holy and full sacrifice to the Lord, in hopes of finding His grace and direction for my life, and completing a

I. Christmas in Medugorje 2000!

conversion to His will. An impatient and selfish soul would go forth and discover what furnace fires and cleansing showers are necessary to refine one for the perfection of the presence of the Lord. And I'd come out of this crucible of love with the Blessed Mother's hand ready to instruct and guide me in my work and in my life, sheltering me from the rains of this world even as I learn to shelter others.

The wearing of the scapular *at all times* became a sign of my acceptance of my Mother's blessed protection. Curiously, it was the shower that proved the final test of such commitment; it seemed certain to me this was not practical or practicable. And indeed the scapular did come apart, first at one end, and then the other. But following in faith I found piercing the plastic covers and the two brown strands with a precious feet (pro-life) pin served to hold either end quite well. And it has endured.

But this grace, as so many others, was only found after my five days in the desert.

January 2 – February 17, 2001

Bridge

There is a place.
Yes, there is a place,
 a place of freedom and light,
 a place where love abounds.

There the angels and the saints wait.
There the Blessed Mother watches over.
There the Lord is in all His glory.

You can come there.
You can be with the Lord.
He calls you;
 He knows your name.

Do you wish this?
Do you wish such freedom and light?
Is it in your heart?

Do not doubt;
 but believe,
 and it shall be yours.

There is a place where freedom waits,
 where the Lord shines His love.

I. Christmas in Medugorje 2000!

Sitting on the Lord's mountain,
there is stillness,
there is calm –
there is peace.

Our mouths drop in awe
at His glorious presence,
and everlasting grace
pours into the souls
awaiting
His light.

The wind itself is still and silent,
though it may have been raging
a moment before –
 even it is in His power,
 is under His authority.

And the waves of confusion,
the distractions of this life...
die too –
 they are no more,
 for all bow before Him.

Watch for Him.
Watch for His coming.
For He is knocking at the door
and soon will be here –
and set you free.

(both) written at the summit of Mt. Krizevic
11/18/97
(Excerpted from *The Will To Love* © 1998 James H. Kurt)

Turn of the Jubilee Year

II. Five Days in the Desert

II

Five Days in the Desert

Turn of the Jubilee Year

**In the dark cold of winter,
a foot of snow on the ground and falling,
I come to the desert to face my soul.
Upon the Baptism of the Lord I depart,
following Him into the wilderness.**

**Here among the Hermits of Bethlehem,
here in a place of silence and stillness –
here I shall look into the darkness,
here I shall drink it in...
and here I shall be purged of all that is false
and be made anew,
ready to walk with Jesus.**

Introductory Notes

A. Theme

(2/20/01: 3:00 – 3:16 p.m.)

This seems a good day to begin this writing, for on this day I also begin preparation for consecration to Jesus through Mary (as outlined by St. Louis De Montfort in *True Devotion To Mary*). As part of that preparation I read Matthew 5, wherein Jesus proclaims the narrow way of sorrow and persecution and love of enemy that leads to the kingdom of heaven. In *The Imitation of Christ* I read of the holy Fathers who followed that way so well, and our own need to resist temptation to prove our mettle as Christians.

The same theme is echoed in the readings for Mass: Sirach instructs us to expect trials, trusting in the Lord and knowing that by them our faith will be refined as gold in fire; while Jesus speaks of the death He must Himself endure. But the Lord also speaks of His resurrection, the reward for those who suffer with Him... and indeed even the Office of Readings today addresses the same essential Christian truth. Gregory of Nyssa reminds us of Paul's "always being crucified with Christ," and that his was "a death whose end was true life."

Dying to self and finding life in Christ is the theme here. I pray the Lord and His Blessed Mother place their arms around me – as does Jesus to the child in today's gospel – that I might become one with them and the Church, and so reach out to others.

B. Technique

(3:16 – 4:00)

I expect this writing to be of a different kind. Unlike the first half of the diptych, it appears this composition will be of a more deliberate nature. Although once the writing has begun (as here it has) there shall be no revision, more careful consideration is foreseen before pen

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is put to paper. One sign of this change in approach is the scratch outline I have scribbled onto (a single sheet of) paper. This spare preparation seems necessary for a work consisting more of subtle movements than major actions of a day.

The other sign is the hour and a half I spent sitting in the dark (last night) pondering the elements of this part of the Introduction. (I actually made a draft, too, which is here written anew – technically within the rules of my method: once gone on one can't go back into the middle of the text, but eliminating all between and rewriting the text is acceptable.) Though I do not expect the body of this work to approach being thoroughly composed in my mind before pen touches paper (as was the case for the lyrics of *Songs for Children of Light*, at the beginning of my conversion in 1984), this section has come close.

In general, I think the distinction Merton makes (in *The Ascent To Truth*) between the “light” and “dark” ways of coming to contemplation of God is applicable here. The first half of the diptych (‘light’) employed a substantially ingenuous (and linear) narration of events, wherein I relied more strictly on the fire of the Holy Spirit to speak through me at the time of writing. This second (‘dark’) half should prove to be more artful, more carefully conceived... and more complex.

I envision utilizing a sort of “cubist” form, incorporating views of a subject from the past, present, and future – hoping thereby to pierce through to eternity. (“There are openings in time through which the angels fly” states an abstract work of art of mine nailed to the wall behind me now. And under it is a clock whose hands have stopped at 5:40, apparition time in Medugorje.) Though principally an account of my five days at Bethlehem Hermitage (January 8-12, 2001), the reader will note in the margins the inscription of the date and time of the actual writing, as well as an expansion of a format of interspersed time frames suggested in *Christmas in Medugorje 2000!* (e.g. stating what is in front of me (or behind me, as above) while writing).

This hinging together pairs of complementary opposites reminds me of one reason I tagged “in black and white” at the end of the title of *Songs for Children of Light* – the pairs of albums (e.g. *The Innocent Heart / Remove the Mask of Lies*) serve a kind of “songs of innocence and experience” motif. Here we experience purgatorial darkness leading to holy light.

1st Movement: Leaving the World

Morning

(2/21/01: 1:53 – 3:22 p.m.)

It is confirmed, even as I come from prayers of preparation for consecration to Jesus through Mary, that this indeed is a good time to be inscribing these words. This beginning phase of the preparation process (twelve days) is purposed for the renouncement of the world, and it is that which I was called to do this first of my five days in the desert. But the perfect appropriateness of this time of writing is confirmed not only by my entering into this consecration process, but again by both the readings of today's Mass and the Office of Readings.

Upon first waking in the yet darkness early this morning, I hear from St. Peter Damian (proper second reading) once more of the tribulations of the Christian and the joy they must be. Indeed the entire passage has this express theme. This, too, St. Francis proclaims in the book I am reading of his Marian charism. And, of course, at Holy Hour today I begin the book of Job in my continuous reading of the Bible.

All points to the refining fire, to the sufferings through which we are purified and find joy. Sirach tells us today that Wisdom – as Mary does for me now in my striving to seek her constant guidance – first “puts him [the believer] to the test... and tries him with her discipline...until his heart is fully with her”; this she does for her children, until she is sure they are indeed for the Lord. (O Lord, may I never be against you!)

And so, now waking on this the first day of my desert experience, I sought to prepare myself for my departure that afternoon. In the morning I attended Mass as always, and the Mass itself was providential – it was the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. We are told by Matthew, of course, that upon His baptism Jesus was led into the desert to be tempted for forty days; and so I took satisfaction that the

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Lord would bless my few days there, that His hand would be with me as I set forth.

After washing my clothes at the Laundromat (and doing some proofreading while there), I drove to the college to type up the final entries of *Days* – the spiritual diary I had kept for the past five special years. Even as I entered the library, I sat first to write the final entry – that for this feast day – for I had decided to take the year to the end of the Christmas Season. I prayed therein to be able to follow in the Lord’s steps, hoping that my search for purity and for direction was at its fulfillment, and that I might now find my place in His Church. The Bethlehem Hermits, whom I’d visited twice before and found great encouragement from, were set before me again this day – perhaps the time had come.

While typing the final few entries, the supervisor of my tutoring at the college (which had been my principal work for the past six years, though in the last one I had taught more) happened by looking for a book on C. S. Lewis for his daughter. He is a very gentle, very humble and kind man whom the Lord had blessed me with as a benevolent superior. I greeted him and informed him quietly (somehow the sword of the Spirit in my throat) that, though I had done little work for him last semester, I would not be available at all for tutoring this spring. He, a widely published fiction writer himself, wished me well in my pursuit of vocation and in my writing.

Sitting next to me as I typed in the sparsely populated library (school was not in session) was a woman wearing a T-shirt which read, “Give God The Glory”. Coincidentally, in one of my infrequent and brief flips through the stations of my (cable-less) television, I had come upon a woman singing these same words the night before, so the message struck me. I think that this is a lesson that we Christians, and I in particular, need greatly to learn. I have often thought that the Lord has kept my mounds of writing from being published primarily because He knows that I would take undue pride in coming into the public eye. It may perhaps be over said, but, yes, all must be for His glory alone.

Upon returning home I still had a most important task to fulfill before setting out on the hour ride to the hermitage: I had to call my three principal employers to let them know of my plan not to teach this semester. The door for such a decision had been opened before I

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had left on my pilgrimage to Medugorje (a couple of weeks prior), and I had struggled to decide to step out in faith this way since returning. One employer (all were of college English or ESL departments), for whom I had actually not yet taught, had informed me the two classes she'd offered might not be available. Another had said she was not yet sure of the availability of classes; and for a third I might be taking a job from another teacher.

The first two supervisors (the second of whom had called to offer a class two days before) I simply left messages as to my decision to pursue vocation. The third answered the phone, and I discussed the situation with him. He had actually spent some time in the seminary after graduating college and was pleased that I was taking this "positive step" with my life. But speaking with him allowed me to hedge my statements somewhat. I let him know that I understood he needed to look for someone else as soon as possible... but when he suggested he might be willing to wait, I sort of jokingly said I would take his number and if I had a sudden change of heart I'd call him that night. But I stuck his and another supervisor's number in my back pocket.

Afternoon

(2/22/01: 2:00 – 3:59 p.m.)

"True glory and holy exultation is for a man to glory in Thee and not in himself," O Lord. So does the holy man's writing (in *The Imitation of Christ*) of the glory that is due only to God confirm our message of yesterday. And it is this I would most need to find in my journey into the wilderness.

Yesterday, too, I failed to mention, during Holy Hour the Blessed Mother let me know the evil one was about to enter into me to tempt me. (Much as Wisdom warned me in the womb of the coming of the Malevolent One – as I have written in my autobiography – that I might be prepared for his deceit.) And indeed I felt his presence make its way into my soul. But being warned and listening to the wise man's counsel to resist here at the beginning of temptation when "the enemy is then more easily overcome," I besought the Mother's help, and if I should kneel. She affirmed that thought, and also my desire to

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then prostrate myself in the aisle of the church. In so doing, despite the wearing of my best pants and sweater (having just come from a wake), the devil fled, the Spirit entered, and I found myself soon strengthened – and fortified for prayer and reading in contemplation of Christ. (We must indeed learn to act on the good will of the Lord to avoid sin.) Praise God!

Driving to the hermitage I prayed the Rosary awhile and listened to half of a cassette of Holy Hour adoration prayer and song led by Fr. Slavko with the assistance of the Franciscan Youth Group of musicians at Medugorje. This seemed particularly appropriate preparation for a stay in a place whose life is framed by adoration. The hermits in their private chapels in their hermitages have an hour of adoration both morning and evening, and, in essence, live with the Lord. As mentioned in the first half of this work, no closer to heaven have I come than the hours of adoration at St. James Church, and my experiences generally with the Eucharistic Lord in Medugorje made it seem as if He were leading me to this most Eucharistic place: Bethlehem, where Jesus dwells as Bread of Life.

During my drive I was very pleased that the rains came. My car had become filthy from the great amount of snow we'd experienced in the industrial area of Northeast New Jersey where I live (Jersey City), and so nature was providing a cleansing I had neglected. As I drew nearer the hermitage, heading west to colder climes, the rain turned over to snow. Precipitation had ceased as I made my way along the long road through the woods which led to my destination; and as I parked before the main house, I saw a friend spreading sand from a wheelbarrow to improve the footing of the walk to the house.

Joe had arrived at the hermitage during my previous, weekend stay – which had begun the Friday after Thanksgiving (the day Fr. Slavko died on Mt. Krizivec in Medugorje). He had come from a lengthy stay with the Trappist monks in Genesee, New York (a place I had also made a vocational visit), and most recently from walking the Appalachian Trail. During that hike the name of “Father Romano” – the desert father and founder of Bethlehem Hermitage, whom he had spoken with some months before – came into his head... and he followed that voice in walking and hitchhiking his way to the

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hermitage. And here he still was, now in the midst of the three-month stay required for candidacy.

I was happy at Joe's arrival because I knew Father really wanted to have a group of brothers at the laura (the name for the community, referring to the "paths" which connect the hermitages to the main house). At the time he had four sisters in permanent vows but no one else in residence at all. He had been very encouraging to me – on the phone one night saying, in reference to the day's gospel, "You must come when called to the banquet." But though all had gone well so far, I couldn't be certain this was the place for my vocation. I felt now with Joe here there was at least one male member even if I couldn't make it.

I was excited to see Joe. We had both been here on a Sunday in my previous stay, so we had had a chance to talk and get to know one another. Sunday is the only day the hermits eat together (the main dinner) and have an opportunity for fellowship – the requirement of silence being suspended for this time. Father had invited us both to the main house for dinner, so I got to meet the four sisters as well. It had been a very edifying time of sharing, and I felt as if I'd made new friends. Now I wanted to share with Joe again, but had almost forgotten that silence had to be observed... so I just motioned a greeting.

In the main house, Sister Mary Loretta opened the swinging wooden doors from the cloister. I gave her the two grapefruit I had left over from a holiday fruit basket I'd gotten as a gift (from the nursing home where I lead a Communion service once a month) and which had saved me from dehydration on my return from Medugorje the previous week, and she told me I'd have to wait a moment to be led to my hermitage. Fr. Romano was sick with a cold (he had sounded terrible when I spoke with him the night before), so Sister Mary Margaret brought me to my home for the week.

I began to speak with Sister as to a friend, and she answered a few questions. But not far from the main house, as we came to the path which led through the woods to my hermitage, she told me very simply that we wouldn't talk anymore while walking. We were going in the opposite direction than I had gone in my previous two stays. My hermitage had been to the right of the central house, more isolated it seemed to me, and looking out over a large open field. Now we

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were heading to the left of the house, passing several other hermitages nearby and surrounded by trees. We passed along ever-narrowing paths which had been shoveled out of the nearly foot of snow that lay on the ground. Sister warned me to watch for ice on the steps up to my hermitage, especially since there was more snow supposed to fall that night.

The hermitage itself was quite different than I'd gotten used to, principally because it was half the size. Sister apologized for not having time to straighten up inside, and told me she'd had to give my other hermitage to a retreatant who'd shown up last minute. There hadn't been need for this hermitage since Advent, when, I presume, greater numbers of retreatants arrive. The bed had been squeezed into one corner, against the original design, to accommodate a change in placement of the heater; the bathroom left no room for maneuvering (sitting on the toilet one could rest one's arms and head on the sink in front of oneself)... but Charles De Foucauld looked upon the hermitage from his place upon the door, with a smile that rose above the deepest suffering I have ever seen in anyone's eyes (reminding me of Vicka, the visionary at Medugorje). The photograph was from the time he lived as a hermit in the Sahara Desert, I think.

Evening

(2/13/01: 3:35 – 5:20 p.m.)

If we are to learn to do all for God's glory, first we must give all to His will and realize all comes by His grace. This point was driven home to me early this morning in my hour of prayer with the Lord. I had been quite disobedient to Him by repeatedly ignoring His promptings for me to rise in the night to say my Office of Readings. This had been my habit since my last visit to the hermitage (when it was suggested by a priest on a cassette we listened to during dinner), but in the past couple of nights I had slept through till morning (about 5 a.m.) and so said my Office after giving the Lord my first hour (as He had instructed me). Several times I woke last night but never did I rise; nor did I ask the Blessed Mother's advice. Indeed I had become quite negligent of seeking her guidance over the past day.

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Despite all this sinfulness on my part, during my hour of prayer the Lord came to me with the sweetest consolation, just at the moment I thought to myself that I must subjugate my will to His in a more definite fashion. This blessing He gave to show me that while we were still sinners He came to us, and that He loved us first. It is indeed by His grace we are saved and not by any work of ours (though, of course, if you are not doing His work, you haven't got His grace). This giving of my will to God and waiting on His favor would be the challenge of my desert stay – to “Listen” for His voice, as Fr. Romano so well states, must be the source of our conversion and our call.

Indeed, this acceptance of the grace of Jesus was the principal theme of a letter on loving your enemy which I wrote to my current pastor yesterday. Responding to his sermon this past Sunday, it occurred to me that we do not take revenge on others not so much because revenge is the Lord's (the Lord gives us power to effect His will, as with Peter's power to bind and loose), but that revenge has *already* been taken. On the cross Jesus suffered the punishment for all men's sins – no further retribution is needed. We must but accept His sacrifice to discover our own redemption, and make up what is “lacking” in it by offering our lives for others. How clear and full of light this is, but how difficult to remember and so practice in our days.

Charles De Foucauld, for whom my hermitage had been named (as well as for “The Visitation” – my previous hermitage had been “The Holy Trinity”), seems to have had a deep sense of the grace of the cross of Christ in his blessed heart. I knew nothing of the saint at the time of my stay (though much could be told from his eyes), but later found out about his avid search to follow in the Lord's way of self-abnegation, taking up his cross in heroic fashion. I also learned that it was not until after his death that communities of brothers and sisters living his mode of spirituality (which seemed to be centered on simply living with the poorest of the poor) began to sprout up bearing his name.

After Sister left I began a stuttering effort to settle into my hermitage. I placed my keys and wallet (and phone numbers) in a drawer of the desk, which was in the midst of the largest portion of space... where the bed ought to have been. I had no hangers, so

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instead of placing my few shirts and sweaters in the space provided above the chair squeezed in at the foot of the bed, I put them on the hooks near the door. I threw my bags and the extra pillow on the shelf above said space, and made the bed with the sheets I'd brought.

In the midst of unpacking my books and toiletries, I noticed the time – it was nearing five and I wanted to have a good hour of prayer in the chapel before the dinner Sister said would be at six. (Actually, I'd eaten at home before leaving, knowing that the hermits' main meal is at 12:30. But since I'd arrived on a Monday, a usual day of arrival for retreatants, there was a special dinner for those who'd come for the week. I wasn't hungry but knew I'd better eat, for on my first visit (on a Friday) when I'd eaten very little, Father seemed to be disappointed with me for not taking what was provided.)

In the middle of unpacking I took my Bible and Liturgy of the Hours and walked over toward the chapel (in the main house). On my first visit, as Fr. Romano showed me around, immediately upon entering the chapel I was overwhelmed by the holiness of the place. Though the art and architecture are unassuming, there is a palpable silence which fed deeply into my soul. In fact, returning there later that evening I had an hour and a half of spiritual ecstasy alone in these confines, transcending words in silence and tongues, and touching upon the angels and eternity. I'd never found a place so conducive to prayer.

Coming into chapel this evening there were several other people already praying. There were, in fact, four retreatants (all women) who would be here for the week as well. In my other stays there had been only one or two (or no) others, so here was another change in atmosphere. After kneeling before the Lord awhile, I sat to say my Evening Prayer and read my Bible. As I did my best to collect myself, a most unusual – and disturbing – situation arose. One of the women, who had been standing behind and to the right of me (near the back of the chapel) wearing headphones (a prohibited item), began pacing incessantly in extraordinarily squeaky boots.

As she shuffled back and forth on a line of about five feet, the woman seemed oblivious to the grating noise she was persistently making. The others didn't turn toward her, and I tried my best to keep my observation to myself, but after several minutes (this had to go on for at least a half an hour), I turned to look at her. I felt a certain pity

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for her – perhaps she'd been a victim of abuse (?) – but thought she needed discipline. I found that when I simply looked at her (or even just in her direction, at the statue of St. Joseph on the piano in front of her), she would stop moving. But when I turned away again, she resumed her pacing. Finally, after quite a while, I motioned to her feet, my ears, and the Blessed Sacrament... gently conveying to her the distraction of her walking... and she sat down.

Obviously, this experience in the chapel was not like my first, but yet the presence of the Lord was with me as I struggled to hold on to His light despite what went on around me. I felt I could have done a better job, however, and questions regarding my actions toward the woman I carried back with me to the hermitage.

At 6:00 a bell was rung for dinner and eventually – I didn't want to go first and it seemed everyone else had the same idea – I made my way down the stairs and along the corridor to where our food awaited us in the small, empty kitchen. (Each individual fills his own cups and Tupperware containers with the portion of food and drink he desires and places them in a personal cooler to be carried back to the hermitage to be consumed.)

Back at the hermitage I sat at my desk and enjoyed my dinner while reading the National Catholic Register – regular practice for me. (I'm not sure if newspaper reading was recommended activity, but I did reserve it only for meal times.) After dinner, and now with it having gotten quite dark outside, I washed my dishes and placed all food remains in a little plastic bag reserved for such a function. I then set to finishing my unpacking and organizing things in a proper place. The principal thing missing from this hermitage was a prayer corner. My previous hermitage had a kneeler, table, chair, and icon – in the spot I'd been told by Sister Mary Margaret, who once lived there, where Jesus had been reserved in a tabernacle. That lacking, I had to arrange my prayer books and Bible on a little bookshelf.

Night

(2/24/01: 6:23 – 7:39 p.m.)

Toward the end of my Holy Hour in a small chapel yesterday afternoon, I had been reading an insightful little book on vocations.

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The chapter I read ended with the essential recommendation to listen with one's heart and ask, "Lord, what will you have me do?" Having heard the voice of a spiritual director say, "What does Jesus really want you to do?" while in prayer one night, I had greater reason to take this entreaty to heart. Before leaving I kneeled before the Lord and asked Him once more, as openly as I could, what His will was for me – what was my call? He confirmed what He had been telling me; and when I arrived home I found a letter from Little Portion Hermitage letting me know I had been approved for a candidacy visit.

The Lord has been calling me lately, and the Blessed Mother has been close at hand. But again last night I ignored several promptings from the Lord to wake in the night and say my Office (and read and contemplate the readings for the day's Mass). I eventually did rise, toward the tail end of the night, but not before having two dreams indicative of my sloth. In one I found myself needing to waste time with a class because I didn't have the prayer we were supposed to work on; and in the other I went into a bedding store to find a nice cover for myself. (We must be ready when the Lord calls: "Awaken, O sleeper!")

And now as night fell in my first day in the hermitage, the darkness and the stillness and the quiet – and my aloneness – began to surround me and make themselves quite known. I remember a supervisor at another college at which I'd taught, a sister, told me that some of her fellow sisters were afraid when they had to spend a retreat week here in this solitude. The idea of being afraid had been far from me in my first two visits – the bugs were all that bothered me in my first – but now, perhaps because the moment was more serious (deeper consideration and application certainly being given to the life), I found myself subject to a profound fear and anxiety.

The anxiety welled up within me and filled my chest cavity. It was triggered circumstantially by the disquietude the devil wrought in me through the strange actions of the pacing woman in chapel (and my sense of guilt at having perhaps judged her too harshly). But the focus of the fear was the absolute change in life I felt upon myself. The Jubilee Year had ended and so the daily pilgrimages in which I had taken such comfort. As noted, with the end of the Great Jubilee came also the end of my spiritual diary, which had indeed provided steady

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outlet for reflection and a source of discipline. And, most especially, I had actually given notice to my employers that I would not work for the next several months. And now would I find purpose in the writing I had to do and the music I meant to pursue? And now would I truly find a religious calling? And would this desolate place provide the environs?

Suddenly, though I'd been alone most of my life and treasured all the time of solitude with the Lord I could find; suddenly, though the darkness and quiet of this place had brought a ready comfort before... now the walls began to close in. And I could do nothing but stand and walk about aimlessly, calling out "Help me, Lord!" repeatedly and almost automatically – not falling on my knees and shedding tears before His feet, which would likely have brought comfort (as later a measure of it did), but in a kind of anxious confusion, just calling out "Help me, Lord!" over and over... It was as if the years of indecision I had seen so clearly and recurrently expressed in my diary were all packed into this one moment and boiling over. All the questions of "Should I be doing my art?" "Should I be teaching?" "Should I be married?" "Should I pursue vocation?" "Should I go to school?"... were here now coming to a crescendo.

And all I could think was that I had to get my jobs back. I couldn't take this step. It wasn't yet eight o'clock, so the chapel was still open. I could pack my things and drive out of here, telling Sister of my decision as she closed the chapel. I could be home in an hour and call all my employers tonight. Or maybe I could ask Sister if I could call them from here. And then when eight o'clock passed, I told myself that, yes, Fr. Romano was sick, but usually he's up till nine, so I had another hour to get out of here, to go, to tell him I had decided this place wasn't for me. Lord, help me! What should I do, Lord? What should I do?

There was no voice to answer me. I looked up, I entreated – but too anxiously – and there was no voice. Charles De Foucauld provided no answers, either. He just looked out, smiling through his emaciation and pain, "Jesus is the Lord of the Impossible" written under his picture.

But I calmed down a little. I eventually took a shower, put my books in just the right place... yet the tension remained. I believe I cried some. I said my Night Prayer. Still the thought of just leaving

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came to me. The darkness and stillness were with me, but I was not so fearful. I climbed into bed, into the corner.

I switched off the small lamp not fixed properly to the wall beside and above my bed. I looked out the window at the deep, white snow and the black trees in the moonlight. I lay down. I slept.

Eternity

(7:42 – 7:51)

The angels look down and see us. In all our tribulation they know us. They watch. They stand guard. At the Lord's command they are ready to guide us. And He commands as much for His blessed children.

Today in the gospel the Lord put His arms around the children. Today He blessed them and told the disciples that of such is the kingdom of heaven. Today Sirach related the Father's gifts to His child Israel, the wisdom which is ours, the understanding – the power we share with Him... how He loves us.

In Confession the priest tells me the same. He is our Father. He loves us. His Son has died already for our sins. We must come to Him.

The Lord is making me His own. Somehow, like the seed which grows into a tree without our seeing or noticing, like the invisible yeast which makes the dough rise – He is in our presence, He is watching over, and He is seeing that we grow and rise.

Someday we shall come to heaven. Someday we shall see Him face to face. But now He watches over all our wanderings, He sees all our movements... and He waits. Soon the time will be right.

2nd Movement: Kneeling in Snow

Morning

(2/26/01: 1:33 – 3:01 p.m.)

Yesterday at Mass in midmorning, though it was ominously dark and rainy outside, within the walls of this temple I felt myself approaching eternity. In here where the Church was gathered for the praise of God, no time existed and the elements beyond our solitude were irrelevant. This was what mattered: this sacrifice, this unity in Christ – our prayer.

And indeed as the day went forward all seemed to go quite smoothly; I completed all tasks I had a heart to accomplish. But yet, though I'd assumed the Lord was with me and the Blessed Mother was at my side, it wasn't really so. I didn't realize my disobedience until the fruits of it showed themselves later in difficulties sleeping and waking to pray, and laziness and the distractions of lust. I had gone through the day quite well I thought, but now I recognized the crack in the back of the bell. I had gone hours at a time without acknowledgement of the Mother's presence, not so much as asking her advice on the smallest matter. And though all I had done may have been done well, without this communication with heaven nothing is worthwhile. The bell looks good (the works are good) – but it makes a hollow sound, for it is not whole. And that critical crack allows sin to seep in.

It is my will I most need to conquer in this time of home schooling from my Mother. It is this burden which keeps me from passing through the needle's eye – and this possession is deeper than any riches of the man in today's gospel. It is so hard to set aside. Sirach encourages us to turn from our sin on this Monday before Ash Wednesday, that the mercy of God will be with us... but I shall need the patience of Job (who appears in our Office of Readings now, too) to purge myself, to scrape this sickness from my soul. O Mother, may I keep you now by my side! (This morning she smiles as I touch both

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her hands in chapel, as she leads me to do, and I see this is the woman whom I must wed.)

I woke toward morning, though still in darkness, to say my Office in my hermitage, but afterward turned off the little lamp and fell to sleep again. I finally rose rather late, but having lost the tension, and with enough time for Morning Prayer and a study of the day's Scripture readings. It was the first day of our return to Ordinary Time and Jesus was healing a man with an unclean spirit. I could not yet see "all things thus subject" to Him, nor the power that He could give to me, but I was open now to sit and listen.

In dressing I took a moment to decide whether to wear the blue sweater or shirt my mother had sent me for Christmas and I had saved for this time. Unbeknownst to her, blue is the color of the dress of these hermits, and so it seemed a special sign to find these clothes when I opened her package. She also sent a card with the star of Bethlehem on the cover – which sits still on the table before me – another ingenuous sign of approval. I hurried to chapel and sat down seconds before the eight o'clock bell tolled out to the surrounding countryside.

As I entered the chapel I noticed immediately how crowded it was. The four permanent sisters [save Mary Magdalene] were in their places in the two seats either side of the aisle in the front row – except for one who had given her seat to one of the two sisters recently arrived and was sitting beside the other new sister in the second row (in the two seats away from the door). Behind the two permanent sisters seated near the door of the chapel sat Joe. And the four women retreatants and two other guests filled the seats of the third and back rows.

When I entered, there was a seat beside Joe in the second row and a seat behind that one – the path to the door separated these two rows. I thought for a moment to sit beside Joe to express my desire to be a stronger part of the hermitage, but deferred to humility and sat in the area of the retreatants, in the third row. Sister Mary Magdalene (who'd rung the bell) entered and sat down, followed soon by Father.

Fr. Romano could hardly speak, and Sr. Mary Magdalene, who read a reflection before Mass, didn't seem much better. In fact, most of the hermits were suffering from the ravages of a cold. Father spoke a little at the start of Mass but was not well enough to give a homily. (I had wondered if he would make it through the gospel.) And during

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the twenty minutes of contemplation immediately following Communion, I thought I noticed a couple of hermits begin to sleep... however, I found later that in deep reflection my own head begins to angle down, though I am quite awake.

After Mass all the hermits left first, their heads looking down toward the ground and not at me sitting by the door. The others of us remained and waited a few minutes for the (hand) bell that would call us all to breakfast. On my way to pick up my food with the cooler I'd left by the kitchen door, I volunteered to Father at the threshold of the sacristy for whatever work he might have needing to be done. I desired to show myself a willing aspirant, despite my less-than-successful endeavor at work during my last stay.

At that time Father had asked me to clean gutters and sweep roofs (of pine needles) of various hermitages – including the one I was in now, where I thought I might fall off the ladder and die, so hard was it to get footing on the sloping land – and wash some windows of the main house. The roofs were no problem (I enjoyed especially making sure the skylights were clear), but some windows on the house were very high and, after my experience at Visitation Hermitage, I decided, after a couple of tentative efforts, to leave them for someone stronger and more agile than I. [Joe arrived later that same day.] Today Father whispered he would call (each hermitage has an internal phone) if he had anything.

I enjoyed my breakfast and the reading of the Catholic newspaper, and after cleaning up I sat and finished the Rosary I had begun on the way to and from the chapel. Since Father hadn't called, I took the time to sit and write, continuing my composition of *Christmas in Medugorje*. I wrote steadily for an hour or so and was happy at this time to have opportunity to accomplish my work – since I felt that this was my call – and even had time afterward to play music for the Lord before the dinner bell tolled.

Afternoon

(2/27/01: 2:27 – 4:05 p.m.)

Job continues present both in the Office of Readings and in my continuous reading of the Bible; and today in the gospel Jesus exhorts

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the giving up of home and family to follow Him, telling Peter and the apostles of the great blessings (with persecutions) which shall be theirs... while Sirach exhorts us to holy offerings generously given unto the Lord.

And, yes, this morning in my hermitage the writing of *Christmas in Medugorje* did go well. As its epigraph states and as the Blessed Mother had instructed me in the message she provided on my return from Medugorje, here was my means of offering myself, of saying yes to the call of the Lord and His Blessed Mother – and it was proving to be effective. My writing without revision (making no provisions for the journey) was being blessed, and my trust in the Holy Spirit rewarded. Hardly had I needed time to stop and think for my hour of inscribing.

This had given me a fruitful sense and, as I've said, after finishing I still had time to play some music. I had brought my guitar along (with Father's approval), and now played and sang a track of one of the ten albums that constitute *Songs for Children of Light*. This was a major project I had completed (more than ten years ago) over a seven-year period while living much as a monk in my parents' house and included lyrics, music, dance, and drama all coordinated into a conceptual whole. I have long looked at it as my "ten talents" and long desired to make it fruitful – but have performed or published it very little. The music is of a most unorthodox nature, inspired I believe by the Holy Spirit, and has a repetitive, contemplative quality. (There are twenty-four rather simple tracks.) I have ever been self-conscious about playing these broken chords and had set the work aside, except for sporadic forays, for the better part of the last ten years.

The happiest day I have ever spent was the seventeenth anniversary of my sister's death, when I played the basic (guitar) track of all ten albums (singing, too) in the church from morning to late into the night. I began after 7:30 Mass and ended 3:00 the next morning with only two major breaks: one for a funeral Mass and the other for evening Mass. I was actually playing a total of about fifteen hours. Not many people came through the doors during the course of the day, but that mattered little to me – for I had Jesus in the Blessed

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Sacrament as a constant companion. (In fact, I angled myself to face the tabernacle while playing, for Him.)

Whenever I play these songs it is like stepping into eternity – no time seems to pass – and that was evident in a mighty way this day. I have also always noticed that my way of singing the songs actually seems to strengthen rather than tax my voice, and though that was evident again in this marathon concert, in the end the human limitation of even this “gliding” showed, as I struggled for breath (and finger strength) to complete the last album of songs (*Bearing the Birth Pangs*) directly before the tabernacle of the Lord, and alone.

This experience coupled with my reading of the singers who were continually in the temple praising the Lord made me dream of this as an occupation. “Oh, that we had nothing else to do but always with our mouth and whole heart to praise our Lord God!” as the holy man exclaims – this was my blessed ideal. And now I had hoped in this laura of hermits, who live each with their own tabernacle, that I might somehow be able to store up such treasures in heaven.

Having no prayer corner (and no Blessed Sacrament) I spread my songbook before me on the bed and began to play and sing. I’d been going through the albums the past several days and now found myself at the album whose first song begins: “Stranded on a desert island / Sad as a bird with injured wings / Like a friend I can find / A guitar is there for me... / To see me through darkness” – an appropriate lyric I had not planned. I played on in relative bliss for the better part of an hour, finishing with time to say my Daytime Prayer and Angelus (a prayer I’d only really been introduced to here) before answering the 12:30 dinner bell.

Again, this midday meal is the main one of the day for these hermits (I think it was meat loaf today), and when picking it up at the central house one also takes whatever one might need for an evening collation (a new word for me). There is always salad and bread and cheese and fruit available, and a fair amount of sweets as well; and I always took a Tupperware glass of orange juice and a cup of tea (morning and afternoon). Back at my hermitage I would divide the food, saving a certain share for my evening meal, and quietly enjoy my dinner alone (as I am quite used to).

After this meal I soon returned to my guitar, finishing the second half of the album I’d begun before. Again this practice was very

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fulfilling, lifting me toward the angels on high. But after completing this second hour of song, I found myself in a quandary again. There were three hours before my Holy Hour at five and I didn't know what to do with myself. The tension and fear of the night before soon rose to meet me once more.

It should be noted again that I am a man who is most used to being alone and always able to occupy himself. (As mentioned above, I spent seven years virtually alone; and, as a curious note, my mother says she used to sit me [as an infant] in a corner with a book and come back three hours later to find me still turning the pages.) So this sense is not one I am prone to, or in fact had known before. But the isolation of the place and my own doubts about what lay before me combined to bring me to thoughts of leaving again.

At least in the other hermitage I could look out on the open field, and I felt comfortable walking out the door. Here there were trees before me, hermitages around me, and a foot of snow which made an easy stroll rather prohibitive. Now I had wished that Father had called this morning with work, for I desperately felt the need for exercise or at least to serve. In this state of anxiety each moment dragged on, and I wasn't sure of its remedy. (I also had some question about what I was *supposed* to be doing or not doing. Should I be writing or playing guitar, or only praying...?)

After a while I happened to begin reading, picking up either a small book or the binder provided to each hermitage – which includes articles as well as other information about the nature of contemplation and the facing of one's false self. Contemplation is not something strange to me, having practiced and written about it for some time (e.g. a book called *Kneeling in Silence*). In fact, I think the Lord may have revealed to me the perfect prayer word – a kind of mantra (“love”, “Jesus”) the contemplative repeatedly returns to, to keep attention focused on God – in an understanding of the tetragrammaton (the four letter NAME of God, YHWH).

Some fourteen years ago I wondered at its significance, learning that scholars could only relate that it shouldn't or couldn't be pronounced (though no one really knew), and in innocence and of the Spirit tried to pronounce it. I found a silent Word, a word which silenced the tongue and allowed only pure breath to pass through,

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leaving one in a state of awe, of pure being (“I AM WHO AM”). Can there be a better prayer word?

Whatever knowledge of contemplation I may have had begged for application now, for my false self it seemed was coming to the fore and challenging the purity of my soul. The reading distracted me only so long, for soon the tension returned again. It would not be until after these five days, when the Blessed Mother began instructing me, that I would come to see my stagnating proclivity to compartmentalize my days, filling in time with works without a thought or any infusion of the grace of God – but that sin (as well as, and shown in, the years I’d wasted toiling in the world quite apart from the will of God) was serving as the goad of my present anxiety. I could not face the silence and darkness I thought I had (and perhaps once had) conquered. My spirit needed conversion.

Finally, I performed a heroic feat – opening the door of my hermitage and going to sit on the porch. It was most cold and I was shivering, but nature provided solace and truth.

Evening

(2/28/01: 1:55 – 3:19 p.m.)

“Now is the acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation!”

Now as I sit here fasting on this Ash Wednesday – having rediscovered the blessing of the Medugorje bread and water discipline – I continue my renunciation of the world in preparation for consecration to Jesus through Mary and find myself making progress. In the night as I lie prostrate after Office of Readings and studying the day’s Scripture, the Lord speaks a word to me, telling me that my work, especially *Songs for Children of Light*, is not my own. And what a wonderful sense of freedom this brings; and losing self-consciousness I resume recording of the first of His albums. (“Magnified be thy work, not mine.”)

And as this time begins when sin must be confronted, I must relate the lingering effects of my own and seek its purgation. I have long been a fool when it comes to relationships with women, being led astray by unfounded, illusory promise of permanency. But no

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marriage have I found; and none there is to be. (So the Lord tells me.) Most recently I had found myself involved with a younger woman with whom emotional (and in a lesser sense, physical) attachment had developed over two years. Her being of a different (anti-Catholic) Christian faith was not enough to deter my false hopes of nuptial bliss. Though for a year or more I have sought dissolution of our companionship, and despite distinct separation for a few months, yet her heart cannot let go – and so yet I pray for healing and resolution by the grace of God...

A divine blessing I find this morning during my hour of prayer: the face of Jesus looks upon me and smiles. It came as I gazed upon the crucifix, with which I have regularly begun to pray. (In the morning hanging near my bed, a night-light below and to the side of it.) My communication with His Mother had become a focus for me, but always in prayer she would remind me to look at Him (on the cross). And I realized this morning what I already knew – that her whole purpose is to bring us to Him – even as I relished this union. And I see, too, that without her presence, our knowledge of Him is less real, as now in seeing Him through her intercession I perceive the fullness of the Son of God.

It was sunset as I sat outside my hermitage on a chair I'd brought from within. Darkness was falling now in the winter sky, though it was not much past four o'clock. For twenty minutes I sat in the cold, listening to the stillness of the trees and finding refuge in God's creation. I couldn't bring myself to leave, despite my shivering, so I decided to kneel upon the ground, thinking that would soon force me inside. It had snowed some more the night before, and I knelt on a thin layer of snow and ice. As my knees indented this white surface, I did not begin to freeze; rather, a marvelous warmth filled my entire body...

I knelt and prayed in this blessed warmth for some time (ten minutes?), embracing, as it were, the wonderful comforts of dying in Christ. How could it be that the ice and snow were warm except by the hand of the Lord? And what was He trying to tell me but to trust in Him and not to fear the death of this world? I knelt there most excited. I wanted to go over to Fr. Romano's hermitage and encourage him to lie in the snow, for if just a knee's amount of snow

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were this warm, how warm must a foot of it be – and surely this would cure his cold... blessed by the Lord he would be!

I didn't do this, of course, (though perhaps he may have understood), but most certain of the snow's warmth was I. Instead, I finished my prayer and entered the hermitage to prepare for Holy Hour. Before going back out with Bible and breviary in hand, however, I gave in to the inspiration of beginning this writing (despite not wanting to have two books present simultaneously), penning the passage which serves as its epigraph. I put this paper aside until finishing *Christmas in Medugorje*, but was edified now to have welcomed the drinking in of the darkness and the destruction of my false self. With greater purpose could I go forth.

Entering for Holy Hour I found the chapel quite full. Though there were only three spaces available for five people to sign and I had placed my name with another for this hour, yet I had not expected all the retreatants to be present here. But I was not ill affected by the lacking of solitude, for as a child now I came to be with the Lord. Quite joyful was I indeed – yes, with the excitement of a child; and as on my knees I prayed before Him, repeatedly did I crawl closer to Him. Nearly to the altar I discovered myself before finding the sense to stop.

The Blessed Sacrament is reserved in a little alcove behind the altar. The alcove has swinging wooden doors which are closed and barred during Mass, and the tabernacle doors are of wood as well (as are the simple chairs). In the most beautiful display, the Sacrament is exposed in a lunette held just above a blood red cup. The inside of the doors of the alcove are engraved with figures of disciples crouched in awe.

I lay prostrate before the Lord for a long time, filling myself with the awe of His presence and wanting to love Him with all my being. When eventually I rose, I did not go to the wooden seats behind me, but remained there by the altar, not wanting to be further separated from Jesus. At home and in peace I was on that carpeted floor, adoring my most holy Lord, and in this place I found myself still when Sister Raffeline Nativity came to close the tabernacle at 6:00.

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Eternity

(3:19 - 3:30)

The awe of the Lord! His agape love! And indeed with mouth agape I behold Him, breathing in His silent Word. “Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it” (Ps.81:10). Like young birds awaiting food from their mother’s mouth, so are we in the Lord’s NAME.

And here is how I saw at once that the visionaries of Medugorje were sincere: In they came and knelt in prayer, reciting the Rosary – then suddenly and simultaneously each of their mouths dropped open... and I knew the Blessed Mother was there.

Enter into our very souls, O my dearest Lord! Fill us with your life anew each and every morning. From your hand never let us turn away; your Spirit be ever with us. Alleluia!

Night

(3/1/01: 2:45 – 4:23 p.m.)

Now that Lent has come and within its confines I sit, I perceive a deep comfort in my soul. The renunciation is easier and more graceful now that others have joined me in turning from sin, in denial of self. In these forty days the Church provides to commemorate and imitate our Lord’s forty days in the desert, the devil is more felicitously mastered. Indeed, my fast of yesterday was more complete, in that I had nothing but bread and water until this morning, yes, but more so because the resolve was wholly present. And even today I eat less at my meals and, that hunger still in me, I sense the angelic dance of purification continuing in my soul. And I am but joyful for this cleansing. And I pray and believe this will be a healing time not only for me, but also I see that somehow this first Lent after the Jubilee Year will signal the coming and the rising of the new springtime in the Church.

Today I hear for the first time songs of John Michael Talbot – the founding father of the community to which the Lord now leads me (and which I prepare to visit) – and in these past few days have received and begun to read a pair of his books... and I can only wonder if this man will prove a mentor and guide for the production

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of my own fruit. We do not know the future, but as I listen to his singing of several psalms and other Scripture passages, and in particular of the refuge the Lord is for those dying to self (which the Book of Psalms so eloquently expresses), I cannot help but find reflection. May all be in the hands of the Lord.

I would like to note here that I had not intended the obvious correlation between these “five days in the desert” and the Lord’s forty days; that is to say I had not realized that its writing would occur during Lent. (The reference of the title was to my entering upon this desert experience upon the Baptism of the Lord.) Now that I see the correlation between these and also my preparation for consecration, I know now that these first two days will be completed in these first twelve days of preparation (ending in two days); then each of the remaining days will be composed during the subsequent three weeks (three seven-day periods) of preparation outlined by St. Louis, culminating on the Solemnity of the Annunciation. And so the remainder of the writing will occur during days of Lent.

I have often found that I do not know the form of a work or the manner in which it will be carried out until after I have begun it. (Such was the case here also with the division of the days into Morning, Afternoon, Evening, Night, and Eternity – with Eternity moving closer to the beginning of the day.) This attests to the fact that we do not know the beginning or end of things; these are in the hands of the Lord.

Coming from chapel after Holy Hour, I ate my reserved light evening meal. Finding myself still quite joyful and desiring further time with the Lord, after washing all dishes and leaving them to dry for the next day I ventured back out into the dark and headed for the chapel. In my adoration reverie I had not taken time to read the Bible, so I thought now to find that opportunity.

The chapel was dark as I entered, and one woman was still there praying. I went off to the far side, sat down, and opened my Bible and began reading. The woman rose to turn on the bank of lights that were over my head. (The switches were in a line near the door.) I tried to motion to her that it wasn’t necessary – I have very good night vision, needing very little light to see (thus I also needed no flashlight going back and forth to my hermitage in the dark) – but let her do as her heart had led her.

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It was not long before the woman exited, and I had the whole place to myself. I clicked off the lights and sat in the center aisle, reading awhile by the shrine lights to the sides. But soon I set my Bible aside and entered into prayer with the Lord. Now in solitude I could speak aloud and call upon His name in song. My speaking and singing in tongues was more tempered than my first hour in this chapel (on my first visit), but yet I was able to find a freedom in the Spirit and a more direct communication with my God.

I left the chapel a little before eight, so as to let Sr. Raffeline Nativity close up in peace, and passing through the hall I noticed Sr. Mary Loretta in the reception area with a couple and their dog. The puppy was quite friendly and affectionate and the topic of conversation for a few moments. It felt good to interact with others, but it felt better to help the couple carry the bags and boxes of food and toys surrounding the door and place them in the back of their pickup truck. They were taking this surplus of goods the hermitage had been donated and conveying it to a nearby shelter. The work I had awaited all day had finally arrived, and was also most needed, for the man was suffering from a chronic back problem.

We stood outside in the, what they said was, cold – it seemed pretty warm to me – and I told the man (who was about my age) of my consideration of this hermit's life. He said we're all called to serve and that sometimes it's difficult to know the way the Lord is calling. Being forty and still searching, I had little difficulty agreeing with this. But it was his emphasis on all being called "to serve" which rang in my ears. Here he was with his wife, Sister ready to return to her post at the doorway to this holy place... and all the varied functions of the Body of Christ came to mind. But all must serve; this is key.

I escorted Sister back inside as the couple drove away into the night, and as I picked up my Bible I mentioned to her again – it had also come up at least once during the conversation at the door – that Father had said he would call if he had work, but that he hadn't called at all. She said she would remind him tomorrow, but we both soon realized tomorrow was a desert day (Wednesday)... a day of fasting and release from labor.

The night was not so ominous as I lay down to sleep about nine, and I accepted gratefully Father's blessing, which he extends to all in their hermitages at this time.

3rd Movement: Fasting in the Desert

Morning

(3/5/01: 2:38 – 4:14 p.m.)

As I resume this writing, I find myself having entered the series of three weeks which lead to consecration to Jesus through Mary. This first week is dedicated to discovering “knowledge of self” or “the miserable and humiliating state to which our sins have reduced us.” For the past day the town criers have been warning of a foot or more of snow, but as yet God has only shed a layer of ice upon the cars, sidewalks, and streets.

And Matthew 25 appears twice today, both in my reading for consecration preparation and as the gospel at Mass, bearing some reflection. As is evident in the ignorance of the righteous of their good deeds (“When did we see you hungry and feed you...?”) and in the Lord’s chastisement of Job – which book I complete the reading of this morning at the Laundromat – who, though a righteous man, had no place to take issue with God... we are all despicable and deserving of hell (as states St. Louis) and must think ourselves so, never presuming upon God for His graces and blessings.

Indeed, my own sin stinks to heaven. In opposition to the holy man’s advice to keep our eyes of judgment upon our own lives, I find myself ever ready to notice the faults of others, and with a longing to criticize them. Guilty am I also of what would seem a converse sin, but is really its complement: I do not feed those who are hungry, not so much for food, but for the word of God. I see the souls of many perishing but do not open my mouth to instruct them; indeed, I do not know how to begin... But I do begin, in understanding and forgiveness and prayer. After Mass even yesterday I had to fall to my knees in tears before the Blessed Sacrament for the eye of judgment I had cast about so freely even during this holy sacrifice. But raising in prayer those whom I’d judged I found the peace of Christ.

Confirmed by John Michael Talbot was this necessary attitude of love and thanksgiving for others; only it can bring true forgiveness

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and reconciliation. And indeed I needed to practice it again this morning in chapel Mass as my tongue began to wander into criticism... What is needed is a means of rightful and fruitful expression of the wrongs I perceive in others, a genuine ministry of leading those in need to the path of God, done in love in His Name.

It was Wednesday at Bethlehem Hermitage, the day of reclusion – of fasting and release from labor to contemplate the Lord. After Mass Fr. Romano (who was again too ill to deliver a homily) went to each of the twelve persons – four permanent sisters, two new arrivals, Joe, the four female retreatants, and me – said a prayer over us, anointed us with oil... and handed us the bread (four rolls) which would be our sustenance for the day. It was quite a moving, Spirit-filled little ceremony.

I had arrived much earlier at chapel this morning. I considered again sitting beside Joe, but had noticed the morning before that Sr. Raffeline Nativity needed to reach across that seat to turn off the lights for the twenty minutes of silent contemplative prayer which follows Communion. I had tried to make note of which lights she shut off, thinking I might do this for her, but decided it best not to presume to take someone else's work. Actually, either this or the next morning I had noticed before Mass that the candles weren't lit. I went to the sacristy to ask Father if I ought to light them, but he said Sister would take care of it. (She did this and closed the doors to the tabernacle alcove just before Mass.) Perhaps subconsciously, or even consciously to some degree, I was hoping to find a place for myself at the hermitage.

The twenty minutes of silence after Communion is another very special practice of the hermits here at Bethlehem. And in what stark contrast it stands to the relative irreverence shown for this Most Blessed Sacrament by the general population of Catholics. Here we have just received Jesus into our very body, and taking this time is a blessed way of seeing that He finds a place in our very soul as well. Lack of reverence for the Sacrament is one of those things which most disturbs me, and for which I do sometimes incur the guilt of judgment I mentioned before. How to teach people (and even priests!) to treasure and show signs of respect for this greatest of gifts – the Presence of our Lord and Savior...? The hermits have found one way.

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This would be the first time in months I would fast the entire day on bread and water. I had done so for a few years on Wednesday and Friday (in accord with the messages from Medugorje), but had begun to allow amendments, including an evening collation, about a year ago. From the first the fast had been blessed for me – I marveled at the ease with which I accomplished it – and should not have let it be abridged so readily. (I do thank God that in this present Lent I have found its fullness again.)

After consuming one of the rolls and drinking some (tap) water, I turned again to the composition of *Christmas in Medugorje*. Though once more I would write for an hour or so, the inspiration was not quite as steady, and I would run into difficulty at the very end. I was writing about Christmas Eve, a day on which I heard Mass in St. Peter's Basilica on this Jubilee morning and Midnight Mass at St. James in Medugorje. I first finished the chapter with a quick and concise statement, then began to feel I'd left something out. My attempts at deleting then writing again proved confusing... and I left off feeling unsatisfied. An undercurrent of anxiety would remain through the day.

Afternoon

(3/6/01: 2:36 – 4:57 p.m.)

Yesterday was one of trouble. It was reflected in this writing, which, much as that described in yesterday's entry, was much more labored than it has been. Overall, apart from having a scratch outline from which to work, this writing has not really turned out to be more deliberate than *Christmas in Medugorje*. But yesterday was a notable exception. And once again I had confusion and question about the ending of the entry.

But the more disturbing and essential trouble occurred from my doubts that the Blessed Mother is near me, guiding me whenever I seek her. After having mentioned such direction to my mother the day before, she suggested it was but my conscience speaking. And my acceptance of this possibility proved to be a seed of doubt. I found it difficult to communicate with the Blessed Mother throughout the day because of this lack of faith. I seemed to hear that I might not go to

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Little Portion Hermitage physically, but just through books – but I couldn't bring the question to her. Other factors compounded the problem, including the assistant vocation director's definitive word that I "absolutely" could not bring my cat; and I was unable to heed the Mother's words not to fear or the holy man's exhortation to "with humility, self-denial, and patience... endure the withdrawing" of the grace of consolation. I dissembled into the doubt of my very call and considered returning to the world...

It is remarkable the world's influence on the human soul, how one can be so easily led astray by a word from its power, and how ready we are to doubt the word of God. For two days here the weathermen had been predicting a terrible storm of memorable proportion, which would drop twelve to twenty-four inches of snow on us. How readily everyone believed. It was announced at Sunday morning Mass that school would be closed the next day (though the storm was far from even beginning). At Mass the next morning, though only an inch of snow had fallen and rain was coming down, the priest stated, "As the storm continues..." as if it were terrible outside. I myself, against the Spirit's prompting, decided to do my laundry yesterday morning instead of today, for fear – even though so little of what had been predicted had fallen, but because the prediction still stood – I wouldn't be able to move my car today. I didn't even have to *think* of shoveling the car out this morning.

But the Lord, the incarnate Word of God which comes to us "just as from the heavens rain and snow come down... making [the earth] fertile and fruitful" – the Lord, whose word never can be empty, we doubt. He tells us "seek and you shall find"; "whatever you ask the Father in my name, He will give you"; "I am with you until the end of the age"... yet these we cannot believe. And without belief we cannot know His voice. For we must come to Him with the heart of a child to find the kingdom in our midst.

He has given us His Mother as He has to John, and she is a mother who is always present to us. If any other mother can neglect her children, she cannot. She is, as a true mother is, *always* there for her children. And so, why should I disbelieve that she speaks with me, who come to her as a child, in faith? Why did I listen to the weather report and do other than the work the Lord had set out for me? Why did I doubt and so find anxiety?

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I questioned even the efficacy of the Rosary during my contemplative hours, a special gift and revelation the Lord had provided me through tears. Already I had adopted the hour of prayer these hermits practice every morning and evening (without the blessing of the exposed Sacrament), though the Lord had changed it to the last hour before bed and the first upon waking. When I finally brought the question of my saying only one mystery of the Rosary to the Blessed Mother, I couldn't see how I would find time to pray the other two in a day already filled with five or six hours of prayer... The hours of morning and night were brought to mind.

I severely doubted the appropriateness of this because, in my own words, this should have been "a time set aside to do nothing, to contemplate, to *be* in the presence of the Lord. Not a time to pray but a time to listen. A time to remember one's death to self, and invite the Lord to make His home in one's heart, mind, soul, and body – that all the action of the day might be blessed." To my mind the Rosary simply did not fit with this call to contemplation.

But I was wrong. Very wrong. Tearfully, agonizingly wrong. From the first words of the Our Father and with all the words of the Hail Mary, it was painfully brought home to me how appropriate this prayer is. In the Lord's Prayer we are *speaking to the Lord*, He whom I was supposed to be in the presence of! And in the Hail Mary we approach the "blessed" "Mother of God" who is "full of grace" and *with the Lord*. She is in heaven by His side and when we speak to her we speak to heaven and enter into the *presence of the Lord*, to whom she can only bring us.

I cried in horrible (yet tender – for the Blessed Mother comforted me) anguish for a good twenty or twenty-five minutes that first night as every phrase of prayer was like a sword piercing my heart and bringing me so terribly close to God. I was sorry I had doubted, and fearful to come so close now to the Lord by the power of this prayer. I quieted more for the remaining three decades (of the Sorrowful Mysteries – best at night when tears enter in... Glorious for morning when the dawn brings praise) and finished praying in exactly one hour's time. But now I doubted again.

Before I go on to tell you of finding St. Cyprian's praise of the Our Father in the Office this overnight ("What prayer could be more a prayer in the spirit than the one given us by Christ?"), and of finding

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the Lord's Prayer in today's gospel at Mass – and finding Luke's version in the chapter of the Bible set aside for consecration preparation! – I must address what I have found to be a certain prejudice against vocal prayer among very distinguished contemplative writers.

First, I think it must be remembered that we are an incarnational Church; “nirvana” or the transcendence of the earth and its suffering is not our care – union with Christ and *His* suffering is our goal. He is flesh. We are flesh. We must make our flesh one with His. I say this because it occurs to me that vocal prayer is (or should be) as the flesh through which the exalted spirit is allowed to fly.

So often our spoken prayers, and especially our Rosary, can be empty sounds, mere words. But let not this prejudice us (for so can be much of this world). Perhaps this has come about due to the separation of the written and spoken word... Be that as it may, we must find the *truth* of words; we must speak them sincerely and honestly, directly as they come – and we will find meaning. And this meaning will bring us to meditation (particularly in the Rosary, where it is prescribed to meditate on the life of the Lord in each decade). And by this meaningful meditation we will pierce the clouds and come to contemplation of the eternal presence of our loving God.

The three cannot and must not be separated. They are one and must work in harmony. Even the great contemplatives have their prayer word (and the WORD is always His NAME: YHWH) to which they return as an anchor when the ship wanders in the waves – and so we can't do without the anchor. And no better anchor of human words will you find than our blessed Rosary. Here is the Body, the strength. The meditation is the Mind. Our attitude or desire to be in His presence is the Heart. And the sacred silence and stillness is the Soul. Make your prayer whole.

And it is *The Whole Whale* I turned to play in my tiny hermitage after coming from writing. This eighth album contains an eighteen-minute kind of magnum opus of the same name, a song which serves as a sort of guided journey for the listener's meditation. Each phrase is pronounced with a whole breath – as indeed my Rosary is for these contemplative hours (and sometimes singing as well) – and it is of the Spirit which passes through and unites all our bodies. (Note that the

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whale is the largest mammal, the largest *breathing* creature.) All we humans breathe in the Spirit, and so find our souls.

And this album, too, is the most of art, the art our bodies make while here to reflect our God. And I cannot but relate the miracle these ten talents were in their making. I had been taking notes (and reading the Bible and reflecting...) for a year or more and orienting all writing to a film script, with no thought of songs (it was actually a silent film of abstract scenes of life common to all men), when suddenly and wonderfully lyrics began pouring out of me. I wrote an average of three songs a day for the month of February '84, having to willfully stop myself from writing more. I tallied these songs at the end of this period and had five albums of material. The Lord then added five more.

The finding of an original key chord configuration for each song and the movement of that form up and down the fingerboard on a "glide" guitar came to me like reeling in fish – and my net was filled to breaking... When I discovered the *exact* opening position for each song's dance, my body literally radiated light; and the simple symbols I'd derived for each album cover metamorphosed into their stage design. And all formed a blessed whole.

Enough of this. Back in the hermitage my playing and singing were not quite as full as they had been the day before, anxiety still flying about my heart. After playing half the album I consumed another roll before heading over to the chapel ten minutes early for a 1:00 Holy Hour. On Wednesday the Hours are reserved for one person alone – everyone getting their own time with the Lord – but I found the chapel again full. I wondered if the others knew of this prescription, and began to worry. I stepped out a moment to use the rest room down the stairs, and coming from there asked one of the women, who'd just left the chapel, if she thought the others knew. She assured me of her belief that they did.

By one o'clock everyone had indeed left, but there was no sign of Sr. Raffeline Nativity. I waited ten minutes then went out and down to the reception door to inform Sr. Mary Loretta of the situation. (I realized Sister had probably forgotten because of the unusually large number of retreatants: normally the Holy Hours don't begin till three, but now they had to be pushed back two hours to accommodate the five of us before Angelus at six.) Sister arrived quickly after being called, and I had forty-five minutes alone with the Lord.

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The time was not exceptional. I spent a while in silence, then read my Hours and a few chapters of the Bible, as has become my custom... and found a moment to prostrate myself before the Lord. But the time was rather dry and unmoving, though it never can really be so when I am in the presence of the exposed Sacrament. Yet not having a full hour and my own restlessness prevented me from giving myself over to and listening for the voice of the Lord. I stayed till the last minute – thinking perhaps the next person would be late – but was ready to leave immediately when she entered at exactly 2:00.

Coming from the main house, I decided to walk a little to pass the time and get some exercise. The snow made such communing with nature somewhat inhibited, but coming down the road from the laura I found a shoveled path which ran alongside where my hermitage was set. Through the woods to the left there was a public path which I had walked in my first trip here. I didn't think much to return there, realizing it was probably snow-filled and knowing there were likely hunters about. To the right was my hermitage as well as others'.

The path did not lead very far; it was not long before I reached an impasse. I suppose I could have walked in the woods, but the foot of snow (from the same storm that held me over in Washington on my way home from Medugorje a week and a half before) made the idea very impractical. So I slowly walked back along the path and, coming to the area before my hermitage, crossed the hundred feet or so to it... stepping in others' footprints most of the way and making my own toward the end. I settled into the warmth of the hermitage and played the second half of *The Whole Whale*, seated on my bed.

Eternity

(5:00 – 5:08)

The Word. The Word was made flesh. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. The Word.

The Word comes down from heaven. The Word is here in our hearts. The Word enlightens and enlivens us with the grace of God.

The Word is flesh, flesh we eat. The Word is blood we drink. Upon this whale we feed. He is whole.

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YHWH. “YH”: in we breathe; birth we find – here is the Incarnation. “WH”: out we breathe, death is ours – here is the Crucifixion.

Birth and death in this one Word. All life in its Spirit. The Alpha and the Omega of all time, and of all creation.

This Word gives life, is life for those who breathe it. This Word which is the NAME of God brings light to every living creature.

Breathe upon us, LORD God,
That we might have life in the Spirit.

Evening

(2/7/01: 3:01 – 4:36)

“Learn to break thine own will
and to yield thyself to all subjection.”

Ah yes. How clearly the holy man (à Kempis) states the desired goal, the stubborn goal for me. How to die to self as the saint (Louis De Montfort) calls us so well? If not, “We shall bring forth no fruit worth anything.” I say I have died, but how well have I done away with that self-love which keeps us from this obedience?

This morning there is a sense of a reconciliation with a pastor with whom I’d disputed: as I hold the Sacramentary up before him I feel the majestic power of the priesthood in the words he speaks. But the question of obedience is one about which I am apprehensive as I consider religious life. Poverty I long for and chastity is becoming a dear friend, but my will... still there needs deliverance. Can I trust that God’s will for my life shall be worked through another? May the Lord give me the grace to be as the holy martyrs of Carthage (including Perpetua and Felicity):

“The day of the martyrs’ victory dawned. They marched from their cells into the amphitheater, as if into heaven, with cheerful looks and graceful bearing. If they trembled it was for joy and not for fear.”

(from today’s Proper Office)

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After finishing playing music in my humble hermitage, I found myself beset with a fear and anxiety which threatened to parallel that of yesterday afternoon. An unsettled attitude had been undercurrent all day, but now it had not only in a sense increased, but really become of another kind. It was that terrible fear of the unknown, of looking forward and not knowing what the next moment will bring. One can only face such death with trust in the Lord, but I was now trembling. Having known it the day before enabled me to alleviate its severity somewhat – but yet the darkness was coming upon me sufficiently unawares.

This straitened period of time did not last as long, for much sooner did I find myself unconsciously picking up a book from the shelf. Without really realizing my motions, I began to read it: it was a treatise on lectio divina. I had certainly heard of lectio divina in my travels to these several religious houses, and may be said to have practiced it, at least in some form, but yet was not grounded in a clear understanding of it – nor had I read an entire book on the subject.

Lectio divina is a means to contemplation through meditation on a short passage of Scripture. It is a common practice of the monk (or hermit), who will read and reread the words (it may be as short as one line), considering them deeply and ultimately attaining to a blessed understanding that transcends the words and brings the monk into the presence of God. Perhaps a more everyday parallel would be a priest (or preacher) launching out on his sermon by first repeating a line from one of the readings, then proceeding to explicate the Scriptures with this single pearl as the focus.

Usually in my daily reading of my missal there is a line which stands out and calls for further contemplation. For instance, in today's readings (which found Jonah as the focus in both reading and gospel) it was the line: "When God saw by their actions how they turned from their evil way, He repented of the evil that He had threatened to do them." If I were the priest this morning I would have given no sermon, but invited the congregation to join me in prostrating ourselves before the tabernacle – and perhaps something like this is the contemplative end of lectio divina. It should lead to prayer, and to a closer mystical union with God.

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But I was far from mystical union with God upon beginning my reading, so I again went outside to sit on the porch, bringing the book with me. There I grew more at ease, despite the cold, and consumed the pages of the book with greater voracity. As the sun set, I strained my eyes and angled the pages as beneficially as I could... until I simply could not see anymore. Before going inside to finish reading by electric light, I again knelt upon the icy snow – relishing its warmth for several minutes on end...

Half the book contained recommended passages for contemplation on various subjects, so I was able to complete my reading in reasonable time – promising to apply myself to the passages on vocation later that night. But putting the book down I discovered a measure of anxiety lingering, and a number of thoughts in my mind.

Over the past couple of days various ideas had come to me, particularly with regard to the life I was considering. It seemed at one time to lack the balance which I had found to be the heart of my philosophy of life; yet when I perceived its heart and purpose, I desired to go further into the woods alone, to fulfill the blessed solitude it required. Generally though, I was certainly becoming more comfortable with the idea of embracing it as a way of life.

In this time I cried, I'm sure, as I often do, finding it to be an effective form of prayer as well as a means of purging any fear or sin from my life. (Why are so many people so ready to laugh, yet so ashamed to cry? Is this not one reason psychologists (and drugs) are so in demand?) And at some point I was led to pick up my notebook and rewrite the end of the last entry of *Christmas in Medugorje*. I crossed out the final half-page and wrote another two, happy to rediscover my inspiration and set any confusion to rest. Now I could breathe more easily, and with greater faith.

I sat back down upon the bed, at peace, and collected my thoughts, offering my prayer to God... and when Fr. Romano called at 6:00, I could hear that my voice was composed. I asked him how he felt, and he said, "Much better," and told me he had some work for me tomorrow. I was pleased to hear of both these things and hoped he'd be able to speak with me the next day as well (for I would be leaving on Friday). He was sure he'd have the time.

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Night

(3/8/01: 3:34 – 5:01)

Today in the gospel Jesus exhorts His disciples to prayer – to ask, to seek, to knock... knowing that the Father is ready to hear and answer. And in the reading Esther begs the Lord to save her and her people: “Help me, who am alone and have no one but you, O Lord.” And after study and contemplation of these words I prostrate myself before the Lord and pour out my own heart to Him, and He answers.

In a recent letter to John Michael Talbot (I haven’t as yet had response or communication, but am to visit his hermitage next month), I compared myself to Esther – coming to him as to King Ahasuerus, hoping he might hold out the golden scepter and give me audience to speak to him of my visions, particularly regarding *Songs for Children of Light*. It was only afterward I made the connection between this fact and my answered prayer. (The Lord surrounds me with “coincidences” or what I have called, in a song titled “Miracle”, “harmonious currents of life.” Some I see before I write, others after having written... and many there are of which I remain unaware. But as we draw closer to Him, we know “We are living in a miracle... / Living by Christ’s blood.”)

I brought my questions and fears about my call in general and my prospective visit to Little Portion in particular before the Lord in prayer. I expressed all that was in my heart, calling out to Him and struggling to present myself to Him in utter transparency: “Here I am.” I desired to know His will for my life. After several minutes I quieted down, and the Lord began to speak. (He will always answer. Do not knock at the door and then walk away; wait for His response!)

About *Children of Light* He confirmed that it was not really my work but that I was, more so than with any other, an instrument He had utilized. Therefore, I should not be afraid to give it away. He told me I must entrust it to John Michael Talbot, to place it in his hands and be obedient to his decision as to its fate. If I were a part of that decision or not should not matter. I could still play the basic guitar track to the Lord (as I had done in my hermitage), but anything more was not up to me. He also first confirmed that I must write, that I would always have writings to do – these were something of another matter. Although they would be done for Him, they were in a sense

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more my own. And so the manner of my obedience the Lord outlined for me. And so I must go to Little Portion and present His words.

After my brief conversation with Fr. Romano I sat in reflection a short while more, finding a growing confidence to accept this call, this life. When I first read the Hermits of Bethlehem's plan of life (about which I spoke with Fr. Romano last night – its now having been translated into Italian), I could not put it down. I read the entire book in one day, much of it before the exposed Blessed Sacrament. It was so translucent, so whole... so of the love the Holy Spirit inspires. I found it most consonant with my own vision of the spiritual life, particularly in the use of the Shema – loving God with heart, mind, soul, and strength – as a founding principle, as well as in its rich application of Scripture in general. It was not rigid, though rigorous, and seemed ideal for the working of the Spirit in one's life.

And now I wondered: Would this be my life? Father had told me the crowding of the *laura* with prospective hermits in the few months since my first visit made it impossible for me to return this winter for my three-month candidacy stay, but still held out the summer as open to me. And though he couldn't promise beforehand that I would have time for writing (to which the Blessed Mother in her message at the end of my pilgrimage to Medugorje seemed to be leading me), he simply stressed one must come and leave all behind... So if it were to be, the Lord would find a way.

At about 6:30 I put on my shoes and coat and walked in the dark of the night over to the blessed chapel again. As I came from the narrow path in front of my Visitation/Charles De Foucauld hermitage (a path which ended at the hermitage) and out onto the wider path, I passed the hermitage of two retreatants to my left. To the right as I neared the main road to the house was Fr. Romano's hermitage (the first one would come upon). This walk was no more than a few hundred feet, and there was another fifty feet off to the left to arrive at the main house. It was a short walk, but ever a pleasant one in the cold but pure winter air.

I found the chapel full again, and marveled for a moment. Then I realized that this was a safe refuge these retreatants had turned to. I felt for their souls, particularly on this desert day when even the solace of food had been exempted. They must have known the same

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difficulties as I in facing the darkness before them. I had my writing and my music to keep it at bay, but it is likely they lacked even means such as this. So here they came with their empty moments. Here they found a place – a building, a little church where they could find the company of others, and perhaps of the Lord of all. Here was a haven in the desert. I understood. (The hearts of us all need a place.)

By this time I had learned to use the little prayer benches placed beside every chair in the chapel and in every hermitage, and I made use of one as I prayed and read my Bible in the chapel tonight. The benches are about six inches high and a foot-and-a-half long, providing enough space for the calves to fit under as one kneels and rests his haunches on the angled seat. It is a very simple yet very useful little invention, allowing one to kneel comfortably for long periods of time. And I knelt in silence a long time upon it tonight.

When I left after an hour, the others still remained, and would, I imagine, till closing. Returning to my hermitage I found myself growing weak... hungry and with a headache. I had no bread left, so I took a sip of water from the sink and stepped into the shower. Though in my weakened state, I resolved to examine the passages on vocation the book on *lectio divina* had laid out. I did not dwell long on any particular one, but looked up each of the twenty or thirty in my Douay-Rheims Bible (a memorial version a priest/spiritual director/friend of mine gave me which I was in the process of reading cover to cover, having read four other versions already). I tried to at least glimpse the significance of each, and mine the significance of them as a whole. I remember now that the Lord calls who He wills, and that of the call He will always take care. (Let us find reassurance in this.)

Completing this exercise, and after thinking a moment and prayerfully offering myself to the Lord, I picked up my Liturgy of the Hours and proceeded to intone my Night Prayer...

I will leave you with a line (or two) from the readings for the Mass of this desert day:

“Rising early the next morning, He went off to a lonely place in the desert; there He was absorbed in prayer.”

and

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“Since He was Himself tested through what He suffered, He is able to help those who are tempted.”

Take refuge in Him.

4th Movement: Hearing the Call

Morning

(3/11/01: 6:29 – 8:51 p.m.)

As I enter this second of three weeks of preparation for consecration to Jesus through Mary (this week dedicated to knowledge of the Blessed Virgin) and this fourth day in the desert, I must glance back at the first week of preparation (and, in a sense, the third day in the desert). The self-knowledge I was left with after this first week was provoked by another text I am reading on the call to religious vocation. In it the author states that the ideal age for answering the call is 15-16 (17-18 for North America). I am forty.

It was at age fifteen that I began experimenting with drugs; it would not be until eighteen that I would begin to stop. It was then I first heard a call from the Lord, and made my first move toward conversion. But in a half year I'd become involved in a relationship whose sinfulness and futility it would take three years to realize. However, that realization, and recognition of guilt regarding my younger sister's death (an absent older brother was I), spurred a strong and deep conversion which would lead to seven years of "monastic" life and the composition of *Songs for Children of Light*. But in this time I again failed to heed the call I had to religious life, and at the end of it found myself embroiled in another sinful relationship – how I could have been so foolish I cannot say, but ignorance of the Church and lack of true communion with it was at its heart. The Charismatic Movement helped raise me from sin and acquaint me with the Church I thought I'd known all my life.

But once again, never did I seriously pursue the call I felt in my heart, being satisfied with whatever work I was doing with the parish and with teaching for some ten years of my life. Then, three years ago, I tried again, and again foolishly, to find a wife in a woman of a faith which hated Catholicism (which by this time had become the blood in my heart). Only the Jubilee Year began to bring release from that relationship built on false hope, and only in the last eight months

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has my serious investigation of religious life gone on. And now perhaps I am on its doorstep.

But, again, I am forty entering a life prescribed for an eighteen-year-old. I have been ignorant for twenty-two years and now must suffer the humiliation of coming so late to a call in my life. To put it in perspective, my grandfather used to place an arm around his grandsons and tell them this story: “When I was fourteen, they came to me and said, ‘What’s it gonna be, boy?’” He knew then what he would do with his life. I come now to it as one born out of time. (The least of the apostles am I.) I found this realization distressing at first, but now have come to accept it and the humility it brings. And the Blessed Mother holds me to herself as her little child.

And of last week’s preparation there is one further quote from the holy man I must share, for it so perfectly relates the call, and its suffering, I find now in life: “Write, read, sing, sigh, keep silence, pray, bear crosses manfully; life everlasting is worthy of all these, yea, and of greater combats.”

And the peace and everlasting light which shall come on the day of the Lord after this day of darkness and struggle is indicated so clearly in the Liturgy of the Word for this Sunday. In the first reading, “a deep, terrifying darkness” envelops Abram at sunset as he prepares to receive the promise, and its intervening trials, from God. And a cloud overshadows the three “frightened” apostles as they hear the voice of God at the Transfiguration. We have promise. We have great promise of everlasting life, of finding our lasting place in the light of the glorious presence of Christ – but we have a cross to carry to come there.

Last night by a dream I was greatly frightened. And before that in exhaustion I pushed myself to pray the Sorrowful Mysteries, after which I found myself ready to die – ready to face the darkness of death unafraid. In another dream the Lord led me to my sister’s grave. He told me, “She is dead.” Then He said, “She is alive with me.” He then led me to lay my body down upon the ground... and my name I saw written on the tombstone. But I was alive. The first dream came because of prayer for a soul who’d lost his way amid the temptation of this life and revealed the suffering I must face to carry the cross of loving my enemies. The second brought me only peace. We must go through the darkness to find the eternal light and life.

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And in the night I woke this fourth day in the desert, to pray my Office; and looking out the window into the stillness and surrounding darkness, the white snow and moon offsetting the black of the night, I found a comfort in this desert wilderness. I began to feel at home... And after singing Morning Prayer upon waking, I turned to study the Scriptures of the Mass for the day and found this key line: "Today, if you should hear His voice, harden not your hearts as at the revolt in the day of testing in the desert." And I believed myself ready.

Though the night before I had gone to sleep in pain and weakness and hunger, I woke this morning feeling exceptionally strong. Not only was my spirit on fire, but my body, too, was alive. My legs, and especially my thighs, were as powerful as tree trunks – though at the end of my fast on the preceding desert day they'd seemed about to wither and die. (I've noticed this phenomenon with regularity of late on the morning following a day of fasting on bread and water.) Here was resurrection and new life.

A kind of resurrection seemed to be coming to the laura as well, for, although Sr. Mary Margaret would again read the introductory reflection to spare the ailing voice of Sr. Mary Magdalene, Fr. Romano (as I knew he would) gave a full homily at this morning's Mass. So well he spoke of our needing to keep in touch with the Lord, baring his own soul for perhaps not coming in faith to Him to be healed of sickness like the leper in the gospel, who moved the Lord to pity – what effect we can have on Him who is so human and understands our lives – and indeed as Jesus had been healing people all the week of gospels. (Perhaps I *should* have invited Father to lie in the snow.) His sermon was well illustrated by the story of Mother Teresa once telling him, after he had said to her she should pray for him and not he for her – "Let us both pray that we don't get in Jesus' way." And the final line rang in my ears: "We must keep the lines of communication open."

At consecration time the past couple of days [unlike the first day] there had been sufficient space for us all to gather in a semicircle around the front of the altar; and after receiving the Body and then the Blood from the hands of Fr. Romano today, I went as usual to sit in my chair and prepare my heart for twenty minutes of silence. In my contemplation two ideas came to me to help prevent sickness among

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the hermits: one to do with heating and the other with a technique I'd learned (as a Eucharistic minister) in cleaning the cup. It was while considering these suggestions that the Blessed Mother brought a guiding word to me... I was not to find a place at this hermitage. Tears filled my eyes.

In a short stay with the Friars of the Renewal, the vocations director said clearly he didn't believe their life for me. At the end of my stay with the Trappists at Genesee, the Blessed Mother had told me I would not be there. I cried then, too; but now I had come here to Bethlehem three times with no word from the Mother, wondering what would be and preparing to make this my life... and at this late time a word of denial. Though no bitterness was in my heart, the disappointment I have experienced all my life was deep now, and I couldn't understand why... But as I questioned her, she confirmed the word provided me. (I sometimes think it was my attaining a level of comfort at the hermitage – signified in my readiness to share my points of view – a level I had found in the previous houses as well, that made it time to leave. I have a line in a song (“Hold On, Here We Go”) which states, “When you get it right / It's time to go.” Now that I had found myself here, I was ready to leave.)

I left the chapel upon hearing the bell, knowing I had work to do for Father and wanting to be ready to go. On my way past the sacristy, he reminded me that he would call when it was time for me to come over and help Sr. Raffeline Nativity take down the Christmas decorations in the chapel. I had by now about perfected filling up my Tupperware containers with food in the crowded kitchen. I set my cooler on a shelf in the hall and brought the containers in one at a time, adroitly moving into an area unpopulated as everyone silently gathered their food together. It became like a dance each morning and afternoon.

Back at my hermitage I somewhat hurriedly enjoyed my breakfast, reading as usual the National Catholic Register. There were several articles on the Jubilee celebrations in Rome in the edition I had brought along. (For some reason the one involving entertainers stands out in my mind.) After consuming these stories along with my food, I went directly to wash the dishes – again, wanting to be ready when Father called. But with breakfast out of the way and no call having come, I decided to sit on the bed and pray my Rosary (the

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Joyful Mysteries, for this Thursday). As I prayed I inquired of the Mother what would become of me and when I would know. “Soon” was the only word I got, which made me laugh, because she seems ever to be telling me “soon.” But she seemed to mean it more literally this time. (Unlike the end of abortion, which I have also been told will come “soon”... And of course the kingdom of God is at hand.)

I had no more than finished my Rosary when the telephone rang.

Eternity

(8:51 – 9:20)

In heaven there are levels of beings, closer to and further from the Father. The Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit, of course, are completely one with God the Father – they are God Himself. Then there are the angels, who are the winged messengers of the Triune Godhead, and the saints redeemed. But the saints are above the angels in heaven because Christ Himself is above them and Him they serve. The saints find their life in Christ and are united to Him, and so find their position with Him (though not God themselves); and, of course, Mary is the first of the saints.

I notice in my prayer how difficult it can be to speak with Jesus, and how easy to speak with Mary. Jesus is God, you see, and just a word from His lips can make me shudder for its utter purity. One must prepare his heart well to meet the King. (That Jesus is not easy to approach is eminently evident in Scripture, where sinners are forever climbing trees, crying out, and running up and falling to their knees... Even the disciples feared speaking too easily to their Master, often reticent to ask Him questions and, of course, once asking John to speak to Him for them.)

Mary is our Mother. She is always there. (Remarkably, I find.) Though Immaculate and “esteemed and loved [by God] above all angels and all men” (as the saint has said... and remember Paul says that we are to judge angels), yet she is not quantumly different from us as God is (as Jesus is at least in His divinity, and that divinity cannot be separated from His humanity). She is human; she is not God. And she is our Mother.

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And she is above the angels. In my prayer I often see the angels clapping excitedly at an idea I propose. At first I took this as blanket approval, but later found the wisdom of the Mother greater than that of the angels, for they cannot completely understand the ramifications of our acts on earth. And I have found, too, the shortcomings of the saints – in particular those recently received into heaven – for their judgment, too, can be colored by excitement, in this case being too close to and perhaps too shortsighted in their desires for the benefits of the earth. Mary's wisdom is so closely united with the Son's that it suffers from neither of these shortcomings... her wisdom leads directly to the Lord.

Oh Lord, draw us unto your kingdom
And ever closer to your Presence.
May your children come unto your Godhead.

Afternoon

(3/12/01: 5:17 – 7:06 p.m.)

How marvelously the saint extols the blessings God has showered upon the Virgin Mary, and how well he tells of their continuance through time. She is truly the aqueduct by which all graces come; though she is “infinitely below her Son, who is God,” yet “in the Heavens Mary commands the angels and the blessed” (saints). And I begin to see how much further than my scapular her protection surrounds me, as indeed she forms me as her son, leading me to the only Son of God.

It is confirmed by my breaking the discipline of prayer before the LORD an hour before bed and after rising (to which I have applied the meditative praying of the Sorrowful Mysteries and the singing of the Glorious ones at each respective time) just of what primary importance this time is. Last night I came to this prayer about three hours late – having written till 9:20 and then corrected the penmanship (to make my scrawl legible) for at least another hour – and I was beyond exhausted. But instead of bearing my cross and finding blessings as I had done the night before, I lay my head down before completing my second mystery. The Lord Himself had given

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me this blessed umbrella of prayer (speaking to me of its necessity as I prayed before an icon of the Blessed Mother in a Polish pilgrimage church), and yet I took it upon myself to be excused from its discipline.

This time of contemplation on the NAME of God is indeed a more important time than prayer of the Church found at Mass, in Confession, in the Liturgy of the Hours, etc. ... and before the work we must perform (in my case, as an artist for Christ doing labor such as this writing). This prayer in the WORD is truly the Temple on which the stone is built. (Originally, “the stone on which the temple is built,” but I think it truer that we make the stones, of which one will not be left upon another, and He is the Temple that gives all life. Indeed, the most beautiful song will be no more in heaven; and even Scripture and the Eucharist will no longer be needed when we find His Name written on our hearts and as we stand in His presence. But that which animates all shall never pass away.)

Yet I turned away from sitting in His silent presence to sleep (indeed, as I had spent the day too much on eating), thus removing what is most important to replace it with what is least. And I was not spared for this, but sin and presuming to hide from the face of God crept into my dreams, and left me as Daniel crying out for Israel’s rebellion, and praying to “live by the law” He provides. But He is compassionate, as we must be.

Immediately upon receiving the call from Fr. Romano, I hurried out to the chapel to help Sr. Raffeline Nativity. Sister is a short and very sweet older nun (much like Sr. Mary Loretta; Srs. Mary Margaret and Mary Magdalene are both taller and younger, it seemed) who has charge of the chapel. Father and Joe had removed all decorations which required ladder work, and when I arrived Sister was removing wreaths and other smaller decorations. She had a few boxes set aside for things such as ribbons and pine cones, and had spread sheets on the ground for carrying the pine wreaths out. I quickly and carefully set to assisting her.

The wreaths I wrapped in the sheets gently and carried them out a side door, where they were tossed onto a pile to the side of the stairs. I flapped out any stray pine needles from the sheets then returned to cradle another wreath outside. When I came to a pair at the sides by

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the doors, I suggested to Sister I might simply carry them out uncovered... but she began to move the chair [out of the way] and spread a sheet below – wisely, for they were not easily removed from the wall. I also dexterously untwined the wire around the altar candles to remove some smaller decorations (ribbons, I think) and placed all neatly in its proper box.

Next it was time to sweep the excess pine needles from the floor and then to vacuum the entire chapel. I swept principally around the tabernacle and altar, where most of the wreaths had been gathered, as well as near the shrines at either side. (This gave me a little time to peruse the beautiful icons in either alcove – in one I thought I saw Fr. Romano among the tiny figures of the saints.) I began the vacuuming near the tabernacle and worked my way out and toward the back of the chapel, deftly maneuvering the cord around the altar (with a short suggestion from Sister).

Finishing the sanctuary I moved on toward the chapel seats, placing the prayer benches of the first two rows onto the chair beside them, then working my way among and under and around the chair legs. As I prepared to do the same for the remaining rows of chairs in the back quarter of the chapel, Fr. Romano came by to have his talk with me. (I was happy to see him for more than one reason, for my body, unused to physical labor, was beginning to tire and my back beginning to ache.)

Father and I went downstairs to a small, private room used for such conferences. He had his crucifix and stole, ready to hear my Confession – which indeed I was hoping to make – but first we talked a few minutes. This really was a moment of truth for me; for even though the Blessed Mother had seemed to tell me I would not be here, yet I held out hope and was looking to see what Father might say.

I began by telling him that this visit had been different than the two before, perhaps because of the seriousness of my consideration of this life. All had felt so comfortable before (I recall on my first visit how close I felt to family and friends despite being here so completely alone), but now the severity of the life had proved trying. Before I could say that I imagined such trials were a normal part of the process of coming to a new way of life – and that, in fact, this day I felt comfortable again, if not joyous, to be here – he shook his head as if I'd confirmed his thoughts that I indeed would not be here.

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Father conveyed to me the situation of the overcrowding – which was the principal obstacle – and also suggested that I pursue religious life at another house before taking such a serious step as this one. He suggested a couple of teaching monasteries (including one of a vocations director who had been at the hermitage the week before), stating that he did think I had a vocation. I spoke of the Blessed Mother's message to me that morning, letting him know I was not completely surprised, and his words remarking on my special relationship with Mary left a definite impression on me. Before I had always doubted that what I seemed to hear was real – but his simple recognition served as a catalyst to instilling confidence in what I did seem being blessed with. His penance to really bring my vocation before the Lord and His Blessed Mother at Holy Hour that afternoon would prove to be a decisive moment in my spiritual life.

For now I returned to the chapel upstairs, where, as Father said, Sister was waiting. Actually, she had already vacuumed the back of the chapel, and I had only the short hallway and sacristy yet to do – which I completed, sadly but strongly, in fifteen minutes or so. It was then approaching 12:30, but I took time to say my Daytime Prayer and Angelus back at my hermitage before returning to the main house to pick up my dinner and evening collation.

But before I sat down to what looked like a delicious hot meal, I heard a couple of gunshots coming from the public woods beyond the path in the snow opposite my hermitage (which I had walked yesterday). I looked out the windows in several directions but didn't see anything or anyone stirring. When another shot was fired I stepped out onto the porch to survey the area. I noticed one of the sisters, at a distance to my right, had come out to do the same. Then a single deer came bounding from the woods (toward my left) apparently unharmed. I wondered if any others were behind him and stood outside awhile... but soon Sister went in, and I eventually did the same.

The deer had been another thing I had greatly missed in these five days. In my previous stays in the hermitage by the open field, I would see a family of a dozen or more at least every evening in the field. Now I had hardly had sight of them. Deer are a favorite animal of mine and I missed their blessed company.

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I finally sat down to dinner and again enjoyed the delicious fare. I can't recall if afterward I wrote or not, but I know I was certainly preoccupied with thoughts of what would become of me now. I could understand how those without faith get angry with God, for if I had not my own, of a certainty I would be the same. In a few short months I had gone from being encouraged here to finding "no room at the inn", and now my search would have to go forward again. But instead of feeling like flies unto mischievous boys, I saw the purgatorial hand of the Lord in all this matter; and though tearful to the depths of my soul, my faith would not allow me to be overcome by woe. I did drink in the darkness of this afternoon.

Evening

(3/13/01: 5:11 – 6:52 p.m.)

"If you are willing, and obey..." But I am not. I "hate discipline" and cast the Lord's words behind my back. I do not listen humbly to Him who is the only teacher, but am afraid to carry my cross. I do not answer to His call.

I am reluctant again to come to my hour of prayer before bed. I hesitate to bear its sorrow and tears – I am tired again and its prospect is daunting to my soul. Why do I not answer His call as I answered the phone this day in the desert, ready to do the work of God? Why am I so afraid of coming into His presence? Why do I not treasure this time, long for this time, for the blessing it is? Why is this grace-filled sorrow not the joyful desire of my soul...? For indeed when I do finally begin my prayer, He is there blessing me, immediately. When I do open my heart before Him, desiring His company, the time is short. Indeed, I step into eternity when I come faithfully to Him, and these tears bring me peace.

I hesitated, but I came before Him last night, and gradually drew closer to His presence as I gave my heart to Him. Then in the night I was awoken gently – the time to rise and say my Vigil prayers. But I turn over; I turn over and to sleep... to a restless, weary dreaming before finally I wake an hour later, with only enough darkness to complete my prayers.

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And in this still darkness of morning I read St. Augustine: “The evening sacrifice is then the passion of the Lord, the cross of the Lord...” and, “In his resurrection He made this evening sacrifice a morning sacrifice. Prayer offered in holiness from a faithful heart rises like incense from a holy altar.” A clear confirmation of my hour of breathing the Sorrowful Mysteries before bed, and my hour of chanting or singing the Glorious ones upon waking; and a clear indictment of my failures in this regard... And a clearer indictment would come upon next reading the Scriptures quoted above, taken from today’s Mass. (Oh Lord, make me not a faithless servant!)

But ready I was to enter the chapel at 3:00 for Holy Hour at Bethlehem Hermitage. Ready I was to seek vocation direction from the Lord and His Blessed Mother. I did not sit in a chair but went immediately to the center aisle and knelt on the carpet (even with the third row). There was another soul praying before the Lord this hour, but she was in front to the left, kneeling close to the altar as I had done two days before. I felt no inhibition from her presence.

I knelt in silence before His glorious presence for a time, then began to bring my petition unto Him, looking to offer myself upon His altar. “Take me, Lord. Let thy will be done. I open myself to you.” And soon I was praying and crying in tongues (all silently), raising my hands to seek Him. Impassioned with the weight of the cross and His holy sorrow, I held my arms out and screamed in silent anguish for the union with His suffering I had found. Prophecy began to overtake me and intercession for His Church I made.

Calming a little I was led to the Bible and to opening its pages at random for a sign. The first passage I came upon was from Maccabees, speaking of a king with “reasoned judgment” who averted a war. I found nothing stirring in this text – nothing dramatic to match my impassioned state – and moved to open the Bible again. Here Paul spoke of the believer who calls out “Abba! Father!” in his spirit. Again nothing was striking me, so I opened the Bible twice more. One reading I forget and the other related Solomon’s plea to God for wisdom. I found no earthshaking word of vocation direction in these passages – so humble and ordinary did they seem to be – and began to believe I’d made a foolish error.

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But as I continued in prayer before the Lord, a certain message did rise to meet me. The Lord was commending a wisdom to me, one which was of His Spirit. (Indeed, it was some eighteen years ago I first made my request to the Lord that, as others seek millions of dollars, so make me a millionaire of wisdom – I want nothing else... And I feel His Word of peace upon my soul even at this moment.) With this thought I prostrated myself before the Lord and more carefully sought His direction.

First I spoke with the Blessed Mother, whom I found very ready to greet me. I did not doubt this gift as I had been wont to do, but opened myself as a child to its mystery. We conversed awhile and she eventually invited me to inquire of Jesus. The Lord answered my plea to know the direction of my life, telling me I was called to be a “teacher.” When I brought to His attention how little I am able to speak of Him as a teacher (of English) now, and how I was not qualified to teach religion in college and had rather failed teaching this in high school... He gave me the word that it was not in the classroom I would teach, but through my writing, reminding me of all I had already written and seeming to promise production of these and other fruits in the future. (For I had said how limited was my success with this work as well.)

The Lord then gave me a blessed command. First I heard it as “Remember my Word,” but later He clarified it as “Remember my Name.” And these words rang with holy, loving truth – and I could see His blessed lips forming them... His Word. His NAME. YHWH. His silence. His Presence. The revelation at the heart of my writing, and of my faith... And now in these days He lets me know that I am called not to remember His NAME only at certain times (or worse yet, in some merely intellectual way), but to speak this NAME – this name which is of life and love, a love embodied on the cross – constantly. And I have but to open my mouth to do so.

What joy filled my heart as I heard this call from the Lord. I lay on the ground for some time more, asking both the Lord and His Blessed Mother a number of questions and bringing before them my fears and dreams. Now the conversation was clear and steady, and I had no doubt of their presence. I might have lain there an hour more, so comfortable had I grown, but the family of deer passed by the windows of the chapel, and as a child I was drawn to them.

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I soon politely excused myself from my Lord and Lady, thanking them for their gracious gifts, and stepped out of the chapel and went to the hall door that leads to the yard behind the main house. Outside by the statue of Jesus sitting and teaching I stood in awe, looking at my four-legged friends. I called to them and spoke with them, and wished I could walk up to them and pet them. At first I interrupted their trek through the laura to the other side, but after they saw I meant no harm, they eventually continued walking (and bounding) by.

It occurred to me they were heading toward the public woods, and remembering the gunshots this afternoon I thought I'd better cut them off before they got there. I went out the front of the main house and down the road to the path I'd wandered on yesterday. I hastened up the path and placed myself between them and the public woods. They were at a distance, but I spoke to them again, telling them not to travel this way. I stood there awhile, and they eventually moved their meandering back toward the field on the other side. And I walked through the snow to my dwelling.

I suppose at this time I ate my collation and said my Evening Prayer, and I think it was while reflecting upon my blessings here, yet wondering where specifically they might lead, that Mary suggested to me that there would be a message waiting for me on my arrival home (the next day). I was thinking of the calls that might be on my answering machine and the mail piling up on my table – and the Mother gave a nod and a smile that in these a message should be found.

Night

(3/14/01: 4:57 – 6:27 p.m.)

“One should think particularly of all those young people – even mature ones – who have never come to a decision, saying they cannot learn with certainty what way to take, what state to embrace. Should they marry? Or seek the priesthood? Or be a monk? Or a friar? ... Or a contemplative? Or a missionary? Oh, the confusion and the suffering! When our mind goes around in circles, what are we to do?”

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I read this quote from a book on vocations (*Come & Follow Me* by Fr. Stefano M. Manelli, FI) shortly after finishing with my writing last evening. And how well it characterizes the struggle I've known for so many years; for all of these ways I have considered – but none have I come to...

Falling to the ground in prostration before the Lord – as has become my graced habit after Vigils and reading of the Scriptures in the midst of the night – I begged Him that I might be a humble servant and bear my cross in patience and with strength. I thanked Him for the fruitfulness of my hour of prayer before bed and my waking in a timely fashion for this vigil prayer. I had found the blessing of obedience.

Finishing my petition and having experienced the Lord's consolation, I rose to my knees and spoke in tongues for a few moments. As I was about to stand and return to bed, my Blessed Mother asked me to stay a moment. Pleased at her request, I knelt flat on my shins and bowed my head to the floor (in a sort of little ball), comfortable and ready as a child for a blessed conversation with the Queen of my soul. I waited humbly for her to speak first, but she only smiled in silence – thus reminding me of the Lord's blessed NAME.

I pulled the blanket around my shoulders up over my head and rested quietly in the comfort and peace of this domicile. I was reminded of the domicile I had found with my umbrella perched just over the top of my head as I prayed my Rosary seated on a rock so near the station of the Fifth Joyful Mystery (The Finding of Jesus in the Temple) on Podbrdo Hill in Medugorje. The rain poured down, beating upon my roof, but inside I was warm and dry... And even as I pulled the blanket up, I thought of a hermit crab who carries his home with him everywhere, ever with the blessed protection of his shell. And I remembered the words of Prince Hamlet, that he could be bound in a nutshell and count himself a king of infinite space... And here I understood the manner of life to which I am called.

When I first entered a hermitage at Bethlehem, indeed I felt as if all the world – family, friends, the Church, and all – were with me. And I understood quite clearly that this life is at the *heart* of the Church and not on its periphery: the hermit lives at the center of the universe; he is not isolated from it. How appropriate this life is for my

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call to teach through my writing. For to teach is to touch the world, but writing is done in perfect solitude. And I realized I am not called to the itinerant ministry I found described in John Michael Talbot's book yesterday – though I have engaged in its like in the past and know of its blessings – but only to venture from my hermitage to support this central call... to teach through writing. (Indeed, my greatest ideal would be to build the stages for *Songs for Children of Light* on the Little Portion grounds and have people come to this source for performances, rather than taking the music on the road.)

I am a hermit. How afraid I have been to speak that word, how embarrassed. Indeed, I have most often used the word “monk” or “brother” in conversation with others, trying to hide from the expression itself. But I am no longer ashamed. I am a hermit, and my hermitage *will* teach me all I need to know. Yes, when I was a child I dreamed of never leaving my room and so living forever, the world unable to kill me. Though this childhood dream may have been spurred more by a fear of the cars on the streets than a desire for eternal life, now as a man I am not afraid of the death the world might bring – I am led forward in this way to discover the glorious life that beats in the heart of us all.

I did not return to the chapel to pray this final night in my hermitage. I began to clean the premises – as all guests are asked to do at the end of their visit. I intended to leave some work for the morning, but I went from sweeping the floor to cleaning the sink and toilet, and moving to the shower stall soon enough all was done. I put all the garbage aside along with the dirty rags, and placed all cups and bowls and utensils orderly into the cooler. After setting this by the door, I went to take my shower. After the shower, I packed away all the clothes and books I could, and was generally prepared for departure.

As I sat on the bed in prayer and a certain reverie, I found it ironic that now that I had grown accustomed to the cold and the quiet of the desert, now that I had drunk in the darkness and the spirit of this place was in my blood and bones... now it was time to go. The Blessed Mother continued to confirm that I must depart for good, so I bore no regret in my soul. But, though buoyed by the call I had found in my

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Holy Hour, still a sadness hovered about my heart. Again I had not found a place; still I had no home.

And I think it was in prayer by the dim light near my bed this night that my Mother first related to me the fact that I must die.

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5th Movement: Dying to Self

Eternity

(3/18/01: 4:12 – 4:22 p.m.)

Good Friday. A man is raised upon a cross. A man. A single man. A simple man. Flesh and blood.

His wounds are deep. Scourged and plaited with thorns, He bleeds. This man. This simple man.

Nails pierce His hands and feet. He cries out forgiveness. He dies. He dies upon a cross, this simple man.

How is it by this we are saved? He is but a single man at a single point in time. How is it His cry echoes through eternity?

Drink His Blood, brothers and sisters. Eat His Body. Carry His cross through this world. Die with Him, and live.

Morning

(4:22 – 6:12)

Waking for Vigils in the night I am not ready; I am not prepared to carry my cross. Must I do this again today?

I say my Office lacking inspiration, lacking a love of the Lord – perhaps with a measure of wickedness under my tongue. And then I come to the readings for this Sunday liturgy. Later at early morning Mass I would proclaim the readings dressed all in black (again, unintended), for perhaps the final time at a parish church. And how appropriate they would seem. In the night as I read them, at first they seemed disjunct: God calls Moses at the burning bush, giving him His NAME and telling him to lead His people out of slavery; Jesus warns His followers to repent or die, speaking to them of the tree which had borne no fruit. But the bridge is found in Paul, who tells us of our baptism but warns us to beware a fall.

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God comes. He saves us. He burns away our sins, leaving our persons untouched. He releases us from slavery and provides us with the blessing of Himself. He is kind and merciful, but we must not take Him for granted. We have not yet lived this day in holiness; waking in the morning, the day is yet ahead of us. He requires our souls of us every day and at every moment – this second, this minute, this hour... eternally. He is always Present and we must be always present to Him. Alive. Remember His NAME! Carry His cross today.

How like the tree which had borne no fruit for three years running am I. For forty years I have wandered in trackless wastes, barely touching His heart. Now my soul is required of me; now perhaps I might bear fruit in this life... Indeed, I continue my preparation for consecration this day, entering the third and final week. I have come by the saint to know the blessed graces of our indispensable Mother, and now turn my attention to her only Son, my Lord Jesus Christ. As I begin the prayers I am distracted, but upon completion how close is He and His peace. And I see already how she leads me to Him.

After early Mass the priest and an altar boy note the coldness of the day, and an elderly parishioner remarks on the coldness of my hands. "I know," I say. I then drive through near-empty city streets and highways to visit my sister's grave. As I exit the car I am immediately touched by the sweet odor of the fresh earth (come after the rain of the day and night before). I think I see an angel, an apparent mute wheeling a red shopping cart.

As I pray at my grandparents' grave, he leaves his cart some thirty yards away and begins walking amongst the headstones. As I move the few rows to my sister's grave, he stops three headstones over to pray. I pray the Our Father and he leaves before I finish. I pray the Hail Mary and Glory Be, and stop in the midst of "O My Jesus..." I turn around and see no one. But I look around as I exit, and find him leaving out the opposite entrance, his shopping cart before him. (I don't know what it means.) And the bells at Queen of Peace Church toll for me.

This final day in the desert I woke in the night and heard from my Mother that my death was nigh. I lay back down after my Office and gazed through the skylight and the snow upon it to the stars in the dark sky. I did not understand the message, but I was not frightened at

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the thought of dying. I did shed tears either here or during Morning Prayer, begging that no one else be hurt in or by my departing (i.e. physically or emotionally). I did not want to be responsible for another's death or cause another misery.

Before going to the chapel I finished packing what remained (sheets and night clothes, as well as my bathroom articles), getting all organized and ready to be taken to the car. (I note that on the day of my last writing, when I spoke of doing the majority of packing, I found myself organizing and packing my mounds of writings – some material to be left at my parents' house, to where I go the end of this week, and other of it to be brought to Little Portion, which visit shall follow. On the back of one of my principal books containing material from *Songs for Children of Light* I found inscribed in quotation marks, "Remember My Words." How I had forgotten.) On the way to Mass I threw my garbage in the can in a little shed beside the main house, and dropped my rags and cooler near the kitchen door.

Father again preached at Mass, marveling at the faith of the friends who brought the paralyzed man to Jesus, and again asking himself and us if our faith is real – and encouraging all to stir it into flame. During the intercessions he asked us to pray for a little girl who was very sick, and for the soul of a Little Brother of Charles De Foucauld. All week Foucauld had been looking at me with that deepest pain and wonderful joy in his eyes and in his smile, and I could not help but find an ironic affinity with his child who had died.

During the twenty minutes of silence after Communion, the Blessed Mother confirmed and made clear in my repeated and thorough questioning that indeed I would die, and it would be today. I believed her completely and accepted without apprehension the fact of the end of my life. Knowing that I would die and die today provided my soul a rather perfect wisdom – there was great freedom in the reality of laying down my life. I was ever calm, with a stillness that ran deep, but I did have the sincere desire to share my knowledge with others, to simply state to them, "Today I die."

I could not speak with the sisters, of course, but had to speak to Father anyway in order to say good-bye. But outside the sacristy a visiting couple with whom he seemed well acquainted awaited his company. So I could only get out a thank you and the statement that I

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didn't think I'd be visiting the teaching monasteries he'd recommended, muttering something about teaching through writing...

It being Friday, I skipped breakfast – wrapping a couple of pieces of bread in a napkin – and returned to my hermitage, saying my Rosary as I walked along. I ate the bread while seated on the bed, and soon was ready to carry my things to the car. I continued to say my Rosary as I made two trips (guitar and bag, then dirty clothes and backpack) to the road in front of the main house where my car was parked. I then walked down that road, finishing my Rosary, in order to come around to the place where the first station of the cross was set. I walked back up toward the house on a rocky trail, stopping and praying at each tree that held a cross and Scripture reading denoting the fourteen stations.

Upon completing this prayer I walked a few paces to the right to look out upon the field, and found a tear forming in my eye. Before returning the key to the main house, I stepped into the small old shed that contains a humble nativity scene. In a previous stay, when I had cleaned the small windows of this dusty place (since I was cleaning windows anyway), and now again, I felt distinctly the presence of the Lord here – and had to sit a moment on an old stack of straw. I needed to duck my head to enter this space and could hardly stand up within... how much like a humble child I felt before the Lord, our baby Jesus.

As I approached the house I saw Joe with the ladder, getting ready to do some work. This would be my only opportunity to speak with him, and I told him I was sad to go. He said everything was going alright and told me to keep in touch – “Just put ‘Joe’ on the envelope and it'll get to me.” Coming inside I ran into Fr. Romano and thought again to speak with him. But I could see he was occupied, so I just gave him the keys and a hug, and told him I loved him. I then walked toward my car.

Afternoon

(3/19/01: 5:33 – 6:35 p.m.)

“Unless the Lord build the house,
In vain do its builders labor.”

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It is the Solemnity of St. Joseph, Husband of Mary. Here in the midst of Lent comes this feast dedicated to the man who was a carpenter by trade and a true laborer for God, building the house in which Jesus was raised. Here was a man of faith who listened and acted on the word of God, moving as he was called.

We are called to the house of God, to be living stones in His holy Temple. To be so we must go when called and where called. We must have the faith of Joseph and of Abraham, who left Haran at the word from God even as Joseph took Mary and fled to Egypt at that same word – both becoming fathers of us all.

And I must go now. I must go as called. Today I pick up my triptiks, the maps for my journey to Florida and then to Arkansas and Little Portion Hermitage. I must go despite any criticism or turning away in dismay from friends; I must go on the word I hear and seek what the Lord leads me to now. There may I see.

I read again this week in consecration preparation the pages of the holy man. Though the saint's work is radiant, *The Imitation of Christ* is the most inspiring text I know (aside from Scripture). Indeed, how sweetly he speaks of the suffering and death we must endure in the cross of Christ, how the dying to self leads to blessed life in Christ: "The more any man dieth to himself, so much the more doth he begin to live to God." May the blood of Christ pour over me. May I be a good and faithful servant.

As I closed the door and walked the short path from the main house, Father called Joe (a carpenter by trade) to do some work inside; he brought his ladder along. I would not be built into this house. Though Father has repeated its possibility in the future, I knew now this would not be my home. I brushed the little bit of snow from my car, hesitated to turn it on for fear of breaking the silence, waited a moment... then moved down the road. I gave the car little gas, but let it move on its own along the thin layer of icy snow which covered the path leading through these woods.

Coming out to the edge of the world, I waited a moment for an opportunity, then turned out onto Pleasant Hill Road. Perhaps another half mile later I turned onto Furnace Road, which led me to the highway... and so, soon I was back in the midst of speeding traffic. I

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had not forgotten that I would die today, and was not afraid that it might happen here in my car. Certainly I had no desire for this, but again was simply acceptant of whatever might come (hoping only no one else should be hurt).

I listened to the second half of the hour of adoration led by Fr. Slavko and buoyed by the glorious strains of the Franciscan Youth music group. I was at peace. I was not happy to be back in the world, but I was at peace. I had planned previous to leaving home to stop at the college here on my return trip in order to do some typing. I had no heart for this, nor for shopping in the supermarket, which I had also planned. I realized I could make do with what I had in the house, and so made only one stop.

On Fridays in a neighboring church the Blessed Sacrament is exposed all day in a small chapel in the basement. I went there to visit the Lord before returning home. I stayed an hour or more and had a considerable span of time alone with Him, so I could comfortably prostrate myself just a few feet before the altar. Here was the same Lord whom I'd just left at the hermitage. I know of two days of adoration (Wednesday and Friday) in nearby churches, and thought perhaps I could find others, and thus still secure regular devotion to Him...

Coming into my apartment I looked to find the message the Blessed Mother suggested would await me on my return. My answering machine had only a recording regarding a political candidate (whom I didn't know) beginning his campaign for office; and amongst the mail piled on my kitchen table by my landlord, the most I could find was a letter of evaluation from my supervisor at a college to which I had once thought I might well have been called, but which did not even have an adjunct assignment for me this spring.

The evaluation was all right, and I noted particularly the transcription of students' comments disliking my bringing religion into the (English) classroom – despite the fact this was a Catholic college – and I suppose especially my stance against abortion and euthanasia. But here there was no message; and indeed nothing did I find waiting for me.

Tired and not knowing what to do with my afternoon, I went to lie down.

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Evening

(3/20/01: 7:30 – 8:32 p.m.)

“My son, thou art not yet a courageous and considerate lover.”

“Wherefore thou sayest this, O Lord?”

“Because for a slight opposition thou givest over thy undertakings and too eagerly seekest consolation.”

How true this rang of myself upon reading the holy man’s words. But I proved myself this evening faithful to the guidance of the Blessed Mother despite the difficulties.

I sit now with paint specked upon my hands, coming late to my writing, for I went as prompted earlier. Picking up my car from the faithful and honest mechanic near my house (it having gotten a clean bill of health for my potential four- or five-thousand mile journey over the next month or so), he confirmed, in opposition to what others had said, that I could use simple spray paint to cover a fender which does not match the rest of the car. (The result of a most remarkable accident I’d had – one stop sign hidden by trees, the opposite one lying on the newly-laid sidewalk – the day I was to revisit the Friars of the Renewal last summer.) I am to visit my parents first on my journey and had hoped to please my mother by making the car more presentable.

Coming from the mechanic, I listened to the weather report, which predicted rain for the next two days – my final two before departing. If I were going to paint the car, it would have to be now. But it was near sunset and I had things to do. The Mother, however, prompted me to go forward. I did not move immediately; I had to ask several times and so took several minutes. I then collected my coins to be sure I had enough to pay for the paint, and headed out to the hardware store in the car. But I’d left my wallet with \$5 in it at home and had to drive the quarter mile or so back to my house again (after having parked and fed the meter). The store would be closing in fifteen minutes, so I had to hurry back home and then return – the Blessed Mother still confirming the call.

At the store I was told they didn’t have the color I needed and perhaps to go to a larger store several miles from my house. There was no time for that, and I was confused as to what to do. I decided to

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check another hardware store nearby in hopes it would be open. The Mother seemed to say this would be the place I'd find my paint – it was my last option anyway.

My car is termed “silver metallic”, but the metallic paint at the store was far more bold and inappropriate. I left the store disappointed. I sat in my car a moment and asked the Blessed Mother what I should do – she insisted the paint was in the store. I went back in to look at the paint again.

First of all, the owner – like most others – thought it a bad idea to paint the car in this way. Secondly, there was no match. But when I questioned him more openly, admitting I knew I was being unusual, he let out that gray would probably be a closer match. Standing on a chair, I reached for the gray. It didn't look quite right, nor did the cap color appear any closer when I went outside to compare it to the car. But going only on faith, I bought the “dove gray” paint and went back out to test it on the car. I was surprised at what a close match it seemed to be.

I went to the bank across the street to get some money to buy another can should I need it, and returned to the store. But they had no more dove gray, only “stone gray”, which the owner assured me was the new name of the same color. (It reminded me of when I would stand at my sister's grave and look at the car, how it blended so well with the headstones.) Instead of buying another can, I decided to paint the car here on the busy avenue and come back if I needed more. (The cap color seemed darker to me.) I sanded the fender a little bit, masked off the edges quickly, and began to spray the paint. I did not do the work as neatly as I ought to have (and the gray does not have the metallic sheen), but in an hour from getting the idea to finishing the job, I had accomplished what I needed: to make it look decent from a distance. A lesson in trust despite difficulties. (The Word is what matters.)

Dragging myself up after an hour and a half of uneasy rest, I sat down at the kitchen table. Quite unintentionally I looked at the pile of mail lying there, and saw something I hadn't noticed before: a tiny picture of John Michael Talbot in the top right corner of my *Our Sunday Visitor* (weekly Catholic newspaper). It struck me. There he was in his Franciscan robes and with his guitar. I had heard of him, of

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course, and had read an article on him and Little Portion Hermitage in the same newspaper a few years ago. I had never heard any of his music, but others spoke well of it, and his hermitage seemed like a dream. I think that is why I never called there (in addition to its being so far away) – it seemed too perfect. But here it was looking at me again.

I opened to the article on Little Portion Hermitage and the man who'd founded it, and discovered this quote at the head of the article: "John Michael Talbot calls his modern lay hermitage a 'school for learning to die to yourself.'" The message seemed quite evident, and though I wanted to believe the death I would die would be more total – not just in the spiritual sense – it was more than enough to lead me to call the hermitage.

I managed to find the number through directory assistance (after failing to find the article I'd cut out three years ago, which had this information), and got someone still in the office. She said she would send me some material (newsletter, etc.) but that I'd have to write to the vocations director to pursue a calling. She also happened to mention the Catholic Association of Musicians – I had discussed my situation with her somewhat – which I had never heard about, and said she would have information about that sent to me as well.

After hanging up the phone, I was encouraged, but still questioned if this was what the Blessed Mother meant about my dying. I do not recall the first time I asked her if this was the place for me, but I know that every time I have inquired of her (and of Jesus) the answer has been "yes." Nothing but "yes." This is the word I have.

Night

(3/21/01: 4:41 – 5:55 p.m.)

"If a man loves me, he will keep my word,
and my Father will love him, and we will
come to him and make our home with him."

and

"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot
bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine,
so neither can you, unless you abide in me."

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These and other passages from John of Jesus' final words of love and union with Him and with the Father I read today and yesterday in my consecration preparation. They evoke a song I've penned titled "Removing the Log from My Eye", and indeed I feel myself coming out the opposite end of the graveyard.

"I will make my beauty pass before you,
and in your presence I will pronounce
my name, 'LORD' [or 'YHWH']."

These words to Moses when he sought the face of the Lord (taken from this day's Office), ones I had not recalled, reinforce the majesty of our "merciful and gracious God" and the blessed gift of knowing His NAME. He is the WORD from which all comes. And His unknowable wonder is made flesh and blood, and His Law and His prophecy fulfilled in our midst, in the Person of Jesus. So Jesus tells us in the day's gospel; and the reading (and psalm) proclaim the blessing of having instruction from the Lord, not a letter of which shall pass away. This Word we must follow and find it fulfilled in the love of Jesus, who is so close to us.

"If you understand this, and live in purity and holiness
and justice, you may see God. But, before all, faith
and the fear of God must take first place in your heart...
God raises up your flesh to immortality along with
your soul, and then, once made immortal, you will
see the immortal One, if you believe in Him now."

St. Theophilus of Antioch
(also from today's Office)

After my conversation with Little Portion I think I had something to eat. I don't remember. In fact, there is only one thing I remember about the closing hours of this day.

I lay down again about seven o'clock or so; I don't even remember why. It is likely I was filled with the desire to pray. As I lay there on my side, my face toward the wall (where I now hang my

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crucifix to look upon Him as I pray the Glorious Mysteries in my first hour), the Blessed Mother came to me. Her voice was very strong (though ever loving, as she can only be – here is one way to check for her voice: in it you will find no mockery), and she came to me with definite purpose. I don't remember when my tears began; I think it was beforehand. And I don't recall how long it took to get to the point I shall now describe.

She began asking me a series of questions (it occurs to me now, much like our Baptismal promises); they were all really one question: "Are you ready to die?" As she repeatedly asked me if I was ready to give up all things, to leave all, to care not for myself... to die, to die, to die... I repeatedly answered through my tears in grateful apprehension – "Yes, Mother." "Yes, Mother." "Yes, Mother." I was ready to die in any way it might be.

Then came a second barrage of questions, and though I cried just as hard as I answered these – actually, with greater intensity – the response was tinged with a sweetness which lifted me from the grave into which I had descended. The question now was, "Do you want Jesus to make His home in you?" And to this question in all its forms I repeated my response with even more grateful desire, calling out the words, "Yes, Mother!" "Yes, Mother!" "Yes, Mother!" I wanted life! I wanted to live! I wanted to be fruitful in His Spirit! May heaven come down and make its home with me! "Yes, Mother!"

I cried awhile after this episode, this blessed moment in time – and the Blessed Mother let me know I had been born in Him. And the Peace of Christ soon descended into my soul, I pray, never to leave anymore. And though now I repeat this moment each morning, every day asking Jesus to make His home with me and finding again that blessed, wordless spirit of peace in me – and all this by the intercession of my Mother – yet I can point to a moment (as many Protestants tend to, truly or not) when I can say I died and was born again: January 12, 2001 at 7:30 p.m. And as I must renew my vows every day, so all my actions and prayers before this time led to this moment. Here is the apex: to this all led; from this all must proceed. But now I am dead, and alive in Christ.

And now that I was dead, perhaps I *could* find a place to live in Christ. How could I do so otherwise? Indeed, as the epigraph of my autobiography I had written:

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“There is no place for me here;
my only place is in heaven.”

And this I had found so true. And in accord with that I had come to believe that only after my death would any fruit of mine be born – not until the grain of wheat had fallen to the earth. But now I understood that here I could come to heaven; now that I had died I could rise and bear fruit in His Name. Now knowing truly, living truly, that there is no place for me here, I could find a place here... for my place would be set in heaven and nothing of this earth would matter.

And so I no longer doubted that I could bear fruit today; I no longer doubted that I might find a place to dwell. And so I wrote to the vocations director at Little Portion something like:

“I have died.
I was wondering if there might be a place
for me there to live in Christ.”

Soon I shall find out if there is.

But for now my heaven must be here.

Note

(3/22/01: 5:53 – 5:59 a.m.)

“Jesus was casting out a devil which was mute,
and when the devil was cast out the dumb man spoke.”
(from this day’s Scripture)

I write this morning at the prompting of the Lord to tell you that yesterday evening and night, as I wrote and as I lay down to sleep, there was an intense storm – the wind particularly strong. The house shook on at least two occasions.

And this morning I am able to speak with Jesus as with Mary. All is calm. The birds sing.

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Following Day

(3/25/01: 8:49 – 10:37 p.m.)

“Follow me.”

So says Jesus to Peter in the final chapter of the Bible read today in preparation for consecration (the third week finishing this morning and only the consecration remaining). Follow me to the cross.

“Those who have been freed and raised up follow the light,” St. Augustine reminds us in the Office of Readings. Let us remember and let us say with the holy man, “This is my whole desire, that my heart be united unto Thee.” Let us not forget our blessings. Let us not forget what the Lord provides. Listen to what the father says to the older son: “Everything I have is yours.” Do we forget what graces are with those who remain close to Him? Do we yet judge with a human heart? Can we not see? Do we follow Him?

Though today is the 25th of March, it is Sunday and so not the Solemnity of the Annunciation, which is moved to tomorrow. I had desired to make my consecration on the Annunciation, and so had had some confusion as to when that should be. Also, I should have finished the third and final week of preparation yesterday (which would have made this an empty day had I decided to make the consecration tomorrow). But due to nearly twenty hours of travel which occupied all of Friday – driving from New Jersey to Florida from just after seven in the morning to just before three the next morning – I lost that day. The Lord cleared up the confusion by having me complete the final week today and make the consecration prayer tomorrow. (Thus making a total of forty days in the desert, if you will: the five at Bethlehem plus the thirty-three of consecration preparation plus today (or actually Friday) and tomorrow.)

I had not planned on driving straight through to Florida (and my parents’ house) and this situation certainly was not without confusion and trials of its own. Having stopped and found no room at the motel I had picked for overnight rest, I decided to drive a little more. It then seemed the Blessed Mother encouraged me to continue (another seven hours or so) to my destination. It itself did not create difficulties, for I

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was not tired and had actually been graced earlier in the day with the ability to contemplate the WORD of God (YHWH) while driving – thus stepping into the eternal, transcending what can easily be a burden of time’s passing. The driving was not a problem.

I did, however, begin to question and have difficulty discerning the voice of the Blessed Mother and getting caught up in the pride and the game of the task at hand. I thus found myself rushing somewhat to arrive at an impossible time, and nearly running out of gas near the end. I should have probably been humble and stopped, recognizing the limitations of my body and mind. In fact, when I finally lay down to sleep, there were many voices in my head. In prayer invoking the Lord’s name they did disappear, but I do not know if this trial was necessary.

But perhaps it was a final trial, a final temptation before coming to light. And through the last day or two of recovery and return to the Lord, the holy man’s words of the temptations that must come have been with me and have helped me make it through the purgatorial fires. (And I see that in general it is not easy to be away from one’s hermitage, though perhaps I must learn to carry it with me better.)

The day following my five days in the desert was a furnace itself, again one of suffering and its conquering. Waking in the morning and just before stepping out to go to Mass, I picked up the *Our Sunday Visitor* newspaper again to look at the article on John Michael Talbot, and found another, smaller article I had not seen before on his Catholic Association of Musicians. Reading this my heart absolutely burned within me. Here was what I had needed for fifteen years. The man actually proposed poverty, chastity, and obedience for musicians. And he called for the mystical in music. I wanted to call him immediately but had to get to Mass, so I assured myself I could wait until my return. (Even calls for obedience to the Pope and the magisterium!)

On the way to church I stopped at the post office to mail my vocation information request and another letter. Returning to my car, I found it wouldn’t start. I had little time to check it, so I soon decided to put some money in the meter and leave it there until after I had run the last half mile to church and walked back. On my return I checked the fuses, but couldn’t locate the problem. I took a walk to my nearby

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mechanic and from there called AAA. (I have no jumper cables.) I went back to the car and waited. I had brought nothing to read and had finished my Rosary, so was without anything to do. I waited. I stood by the car in silence and stillness (on a busy street/avenue) for an hour... undisturbed, at peace. I called to check on the mechanic (they had said "within an hour"), then returned to wait another half hour. I was not anxious.

When the mechanic finally came, it took him about thirty seconds to jump the battery. He said I probably needed a new one, and I brought the car to my mechanic to be sure. He concurred. I went to Sears to get the battery, all the time longing to make my call to John Michael Talbot, yet all the time patient. At the auto center I sat on a box near the busy cashier's area and read my Bible (which I had picked up at the house, without letting my engine stop) and waited. The diagnosis was that the car had a problem with its alternator, but I told him to put a new battery in anyway. Rushing back to my mechanic before he closed, he and another customer (coming from inside) both said, separately, without my saying a word – "alternator trouble" – for they always say the same thing.

Anyway, I returned home from 9:30 Mass after 3:00 in the afternoon and finally got to make my phone call. Before I did so I couldn't help but smile to myself, thinking that the typical response to what I'd gone through would be to say that I had a "terrible day." But no words could have been further from my lips. I felt only blessed – blessed to have been so chastised and blessed to have thus found such utter patience in the face of trials, thus conquering suffering.

I did not get to speak with John Michael Talbot, whom I learned was only at the hermitage about six months of the year, but the (married) brother I spoke with told me to write a "brief" letter – thus my pithy comparison to Esther and King Ahasuerus – and also said to get on the road and keep walking it till the end, as I related to him my burning soul [whose flames had actually died down some].

My trials this day were as a pebble dropped in the ocean, for on this same day came a terrible earthquake to El Salvador – more than a thousand died and thousands more were left homeless. I have two pictures I've saved (both from the same Catholic newspaper) and they are before me now inspiring this writing. One is of a young lady with a hand over her mouth and nose, her head turned to a cross above a

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grave. Her eyes are opened wide, and I can see that, after the tears, a light has gone on. The other is of a young man standing among the total ruins of a house. He holds a crucifix (broken at the bottom) he has rescued from the rubble. He holds it out and up and forward, directly toward the camera. It is in light, and the boy's eyes look straight into the camera, unwavering. Faith. This is faith. Have you faith to overcome all trials?

I could speak of the empty luxuries of the U.S.A., but I think now of my sister's death – the worst tragedy to hit my life. A young girl, fifteen years old. And yet I can tell you without hesitation it has been the greatest blessing the Lord has provided. Without it I would not have faith. Without it I would not have found my soul; I would not have converted to the Lord. Had I not had this mirror held up before me, calling me to confront my own vanity, and my own sin, I would not have found the triumph of life over death. I would yet be empty.

The first part of this writing began with mention of a lesson on suffering I had given in my final class. That lesson was conceived on my second visit to Bethlehem Hermitage. After doing two or more hours of hard labor around the grounds, I lay down on the bed in absolute pain, my entire body aching. And I felt so sorry for myself. I should not have had to do what I am not used to... Poor me. But then I thought of Christ on the cross. I realized all must suffer, all must die; and it is how well we face the suffering that makes us who we are. Do we try to take the easy way out, or confront and conquer our fears? I united my pain to His:

“As I lay there on that bed and my mind turned to giving birth to this lesson, my body hurt no less than it did before. The body remained in pain. But my soul was no longer under the pain of the body. My soul, as I accepted this suffering, and this truth which I now share with you filled my soul – my soul transcended the body and its pain. It rose above it. I was as Jesus is now, as He was even when fixed to that cross... in God's hands, in heaven.”

Follow Him.

Coda

(1/26/01: 12:48 – 1:19 p.m.)

“Yes, James, I am with you.” The Blessed Mother tells me as I sign my consecration here before the Blessed Sacrament in a small chapel. And she assures me Jesus is with me, too.

Now she returns to me. It seemed that as the bride is removed from the groom before the wedding day, so she was removed from me before this my marriage to her. Because of the circumstances of travel perhaps were created the means of such separation. To this I say “Fiat,” as to all things. If such separation was necessary before this moment of union, let it be. For now she is with me and, I pray, more deeply.

Never must such a privilege be abused. Never by pride must it be presumed upon. A man must always love his wife and give all things to her, caring for and respecting her – and so must I be toward my Mother and Mistress. All must indeed be done by her. She is indispensable and brings me now to union with my Lord.

This morning, in fact, in my Glorious Mysteries of the first hour was repeated, intensified, the experience I had upon first praying the Rosary (Sorrowful Mysteries) in my last hour of contemplation. Again came tears; again came calling out; again came a clearer realization of Mary’s presence at the right hand of God and her dispensation of His graces: “On your right stands the Queen in gold of Ophir.” It *is* through her our prayers will be answered. (Come, new springtime!) Again, we must not be like those who look at the Rosary (and Mary) “as at a devotion which is good only for the ignorant and for those who cannot read.” We must come to it and to the Mother in faith [as the saint instructs].

A body the Lord prepares for me. No longer must I follow my own “will and operation,” which “however good they may appear” can only hinder my giving myself to Mary and so her Son. Blessings the Lord provides, giving me the direction I have so long sought through the wisdom and guidance of His Mother. Purity He provides through the discipline of prayer – particularly first, last, and hour in the night. May I cherish and guard these, allowing myself ever “to be

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moved and influenced by [the spirit of Mary] in the way she chooses” – and thus find my way to the fullness of Jesus.

Through Medugorje and in Bethlehem I have found the basis of my spirituality (a spirituality the Mother exhorts us to pursue in her latest message). Through Medugorje, for the messages encourage three hours of prayer, fasting on Wednesday and Friday, Communion and Confession – all of which I now follow to fruitful results. The messages especially promote prayer with the heart and in particular the Rosary, and this has become my constant guard.

In Bethlehem I have learned to wake in the night to pray – an important server of the maintenance of purity. It is from there I derived prayer in the morning and night, an hour each of contemplation. There I have found the Angelus and, of course, silence and stillness [with credit to the Trappists, too]. (And even eating of a main meal in the afternoon.) Now through these two means I have come to a fulfillment of a spiritual form of life.

And the Mother’s first message to me three years ago is now clearer in its four parts. First, I must trust in the Lord for my work, allowing Him to make it fruitful (and even to guide its presentation). Second, I must practice the glory of chaste love, love of all – and through this I shall find community. Third, the Blessed Mother is now my teacher, my instructor, ever leading me in the school of Christ. Fourth, my call is with Him: I have a vocation.

And now as I prepare to visit Little Portion Hermitage, I must trust in Mary and that she will bring me to where Jesus is. [The only word she knows is “Jesus”, “Jesus”, “Jesus”.] I must seek such obedience. Now as I come out of the desert I must find and be led in the light of the Lord to the work and purpose and life He has for me. I must not be afraid.

Now the suffering must bear fruit. Now I must open my mouth as He inspires.

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Final Note

If these words come from a fancy unfounded in the faith of God and in His blessing, let these pages return all the more quickly to the dust which is the fate of all flesh; let them never be opened to the eyes of men. But if there be truth between these covers and the Spirit has come upon these lines, to this extent let them be published for the edification of the soul who finds himself on the path of life.

II. Five Days in the Desert

Message of March 25, 2001

“Dear children! Also today I call you to open yourselves to prayer. Little children, you live in a time in which God gives great graces but you do not know how to make good use of them. You are concerned about everything else, but the least for the soul and spiritual life. Awaken from the tired sleep of your soul and say yes to God with all your strength. Decide for conversion and holiness. I am with you, little children, and I call you to perfection of your soul and of everything you do. Thank you for having responded to my call.”

Our Lady of Medugorje

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III. Morning

III

Morning

Turn of the Jubilee Year

This serves as completion of a triptych, being added to the two parts of *Turn of the Jubilee Year*. It will be composed during the novena which leads to Pentecost.

Preamble

Though it might have been better to run my car into the ground (as the Mother seemed inexplicably to be leading me to on my drive down to Florida), yet I ventured forth, hurriedly – for already I had been unexpectedly delayed ten days at my parents' by the hermitage – for a two-week visit to Little Portion in Arkansas. And ill-fated it would be. But I could not see.

After an unpleasant night in a malodorous motel room in Tupelo, Mississippi, I pushed on toward my desired end, back and neck already in pain from the extensive and intensive driving of the day before. The pain, of course, did not improve by the drive, and I found myself decidedly unready for the labor awaiting my arrival.

Damage to my muscles was not the only difficulty I'd encounter at this community to which the Blessed Mother seemed to be leading me, for while I toiled fruitlessly my mother would fall in the middle of one night and sprain her ankle, and my cat would begin not eating. And all this to find but five minutes time I'd needed to beg of the leader to babble so anxiously and impossibly about the visions which had brought me there. I was as the red bird flying into the windowpane of the chapel, repeatedly knocking its head against the unmoving surface, drawn by an illusory image.

I left there after my two-week stay, in the night, just before curfew, prompted by the Blessed Mother to go despite the hour. (I had intended to leave the next morning.) After fixing a flat just a few miles from the hermitage (incurred on its treacherous dirt roads), I drove straight through the night and next day to arrive at my parents' house that evening. I entered to find a cat that'd seemed an obstacle to vocation – and though old had always been so healthy – near death. And I began to know the sorrow... and would it lead to joy?

1.

Yesterday the Lord ascended,
and now we await
the Spirit's coming.

A cat has died. What of it? It is but an animal, no? Has it some greater significance...? Herein I shall explore its relevance to a man seeking heaven, seeking to wake in the presence of the Lord.

This cat I found some seventeen years ago. Here are the circumstances. Here we begin our story. (The following is excerpted from an autobiography, "*Still Greater Progress...*", written in 1995/96. It is the first chapter of the first part of the third and final section, "Maturity".)

I awoke on the morning of June 9, 1984, with my eyes red and swollen. The night before I'd cried more than I had this entire period of time. I cried out the lyrics for the final song to be included in *Songs for Children of Light*, "Where's My Brother?"

I had been listening to a marathon of Bruce Springsteen music on the radio and thinking hard about my sister's death and my own guilt therein. I was particularly taken by the selections from Springsteen's *Nebraska* – a very personal, soul-searching album he had done while quite alone. The songs struck home.

I literally cried for hours, and hard. The lyrics for the above song came in pieces, in fits of tears. They were the exposition of my sin and the longing for innocence that characterized these years. The title of the song came from something my mother had told me. She said that the night my sister died she had been repeatedly looking out the window, waiting for me to come home (as expected), and saying, "Where's my brother?" Where indeed was I, Lord?

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I was not there for my sister that night, nor for that time of her life. I had no sense of the responsibility of being an older brother. I cared only about myself.

That morning as I woke, I went out to jog, as had become my custom. As I entered the park across from my house and approached the track on which I ran, already jogging lightly, a boy came (it seemed) from nowhere, stepped in front of me, looked directly into my swollen eyes, and said, "Good morning." As I continued on, I replied in kind, then, a moment later, turned to look again at this young child who had so surprised me with his purposefulness. But when I turned, I saw no one. I veered to the side a little to check behind a small bush that was nearby... but saw no sign of anyone. I believe he could only have been an angel.

Jogging around the track, I passed a baseball field where young boys were practicing. Suddenly, a black cat ambled into my path. I avoided her and kept running. As I came back around, a woman had the kitten in her arms and was looking for someone to take her. She already had several pets, but her children would not leave the cat behind. I continued on, but as I circled the track again, I began to consider the situation. I remembered my thought (of which I was so ashamed) as my sister lay in a coma in the hospital – that perhaps, if she would suffer brain damage, it might be better that she die. This was a terribly selfish thought, and now, for some reason, I felt as if the Lord might be giving me a kind of second opportunity.

As I passed the woman and children leaving the park, I approached them about the kitten. Both the kitten's eyes were closed, and she was thin and barely alive. Someone had abandoned her, and she had been subjected to the series of violent storms that had hit us recently. The woman told me of a pet store that might take the cat if I couldn't... so I cradled her in my arms, and she clung to my chest all the way home.

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The kitten was little more than a spec upon my bedroom carpet, but she had enough strength to pull herself up, and actually had enough sense to go to the bathroom on a little rug my father had placed in the room. (At first my father was dead against a pet, but seeing her condition, he could not resist.) I had to bottle-feed the cat with milk and get special food and ointment for her eyes, but I was doing well at nursing her to health. I had gotten one eye fully open and the other partially open, but when I found the cakes of mites in her ears, I knew I'd have to take her to a veterinarian.

The vet kept the cat at her office and decided to operate on her eyes. She called me at one point and caused me great distress upon telling me the cat might not live. I argued that she was getting well with me and I did not understand the problem. (I believe she saw the cat as just another stray that didn't merit serious attention.) The vet hung up, and I prayed in tears that the Lord not take the cat yet. As it turned out, the vet removed one eye, saying it had ruptured, and delivered the kitten back to me. She has not been sick a day since.

I have the cat still, and she is still a good companion for a man alone. I named her 'Morning.' 'Morning' because it was morning when I found her. 'Morning' because the boy had said "Good morning." 'Morning' because she is black as most a.m. hours. 'Morning' because her paws and whiskers and underside are white – like the dawn. (She has a white diamond on her neck, a white arrowhead at her loins, and a white cross upon her chest.) 'Morning' because of the purity of her fur and the purity of her soul. 'Morning' because of the play on 'Mourning' and the suffering she's undergone. In the same vein, 'Morning' because it may also be 'Mourning,' depending upon which eye you see. But most of all, 'Morning' because she marked a new time for me. ('Morning' also because of the oriental nature I see in cats.)

III. Morning

As I conclude this lengthy chapter, I would like to relate my favorite story about my sister. On one of my trips home from college, we got to talking about a boy who lived across the street, the brother of a friend of hers. I did not even know the boy existed, so she was telling me about him and how they would play together. He was what is called a “vegetable” – unable to see, hear, talk, or walk. I, being in a state of sin with no light in my mind, was completely mystified about how she could play with such a person. With absolute innocence and the purest of joy, she smiled widely and said to me: “He can roll over!” (I cry even now to remember this.)

“Eye has not seen...”

There is a life beyond our physical sight, beyond our limited minds. St. Leo the Great speaks so well of this in today’s Office of Readings. “Truly believing souls...put unhesitating faith in what is not seen with the bodily eye.” He states of the blessing of the Lord’s Ascension that “He now began to be indescribably more present in His divinity to those from whom He was further removed in His humanity.” This is the truth of our faith, and it is what I learn now in the Lord’s taking of Morning – just a cat, yes, but also a special gift – from me.

“You will weep and mourn...
but your grief will be turned into joy.”

Jn. 16:20

(from today’s gospel)

2.

“Let joy in the Lord prevail, then,
until joy in the world is no more.”

St. Augustine

(from today’s proper Office reading)

Last month Our Lady of Medugorje encouraged me by her message: “When you are tired and sick and you do not know the meaning of your life... pray until prayer becomes for you a joyful meeting with your Savior.” Yesterday she requests: “Put God in the center of your being” in order to “witness in joy the beauty that God continually gives.”

Certainly over the last month I had been tired and sick, and confused. Her message came even as I nursed my sore shoulders with an ice pack at Little Portion Hermitage. And returning from there the following week, I tried to nurse my cat back to health as I questioned and came to terms with what had gone wrong with my vocation search. And those around me all seemed sick as well, sick and tired and unable to lift themselves up. It was so at the hermitage, it was so at my parents’ house and with those I spoke of vocation with there, and it was so returning to my parish in Jersey City... All tired. All sick. All waiting.

As for my cat, I thought she had entered on the road to recovery – it seemed a couple of times she was healing. After a visit to the vet and a shot of fluids and some antibiotics, she had begun to eat again, with an appetite, and to walk about. I apologized for seeming to try to get rid of her in order to pursue vocation (virtually no house would take her), and said I would not leave her again. Indeed, I had left her alone with much greater frequency over the last nine months as I pursued a call, but perhaps worse was my seeming indifference in speaking of her and my need to eventually find her a home. It was thus that I’d brought her to my parents’ house before venturing to Arkansas, in hopes both parties would find comfort together. But now as I realized I had no official call to religious life, now she was dying.

III. Morning

Life can be ironic and seem unfair, and we can beat ourselves repeatedly over the mistakes we've apparently made – and I had my share of ammunition in these circumstances. First, what seemed a foolish search had apparently led to my cat's ill health, and I had been blind to the signs of its coming, and suggestions to its remedy. I did not take seriously her weakening of late, never really considering taking her in for care. And when she turned for the worse again, I hesitated to return to the vet, in part due to lack of trust in medicine, and in part over concern for money. She had begun eating once again on her own, helped by a change of foods, but before I decided (wrongly?) to drive her to New Jersey with me, she had stopped again for two days.

During this time I had made rather in-depth investigation into diocesan priesthood in my parents' area, and after speaking with the director of vocations, thought I would pursue it for the fall. (He actually seemed to understand my need to care for the cat.) But I later realized my call was to write, and to try to fit anything else into it was disingenuous; it was at this time I became desirous to return to New Jersey.

But now my cat was very sick, able to walk only a few feet at a time. Now her bones were becoming apparent again as she could only drink, and that with her head leaning upon her water dish. I had to bring her to the vet again, and made an appointment, despite promising her and myself (after getting fluids for her on a second trip) we wouldn't come to the office anymore. I was uncertain about the situation all that night, and prayed about it as the time approached the next morning...

Joy seemed far from me then, though prayer provided certain rescue. In fact, in prayer with the Blessed Mother before her statue in church one morning, she assured me I shouldn't be anxious about my cat; so this I tried to give to God. But my mother's anxiety and problems walking, and my own lack of clarity about my call were often difficult to bear up under.

As I write I find myself drawing closer to the Lord and the light in which He does dwell. This morning in hopes of helping me realize the silence at the center of my heart, upon waking and after singing the Glorious Mysteries – and just coming from inviting the Lord to dwell with me – the Blessed Mother asked me to remove from my wall the

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ten symbols that serve as album covers for *Songs for Children of Light*. They surround a large (3' x 2') copy of the first of the songs ("Baby Being Born") and its drawing. It was as if she wanted me to pare away all that surrounds the center (indeed the albums are meant to progress from birth to death through the life of a human) to focus on the essence. There is an innocent heart that beats at our core, and it is of the breath of God, and it is our dearest Jesus. At this core of life she invites me to live, to focus all upon God the Creator. All things else truly do not matter; He alone should be our treasure.

I pray always I shall work from this heart, and be so happy and free. Death to the world must come first of all, before we can find the life that is.

3.

Perhaps before I go on to relate the events of the day of her death, I should speak some of the life of her whom my mother and godmother called “Morning Glory”.

Morning was not a perfect cat but was certainly a remarkably good one. She had a definite wild streak in her, which I had to tame when she was a kitten (principally by pretending to growl at her, opening my mouth wide and showing her my teeth were bigger than hers), and though she never lost it – I recall her running around like a “wariat” (Polish for ‘wild one’) just a couple of months before her death – she never did any wrong with it, and in fact would use it for good. For example, when I was living in my parents’ house and working full time on composing *Songs for Children of Light*, whenever I would lazily start to nod off, she would climb up the couch and knock me on the head with her paw. Also, I would often lay out on the floor pages of writings and drawings I was organizing, and not once did she, even as a kitten, ever damage one of the pages. However, and quite remarkably, when there was a piece of scrap paper laying beside the others and looking just the same, that one she would pick out and attack with a vengeance.

For all of her wild intensity, Morning was terribly afraid of other people. It was not until toward the end of her life that she even became comfortable with my parents and brother. Whenever anyone would enter the house, she would run and hide under the bed, far away from them. There were a couple of people who managed to get close to her (usually children and usually girls), and for a friend who’d been to the house a number of times she might stand in the doorway, but generally at the sight or sound of another human, she was gone. (I always thought this was probably due to abuse she may have suffered before I found her.)

She loved me, though. And she would watch me. She would often just sit there and stare at me on end. (I could rarely match her looks.) She loved me more than I cared for her. Though I did love her greatly and would play with her frequently – unlike any other cat I know of, she loved to play fetch... I would shoot a rubber band across the room

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or into the next room, and she would pounce on it and bring it back to me – yet I would leave her alone without a thought for periods of time. A case in point: once while still living with my parents, I returned to my college for a two- or three-month visit. I had virtually forgotten about her, but when I entered the house again she jumped up on the kitchen table and was there to readily greet me and follow me back to my rooms. Always she greeted me with healthy meows upon my return from vacations – which is how I knew the end was near this time I returned from Arkansas. As I entered the house, expecting her to come running at the sound of my voice, she remained hidden under the bed, unmoved. When finally she came out, she did purr at my petting, but her bones told me she was almost gone. (It was at this time I wrote the poem, “Parting Is Such Sweet Sorrow”, appended to this work.)

Though afraid of humans, Morning was not afraid of other animals. She would just sort of ignore my parents’ dog (a Yorkshire Terrier named “Muffin”) as well as the birds that swooped around her when I would bring her out onto the porch (she was not a hunter), but she was surprisingly strong with other cats. Once as she sat next to me, a cat – probably a tom – came creeping up toward her. I was shocked to see her get her back way up and hiss him away perfunctorily.

Naturally, as Morning grew older she became less interested in playing. She would leave the rubber bands further and further away from me – making me get up and do some retrieving myself – and spent less time knocking around the folded and rolled-up pieces of paper I’d toss on the floor. (I would also spin in place with a length of string and she would chase it in a circle.) But, as stated, though she grew to prefer being pet to playing, she never lost her wild spirit until the very end.

Even before I left for Florida I noticed that she would stumble very slightly when she would jump up on the arm of the chair. I thought very little of it, and even poked fun at her; but now that I consider it, the stumbling seemed to affect her, to throw her confidence off. I read later that signs like these are important to notice in aging cats, but I took it at the time as a minor indication of growing old. To her I believe it meant much more.

III. Morning

Now as I look upon an old chair she clawed up – she would only scratch old chairs such as this or the back of furniture where it wouldn't be seen (I don't remember her ever destroying or harming anything of worth... never was she any trouble), I realize how close a companion she really was for these seventeen years, most of which I have spent otherwise alone. Whenever someone would ask me how Morning is, I would laugh, if not scoff it off, wishing to downplay the sort of seriousness of the relationship for those who might, even if just in jest, be speaking of her as a member of the family. But, though I would still demand that the situation be kept in perspective – she was not a human being – yet I can now see how much she and her company meant to me. And how much it means now still to have her in a sense with me.

It is perhaps in prayer that I have noticed her absence (and presence) the most, for whenever I would sit down to the Liturgy of the Hours, there she was quickly next to me – even in the final few days. She did not always sit beside me when I wrote or read or watched TV, but she was there without fail when I prayed these prayers. (A good Cistercian I suppose she was, in her black robes over white.)

A good cat she was indeed, and I would be crying for her even now if I had not faith in Jesus and the resurrection of souls to glory.

4.

“As light strikes the eyes of a man who comes out of darkness into the sunshine and enables him to see clearly things he could not discern before, so light floods the soul of the man counted worthy of receiving the Holy Spirit and enables him to see things beyond the range of human vision, things hitherto undreamed of.”

St. Cyril of Jerusalem
(from today’s Office)

Before entering upon the narrative of my cat’s death, I find it incumbent upon myself, as this is meant as a sequel to *The Turn of the Jubilee Year*, to continue and answer question left remaining from that work.

At the end of that writing I was about to visit Little Portion Hermitage with the apparent blessing of Mary our Mother – all seemed as if I were being led there. Yet now I am here, back in Jersey City, with little but aching shoulders to show for my efforts. What happened? Was I misled? Were the messages a product of my imagination? How could something so encouraged come to naught?

First of all, there were signs that I might not actually be being led there. There was a message that I would not go there physically but only through books, a message I never did bring before the Mother. There was the extraordinary circumstance, which served to shake my faith, of the Blessed Mother’s encouraging me to continue driving on as I approached my parents’ house, even though the tank was on empty and there were a good thirty miles to go. (This would have likely put the car in such disrepair as to make it impossible to drive to Arkansas.) There was the hermitage’ calling to postpone my visit as I played cards with my mother and two aunts a week before my departure, first asking me to come in *July* (three months later!), then relenting to a ten-day postponement after my explaining the situation. (This occurrence could have served to dissuade my going.) There was also the curious reference at the end of the last volume of my place here in Jersey City as my “hermitage” it was hard to be away from.

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In addition, the Mother's messages to me should have made clear where she was and wasn't actually leading me. In the past she told me not to be anxious about the production of my writings, yet still I was quite obviously preoccupied with this. Hence the Lord told me to give them [i.e. *Songs for Children of Light*] over to the leader of the community, hoping this would take them off my mind. (I did manage to do this in my extremely short meeting with him. At the end of it I prayed the Lord's will be done as I gathered my things to leave, vowing not to ask for my book back. He returned it, saying I should have it, and I asked him if he was sure.)

In the second message [from Medugorje pilgrimage] it should have been quite obvious to me the manner of poverty the Blessed Mother was calling me to. Taking a passage of Scripture most related to the vow of poverty and applying it to my writing should have indicated to me that she was thereby letting me know that I was not called to the vow of poverty common to all religious communities, but to *this* vow of poverty... but I did not see it. And if the Lord Himself had called me to teach through writing, why was I blindly trying to impose that call on any community anyway?

But I have learned a further thing about the voice of the Blessed Mother and her conversations with and messages to me. The voice that was forever telling me "yes" I would be at Little Portion was not the voice of sobriety which speaks the clear truth. It is not that she lied to me, but in her excited tone she was allowing me to hear what it was I wanted to hear. I could have realized that the voice was not actually straight by what I learned about the angels excited clapping for my proposed ideas. Though this would not lead me into evil, yet, as I have noted, it is not of the best wisdom – for several times has the Blessed Mother corrected them and led me on a truer path. I could have detected a similar "excitement" in her voice which was not grounded in fact, but which, though not mocking (as I have said she does not do, cannot do), served to humor my obstinate decisions.

I had an ideal in my mind and I needed to face it and find that the ideal is not real. With bated breath I approached the hermitage; with wondrous awe I looked upon the beautiful prayer garden. But even then could I sense the emptiness behind the glamour of it. (In fact, I never saw anyone *pray* there; it was there primarily for show for visitors.) I was chasing a vain image. I didn't think I was, but I was.

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Here is what I'd dreamed of. I had a lake a stone's throw from my hermitage, yet it was like it wasn't there at all: it made me no different than being on the streets of Jersey City. Now there was peace in the place and the protection of a vowed community... but for me it was not real, and I was neither called nor accepted there.

If I had realized all this long before, much trouble I could have avoided, and my cat would likely be alive today. Why do we have to do such things? Why are we so stubborn and blind? Ignorance. My measure of ignorance astounds me at times. It has become apparent to me of late how ignorant I am even every day. It seems almost as a curse we must continually overcome. Sin. Sin it is that works so invidiously through our days, making our ways seem right to our own eyes: only later do we come to see.

It is evident to me in the gospels that, though it was the will of the Father otherwise (perhaps knowing it could not but be otherwise with us humans), if even one of the disciples had been vigilant as Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, the cup might have passed from Him – He might not have had to die. But they slept, even three times, as we all sleep as Jesus suffers. And so He must die for us, for this is all that will open our eyes.

I will not say that Morning died for my sins (though it does seem she died *because* of my sin, of my ignorance), and I do see that all the occurrences of these times were somehow necessary as Christ's death to bring me to the understanding I now possess, to the light which now seems to rise in my life – yet I am conscious that I have sinned, and wish that it were not so.

5.

On the morning I was to return to the vet with my cat, as the hour approached and my mother dressed to accompany me, I closed the door to my room and knelt beside the bed, crucifix in hand. I prayed intently for guidance from the Lord. I was not sure it was right to bring Morning to the vet again, particularly since I had said I wouldn't, and so I sought a word from Jesus.

As I explained my lack of faith in doctors and medicine, He said to me quite strongly: "Then trust in me." As I was assimilating this message, my father (not a church-going man) came into the room rather excitedly, speaking of a show about Medugorje on TV. (He knew of my two pilgrimages and love for this place.) I continued praying awhile, realizing this prayer was more important; and after reaching – though not without reservations – a decision not to go to the vet, came out into the living room where my mother waited and a woman spoke of being given the power to walk after praying to the Blessed Mother of Medugorje. I told my parents I had decided not to take Morning to the vet, and they did not argue.

I returned to prayer, not entirely sure I had done right, and sought the Blessed Mother's word. First, I heard from the angels, who were quite fearful at my decision. The Blessed Mother herself seemed hesitant to signal approval, but noted that I would be going with Jesus this time. (Part of my decision was also to drive Morning up to New Jersey with me and, if the Lord had not provided a healing by then – which I had cautiously expected – to take her to a friend and the cat doctor he worked for.) Her emphasis that it was *with Jesus* [I'd go] was significant because in my previous twenty-hour drives I had gone at her inspiration and with her guidance; now the Lord Himself would be my guide, and so it would be a special day. She assured me He would keep His promise. At this realization the fear of the angels fell, too, and they came around to approval.

I had thought to leave the next evening, but couldn't see any reason to wait around another day with a cat that wasn't eating; so I prepared myself to leave the same evening. I was not enthusiastic about going. I had doubts and reservations – which I did not show

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outwardly – and I was feeling tired and drawn... but I felt for some reason that I must go. (I suppose I had also gotten comfortable at my parents' house.)

As I packed a few final things into the car, I asked my father to watch that the cat did not crawl under the bed, where she liked to hide and from where it might be difficult to get her out – though she didn't seem to have the strength to get there anyway. My father said that as he sat with her he thought Morning was anticipating something. I thought he meant the car ride, but later realized (and he confirmed) that it was her death she saw.

I was going to keep Morning in the carrier, which is where I saw her when the Lord spoke to me of trusting in Him, but was not able to confine her so. I sat her on the back seat first, then moved her to the front before pulling out... however, shortly after beginning to drive, she seemed to want to return to the back again. I put her there and drove along, but after fifteen minutes turned around and noticed her lying in her litter box. I pulled off to the shoulder of the road, picked her out of the box (behind my seat), brushed her off, and placed her on the back seat again – smiling to myself about how silly she'd been.

I drove for a good four hours and she seemed fine, resting comfortably on the seat. (I had put the carrier in front with me to give her more room.) Periodically, I would reach behind me to pet her and make sure she was there, because by now it had become pitch black and her black fur was difficult to see. When I stopped for gas I put the water by her, and she rested her head against the dish and drank quite readily. In fact, after I'd pumped the gas, paid the attendant, and gone to the bathroom, she was still drinking – so I went back inside the station store to buy a bottle of water. Everything seemed fine.

As I set out on the next leg of the journey (at about 12:30 a.m.), at first I felt a little tired, and even considered stopping in a motel – where I figured I could still get eight hours rest before checkout at 11:00. I tried to play some music (my tape of Fr. Slavko and the Franciscan Youth musicians of Medugorje), but this didn't help so I turned it off. I had the window cracked open also during this time, to get some air, and, going seventy miles an hour, it made quite a din. I gradually caught a second wind, and by 3:00 I noticed that I was remarkably wide-awake... as if it were the afternoon.

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I played the Medugorje Holy Hour tape again, and now quite enjoyed it. It was at this time I had a rather profound line come to my mind, even as the singers sang “Emmanuel”: “Anything short of being with God is image.” I realized that all things – music, poetry, even Scripture and prayers – were images. They were not God, were not being with God. Though these images reminded me of Him and led me to Him, being with Him was something quite magnificent which was beyond their realm.

During this time I occasionally reached or looked back to see if Morning was O.K. At some point I couldn’t reach her anymore, but figured she had moved, and thought I saw her closer to the car door. I couldn’t hear much with the window open and music intermittently on (I later played the radio for a short while), and I couldn’t really see anything in the dark. [Note: my interior car light has never worked.] I thought I heard noises a few times, but attributed it to the cage of the carrier clicking as I went over bumps.

At about 4:30 I pulled into a gas station, quite happy at having made it all the way to South of the Border (particularly since I had gotten the same number of miles from a mid-range gas as the high-grade I usually buy). I parked the car at a far pump and turned around to see Morning. She was not on the seat. (Funny, there was a moment during the drive I imagined her somehow disappearing from the car.) I began to panic a little, realizing it was the seat belt I had seen instead of her. As I pulled myself up to look into the back, I saw her lying in her litter box, her arms rather twisted up and her eye wide open. I cried out “Morning!” and jumped out of the car and into the back seat. I pulled her out of the box and held her to my chest, petting her and begging her not to die.

I held her for an hour, rocking and crying terribly. I begged the Lord, praying that even if she were just alive, barely alive, it would be O.K. with me... I would care for her. In that moment, with that prayer, I could understand life, the breath that is life – even if in just a cat – and I meant my vow to take care of her. And I cried. (How different I was now, seeing life in its most essential, when with my sister, who was in a coma three days, I could see nothing.)

I did not know what to do. I cried for all the mistakes I had made, from trying to get rid of her to not keeping her in the carrier where she might have been safe. (I thought at this time that she had died trying

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to climb out of the box to the seat above and was unable, so my ignorance of her struggle hurt me most. Later, my friend told me the litter box would have been a comfortable place for her to go to die, and I remembered she had been lying there earlier quite comfortably when I picked her out and put her on the seat... both times she had urinated and was lying apart from her urine.) Finally, I wrapped her in a towel/blanket and put her in the carrier, hoping the Lord could still work a miracle.

I did not turn around and go back to Florida, nor did I call my parents, whom I didn't want to worry... I continued on my journey. The sun rose as I pulled back onto Highway 95, but it would remain cloudy and rainy throughout the day. As I drove I realized a startling coincidence between this and my sister's death: my sister, too, died as I drove along this same road. Then I was returning from college in Florida – same city as parents live in – with friends who were to stay at our house a few days. (We should have been there a day earlier than our eventual arrival, and so my sister's asking, "Where's my brother?" before going out that night.) It was also curious that this was the seventeenth of the month, Morning was seventeen (born about the same day), and that it was on the seventeenth anniversary of my sister's death that I played all ten albums of *Songs for Children of Light* all day (fifteen plus hours) in my parish church for her. Also, oddly enough, I had found Morning the same date my childhood friend – whom I've known all my life, was born but two weeks earlier than I, and still lives a half block from me – first met his wife; and the next day would be their anniversary.

Any poetic coincidences aside, I was still not ready for Morning to die, and I cried and prayed to the Lord as I drove along, expressing openly my guilt and reminding Him of His promise to me. This could not be my reward for trusting in Him, so I felt I must have expectation of a resurrection. In a sense, this was the time, this was the moment I was led to – and now I needed faith that He would work.

I played the Medugorje tape repeatedly (eight times?) over the remainder of the journey, and at one stop I thought as I checked her I saw Morning's abdomen moving, breathing. I did not become excited, leaving this in God's hands, and not trusting my eyes. I called my mother at the Virginia Welcome Center and told her Morning had died. She cried...

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As I cried at one point along the drive, overwhelmed by grief and guilt, I heard the Lord say, “She is with me,” and that she forgives me. The Blessed Mother and my sister entered the conversation, and, finally, Morning, too. (Are animals in heaven and can they speak? I have not yet discovered the Church’s stance on this. But they were originally created eternal as we, as companions for us here; and as for speaking, the ass spoke to Balaam, so perhaps all they need is the Lord to give them the ability...)

When she was young I used to think it would be a beautiful miracle if Morning’s fur would – from the bottom where she is so on paws, chest, neck, loins, and whiskers – turn entirely white, like the sun rising. Now she told me, as I wondered at her beautiful markings (particularly the white cross on her chest) being gone, that her fur was now entirely white (whether this be literal or not is no matter; everything is pure, and in this sense “white”, in heaven) and reminded me of the message I had received earlier: that being with Jesus is all that matters and everything else (including her cross) is just image.

Hearing that she was with Jesus – and indeed at one point earlier I had felt her soul rise to His presence – helped me understand... but still I cried, despite Jesus’ asking why. Overall, I became acceptant, and recall being rather jubilant while at one gas station; yet I wished she could live three or four years more, and yet I continued to play my Medugorje tape and pray.

“Abba, Father...”

6.

As I drew closer to my destination, I stopped at a rest area where I had always figured I was at the time of my sister's death. I thought briefly that it might be poetic to bury Morning here in this place and considered digging a hole to do so. But the Lord did not seem to concur with the idea, so I continued on my way.

As I drove along, I became somewhat preoccupied with the sense that Morning's body might be beginning to stink. Several times I thought I might have smelled something... but it didn't last or proved to be coming from outside my window. Though I didn't feel tired, my muscles were certainly tense with the stress of the situation. Finally, I arrived at my house late in the afternoon (about 3:30).

I had hoped to bury Morning in the backyard and figured my landlord, who is a lover of animals and has buried several of his pigeons there, would allow me. In fact, he suggested it before I, and we set to work. I dug a good hole in the corner of the yard and removed Morning from her carrier. As she lay to the side, my landlord said, "Wait a minute, she's still breathing." He then put his hand on her still warm body, and said he detected a faint heartbeat. I found it difficult to believe that my own eyes had seemed to see her breathing, but since he had said so – without any word from me – I had to think there might be something to it. I certainly couldn't bury her as it was.

I removed the top of the carrier and laid Morning in the bottom half and carried her into the house. I set her down on the coffee table and called my friend who worked for a vet. He found it very odd that the body had experienced no rigor mortis, and his vet requested that I bring her in. So we were back in the car again for another twenty minutes or so of driving through congested city streets and highways. For the first time I had hope that Morning might awaken.

But when the doctor came out into the waiting area to press his stethoscope to her chest and check her eye, he rather quickly pronounced her dead, saying rigor mortis could have come and gone quickly, since it is a temporary condition. I was in and out of the office in just a few minutes, and back in the car with Morning,

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heading home. At first I figured I would just bury her now, but questions persisted in my mind; so after having carried her upstairs again, I soon returned to the car with her in arms to visit another vet I had phoned.

I parked my car a couple of blocks from the office, so I had to carry Morning through the streets, by now beyond the point of exhaustion to numbness. This doctor also pronounced her dead, though he could find no explanation for the lack of stiffness in the body. Every cat he had seen had had rigor mortis for at least twenty-four hours. He thought perhaps she had only actually died more recently and rigor mortis was yet to set in. I took her back through the streets and returned her to my coffee table (setting her, as it turned out, before the photographs of Medugorje on my wall).

I called one more vet, who also was rather baffled, proposing that perhaps her diet might have caused such a condition. He said there would be no problem for me to keep her in the house overnight to see if rigor mortis set in. So I made sure she was wrapped properly, placed my crucifix and statue of Mary near the body, and prayed that the miracle could be so.

The next morning I did not go directly to her, a little afraid at what I might find, but still very hopeful inside. When I did unwrap the towel around her, I found her just as she had been the night before, her body warm and as flexible as ever. I soon called my landlord and asked him to come up and check her once again. Though he hesitated a little this time, he still maintained that he felt a faint heartbeat. He told me of his particularly sensitive fingers, and when I suggested he might be feeling his own pulse (as a vet had proposed the day before), stated that he was familiar with his own pulse and what he felt was not the same. What could I do but believe him?

Now it is probably so that Morning was at least brain-dead – her eye was fixed open and her head easily rolled on her neck – and I imagine this would be enough [to declare her dead] in this society obsessed with the brain and its workings, a society and medical profession which equates the brain with life – but I find it rather indisputable that it is the breath and the heartbeat that give life, that are so much closer to its source. I could do nothing less than respect that almost imperceptible life that was still in my cat, and could not conceive of doing anything to take it away. Indeed, it seemed the

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Lord had answered my prayer, keeping her just barely alive for me even as she sat at His feet in heaven. Could this have been the gift, the answer to the promise He had made? It seemed ideal.

I went to Confession and Mass shortly after my landlord left, and had a singular experience. Already the day before, the Lord had been instructing me to slow down in my driving, to *watch* for His presence – to be with Him – and now at a neighboring church a visiting priest was saying Mass more slowly than ever I had experienced. He held the Eucharist aloft at consecration for an immeasurably long time, even turning to the right and left with it, as one would do at benediction, and waiting there... before finally lowering it. It was truly an extraordinary experience.

And at this Mass in a church which is on the scale of a cathedral, I thought of the Book of Revelation and all the creatures mentioned in John's vision (as well other prophets') and wondered why we should think it odd there would be animals in heaven. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy," says Hamlet; and it occurs to me how narrowly focused on ourselves we are, even if we are the crown of God's creation.

Back at home as I lay on my couch in the late afternoon – beside the carrier which held my cat – and listened to the tape of Holy Hour from Medugorje, I believe I touched the very heart of life, what life is. Morning's shallow breathing was as a sign of life, a gift given to me to reveal to me life in its purest essence. This quiet, innocent heart beating at the core of all of us; this simple, silent breath touching the soul of every living creature... this is life. This is where God rests; this is where Jesus is. And I was with Him in that moment.

I didn't know how long this gift would stay with me. I was happy to be so blessed and hoped it would remain forever. Jesus and Mary and Lynn and Morning did all speak with me throughout the day as I questioned the gift – saying maybe she would awaken, or she should stay at least the three or four years I had hoped for... but I didn't know. I didn't know, and we are not meant to know when life will come and when it will go. (This occurs to me now.) Life is something we must accept and cherish and simply live each day. And only by trust in God can we do so.

Later in the evening I began to fear that I might be beginning to smell something. (This, of course, would take her body from me.) I

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would smell her once and there seemed to be something; again, and there was nothing. I could only say that her mouth had an odor, which it did all along – and indeed the vet in Florida had diagnosed her as having halitosis – and later at her tail end, but neither smell was the smell of death. But I continued apprehensive.

That night I did not sleep comfortably, and rose a couple of times to check Morning for odor. But then and the next morning it was the same story: I could only be sure of the head and tail, which were other kinds of odors. (Another factor is that I myself had bad breath and was suffering from flatulence, further complicating matters.) I decided to take a wet rag and wash Morning's tail end, which had only begun to smell like feces recently, thinking this might clear the air, as it were. Stains were left on the rag, and I hoped this cleaning had helped things. I wiped the rest of her body down and left her alone awhile.

Before going to Mass, however, I had the idea to change the towel around Morning and turn her. I did this and detected an odor on the other side of her body. I was on my way out, so I didn't have time to consider the odor completely. I decided to wash this side of her down with a wet towel to see if it would remove the smell, and went out. (The day before I had also, probably foolishly, placed a heater beside and below the coffee table, since her fur seemed cool though her insides were still warm. This heat was present upon the underside of Morning for a couple of hours, and I thought it might have caused the odor.)

I saw my landlord on my way out and again on my return, telling him of my suspicions, and I brought a box back with me that would be the right size if necessary. I entered my apartment and bent my head toward her body, and the odor was quite distinct. Before putting her away I asked my landlord to come up so that I might be sure about what must be done. He confirmed the odor was strong and said he no longer felt a pulse, so we put her in a plastic bag, placed her in a box, put another bag around the box, and took her to the yard for burial.

Later that day I went to a park to play baseball with my childhood friend and his son. (This was the first day of sun in some time and would be the last until Ascension Thursday.) At the field, gnats were swarming all around – my arms would itch for several days. It seemed the flies of death had followed me here to torture my body. At first I

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thought they might be a sign of my lack of faith, for not trusting that the Lord's miracle could last, but later remembered the Lord's words: "Where the body is, there the eagles will be gathered." Yet, returning home I was decidedly sad, finding it difficult to breathe, and I wished my Morning were still with me.

7.

“Our lives are all controlled by the Spirit now, and are not confined to this physical world that is subject to corruption... None of us lives in the flesh anymore... ‘Once we thought of Christ as being in the flesh, but we do not do so any longer,’ says St. Paul... We who follow in His footsteps must not think of ourselves as living in the flesh any longer, but as having passed beyond it.”

St. Cyril of Alexandria

The day following my cat’s burial was a Sunday (from which day’s Office the above quote is taken). In the readings that day, John spoke of his vision of the heavenly Jerusalem and Jesus bid good-bye to his disciples as He prepared to go to the Father – who is “greater than I” – and left them His peace and the promise to come to them with the Father and make His home with them. Here again is our faith.

The night before, my spiritual director had left a message on my machine that I could meet with him this afternoon at a carnival at his parish, where he had to be present. In writing a song titled “Souls at a Carnival” so many years ago, I had discovered the literal meaning of carnival as “removal of flesh”. It seemed particularly poignant to be meeting him there today.

The above song had come from a dream I’d had of myself, my childhood friend and his wife, and his (and my) close friend and wife (who had also met first on the date of my finding Morning) at a carnival. It was an especially joyful dream, and I remembered in particular the Ferris wheel. (The song comes from an album titled *All One* and speaks of the joy of being one in Christ: “We are all the same person / Living in the same world / No beginning and no end / No frame at all.”) I had hoped to be spiritually lifted out of my flesh, out of my sadness and misery, by my trip to the carnival.

I spoke somewhat haphazardly with my spiritual director about my finding no call anymore to any form of religious life, per se, but

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only to write and to teach through writing. He still thought the priesthood would allow time and provide inspiration for writing, but I tried to point out to him that it was a different call. I had brought him a copy of *The Turn of the Jubilee Year*, and in reading a few pages as we sat together he seemed to be moving away from his assumption that I was “a mediocre writer” (he had never read anything I’d written before), but I haven’t yet heard from him since. (For one reason or another I have never been able to maintain a steady relationship with any one spiritual director, it seems.)

That day we walked around with a man and his fiancé and child (and the man’s mother – all very good people), and as a group of others arrived to be with the priest, I realized it was time to leave. But before I left, I went alone over to the Ferris wheel. I had been trying to talk my spiritual director into going on with me, but, a little fearful for his heart, he declined. I thought I would probably let it be, but as I was getting into my car, the Blessed Mother prompted me to go alone.

I sat on the ride with my eyes closed, letting my body go and allowing the machine to take me around... and I did feel my soul soar through this form. It was like dying and being taken from your flesh to the hand of God and heaven must be. I could hear the clicking of the gears, so I knew it was just an image; but it was an image which led me to God.

His presence and His peace and joy were with me as I came from the ride, and before leaving the field I provided a man with a quarter he lacked for his son to wield a hammer in the test of strength. After the boy had gone, I said, “I bet your father could make it go all the way to the top,” and the man got change and rang the bell as his son and pregnant wife looked on. I was really outside myself with a blessed joy. I thanked them as they thanked me, and went to my car to drive home.

This day and the days which followed were all cloudy, if not rainy (twice the little league games of my friend’s son were rained out), and it was only gradually that I came out of my mourning. Cleaning the house and cleaning the car helped a lot, and soon things seemed close to order... Finding inspiration for this and other writings gave me purpose, and though I would occasionally experience emptiness where Morning had been, I did come to know her presence next to me.

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On Ascension Thursday the sun did shine, and a fulfillment of joy was upon me. The following day I began this writing proper, and now to terms I come not only with the death of my cat, but also with the way in which the Lord and His Blessed Mother would have me travel. Within I find His silent presence, and from this center He leads me forth. The Blessed Mother visits me as she did Elizabeth so long ago, and brings me the eternal joy of the Lord which she carries through all generations. This indeed is the Feast of the Visitation and a day of joy for all. “Great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel!” yes. But I must ask with Elizabeth, “Who am I that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?”

8.

“I tell you solemnly:
as a young man
you fastened your belt
and went about as you pleased;
but when you are older
you will stretch out your hands,
and another will tie you fast
and carry you off against your will.”

Jn. 21:18

How appropriate the above quote from today’s gospel. These words of Jesus to Peter were given to me while at Little Portion Hermitage. After being virtually immobilized from labor my third day there, I could not but think the place was not for me. But yet I was called there by my Lord and Lady. How, I couldn’t understand.

The following day I spoke with a priest after my Confession in a parish church of the neighboring town, and a few days later with a priest who serves the hermitage – each stated the hermitage, as well as the diocese, needed priests, and suggested I bring my idea to serve both to the leader of the community. Even before arriving I had had the idea, having been surprised to find Mass was celebrated at most twice during the week.

But the leader of the community would not hear of anything but the brothers laboring in the garden. In fact, I found it virtually impossible to communicate with him, except through the brother overseeing me. It was clear that even though I was sincerely offering my will to the Lord, to stay in this place and serve the people here – although I would have assumed return to New Jersey to teach part-time and have time for prayer and writing – there was no possibility my sacrifice would be accepted, except through labor, which my shoulders could not bear.

Love must always be mutual. If we offer peace and it returns to us, if we profess love and it is rejected, what can we do? If love is not mutual, it is nothing at all. So, try as we might and struggle as vainly

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as we often do, if the woman will not love us in return, if our gifts and offerings return to us unopened, there is little we can do of benefit.

Upon my return to Florida, the call of priesthood was still much on my mind, though after all the rejection of the past nine months I was beginning to realize a lack of genuine vocation. I did speak with a couple of priests – I needed at least to investigate the possibility – and here found encouragement I had not known before. And Florida seemed an appropriate place to be if I were to die to self, for this place I have always viewed as a way station before death; and its flatlands spoke to me of the desert. But as I've stated, I finally had to come to realize that I was called to write, and priesthood or any other form of religious life was a different call into which I could not force my own.

Now as I find myself back in my apartment in Jersey City, working on my writing and with the discipline of prayer I hold – and preparing to return to my adjunct college teaching (albeit with more of a bent of teaching through writing)... now as I sit here moving toward doing what I had said I would do if it were I who had to choose, I cannot help but wonder if it is right. How is this dying? How is this giving my life over to the Lord? I wonder if I should so readily give up expectation of vocation and accept this situation. I question specifically, too, if I should not return to Florida to be with my family, who are yet living, while in this place are but my sister's and my cat's graves.

I took up this writing as a call upon the Holy Spirit to direct and guide my decisions, to come to terms with the journey I have given myself to for nearly a year. I had hoped this writing would prove a process of discovering more clearly the path set before me. It is now but two days until Pentecost, and the answers must be upon me. (Here in particular I bring the questions to the fore.)

I am willing to enter prison as has Paul; I am willing to die as Peter. But yet do I struggle to see clearly the way this is to be accomplished in my life. This sense of death and sacrifice I have perhaps known most poignantly in practice and consideration of performance of *Songs for Children of Light* – in this I have felt myself laying down my life. But so long this has sat by and so little has this fruit been produced that I cannot but question if it shall ever come to light, or if it even should. Perhaps the performance of it all on the anniversary of my sister's death is all that is called for by the Lord.

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Perhaps I need to let it go, as indeed the Lord has seemed to lead me towards.

Two things I seek of the Lord and His Blessed Mother – place and work. Where shall I live and what shall I do? In her messages from Medugorje and in the wisdom she speaks to me of late, the Mother tells me the place is in the silence of my heart, that I must be here where I am, and remain in the presence of the Lord. With regard to work, she tells me not to be anxious for the production of my fruit, but to simply keep working. But this seems to leave me here where I am, and again I wonder if it's right and if by it I am becoming a holy man. Poverty perhaps I can find in the writing; obedience may be mine in listening to my Mother's words; chastity I fear to lose without the blessing of official vows. And do I hear a call to move to Florida, to be with my parents as they grow old? Yesterday at Mass after speaking of Mary's blessed charity, of her being present to Elizabeth in her need, the priest exhorts us to be present to others, especially our family. (But my family is not here?) And this morning at a Mass in which the priest speaks of love, he tells the schoolchildren gathered there for First Friday that most important is the love for their parents.

I do recall upon first entering a hermitage at Bethlehem how I felt so close to friends and family, how they were very present to me here in the heart of all, and so I do see that it is possible to be with my family wherever I am, and especially in the blessed confines of this my hermitage here in Jersey City – which mirrors the closet of prayer I find in my heart... but still I wonder if I should not go.

Finally, a Buddhist quote I heard propounded some months ago seems to stick in my soul. I do not recall the exact words, but the point was – before enlightenment, do your daily work; after enlightenment, do your daily work. And I wonder if this is what is meant for me... simply to return to the work I had done before, yet with a renewed perspective, having been born again in Jesus and, by conversion, His having made His home in me. And the thought comes to me that perhaps to do my own will is the one thing most against my will.

Let your will be mine, dear Lord.
Take me by the hands and lead me
according to your word.

III. Morning

Leave me not alone in this world,
but be ever present to me.
I give you all my life;
I only pray you remain close by.

O Lord, I pray all fantasies will flee far from me
and what is real, your presence, will be here with me.

I love you.

9.

“Now is the time for Christians to rejoice, since Scripture says that ‘we should rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering trains us to endure with patience, patient endurance makes us pleasing to God, and being pleasing to God gives us ground for a hope that will not be disappointed.’ Only let ‘the love of God be poured forth in our hearts through the Holy Spirit.’”

Origen
(from today’s proper Office)

Joy. Nothing but pure joy. After all the trials, beyond all the difficulties, comes nothing but pure joy. Yes, my cat has died. No, I have not found a religious vocation... but yet pure joy. For all is made right in God’s hand, and I am finding the patience that leads to everlasting life.

And now the Lord comes to me. And now He speaks to me. And now He makes clear His call for me. Now I find no hesitation as I see the evangelical counsels’ application to my life: for chastity I am wed to the Blessed Mother; for poverty I have this writing to share; and in remembrance of the LORD’s holy NAME I find my blessed obedience. (And all three really are one call to my soul.)

And so clear by today’s Scripture does the Lord make the place and the work to which I am called. We hear of Paul at the end of the Book of Acts (on this day before Pentecost, as the novena comes to a close) that “although a soldier was assigned to keep guard over him... for two full years Paul stayed on in rented lodgings, welcoming all who came to him. With full assurance, and without any hindrance whatever, he preached the reign of God and taught about Jesus Christ.” And though none will come to me in this rented room in which I must stay (guarded by the Spirit of Wisdom), I pray they shall someday come to the writings the Lord inspires in my soul and find teaching and truth.

III. Morning

But clearer than this does the Lord make my call, for in the gospel of John, Peter is prompted to ask the Lord, “What about him?” You see, John is the beloved of Jesus and loves and follows Him everywhere, so why does the Lord ask Peter of *his* love and call *him* to lay down his life in sacrifice as the first and most prominent of priests? Is it not John who has the love for such sacrifice (which is itself love)? But Jesus chooses whom He will, and He chooses John to remain as witness, to write His testimony and receive his vision “caught up in the Spirit on the Lord’s day” while exiled on the island of Patmos in his later years. Peter is the priest; John is the mystic, the visionary, called to witness to God in writing, to which I myself feel indeed called.

And in the midst of this past night, in the early morning darkness, I take (or am given) an entire hour to prepare an introduction to a work which has been much on my soul, and which I am set to begin on the morrow. The Lord calls me to write down insights He shares with me in reading the Scripture of Mass each day. This I have done in diary form for the five years previous, but it is the sense of the Scripture alone, and His presence there, He calls me now to expose. This would take two years to cover the readings of daily Mass, and perhaps a third for the three cycles of Sundays. For this time I will be here in my rooms.

So what has been the purpose of all this searching? Have I simply come back to the place I began, doing the things I did before? Has it all been useless wandering and has my cat died in vain?

Morning came to me in a year following a Holy Year (one dedicated to redemption), and I was in my purest state, crying for my sins and being washed clean – particularly of sins of omission toward my recently deceased sister caused by sins of commission in pride and concupiscence. She came at a time that was a new morning for me, indeed, after the night I had cried the most and had so finished the lyrics for *Songs for Children of Light*. She came as a kind of replacement for my sister, as an opportunity to show the love and care which had been far from me when my sister died. Through this small black creature with the white cross on her chest, the Lord was serving to call me to love of other than myself. She was not a wife; she was not a child – these the Lord did not have in store for me. But through this animal he brought a sign.

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Morning has died in a year following a (very special) Holy Year, at a time when I have regained my purity, now in a complete way. My Jubilee prayers and searches have led me to find much even beyond the grace of renewed chastity. I have found the Blessed Mother close to me, watching over me, standing behind and guiding me as any mother (or wife) would do. She answers all my questions and grants me the direction I have so sorely lacked. I have found the Lord's NAME and the fullness of its significance in my need to remember His silence at all times. Kneeling there I am at home. And I have found my calling; I know that to which I am led, my purpose in this life. Though I had practiced it before, and for a long time, now I see it without reservation.

And now a new morning is upon me again, one not dependent on images and signs such as have guided me to this time. It is a time of death, and new life; for now the flesh and its corruptibility pass away, and I am seated with Jesus. Morning is with Jesus now and no longer here in this apartment with me. And so she continues as a sign of my soul, which resides no longer in these rooms but in the arms of God. This is the gift of sight Jesus gives me; this is His promise fulfilled. I no longer need to reside here, and neither does she now.

And of course her death completes the grieving process I had undergone for Lynn. The guilt, too, is now gone. The final act I performed for Morning (aside from burial) was to clean and turn her body, as a nurse in care of the sick. The Lord left her body with me these two days (in much the same way my sister was in a coma for three) that I might prove to myself (not so much to Him) that I was indeed willing to care for Morning in her disabled state, and, in turn, that so I would have cared for Lynn.

And beyond these specifics concerning my sister and cat, the Lord allowed me to see what life is – and how it must be treasured from conception to natural death. This life by His grace I now carry within me. This breath, this heartbeat, now lead me. This is where His NAME speaks; this is where His glory is.

Good Morning.

Pentecost

A new day is dawning!

Again the Scriptures of the day, and indeed all around me, are rich in the voice of the Lord speaking to me, showing His presence and His blessing to me. And indeed what joy I have finally found!

Again appears in the gospel today the verse which was upon my heart the night I was reborn in Jesus, the night I died and Jesus made His home with me (as He does now every morning)... “Whoever loves me will keep my word and my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our home with him” (Jn.14:23). And in the reading from Romans (which appears also in the Office) Paul again assures me, “You are not in the flesh; on the contrary, you are in the Spirit.”

My spirit cries out “Abba! Father!” as the Lord blesses my call this early morning. I had found reservations last evening; doubts had begun to rise. The devil accused me of being presumptuous; he said it was too much work and too lonely, and that I could not and should not do it. But for three hours I was awake, beginning exposition of the readings of Mass – to which the Lord calls me – with today’s readings. And I realize I “did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear,” back into sin... but that the Lord is with me.

And I find myself so clearly realizing the call upon me: no religious vocation per se is for me, yet this calling to write, and here, is so strong. And I see that it has been there all along in the messages the Blessed Mother has given me, and in her message of this month. How I have toiled in vain trying to make a vocation that was not there. But how free I feel now that I see clearly the way. And I now prayerfully desire a computer, which shall serve as a tool for my work. And as I work at my call, I notice the twig with thorns I placed at the top of the drawing of the crucified Christ, which the artist had given me at the bottom of Mt. Krizevic (as my friend led me down the craggy path with my eyes closed), has somehow moved forward, framing Christ’s head as it hangs by a thorn. And I hear Paul’s word:

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“If only we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him”; and I find such joy in this call.

Come, gentle Spirit, and be with me
on this new morning.

Author's Epilogue

It is two years since I completed this writing, and Pentecost approaches once again. On that day I shall finish the exposition of the readings for holy Mass (700+ pages) I undertook these two years ago. This work, too, I hope to publish.

The work I publish here – at the same time as the lyrics for *Songs for Children of Light* and a book of poetry titled *silence in the city* – is my first. Though I have been writing regularly for twenty years, only now do I venture into publication. What shall come of it? Will anyone read these lines? I don't know. It is not in my hands. I can only be obedient to the Lord's prompting, to His cross. (As St. Faustina, whose Diary I have eaten in the past year, has said – and Jesus has stressed to her – it is the intention that matters and not the work itself.)

And in the past month I have begun composing *Chanted Verses* for each of the days of Catholic Liturgy; and so another year I shall be in these rented rooms. (And other writings come, as the sword of St. Michael stands by...)

As I find I need remarkably few hours teaching to sustain myself, more deeply do I enter into my hermit's life, increasing practices with the passing days, and with an eye toward forming an order, if I may, dedicated to the LORD's Divine NAME. For this and my other writings I have developed websites.

We do not know where the Lord may lead, brothers and sisters. Let us simply be obedient to His call, and lay down our lives for all.

June 25, 2003

“Dear children! Also today I call you with great joy to live my messages. I am with you and I thank you for putting into life what I am saying to you. I call you to renew my messages even more, with new enthusiasm and joy. May prayer be your daily practice. Thank you for having responded to my call.”

Our Lady Of Medugorje

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Appendix

Five Pieces

- 1. Reflections on Blindness**
- 2. “Parting Is Such Sweet Sorrow”**
- 3. Green Earth**
- 4. The Work of Prayer**
- 5. YHWH: “Remember My NAME”**
 - A. “Hear, O Israel!”**
 - I. What His Silence Is Not**
 - II. What His Silence Is**
 - B. “Love the LORD...”**
with Heart, Mind, Soul, and Strength

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Reflections on Blindness

(Upon return from Little Portion and in consideration of Jubilee turn)

Messages so clear, and yet such ignorance. What irony arises when we fail to listen. How human is our frailty.

The Blessed Mother tells me not to be anxious for the production of my fruit, of my writing, and yet my self-interest I seek; and yet about this I continue anxious. Her message makes clear my poverty is in my writing, and yet I seek religious life. Why can I not hear? Why must I bend her words to suit my means?

And then I hear her tell me things not entirely from the source, not entirely of the Lord. But this with a smile I do not see, a smile whose meaning escapes me. When she smiles in this way, the message is true but not of precise facts. If she told me I would be at Little Portion and now I am not, it is not to lead me astray but to humor my obvious inclination and teach me more deeply her message.

There I have learned not to chase vain images. There I have come closer to realizing my call to write and make the world my cloister.

And in my final hours there, a teaching is given on the genius of a place, the spirit of the physical house. It is said that somehow our presence remains in a place we have prayed, that the church hears and assimilates the praises and intercessions which rise from the human heart, which are given voice there. And so perhaps I shall remain there; for this blessed grace I pray... and for the Lord to open my eyes.

And there have I found a call to the priesthood, or is this priesthood but of the pen?

“Parting Is Such Sweet Sorrow”

This sorrow in my soul
shows me I have loved you,
lets me know how much I care.

If I cared not,
there would be no sorrow
at your departure now –

But as it is this sweetness I know.

And the sweetness tells me
of the love to come,
of the love that shall follow
this time of separation...

In it I know we shall love again.

“A little while and you shall not see me.
Again a little while and you shall.”
And you are with us always.

When the loved one is lost,
we cry the most tender tears;
for here we know the love that has been,
and the love to come.

Green Earth

(conceived working in the garden at Little Portion Hermitage)

The earth breathes.

The earth is alive

and gives life

to us.

The earth gives food.

The earth gives breath.

The rains come down and water the earth.

The sun's rays give it light.

Our breath feeds it.

And it is green.

And it is alive.

And it gives life,

for it breathes

for us.

It is in God's hands,

this whole, green earth.

May you find peace upon it.

The Work of Prayer

(I pray this not be taken as a brand of sour grapes,
but that it might somehow be instructive instead.)

Whence comes this lack of respect and honor for the dignity of the work of prayer? How is it that even in houses that are supposed to be houses of prayer, it can be looked so down upon and set aside? Can we not see that prayer is the center and soul of all work and that there is nothing more powerful than prayer?

By faith we can move mountains. This is not hyperbole. Elijah prayed and the heavens were stopped; he prayed again and the rains fell. By prayer we turn aside God's wrath; in prayer our lives are healed.

And prayer is not only powerful in its fruits, but most laborious in its doing. Prayer is like stepping into the presence of a very great king. Only a fool would think that easy. Prayer is like being crucified.

Everyone can pray, yes, and everyone must pray. But there are those who are called to prayer, those who must serve as the hub of the wheel, keeping the world from spinning out of place. Yet in my visits to religious communities, it seems labor takes precedence over prayer; the spirit of work predominates. I hear, "Ora and labora, but especially labora." "We need people to work in the bakery." And I see basic prerequisites overlooked for those who can do the labor.

Labor is fine and can serve to balance the cart, but it is not the call in this state. The call must be to prayer, and everything else must be subservient to it. Yet there seems no place for one desirous of prayer above all. In theory all is prayer, but one wonders if he were to pray all day, if he would be allowed to eat. One would think the Lord scolded Mary for sitting long hours at His feet.

And so in fear of being accused of doing nothing, we log in the hours in the field; and this which is to keep us humble becomes but a source of vain pride. But those called to this state will never be happy with the work they squeeze in nights and days and weekends. For they will never be paid for such mere activity.

O Lord, let us kneel in the silence of our hearts before you.
Let us put God at the center of our being (thank you, Mother);
and so may we end wars.

YHWH:
“Remember My NAME”

“I AM WHO I AM...
this is my name forever,
and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.”

Ex. 3: 14, 15

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A.

“Hear, O Israel! The LORD our God is LORD alone!”

Mk. 12: 29

- I -

How does one explicate silence?
How does one tell of the NAME of God?

Let us begin by saying what it is not.

1.

It is not darkness; it is not *death*.

“It is not the netherworld that gives you thanks,
nor death that praises you.”

Is. 38:18

It is appropriate that I begin this writing, and particularly this theme, on Holy Saturday (from whose Morning Prayer the above quote is taken), for on this day we know death most deeply; for on this day the WORD is silenced. And this silence is not that of which we speak.

The silence we experience this day is the absence of the voice of God in the absence of the Son by whom we know the WORD of the Father. It is the absence of Life itself. This silence is death; but God is of Life. Such emptiness does not denote Him, but is indeed the inverse of what He Is.

In speaking to the Sadducees, those who disbelieved the resurrection of the dead, Jesus tells us that God is not the God of the dead but of the living – God has no store in death; it is the living who give Him thanks. This is a most important point as we start out on our treatise, for many there are who erroneously think death is a solution to the problems, the suffering of life: the solution is to speak, to pray, to call upon His Name and enter into His presence. Death can but intensify the state you’re in; only in life release is found.

If I may be permitted a reference to a work of literature (not that Scripture is lacking illustrations of those who would call the rocks to fall upon themselves to end their suffering), in perhaps the most famous speech of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, the prince contemplates suicide to end his woes – “To be or not to be...” – but realizes he cannot his own “quietus make,” that death will not guarantee his peace: “For in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil.” Indeed, life, that which is in God’s hands, is not so easily dispensed with, and the presumption of taking it in our own (hands) may bring us but an eternal death, an eternal suffering, wherein is no rest. We do not

silence the voice of life by turning in vain to death, but we might by our own device make that voice estranged. (Indeed, as I have written elsewhere, the silence that is God's NAME is not like the laughter of aborted babies missing from our streets.)

2.

It is not mute; it is not the absence of sound.

In the same vein, this silence of which we speak is not without voice; it is far from the mere lack of audibility, which is, in fact, its denial. Though still, it moves – it moves all and is the source of all true sound, of all true words, and is known in and through them. Jesus came to us speaking; He came to us teaching... He came to us accomplishing the deeds of the Father, and it is the fruit of this tree we eat.

“For thus says the Lord,
the creator of the heavens,
who is God,
the designer and maker of the earth
who establishes it,
not creating it to be a waste,
but designing it to be lived in:

I am the Lord, and there is no other.
I have not spoken from hiding
Nor from some dark place of the earth.
And I have not said to the descendants of Jacob,
‘Look for me in an empty waste.’”

Is. 45:18-19

He lives in light and in life, and His Word brings life. (Enter into that Word.)

This is significant because there are those, and in abundance, who think it best simply to keep their mouths closed, to turn a blind eye, to say nothing in the face of the evil and sin of this world – they think

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that such silence is of God. It is not. We are not born and given the gift of the tongue and the Word stirring in our hearts to be speechless, to be dumb. We are of the tree that is Jesus and must bear fruit accordingly. The Word of God is not of ignorance. This is not whence its silence comes. Indeed, it must be spoken.

Does Jonah do well to turn his face from Ninevah? Is it not for this he finds himself in the belly of the whale? Is it in that dark silence the Lord speaks? No, the light of God does not radiate in the whale's belly, as it does not radiate in the tomb – we cannot shut our mouths or turn away when the Lord calls us; we must ever speak in His Name. As He tells Jeremiah, in this will be our salvation, whether our audience listen or not. Yes, we must open our mouths and speak in His Name.

These two points are important in order to avoid the laziness which, along with pride, is the bane of the Religious: instead of resting with the Lord, he might tend to fall asleep, thus failing to remain “awake” for the hour the Lord requests.

There is, however, a third point:

3.

It knows nothing of noise.

Silence. How can silence be of noise? Though the silent Word of God, His NAME, is spoken out for all to hear, though from it all true sound emanates, none of that sound is of noise – none of it is wasted expression.

The voice of God is as music, harmonious and whole, balanced and radiant. The voice of God sings in all sound and can only be heard by the purest of ears, ears that are themselves of God. Though this be perhaps a fourth point – that only those ears, those instruments, those hearts and souls blessed by God, may hear His holy voice – we shall incorporate it here; for that which is spoken and that which hears are as one, are so united as to be inseparable in His kingdom, in His realm. And as in the voice there is no noise, so in the ear none is known.

Appendix

Before the Blessed Sacrament. Before the Blessed Sacrament exposed to all eyes and all ears, now I write (here at Little Portion Hermitage in the Octave of Easter). Listen for Him speaking here in the silence, alone. Hear His voice radiate here in this sacred space, here in the Blessed Presence of God. It sings. It dances. The voice of God is heard clearly, for there is no noise to distract the soul.

There is a fountain of water dripping, very lightly, and this carries His voice, for our ears are open to hear Him – our hearts are centered on His love; dwelling with Him at our center, all is touched by His grace.

Shshsh... no noise. Sing, yes. Shout, yes – but no noise. In Him all is whole. All remains enrobed in silence, this pure silence.

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- II -

Then what *is* this silence? If not the darkness of death or the absence of sound, then what? When this silent voice speaks, how do we hear it? How do we know it? How can we speak a name which has no sounds as we know them, no alphabet or phonemes, yet is itself the alphabet, the alpha and the omega of all sound, and which alone articulates all that is spoken, all that is understood – all that has meaning? He Himself is so far above and beyond our comprehension... yet He has given us His NAME. And this silent WORD can be spoken, is spoken in every breath we take in purity:

“YHWH”

Here are the letters. Here is the Word. Here is that which the tongue can make to call upon His presence, in silence.

1.

There are letters.

Having given us His NAME, He has given us a way to approach Him, to come to know Him – and to recognize when we are in His presence. These letters signify and confirm His presence; they lead us to Him and let us know we are with Him. For the sounds they represent, the articulation of lips and mouth and tongue they demand, lead us into His silent presence by making still the tongue and the speaking apparatus, and causing us to listen for His voice...

Yes, the “Y” opens the mouth, poising the tongue for speaking; but before a sound is uttered, the “H” opens the throat, depresses the tongue... and the head is lifted in wonder as light enters the skull (the light of Spirit, pure breath). Then as the lips begin to move toward one another (“W”), as if to question this marvel... sound is prevented once more by the opening of the throat again in the final “H”. And in this inhalation of light and expiration of any question, of any doubt or darkness, we know His sacred presence.

He has given us this Word, His NAME for all generations (made flesh in the Person of Christ), that we might indeed approach, that we might indeed know Him – and that we may speak of Him to others.

What grace the Lord dispenses, letting us come to Him even as humans.

2.

The WORD is a paradox.

The WORD, His NAME, is a paradox because though pronounceable, it is silent, and though still, it is yet a spoken word. It is pronounceable silence; it is the moving stillness. As said, it stills the tongue – in its enunciation it halts enunciation – and so it is a word which leads to silence.

It is something of a paradox, too, because all our words (not of noise) are founded in this silence; whatever is spoken truly comes

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from this silence. God's NAME, indeed God Himself, is the stone on which the temple is built; or perhaps better yet, the temple on which the stone – the stones of our works – is built. The WORD (and, of course, the WORD made flesh) is the cornerstone of the Church, of the temple we are and we build in His Name: all is founded on this WORD, as all words are founded in His silence. But more to the point, He is the temple itself and we but mere stones. He is whole, He is all, and we are fitted into Him as pieces.

And we know that one stone shall not be left upon another; nothing of our human hands shall stand on His day. The most beautiful of songs, indeed even Scripture and the Eucharist (as the law and the manna once did) will stop, will no longer be necessary in heaven, where we shall know Him as He is, His NAME written upon our hearts, and stand forever in His eternal light. So let us not be distracted by the gleam of the stones, of our works, of our words... Indeed, we have thus a place to burn incense to our God, but let us never lose sight of the foundation and of the temple itself – let us remember always His holy silence. His silence animates all our words: He is the animator of all our actions.

3.

The WORD is the Alpha and the Omega.

(Still in the chapel I write, before Jesus, before the Blessed Sacrament... Yes, Jesus is God, is the WORD made flesh, and in this way He remains with us, He speaks to us. Here, too, we have paradox, for here is His invisible presence made real to us, calling us to live not amongst the dry bones of a desolate land, but in His Spirit and Life...)

Yes, Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega of Scripture (as of all time and space). God, the WORD, the silent WORD, the breath which passes through every living creature (YHWH), is at the heart of the Bible, is its very essence. The Bible is an inspired work, not with man or his imagination or the testimony of others as its source, but God – unlike any other work. And its fulfillment, its final form, its effect, is

in God's hands as well. Scripture is but one WORD spoken by the mouth of God.

And all words are spoken. The spoken word is closest to the source, not the written, for the written word derives from the spoken as a newspaper account derives from testimony of eyewitnesses. And in the end the word on the page is dead, is worthless until read, until *spoken* (to oneself, a neighbor, or a million people). And even the form of spoken words is meaningless if one knows not the language – it is God who communicates through the Spirit. And in His silence comes this communication, at the heart and as the fulfillment of all words. Nothing has meaning apart from Him, for He is all in all, He is life and light... and this Life is spoken in His WORD.

Listen to the heart of all words, and you will hear Him speak. Proclaim your words in this silent Spirit of Truth, and Him you will know. At the source and in the flesh and bone He dwells. Alleluia.

Footnote

Speaking the letters is not of necessity.

Though speaking the letters of His NAME may aid us in attaining to His presence, in coming into the silence in which we know Him, this means provided is certainly not the sole path to being with Him. But once in His Presence, the WORD is upon us.

The LORD may draw us into His presence, into His silence, into His NAME, at any moment and by any means He may choose. And indeed His silence is always with us, within us, in some measure (though indeed He cannot be measured). The manner in which He brings His silence to the fore and makes His light clearly present to us is entirely in His hands. Though His NAME has been given us by Him that we might know Him even in these earthen vessels, God is certainly not bound by this means alone.

And indeed some may become too caught up in the letters, in our speaking of this WORD, and fail thereby to fly unto heaven which transcends it. It is not the letters and the speaking which matter, but the LORD and the coming into His presence. But here we have confirmation of His silent Presence. Here we have the LORD

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reaching down and drawing us unto Him by means at our disposal. Yes, as Christ has become flesh to draw us unto the Father, so this WORD meets us where we are to bring us to where He Is.

Finally, I will say the speaking of the WORD, the entering in His NAME, His silence, is extraordinarily simple. It is beyond words to explicate it, but it is not in the least complicated. The absolutely simplest matter taking the perfectly least amount of time, it is but to open one's mouth and be quiet.

“Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.”

Ps. 81:10

B.

“You shall love the Lord with all your heart,
with all your soul, with all your mind,
and with all your strength.”

and

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Mk. 12: 30, 31

Wholeness

To be holy we must be whole,
We must love God
With all our heart, mind, and soul –
and with all our strength.

The four corners of the universe
meet in Him.

If God, the LORD (YHWH), is one – and He is as He says – then *we* cannot be separated... His wholeness tolerates no division. We must be holy as He is holy. We must love one another and find ourselves alive in Him.

There are Four Corners to this universe, four parts to the whole; but though different parts, we are of the same body, and that body is whole. And we are indeed all one in the Lord. Let us unite in His love.

To begin I will discuss each of the Four Corners individually, then seek to unite them.

1.

Heart

The heart. Love. The love of the heart. Giving, serving, caring... Laying down one's life in compassion for one's neighbor.

Tender movements. The tear in the eye. The dance we humans share... such is the heart. (Here we mean by "the heart" the seat of emotion and not the center of being itself.)

Human life does rest upon the heart, upon our interactions one with another. How do we love one another? How do we care? What do we give one to another? How do we show we are there?

In service of one another the heart is known, in giving of ourselves. The beating of the heart gives life to all; it nourishes us well.

In love of man and woman, in such romantic interchange, the heart is clearest to our human eyes: here is most evident the human heart. Here is the sacrifice epitomized; here is the selfless care. In the tender beating of these two hearts, in the graceful dance of affections here known, is example all must follow.

Let me put my arms around you. Let me kiss you on the cheek. Let us show ourselves as brothers, united by the blood of our God.

As the heart bleeds so tenderly, so deeply, it is like the ocean's waves, like the river running, coursing through our veins. The movement blesses, the movement gives life... the movement cleanses and forgives. The movement of this ocean is complete and brings life ever new.

The water of the ocean, the water of our tears... the water flowing so gracefully in God's palm renews the face of this earth. It brings us closer to union with Him as it washes and makes us whole. (Step into the stream growing from the throne of God; cleanse yourself in the blood of Christ.)

In the South it is warm; there is no ice, only water – flowing, moving, dancing water. It is like this in summer as well; often the air fills with water. Often we sweat in this liquid environment. People

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move more easily toward one another in the summer, in the South; there, love is more apparent. And though if not controlled it may lead to lust, to an overheating of the heart and its emotions, here love is most present.

Here in the South the Black Man dwells, he who is most human, he who is of the heart – of motion and emotion and affection one for another. Here he dances, she dances... knees rising in unison like the waves of the ocean, like the flowing river... Here is the tender touch upon smooth skin. Here does the blood flow.

Here is love and here is forgiveness; here is the compassion for the plight of others, here the service and sacrifice for the sake of man.

The ears hear the flowing waters; their rhythm moves the heart... the sound encourages the heart to beat. And the blood thus flows, and greatly to the legs, down to the feet – and these receive the rhythm and are thus moved. And the dance it is which circulates the blood, which showers forth the love. Without this love we minister neither wisely nor well. Come to the fountain of the gently flowing heart, and love. (On a warm Florida afternoon, I write these lines to you.)

2.

Mind

The sun's rays pierce the clouds like arrows, bringing light to the eyes, to the mind open to instruction. Wisdom comes. The wisdom that is of God, that is His logic, His order, illuminates the universe and kindles the fire in every mind. We must open our eyes. We must see. The breath of the Spirit must fan the flame of our intelligence, an intelligence that is of God.

And the opposable thumb enables our hands to manipulate our environment, even as the tongue and our intelligence articulate our thoughts. We can make; with our arms, our fingers and hands, we can devise. Let us do this in wisdom and not in wickedness.

The machines we make reflect the machinations of our own systems, particularly the system of nerves which stem primarily from the brain to the arms, facilitating the coordination from eye to hand. This quarter of our make-up is mechanical in nature, but its functions

must not be allowed to become coldly calculating, but be warmed by the blood and love which stem from the heart.

The Yellow Man of the East, where the sun does rise, where morning lasts the day, where the eyes squint to temper and focus its sharp light – this man knows the quickness of fire, and in wisdom listens to its silent crackling. His eyes shine with its light; his mind is alive with the fire. His hands articulate its music.

The strings are plucked with precision; practiced is he in its art. And these same hands are skilled in healing – its science is well schooled within him. He sees. He knows. He controls the scales of harmony and healing, sharply, effectively piercing what seems its mystery. In his hands he holds the answer.

Let wisdom clearly shine. Let it give light to your mind. Let it radiate to all in its path. (Having come from reading Proverbs' passages, I sit near my cat as I pen these observations. And it is still spring.)

3.

Soul

Anima: breath, wind, spirit... giving life, animating – soul.

It is in these three days my cat has died, this animal. And before dying it seemed she was in a comatose state – perhaps brain-dead, but still breathing, ever so slightly... still alive.

God breathed into man's nostrils and so he became a living being, who rose and named the other animals. We are God's animals; His Spirit animates our beings.

And is your spirit at peace? Is your breath deep and regular? Do you know the stillness of breathing at the center of your being? In your hands do you hold your soul? Are you in control, under the Spirit's hold?

And what do you say? What is it you speak? What do your words reveal? Breathing into your nose, your lungs are filled... and so you can speak your soul. Have you a good head on your shoulders?

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The Red Man of the West kneels in the evening twilight and breathes in the winds of the sky which set his soul afire. And so he chants, inspired. Poetry of the spirit we speak in tongues set aflame by the breath, by the wind of the soul.

Listen for the still, small voice speaking at the center of your being. Feel pure breath fill your lungs, and speak in line with the Spirit.

(It is evening now and I am alone in my prayer corner... Peace be with you. Let the autumn wind fill you. Be one with all God's creation.)

4.

Body

Earth. Down to earth. Humble, and strong. The White Man labors upon the earth, and eats the fruits thereof. His back is strong as he digs the earth all the day. His shoes are dirty. When he comes home, he eats.

Simple. This simple life of callused hands and hardened foreheads. On his shoulders he carries the earth. He feeds the world.

Yes, there is a middle-aged man who has been tilling the earth for decades, who has been carrying trees on his shoulders – and he himself is as a rock. But let his heart not be too hard, and let him, too, breathe in wonder.

In the North it is cold. In winter it is cold. In the night the cold comes and hardens the earth. Here we might find a solid foundation on which to build. In the stomach is the strength of a man.

(My white skin should prove me strong, should prove me humble... We must do. This is the daily drama.)

Together

Together they are one. Together they are whole. Together they make a holy man. One man at the center of the universe: Jesus Christ.

And, yes, we must be like Him. We must follow in His steps. Walking the path the Jews have trod with this essential Jew, the Son of Man and God, Jesus Christ.

One Man is set apart. One Man is whole and holy. One Man there is who is all of us, who is all of us made one, made whole.

In Him we live and move and have our being. In Him we are born. In Him all comes to be. Listen to Him call you into being as He invites you to love with heart, mind, soul, and strength. Come to this water and drink.

No division. There is no division in God. He is One. He is One and we, many though we are, are made one in Him with one another.

This is our ultimate destiny. This is our glory. To be made so one, to be made so whole – to be made so holy.

In Him it shall be so. Apart from Him shall nothing be. Let us now radiate His glory. Let us now be one in His Name.

I love you, my brother; turn not away.

(With pierced hands we come to Him, only loving...
and we are one and whole.)

