

If Thou Wilt Be Perfect

At the Monastery of the Holy Spirit, Father Bob
seeks truth but sometimes beseeches, “God, please say something.”

By Frank O Smith

Near sundown, the first tolling of the bells breaks upon the silence like a heavy stone cast into a pool of water. From high in the belfry above the abbey church, the brassy reverberations of the bells call the fifty-five monks who live at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in the countryside outside of Conyers Georgia.

The din ruptures the silence of the monastery, spreading down through the quadrangle into every corner, into the hushed quiet of the scriptorium, into the library and the refectory, into the individual rooms of the monks. The ringing vibrates in the blackness inside the massive chimney over the boilerroom where hundreds of small, dark-bodied swifts nest. The birds, answering the bells, ascend the chimney in a swarming mass to whirl over the slate roofline of the church, piercing the twilight with their rapid darting and tiny shrieks of aerial exuberance. The sounds of the swifts come through the large purple and blue and lavender stained-glass windows of the church as the monks in their sweeping white robes and black scapular hoods enter and bow before the sanctuary. The bells toll again and the last monks to enter find their places in the long row of choir stalls that line the central body of the darkened nave. On the right stands the abbot and his choir; on the left is the prior's choir.

The two choirs stand silently facing one another over the aisle that leads to the altar.

With the lighting of the two sanctuary candles, the two choirs bow toward one another in the recitation of the opening prayer. Thus begins Compline, the evensong of the monastery, the last of the five liturgical daily services. The singing of the liturgy is the thread of continuity that ties together the monks' lives, weaving one day to the next, and it is revered as the most important endeavor at the monastery. As members of the Order of Cistercian of the Strict Observance – familiarly called Trappists – the monks celebrate a heritage that has been honored for fifteen hundred years.

In the weak crepuscular light inside the abbey church, the voices rise in simple harmony to sing the Psalms. Unlike Vigils, the liturgy celebrated when the Trappists' day begins at four in the morning, Compline is conducted without the glare of the choir lights overhead. The dim light mutes the distinctive features of the monks, and their voices rise and fall as one, like small waves rocking meditatively in the darkness.

One of the fathers moves to the back of the abbot's choir and lights a small lamp in order to give the reading. The verse comes from the *Book of Matthew* in the *Bible*. It is the story of a young man seeking Jesus to ask how he should achieve salvation. In the parable, Christ tells

him to follow the commandments of the Lord. The voice of the reader possesses a rich clarity in the absolute quiet in the church

The young man said unto Him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet? Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.

With the singing of the last Psalm, the great round mandella of stained glass at the height of the sanctuary is lit from behind so that the brilliance of Our Lady and Chris Child burns in the cathedral. Seen from the perspective of high in the balcony at the back of the church, the mandella glows in a soft radiance reflected in the highly buffed terrazzo floor at a point precisely centered in the aisle between the two choirs. The sound of the voices resonating in tones of earnest supplication seems like an evocation of the abiding mystery in the lives of these Trappist monks, men who live only to seek God and give glory to Him.

For Bob Pearson, the conflict over whether or not to enter a monastery was an oppressive battle between the allure of the world and the world of the Spirit. Vacillating between the two polarities, he knew the choice of entering a monastery would lead him away from everything in the world that was familiar and comfortable, cutting him off forever from friends, from his sister and his parents. At the same time, the idea of living the life of a monk greatly attracted him: he felt that it would lead him toward something that seemed innately destined. For the tall handsome youth, it was a decision he knew he would not make impetuously: he knew if he were to choose to enter the monastery and become a monk it could

be the last temporal decision asserting free will he was ever likely to make.

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At thirty years of age, there was much of the world to live for even if life in the world seemed fraught with endless uncertainties. He had grown up in a stable family in Tampa, Florida. He'd studied architecture at the University of Florida where he had many friends, and later went on to teach on the faculty. He had served an enlistment in the Navy, first as an ensign, then as a lieutenant j.g.

As a child of five or six, Bob had expressed a great earnestness in the practice of his Catholic faith. When a Sunday school teacher had presented Bob with one of his earliest and most memorable dilemmas – that he must love God more than any other – the child in him responded first: How could one love God more than one's parents? It was his religious spirit that answered: *One must.*

Many years later, when Bob was twenty-six and teaching architecture at the University of Florida, he would again feel the powerful allure of that obligation. On a weekend trip to Atlanta at Thanksgiving to attend the annual Georgia-Georgia Tech football game, he felt compelled to visit the Trappist monastery that had recently been established outside Conyers. On the long drive north from Florida, he wrestled with his dilemma, but finally decided to skip the game to visit the monastery. There, in close proximity to the monks, he observed the order's regime of

strictness and austerity. Absolute silence was strictly observed at the monastery.

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Communication between monks was restricted to a sign language of two hundred and fifty “words.” Humility and obedience to God and the abbot were the guiding virtues. Though the strictness frightened him, the seed of the idea had been planted. His room in the old Guest House was just off the church and one night, Bob recalls, “I awoke to choirs singing the first office. It was beautiful. It sounded like I was in heaven.”

On October 15, the Feast Day of St. Teresa of Avila, Bob Pearson entered the Monastery of the Holy Spirit. It was 1951.

In a small room just off the dining room in the Retreat House, Father Bob sits comfortably in a large sofa chair. It is the office assigned to the retreat master, one of the chief responsibilities assigned to Father Bob and a position that he has held for the past fifteen months. As retreat master, he provides religious and spiritual counseling for the men who come to the monastery on retreats. The Retreat House is a three story dormitory annex adjacent to the cloister that has an open-door policy to visitors, men who come seeking a quiet, meditative environment in which to spend a few hours or a few days.

As Father Bob talks, the midmorning sun comes in through the window and falls across his right shoulder and onto his hands resting quietly in his lap. He is relaxed and at

ease and has a quiet manner that is friendly and engaging. Though he will turn sixty next spring, he looks ten years younger. He speaks in a pleasant, even voice, and he laughs easily. His forehead, a rake of lateral lines, flashed expressive nuance to the wide range of sentiments and emotions that rise in him.

“I think the real value of the monastery is that there is only God to seek here. There isn’t anything else. And that’s the thing. If you say, ‘That is what I want, that I am drawn to life of prayer, that I’m comfortable with a life of prayer and believe in it and I feel that I had direction in my life in prayer,’ then that is the best way of life. But you can’t go around saying that something is – per se – the best. What is best is what suits *you*, the way god made you.”

Father Bob seems an ideal choice for retreat master. Though one might assume a bland homogeneity exists at the monastery, there is, in fact, great diversity among its members. They include an ex-salesman of Brooks Brothers suits, a former New York City policeman, and a man who taught classics at Yale. Father Bob is considered the monastery’s resident humanist, a reputation supported by his empathetic manner giving counsel. Before being appointed by the Abbot Dom. Augustine to his present job, Father Bob spent eight years as a novice master, the spiritual guide for men going through the five-year novitiate that leads to professing the order’s solemn vows. There are many similarities between the two jobs, for it is at the Retreat House that a prospective novice gains his first experience with the world inside the monastery.

“When I was a novice master, what I tried to discern was whether someone really had a vocation for a life of prayer. I tried to get to know him, have him tell me something about himself. I wanted to know what really turned him on. If someone talked about God and that was what seemed most important in his life, then

I felt encouraged of the possibility this was his vocation. It's not that you're always going to be turned on," he laughed. "Just like in married life, you're not always going to be on a honeymoon. But when you get back to your basic self again, and prayer is still what sparks you, then it is the thing that leads you to the meaning of your life.

"The meaning of life is still largely mystery, but I am comfortable in mystery. I really believe that without mystery, we lose sight of the meaning."

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The monk's life is a wealth of mystery, says Father Bob. Like Abraham, who sought God through contemplation in the desert, a monk is faced with a single, great paradox: he will never encounter God face-to-face.

"Life, particularly in Catholicism, is very paradoxical," Father Bob says, laughing at the thought. "You read the words of Christ: He says you lose your life and gain it. The seeking of something is not always to find it. In this sense, St. Paul says you will receive Him darkly. And this is what prayer gradually cultivates. It starts with faith, which is a gift. It starts with intrinsic acts of faith and of love so that God becomes real in the sense that we might not physically feel His presence, but we intellectually and in our hearts feel Him, that He is that person that dwells inside us.

"Sometimes we have what might be called a legitimate spiritual experience, say, when the senses tingle. Not everybody has

them, and those who do, do not have them all that often. When it doesn't happen again it is easy to say, 'Well, that was really nothing.' But you feel if God has brushed that close, if the Author of Life is touching me, who am I – a little pipsqueak – to turn away and say, 'I didn't see You.'

"On the other hand, it can be dangerous to put too much stock in a spiritual experience like this. John of the Cross says if you have one don't pay any attention to it.

"There are other times when you don't feel anything at all," Father Bob continues. "When you're living it daily, it's hard to always be with it. You have to vary your days, be watchful inside that you don't go dead. Sometimes I drag around here like a poor old human being. There isn't anything going on inside. But even then I think: *Don't Go Away*.

"This is something I've thought about a lot, especially when I've watched someone else decide to leave the monastery. I always wonder: What if God was going to enter his life tomorrow and he leaves today? I think about that in my own life."

The monastic movement in this country exerted its strongest appeal in the decade following the end of World War II. Hundreds of young men returning from the Fronts of Europe, North Africa, and the Pacific saw life within the embrace of the cloister as a way to retreat from the horrors of war. The books of Thomas Merton, the most articulate Trappist writer in recent history, were also important in promoting the monastic movement. (His autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, an account of his journey toward becoming a monk, was published in 1947.) Through Merton's

writing, an entire generation was able to learn something of life within the cloister walls.

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Modern Trappists trace their lineage back to St. Benedict, a fifth-century ascetic who wore a slim volume of religious precepts now referred to as the Rule. Though the Rule was written around A.D. 520, the establishment of the Cistercian Order took place in 1098 at Cîteaux, a monastery just outside of Dijon in southern France. By then, monasticism had not only survived the period of the Dark Ages which had intervened since the writing of the Rule, but it also had prospered, offering peace, security, and protection in an age when civil authority did not. With the rapid spread of monasticism, however, observance of the Rule had grown lax. The monks who founded the monastery at Cîteaux set as their guiding premise rededication to the religious observance of St. Benedict's Rule.

Over the next seven hundred years, the direction of monasticism would swing widely, corresponding, to a great degree, with the political climate of Western Europe; it passed through periods of growth and renewal as well as periods of decadence and decline. Prior to the French Revolution there were more than 30,000 monasteries spread across Europe, yet when the revolution was over, there were less than 3,000. During the tumult of this period, in 1790, a congregation of monks once again gathered to reaffirm their commitment to the strict observance of the Rule. This reaffirmation took

place at the Monastery La Trappe in the Burgundy region of France; it propagated other Trappist monasteries that eventually led to the modern order.

In 1848, twenty-one monks sent by the "mother house" in Mellery, France, founded the first Cistercian monastery in the United States near Louisville, Kentucky. The Abbey of Gethsemane would become the monastery of Thomas Merton. It was also from Gethsemane – on March 21, 1944, the Feast Day of St. Benedict – that twenty-one monks set forth by rail to establish a new monastery on 1,500 acres of a ruined cotton plantation in southern Rockdale County, Georgia. The monks traveled in the railway baggage car along with the mountain of provisions that was necessary to start the new monastery.

Over the next fifteen years, while living in temporary barrack quarters, the monks at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit set about the task of building a permanent cloister and abbey church. Performing the laborious task of mixing and pouring the cement themselves, the monks put shape to the Medieval-looking cloister, which was straightforward in its lines without the mitigating relief of a single Baroque arch. The cloister was dedicated December 9, 1960. The church was finished the following year.

In the year after the church's dedication, the spirit of Vatican II swept from Rome to affect the Catholic Church around the world. As Father Bob describes it: "Pope John opened up the windows of the church to the world and the winds came in." Those winds blew through every corridor of the Church, bringing changes that were both simple and profound. The Mass, which had always been conducted in Latin, was allowed to be conducted in the native languages

of the parishioners. Priests celebrating the Mass moved around to the back of the altar in order to face the congregation. The changes also reached the Trappist order, and Father Bob, who had been ordained a priest on the eve of Vatican II, welcomed them. Along with many of the men who were attracted to monasticism after World War II, he felt that the spirit of renewal of Vatican II was just as relevant inside the monastery as it was in the larger world. “If life at home was like life with the king,” he says, “then life in the monastery was like life with an emperor.”

Before the changes that came with Vatican II, Father Bob lived for twelve years under the order’s strict rule of silence; he was permitted to speak only to the abbot, the prior, and his confessor. It created an enervating tension, he says, a tension bred by living among brethren, yet never being allowed to communicate with clarity and precision. “You never knew if a frown given you by your brother meant disapproval of what you were doing or was just the product of an upset stomach.”

The tension was compounded by the ritual observance once a week of the Chapter of Faults; this was a spiritual honor court presided over by the Abbot. While the violation was being declared before the community, the accused had to lie prostrate before the abbot and suffer the accusation in silence. There was no recourse for the accused, whether there was truth in the accusation or not, for to speak in your own defense would not be keeping with the virtue of humility. Both the observance of strict silence and the Chapter of Faults were abandoned in the early 1960s.

“We said it was done for charity,” Father Bob says, “but I can still remember faults that were proclaimed against me twenty-nine years ago.” To illustrate the fallibility and shortcomings of the Chapter of Faults, he tells

the story of a monk who was proclaimed for not doing the Stations of the Cross everyday as required by custom. (The Stations of the Cross is a prayer ritual recited in series at different points in the church.) The monk being proclaimed prostrated himself before the abbot without a word. Later, one of the other monks went to the abbot privately to tell him that the reason why the one brother who proclaimed the other never saw his brother doing the stations was that they both did them every day at the same time. Had the one who made the claim looked over his shoulder he would have seen the other coming along right behind him.

The daily life of the monk is scheduled closely, his time divided between celebrating the liturgy, praying, and working. The several offices, or liturgies, of the hour comprise the skeleton upon which the monk’s day is hung, beginning when he arises at 3:45 for Vigils and ending at night with the close of Compline at 8:30. Throughout the day, with periods for prayer, meditation, and work, the monk is called back by the ringing of the bells for the singing of the office. The schedule varies slightly on Sunday and on big feast days, but the rest of the

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time there is an unwavering similarity between one day and the next. For Father Bob, the day begins in his room, a small dormitory cubicle

with an eastern exposure overlooking the woods behind the cloister. When he dons the white robe and slips the black hood into place, there is no hint of light on the horizon. He leaves his room on the second floor of the cloister and makes the familiar walk to the church where he takes his place about halfway down in the prior's choir, where he stands, as he always does, between Father Matt and Father Luke.

It is a favorite time of the day for Father Bob. The mind, having been at sleep for seven hours, is much easier to quiet in the half-hour meditation following Vigils. The monks are permitted to go anywhere in the cloister to pray or meditate, though many remain in their stalls in the church. Father Bob likes to go out through the Retreat House's dining room to sit on the veranda that overlooks the Novice Garden. When the Retreat House was completed, Father Bob had the job of landscaping the garden. Now the pines have grown as high as the third-story windows. Here, beneath the vast blackness of the early morning sky, Father Bob sits in prayerful meditation.

"What we're trying to do is quiet ourselves down," Father Bob says. "We are attempting to go into the interior, to move from our heads down into our hearts."

The move into the interior can be, as he says, "a tricky thing to do," particularly in the early days of one's monastic journey. When Father Bob was novice master it was his responsibility to teach the way of monasticism, to aid this quieting. In both prayer and meditation, a novice finds the chatter of his mind a persistent and unruly bully that resists relinquishing control.

"When a novice first sits down to meditate, the difficulty of clearing the mind is often a frustrating, scary thing. I try to get them to realize they're going to have thoughts running through their heads. The idea is not to chase

them out," Father Bob says. "Like little children, if they can get you to chase them, they've got you."

Outside of work and the singing of the liturgy, prayer and meditation are the central features of the monks' days. Their prayers can be formal or personal, universal or private. A form of prayer observed by all is the *lectio divina*, or divine lesson: scriptures from the *Bible* are isolated for meditation and are read slowly, repeatedly, until some insight or inspiration is experienced. "This is anything but speed-reading," Father Bob says.

Meditation for the Trappist traditionally takes the form of prayerful consideration of a scene from the life of Christ. Various other techniques of meditation drawing from Hinduism and Zen Buddhism are also practiced. The meditation on Christ is meant to lead to aspirations of love and resolutions of change. It is one path in seeking the contemplative ideal: the state of being in the *presence* of God.

"The process takes exploration of a cautious nature," Father Bob says. "I think we start out when we first come in here with all sorts of plans and schemes. We have it all mapped out how this is going to work. There's going to be no nonsense. But there is a danger of trying to push that frontier to the point that it backfires. You become so detached that you go dead."

Father Bob pauses a moment, reflecting. "We get anxious, though. Always reaching, reaching: 'God. God. God.' After a while you feel – 'God, please say something.'"

In the twenty-nine years he's lived in the cloister, Father Bob has never given serious consideration to leaving. In that time he has seen many others come and go, particularly in

the sixties when the intense interest shown in monasticism the decade before began to wane. At present, there are no novices in the ranks at Conyers. The idea of peace and serenity in the monastery will always have its appeal to those living in the chaos of the world, but to live that life requires a price most people see as prohibitive. Only one in ten who enter goes on to profess the solemn vows. Of those who leave, Father Bob says it is extremely rare for them to return. “It takes a head of steam to run into one of these places the first time,” he says.

After nearly thirty years of living with the ascetic discipline of a monk, Father Bob still admits to worldly desires and attachments to material things. After the death of his mother, his sister encouraged him to take anything in the house that he wanted. Resisting temptation to the last day, he finally selected two elegant blown-glass goblets he’d given his parents as a Christmas gift many years before. They are now in his room at the monastery, yet the struggle continues. He has resolved, he says, to return them to his sister.

Early on a Sunday morning, in the half hour of prayer following Vigils, Father Bob walks slowly along the road behind the sanctuary. The road was cut through the woods many years ago to muffle the noise of trucks making deliveries to the monastery. As Father Bob walks, the sound that meets his prayer is that of a thousand – possibly a million – particles of water dripping simultaneously through the leaves of the trees. It had thundered and rained most of the night until just before the bells for Vigils. Rather than go through the Retreat House to the veranda overlooking the Novice Garden, Father Bob felt drawn to spend

some time in the woods. The near fullness of the moon glowed behind sheets of cloud, which permitted the moon’s light but not its form to be seen.

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This morning Father Bob’s mood is one of peace. There are no issues burning for resolution, no disquieting thoughts intruding on his mind. Instead, he feels a quiet contentment within, a contentment rising out of thankfulness for all he has received.

When Father Bob first came to the monastery, this road through the woods was freshly cut, the trees on either side peeled back to expose a broad band of sky. In that time of strict silence, the tension that was so much a part of life in the monastery seemed like the road cut: flagrant and unrelieved. Stopping now to listen to the dripping chorus of water, Father Bob notices that the trees have grown up to enclose the lane in an arboreal embrace. The way the limbs reach out from either side of the road, arching the distance and enfolding it, seems like the loving embrace of God. The peace inside Father Bob swells into a prayer of thanksgiving. Standing in the woods behind the sanctuary and looking up through the leaves, Father Bob feels love for his God. In return, he knows the fullness of God’s love for him.