THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

"The Four Consents, Part 2"
Excerpted from
The Spiritual Journey Part 3, Paradigms of the Spiritual Journey

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BERNIE

I'd like to try to emphasize, at this point, by a concrete example just what I meant by consenting to the goodness of life. This is a story about someone that I knew very well, a monk, and he entered the monastery just a little bit later than I did. And we were both in the choir, and he had just emerged from high school. He was about seventeen. And his name was Bernard O'Shea and he came from Lynn, Massachusetts. Well Bernie. How he ever got into this monastery is beyond me. But anyway, he was obviously a very warm, affectionate, loving person who enjoyed nothing so much as chatting and close personal relationships. Well, here he was in this strict solitude which was more like hermits in community than people in community. And so, the strict rule of silence ... I guess he must have heard about before he entered. But, anyway, in he came with his exuberance and his bouncing step. The fascinating thing was that he immediately tried to make friends with all the other novices; and since you could only use the signs to communicate, he learned all the signs, about three or four hundred of them, in one day, apparently! He used to love to use every occasion that was available to relate. And one of the chief opportunities was when someone would hold a door for you so that you could go down the cloister. Whenever you did that for him, this was an occasion for him. He was waiting for this. So, he went through a kind of ritual. Now the sign for "thank you" was this [gesture of kissing]. That means you brought your hand to your lips and you kind of kissed it. But you weren't supposed to make a noise because any noise while making signs was a "no, no." So, when you served him in this wonderful way, by opening a door for him, no one else would have given you this treatment, he would kind of wind up for the pitch, you might say. He'd go way back here and then bring his arm with a great flourish to his lips with a big smack, looking right into your eyes with this heavenly smile of total interest in just you. It was marvelous the first time. But after you'd done this three or four times in one day, and you'd see him coming down the cloister, there was a strong inclination to go in the other direction. Enough is enough.

HE WAS THE COOK

Well the superiors were aware that he was very social, and so they thought he would be better (and so did he), in the life of the lay brothers in which there was more work and where there were opportunities for signs and sometimes even an occasional word of instruction. So, they tried to teach him how to cook, thought that would be a good job for him. Well, he was very absent minded,

and he probably had a slight dyslexia. So, for him to learn to cook meant he had to copy out in his little notebook, page after page of these recipes which he painfully copied out in this small little writing with all kinds of accessory instructions that meant nothing to anybody except him. He finally succeeded in learning to cook ... more or less. So just before the fire at Valley Falls that burned the monastery down, he was sent to Spencer with the priest who was in charge of transforming these barns into a monastery. And he was the cook. Well, this was his first experience relating to other people outside the cloister. And his innate friendliness had a little bit of scope, and so on.

And then, after the fire, the abbot thought that it would be good if I went up there and was in charge of the situation, so that the priest who was gifted in organizing material things could go to the temporary dwelling that the monks had been given by the local government.

IN FULL FERVOR

Well, meanwhile I arrived at the Grange, having just been ordained, in full fervor and in support of the full Trappist regime. Well, Bernie had made friends with the previous owner's wife. They were very simpatico. They both liked nice things. They both liked little knick-knacks, and rugs and curtains and things; and they used to swap menus and recipes. Well, one day, when I was out for a walk, they had got together and they put some curtains in the window, a rug on the floor of this Grange, and they put a few knick-knacks on the windowsill. Well, when I walked in, I was shocked. The Trappists are noted for their extreme simplicity: we used to sit only on benches; there was no such thing as a back to a chair, and never a rug on the floor; and, as for curtains on the windows [gesture of exasperation]. Well I said to myself, "What is this? It's against our spirit." And being fervent at that time, I felt it my duty as the one in charge there to emphasize the situation. So, one day shortly after, Bernie went for a long walk. So, with the help of the other brother there, I removed all the curtains and the knick- knacks and the rugs. So, when poor Bernie came back in and saw the devastation, his heart was just devastated and broken. But I was upholding the law, and in those days, people were secondary. I had to uphold the law. So, here's our spirit and it's being violated. So, I righted the situation.

TO LOVE BEAUTY, MUSIC, FLOWERS, SUNSETS

Well Bernie was someone who just could not understand why it was wrong to love beauty, music, flowers, sunsets. There was a tendency in that early Trappist regime not to enjoy anything ... that was considered a "no, no," or at least a lack of fervor, a slipping back to the world. So, Bernie was very broken hearted, but he put up with it, because I was the authority there. But, fortunately for him, shortly afterwards, he was transferred to the camp and he got out of my rather austere regime.

WHERE HE WAS MEANT TO BE

Well along came the foundation of Snowmass and the abbot decided to send Bernie there as the cook with his big stack of cookbooks. And when he arrived here in this

valley, with his great love of nature, he knew this was where he was meant to be. And he just settled in like a hand in a perfect glove. And he just fell in love with the mountains, and the clouds, and the shadows over the mountains. Nobody ever loved this valley ... nobody had the capacity to love it ... as this guy. The extraordinary thing about him was that the simplest things fascinated him. He could almost become ecstatic over a little daisy. And people used to think ... he's putting it on. He wasn't! As he used to tell me, "God speaks to me through nature, through these little flowers and beauty," and ... "is there anything wrong with that?" Well, I had to say, "I guess there's nothing wrong with

that." But I really didn't approve of it. I thought he should be more into prayer and into penance and into reading. Now he was faithful to reading the Gospel, but he never was really interested in reading too many other things, possibly because of his dyslexia. But he always said when he'd read a few sentences, that was enough for him ... and then he'd like to go out into the woods or onto the mountainside and see the flowers and the elk and the deer and the porcupines and the eagle, if you could see it. He just resonated right from the top of his head to his toes. Well, in those days, his social life was pretty restricted because of the strict silence, and he couldn't understand what was wrong with a little socializing or an occasional party. But in those days, we almost never had a feast, and it was an innovation when our abbot even allowed a few Christmas carols to be sung on Christmas. We usually had just the Office! And gradually our abbot, who was somewhat avant-garde, allowed ice cream on certain great, great feasts, but very rarely and there was no talking.

Well now an unexpected thing happened—Vatican II! And after Vatican II, the suggestion that religious orders reconsider some of their observances in the light of modern human conditions and in the light of the charism of their founders. So now the abbots started getting together and thinking about change.

THE COMMUNITY AND LOVING THE BRETHREN

Well, shortly before that movement began, the abbot of Spencer, after this community had gotten started, conceived the idea of sending me here as the superior. This was in 1958. So, I arrived and was duly ensconced as the superior, and Bernie, of course, was here, so naturally he must have received me with some misgivings, if he remembered what happened at the Grange in regard to the curtains. And so, we got on pretty well. He often expressed the deep self-doubts he had because he realized that the Order had different ideas than he had. He felt, you know, that the supreme value of monastic life was the community; and loving the brethren and serving them. And he couldn't quite understand this business of hermits in community and the value of ... well, he approved of solitude, but he didn't think it should be overdone either ... that there should be some kind of communication. But he accepted the status quo and he was the cook and he was constantly working at it and serving the brethren. He cooked three meals a day in those days. If there was a meal in the evening, it usually was a short one.

PARTIES

Well, then I was elected abbot of Spencer and these changes began to occur. And now the rule of silence was somewhat modified; and the superior was given the discretion whereby he could have some parties or maybe a hike, or something like that. Well, he saw this happening and he experienced this as a kind of affirmation of his own orientation because for so many years, he had thought that he was the only one who was crazy. So now it seems that the Order was beginning to move in the direction that he thought it should have gone in the first place. So, this for him was akind of encouragement in his vocation. So now he really opened all the valves and started to follow his attraction of service. And he developed this into a kind of art. "If genius," as someone has said, "is the art of taking almost infinite pains," he took infinite pains in regard to fraternal love and charity and service. So, he would be concerned for people: whether they had enough blankets, whether they had the right food, when there was an elk out there, he wanted to make sure they would get to see it. He sponsored hikes into the mountains and he instituted parties. Now a party is not disreputable, please, in a monastery. But it did consist in a chance to talk and to have some little goodies, you know, and especially ice cream.

SMACKING HIS LIPS AND TAUNTING THEM

One of his favorite tricks at a party, or what gave him great satisfaction, was to tease the more, strict members of the community. And he would make himself a big bowl— you know a soup bowl—he would take ice cream, with four or five scoops of chocolate or vanilla ice cream, and then on top of that he would put some chocolate sauce; on top of that would go a generous portion of whipped cream; and then, of course, the pecans. Then he would sit down, in the presence of any number of ascetics, and with great pleasure he would eat this ice cream, smacking his lips and taunting them. He could not understand why, if you were going to have some pleasure, why not enjoy it? He couldn't figure out this monastic superego I spoke of earlier, which, whenever you're enjoying something, begins to experience guilt feelings from the superego and feels you're being half a monk if you enjoy something. He didn't go for that. But, on the other hand, he did go for the community and the community began to include guests.

HIS KINGDOM

Now in a Western community, as you know, the kitchen in the home is the place where everybody enters—that was his kingdom. And from there he somewhat ruled the roost and he was sort of the abbot's right-hand man whether by choice or by the facts. And so, he was able to take an interest in guests. Well, this being his specialty and his charism, he used to show so much interest in everybody that people who met him could never forget him. He would even be interested in what they had to eat in the restaurants in Aspen and would take a kind of vicarious pleasure in what they had enjoyed. He would be concerned that they had a good breakfast. I remember when my brother came, he was so impressed with the fact that Bernie would take him in and sit him down and insist that he have some eggs and bacon, things the rest of the community (like bacon), didn't have. And he would make him feel right at home and then he'd make sure the heat was just right.

PLEASURE IN GIVING ANOTHER PLEASURE

Now I was starting to come as the Father Visitor, which is a canonical situation, to check up on how things are going, to make sure the observance is well kept. Well, here's his thoughtfulness. In those days such things as coffee breaks were unheard of in monasteries. So, before this was allowed, when you're, you know, meeting for about eight or ten hours a day listening to people's attitudes about the way the observances are being observed and their difficulties, he felt "Well, this is a strain!" He used to bring me a cup of tea or a cup of coffee, and, of course, with a few little cookies to go along with it. He didn't have to do that. I didn't ask for it, but he took such pleasure if he could give you pleasure that you kind of ... you couldn't say no. And it challenged you to accept something good once in a while, you know, to see if you could do it in good conscience!

THE LAY BROTHERS' VOCATION WAS INTEGRATED

Well, at a certain point, the lay brother's vocation was integrated, or there was some talk of integrating it into the choir, to the great dissatisfaction of many lay brothers, including Bernie. And there was a strong invitation to come to choir so that there would be common prayer. The brothers never used to come to the choir because it was in Latin and their vocation was to work in the service of the community. Well, that whole concept was kind of changed after Vatican II, perhaps largely because they were treated as second class citizens in Europe. Well, in this country, most of them were treated very well and they ran the temporalities of the monastery, so the attitude was different.

IT WAS HIS TASTE TO PULL OUT THE TREMOLO

Well, Bernie recognized that if you're in a small community, everybody has to pitch in. So, although he had no inclination to come to the choir, he learned how to play the organ, maybe three or four pieces. And so, with that he came to the offices and gave us the gift of his presence. Well, as I say, he loved music and he also loved music that I would call a little sentimental. So, when he would accompany the chant, he had a kind of weakness or penchant with his taste, to pull out the tremolo. So, for someone trained in the purity of Gregorian chant, this was not exactly the last word in worship. But here I was ... I was so impressed with his desire and with his sensitivity that was coming from charity. I could see that he was growing all the time, that some of his immaturity from entering so young was leaving him, and that he was less obtrusive in inflicting on others his charitable intentions. But, none the less, he was always there when you needed something, and ahead of you, thinking of you.

A MACROBIOTIC DIET

Another remarkable thing about him that impressed me was that the former abbot was convinced by his reading and his workshops that the community would benefit from a macrobiotic diet. Now everybody agreed to this, so Bernie went along with it, and that meant for him the total disruption of all his recipes. By now he was the best cook in the Order, and his food ... he always went to great pains ... and now that meant learning all this stuff and it ruled out all the goodies that he loved so much ... he had a sweet tooth of course. And it was with the greatest difficulties that he persuaded the abbot to at least have ice cream and a hot fudge sundae. So now they were all eating carrot juice and uncooked vegetables and things that were totally foreign to his taste; yet he went along with that a hundred per cent. Well, fortunately for him, God had mercy on him, and everybody started getting sick, including the old abbot. And so gradually this great health food diet was modified to reasonable proportions.

THIS IS NOT OUR VOCATION

Now some other changes were being considered beside parties, beside hikes. The community would every now and then have an evaluation and would all gather; and the question was raised: would it be all right to see a movie once in a while, or some exceptional program on the TV? Well, you can't get TV in this valley anyway, but you can copy it and play it ... copy it over. So, the monks were sitting around and each one gave his opinion and, of course, the monastic superego started registering and the monks would say, some of them: "this would be bringing the world into the monastery; this is not our vocation; we might get distracted; our contemplative prayer might go to the dogs," and so on. When everybody had finished, then Bernie would say, "Well, just suppose if everybody who is watching TV at this moment were holier than we are." Well, you can't answer that question too well. You can't deny it. So, as a result, everybody would be humble and bring in the television and more or less do what they wanted to do anyway.

WELL, I FIND GOD IN ASPEN

Well, some people disapproved of Aspen. But he loved to go down there and look at the shops. He never really bought anything. But remember, he entered very young and he enjoyed going to the mall and seeing what was being offered. And he would appreciate it so. And he had a special weakness for those National Geographic travel things. So, once in a while, the abbot allowed him to drop into the local rectory when PBS was showing some whales, or something. Well, he just loved nature, or whatever, you know, manifested God in that way. And so, when people said that Aspen

was Sin City and Babylon of the West, Cocaine Capital, and things like that, he would defend it and say, "Well, I find God in Aspen" and that would keep people quiet.

WELL, THIS MUST BE THE WAY GOD TREATS PEOPLE

Well now it happened that I resigned as abbot of Spencer, and the community here graciously invited me to come, having been the first superior. So, they all agreed that I could come. It was a very nice invitation. So, I came. And everybody welcomed me so warmly and charitably. But I could see that his mind was working kind of overtime. And he was thinking, "Well, gee, this guy has been abbot of a big monastery. And he's been all over the world in the service of the Order. He's been to all the general chapters. Here he's coming to this little community. He must miss all those brothers there. He really needs special attention." So, instead of treating me like everybody else, he went out of his way to continue to cook eggs for me, or to find out what food I liked or couldn't take, and provided, you know, in addition to all his other activities, which now were getting more expansive: he was an advisor on the decor of the monastery and so on, and his taste had improved a little bit through dialogue, and so he was very helpful. But I was so touched by that, that I remember thinking ... well, this must be the way God treats people.

THEN THAT PERSON IS A SACRAMENT OF GOD

Now that very thought is the signal that somebody is really moving on in the spiritual journey. Because, when someone treats you in such a way that it makes you think of God, then they're a sacrament of God. And the sacraments are really meant to make us into sacraments; that is to say, to enable us to transmit the experience of divine love in some way. So, one time when we were having a party here, and he was banging on the piano, he happened to play a little melody that happened to mean a lot to me in my spiritual life. But there was so much going on that I didn't mention it to him.

WELL, THIS VALLEY REALLY BELONGS TO BERNIE

Then, a few weeks later, there was a meeting in a monastery out farther west and the abbot took me along, and while we were there, the abbot had a phone call, and that was that Bernie had dropped dead on the streets of Aspen. He was taking ... some of my clothes, actually, to the cleaners, and he was on the way to see a picture of some whales, and he just collapsed and had a heart attack and died instantly. So, Michael was completely busted up because he had been his right-hand man and support for years and years and years. So, he went home right away.

And he asked me to stay there: "Please stay for a little while and finish the meeting." So, I came a few days later, and I landed in Aspen, and it was one of those glorious days in winter, in February, where Colorado is absolutely at its best: blue skies, a few clouds, and the snow, and that wonderful tang in the air. And I couldn't help thinking: well this valley really belongs to Bernie, because if there's any way of possessing anything in this world, it is in loving it. So, when I got in the car, the brother said to me, "You know, would you like to hear Bernie's voice again?" And I said, "Well, what do you mean? How can I hear his voice again?" And he said, "Well, you know, just a few days before he died, we were making a little tape together for my brother who was having a twenty-fifth anniversary" ... characteristic of Bernie, he was thinking of giving a little pleasure to the relatives ... and so they had made this little skit together in which Bernie was represented as a night club entertainer in Aspen ... and he was playing on the piano. So, there was this little dialogue. So, I said, "By all means." So, they had a cassette in the car and he turned on the cassette. Well, what do you think came out of there? The first thing that was playing was the tune that I had wanted to ask him to put on the cassette ... but had forgotten to and didn't have time to. So, I said, "My God, Bernie,

you really are thoughtful!" Here he is in his glory and he's thinking of this stupid little request that I had forgotten. It was so typical of his thoughtfulness that it's absolutely impossible for me to interpret it any other way except that he was still thinking of us.

And so, when I got home there were the things that he put for me in his thoughtfulness ... still on the stove or in the refrigerator. The suddenness of it was extremely poignant for everyone. Well, he had a glorious funeral, and so on.

LIKE SUNSHINE IN HUMAN FORM

But here's the message I got from that and which has meant a lot, and that is: Here's a guy who almost ... I never met anybody who was more like sunshine in human form than this guy. No one who ever loved life so genuinely and who consented to its goodness so completely. And yet in one second he dropped it all at God's request. Now that is what detachment is. It's the acceptance of everything God wants us to accept and the willingness to give it back to him at a moment's notice. That is human freedom. And it's not loving the world less that makes you holy. It's loving it passionately and the people in it and the concern ... this is how God is. And, at the same time, for the love of God ... to let it go when he requests it, without a moment's hesitation.

What a gift to our community! Thank you.