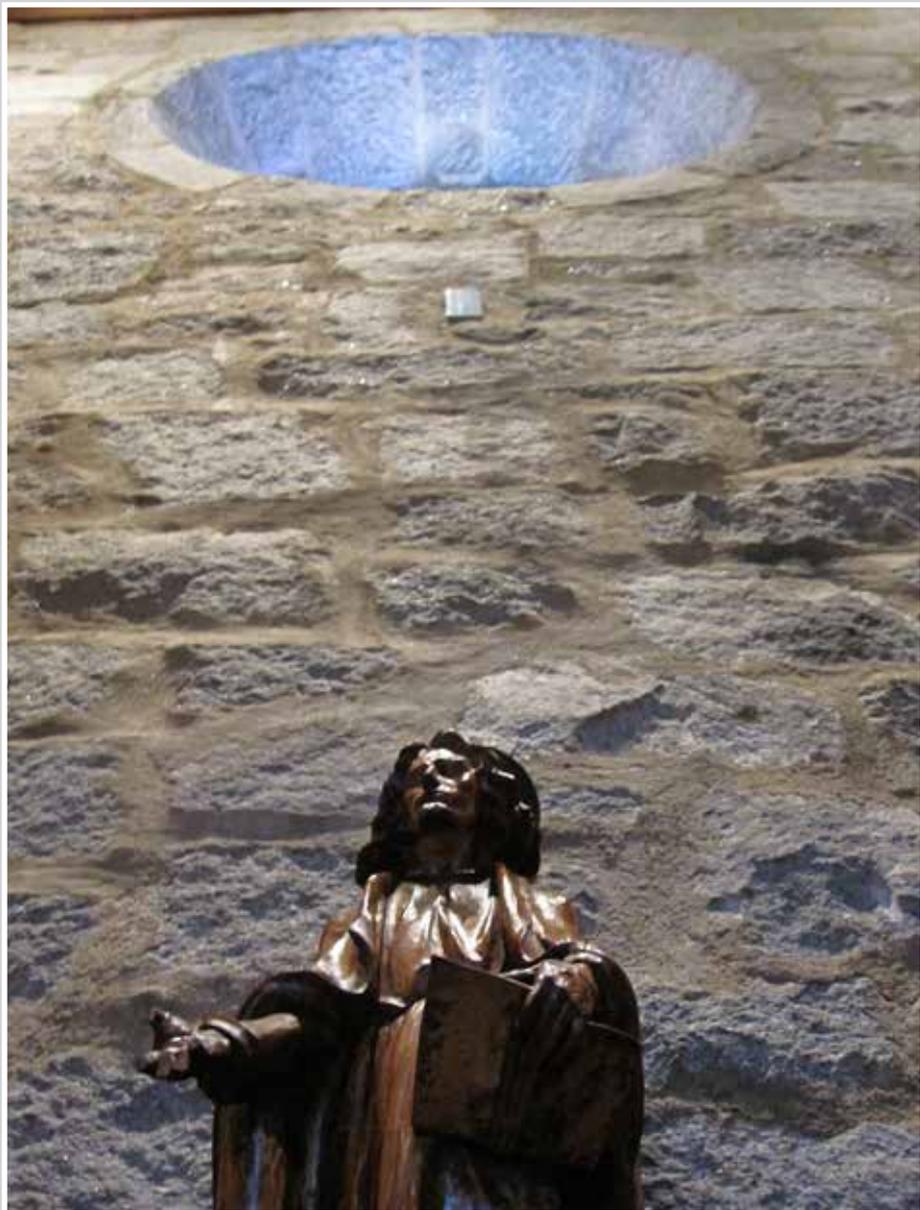


# Cowley

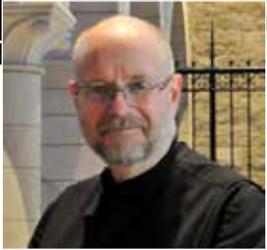
SOCIETY OF SAINT JOHN THE EVANGELIST

Volume 47 • Number 1

Fall 2020



# A Letter from the Superior



## Dear Friends in Christ,

Like all of you, we Brothers have been experiencing this past season as one of tremendous challenge, mixed with moments of real grace. We have been encouraged and supported by the prayers and care of so many of you, for which we are enormously grateful. Whenever I speak with someone, their first impulse is always to show their care by asking, "How are you and the other Brothers?" So first of all, I want to assure you that we are all well and safe, and that in itself is a great grace.

One of the surprising graces we have discovered is in our growing online ministry. While we miss our regular contact with guests and those who join us for worship, we are finding new (to us) and rewarding ways to reach out beyond our walls. We are now joined regularly for live-streamed Evening Prayer online, not only by people from down the street, but across the country, and indeed around the world. In the months to come, look for other ways to join us online, not only for Evening Prayer, but also for retreats and workshops.

Some of the challenges we face are how, when, and for what we will reopen the Chapel and Guesthouse. At the moment, we are moving slowly and cautiously in this regard. We want this to be a place of safety for our guests, members of the congregation, our staff, and the Brothers. You will know that one of the Great O Antiphons from Advent, "O Sapientia," prays "O Wisdom ... Come and teach us the way of prudence." I find myself often praying this antiphon these days and asking for the gifts of wisdom and prudence, not only for myself, but for everyone who makes significant decisions that affect the life, health, and well-being of others.

It seems that wisdom and prudence could very well become our watchwords in the days and months ahead. Like many things in the Christian faith, they are gifts of the Spirit to be prayed for and attributes to be cherished.

The word "prudence" appears only once in our Rule of Life, in the chapter on "Ministry in Practice." There we read, "prudence ... is not meant to hold us back from responding generously and spontaneously to unforeseen and urgent claims that the Spirit makes upon us." The word "wisdom," however, appears twelve times, referring to Christ as the creative Wisdom through whom the Father created all things, as well as the collective wisdom of the community, and the interior wisdom of the individual inspired by the Holy Spirit. One of the goals of the monastic life – indeed one of the goals of the larger Christian life – is the development of the Spirit's gift of wisdom in the heart of the faithful. As a gift of the Spirit, wisdom is very much a manifestation of the being and nature of God. When we pray, "grant that we may share the divine life," we are asking that we may not simply pattern our life after the life of Christ, but that we may actually share in God's nature, which in part is a life of wisdom.

This edition of Cowley is offered very much in the spirit of wisdom. We hope that not only will you discover wisdom in what the different Brothers share, but that you will discover an underlying wisdom which you can adopt as you make your own prudent and wise decisions in the days and months ahead.

Please join me in praying for the gifts of wisdom and prudence! Know that we give thanks for the gift of your abiding friendship and support.

**Faithfully in the One who is the source of all wisdom,**

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "James SSJE".

James Koester SSJE  
Superior

# A Letter from the Fellowship



We clicked the Zoom link and there they were: Brothers Jonathan and Jim greeted us from the Monastery Chapel as our six friends separately logged in too. This supportive little “congregation” watched attentively as we were received into the Fellowship of Saint John in June. And thus began our official journey as members of the Fellowship of

Saint John!

As students of the monastic tradition, we have a great appreciation for this way of life. Several years ago we began to follow a rule of life ourselves. It includes portions of the daily office, contemplation, spiritual direction, silent retreats, tithing, etc. But we longed for the support and sense of community that affiliation with an order affords.

We were delighted to discover SSJE. We first heard of it through a clergyman who mentioned the “5 Marks of Love” video series. After perusing the SSJE website, we signed up for the “Brother, Give Us a Word” daily email devotional. We look forward to these positive and uplifting messages of encouragement.

The Brothers’ vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience are especially attractive to us. Although these are not part of the reception rite for the Fellowship, they resonate with us since we have, over the years, incorporated them into our own lives in a modified fashion.

After carefully reading the Rule of the Society, we found it to be well reasoned and grounded in love. It sets a welcoming tone of compassion and understanding, while considering the evolving circumstances of living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Likewise, the Rule of the Fellowship is an open-ended document that offers spiritual lifestyle suggestions that are both gentle yet profound.

Although our initial probationary period was prior to the pandemic, our association with the Fellowship has been a steadying rock in these uncertain times. Participating in the streamed evening services helps us stay connected with the Brothers, even as it offers a lovely and calming time of meditation. Other communications we’ve received have uplifted us as we continue in our secluded lives.

Although this is a jointly written article, we each have personal thoughts about joining the Fellowship:

## Calvin

I’m a devotee of John, who instructed his disciples saying, “Little children, love one another.” That’s what I find in the Society through its Rule and media. Everything I read from the community is salted with love and joy. The Fellowship provides a friendly garden where I can grow.

## Lisa

I appreciate the sense of community I’ve found with the Fellowship. It is enormously comforting to know that I am praying each day in concert with other FSJ members and following a similar way of life. Although I may never meet or communicate with them, we are together in spirit.

We are overjoyed to be received into the Fellowship of Saint John. As we journey together over the next months, years, and decades, we give thanks for each member of the FSJ and for the Brothers whose wisdom inspires us each day.

## – Calvin & Lisa Wulf

**Calvin currently serves as a spiritual director after retiring as a corporate executive in human relations. A published author of Christian devotional books, Lisa is an adjunct accounting professor. Calvin and Lisa live in Colorado Springs, CO.**

**Like so many others, I have found the recent isolation necessitated by the pandemic to be quite diminishing. It’s been a real grieving experience for me to feel separated from our immediate and wider world. I was intrigued – and honestly a bit nervous – when the community decided to explore how technology could allow us to ford the distance. We decided to begin gently, by inviting members of the FSJ to serve as our test group. First, we welcomed several new members to the FSJ through an online induction ceremony. Then we hosted a series of online conversations for Fellowship members and Brothers. FSJ members wrote in questions, and Brothers shared some of the ways that we have been finding grace in the midst of trial these last months.**

**It wasn’t until we were in the midst of the first virtual conversation that I realized just how very much I have missed seeing our regular worshipping congregation, as well as those more long-distance friends who have had to cancel their scheduled visits with us. Suddenly, through the wonders of technology, there they all were, and we were able to see one another’s faces. It was so moving. I was really quite teary the whole time. I could feel the prayer and affection that unites us, as well as our shared desire to remain one. Our baptismal faith promises that, as Christians, we’re connected, at all times. The communion of saints reveals that neither time nor space can break this connection. This promise was made real to me during our virtual gatherings with FSJ members this summer.**

**In many ways, this discovery of how technology can connect us with the FSJ – and FSJ members with one another – has been its own grace in the midst of trial. The FSJ has always been a virtual web of support, a community of individuals bound to the Society and to one another, across time and space. It took the physical closing of our Guesthouse and Chapel to discover this new way of gathering together for fellowship. We Brothers are eager, over the coming year, to explore more ways of connecting with FSJ members and other friends. Visit our website to learn more about these online offerings.**

**– Br. Jonathan Maury, Director of the Fellowship**



# What Is God's Call?

Lucas Hall, SSJE



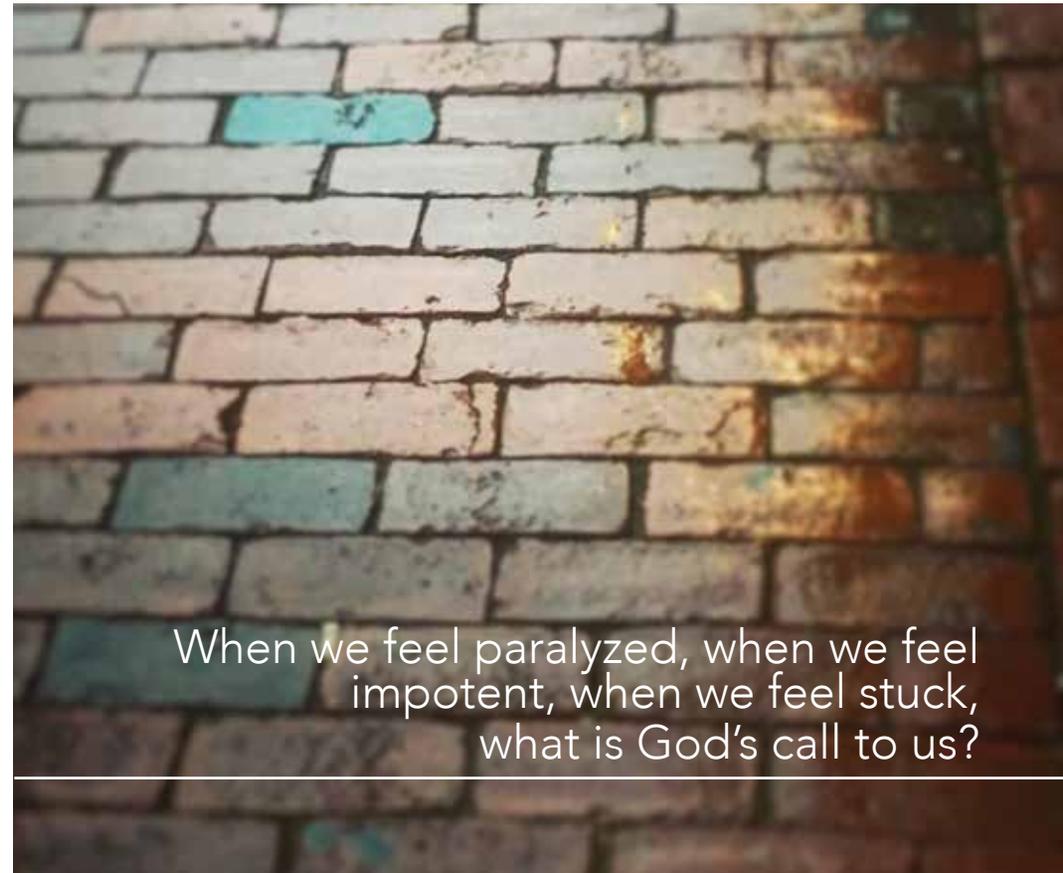
Our present circumstances have left me feeling very stuck. I feel some paralysis and malaise over the experience of not really moving forward, not really doing anything productive, constantly planning to do things, waiting for my working life to begin anew. Of course, my life contains work right now, but it's work that feels like it's in a bit of a holding pattern, work designed to keep things afloat until things can really start happening again. And I'm finding it difficult to pray in this time, because I just feel stuck.

I suspect many of us have similar feelings. The United States right now is a country ravaged by two sicknesses: a global pandemic and the violence of racism. Both are huge and intractable problems. Both simultaneously demand a response and seem to swallow up anything most ordinary people are capable of doing, to render our best intentions and actions impotent in the face of these deadly plagues. Actions, like protesting, that might help us to face one problem might play right into the hands of the other in a horrible lose-lose situation. We are in a position of having to trust the judgment and skill of our leaders, many of whom have proven themselves to be unworthy of that trust. So the question arises: when we feel paralyzed, when we feel impotent, when we feel stuck, what is God's call to us?

God calls us onward, and there are layers to this call. We often think of it in terms of our careers or hobbies, and it can include those, but it extends much broader and deeper. On one end of the spectrum, we all share one ultimate, eternal vocation: union with God and communion with one another. On the other end, God's call is not something we plan for in the future, but what we do right now, in this and every moment. God's call does not cease. It is from this truth that we Brothers, in our Rule of Life, have described God's call as "continuous, abiding, and progressive." Our vocation, then, is endlessly constant and stable, and also endlessly responsive to the changes and chances of our present moment.

How, then, might God be calling us at this time? There is a huge variety of specific acts, specific works, that God calls us to do, and from the example of the Genesis narrative of Adam, being placed in the Garden to tend to it, we see that humans are called to work. But we are not created for the purpose of work. We are not, fundamentally, doers of things, means to some end. God has made us out of love for us, not because some cosmic chores needed to be done. As Christians, Christ's life is exemplary for us, and he frequently refused opportunities to accomplish impressive feats, often preferring to pray in private over public deeds of power. When he did perform miracles, he often instructed those who received his aid not to tell anyone. Several examples of his healings show a dichotomy: Jesus gets exasperated at those who approach him primarily asking him to accomplish some deed of power, often using words like "faithless" to describe them. But when people approach him, not because of what he can do, but because of who he is, and trusting that "who he is" is enough, he seems surprised and joyful, praising them for their faith.

Trusting Jesus for who he is points us to a truth about ourselves: we need to trust who *we* are. There is ample time for doing. Indeed, it's no virtue to



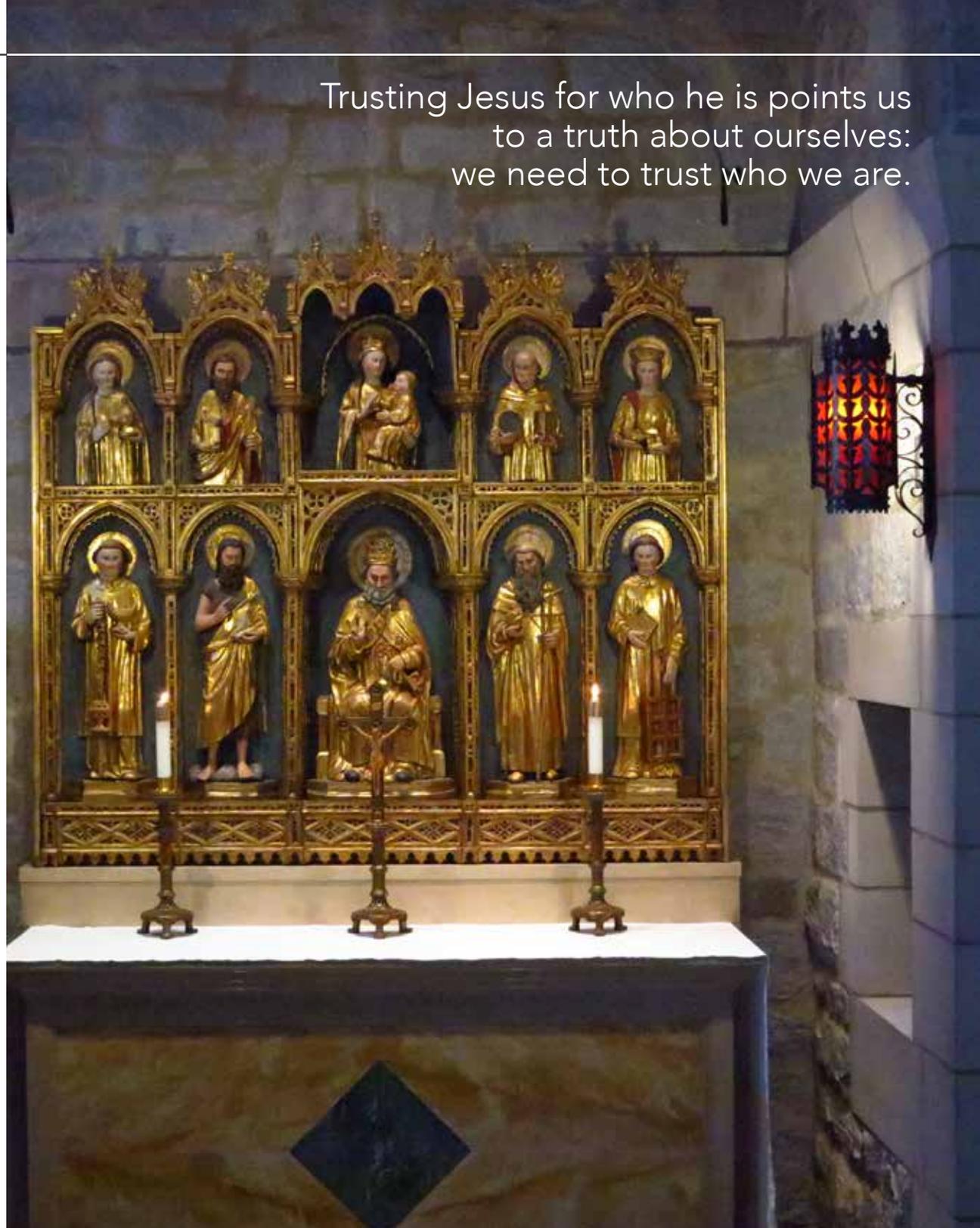
When we feel paralyzed, when we feel  
impotent, when we feel stuck,  
what is God's call to us?

shun holy works. But good works are the good fruit of the vine; they are not the roots. In this culture especially, it is extremely easy for us to identify ourselves with our work, and when it is hampered or taken away, to experience a very wide and yawning gap in our lives. But we aren't our work. Our work may be good, even sacred, but who we *are* is far more important, far better, far more sacred. We are bearers of the image of God. This is true in all things, forever. No particular work, no matter how holy or heroic, can of its own accord give us our lives. When we begin to think this way, we can descend into an idolatry of good deeds, an insidious tendency to build our own moral resume, and there will never be enough.

This isn't an easy message for me to swallow right now. I want to *do* things. I feel ready to *do* things. Not to plan, not to talk about, not to meet, but to *do*. And I'm frustrated by the reality that I can't. Not yet. And, I suppose, those feelings are not, themselves, wrong. But when I find myself despairing over the lack of doing, feeling worthless because of the lack of doing, that's when I've begun to identify myself, and God, and others, as means to an end, as tools of accomplishment, as things. I want to do good things, but idolatry of the good is just as much a sin as any other idolatry.

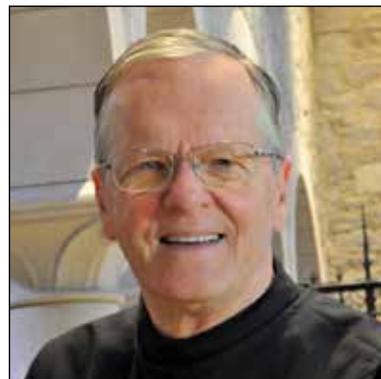
Perhaps you've felt this way too. It's hard, but you aren't alone. When everything around us seems to be failing, when we feel paralyzed and unable to meaningfully affect the world, when we so deeply long to see good in the world and the fog just doesn't seem to lift, that is when trust in God is more important than ever. We will move past this, because God has chosen us as his dwelling place. We will get through this, because the Church's mission of bearing witness to the union of God and humanity does not falter. We can persevere, if only we remember who God most fundamentally calls us to be: ourselves, bearers of Christ in the world, not by virtue of particular accomplishments, but because of the love with which God has made us. 🙏

Trusting Jesus for who he is points us  
to a truth about ourselves:  
we need to trust who we are.





“Out of the death of the old  
the new arises.”



## Making Meaning

Curtis Almquist, SSJE

**“Truth shall spring up from the earth,  
and righteousness shall look down from heaven.”**

“Normal will never return. I hope not.” An African-American friend said this to me recently. She was speaking about the experience of injustice and suffering that has been so poignantly exposed during the coronavirus pandemic: the strains and inequities in healthcare, the economic disparity, the hijacking of hope and trust, the infectious cynicism, the splay of racism. We have right now both the need and the opportunity to make meaningful changes in how we live and share life together. How to begin?

“Out of the death of the old the new arises,” Paul Tillich writes. “The new is created not out of the old, not out of the best of the old, but out of the *death* of the old.”<sup>1</sup> What is it that needs to die to open the space for the new to arise? This is a very difficult and yet very liberating question to ask, on both the societal and individual level. Allow the current crisis to illuminate the way forward. A crisis is invariably enlightening. It oftentimes exposes what we have taken for granted, what we have assumed in privilege, what we have presumed we can control. Look around you: what do you *now* know that you did not know before this pandemic crisis began?

The prophets of old promised a new thing that God wants to happen.<sup>2</sup> Make peace with your past first, to make space for your future. Here are three ways ahead to consider.

**Put to rest what is dead or deadly.** Laying to rest those presumptions and practices that are not retrievable, sustainable, or equitable helps make space for the

<sup>1</sup> The Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965), in his *Shaking of the Foundations*.  
<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 43:18-19; 65:17. See also Revelation 21:5.

new thing that God wants to happen in and through your life.

- What has died? A relationship, an ability, a privilege? You might be clinging to some desire or presumption that is on a ventilator, and it needs to be laid to rest. Conversely, you might need to let go of some positive life practice or experience that has helped get you to this point, but which no longer has a place in your life.
- For what do you need to repent, where you got it wrong? Does your repentance need to be expressed in some way or to someone?

**Uncover the good.** What do you know to be important as you look ahead, as you participate in *God's* future? What have you discovered about life and about yourself? The English word "discover" has a fascinating Latin etymology: *dis* "opposite of" + *cooperire* "to cover up, cover over, bury." A discovery is the opposite of a cover up. What has been unearthed or exposed in your soul coming out of this crisis? What good is coming out of it for you? I'm not in any way denying the suffering or terror of the ongoing pandemic; however I *am* saying there may be good coming out of the bad. Bad is bad; however bad may not be the last word. Is there good that has been revealed or can be redeemed from the bad as you lean into *God's* future? One grace you may be in touch with is gratitude, how grateful you are for so much and so many. Take much less for granted in life, and you will find only more good for which to be grateful.

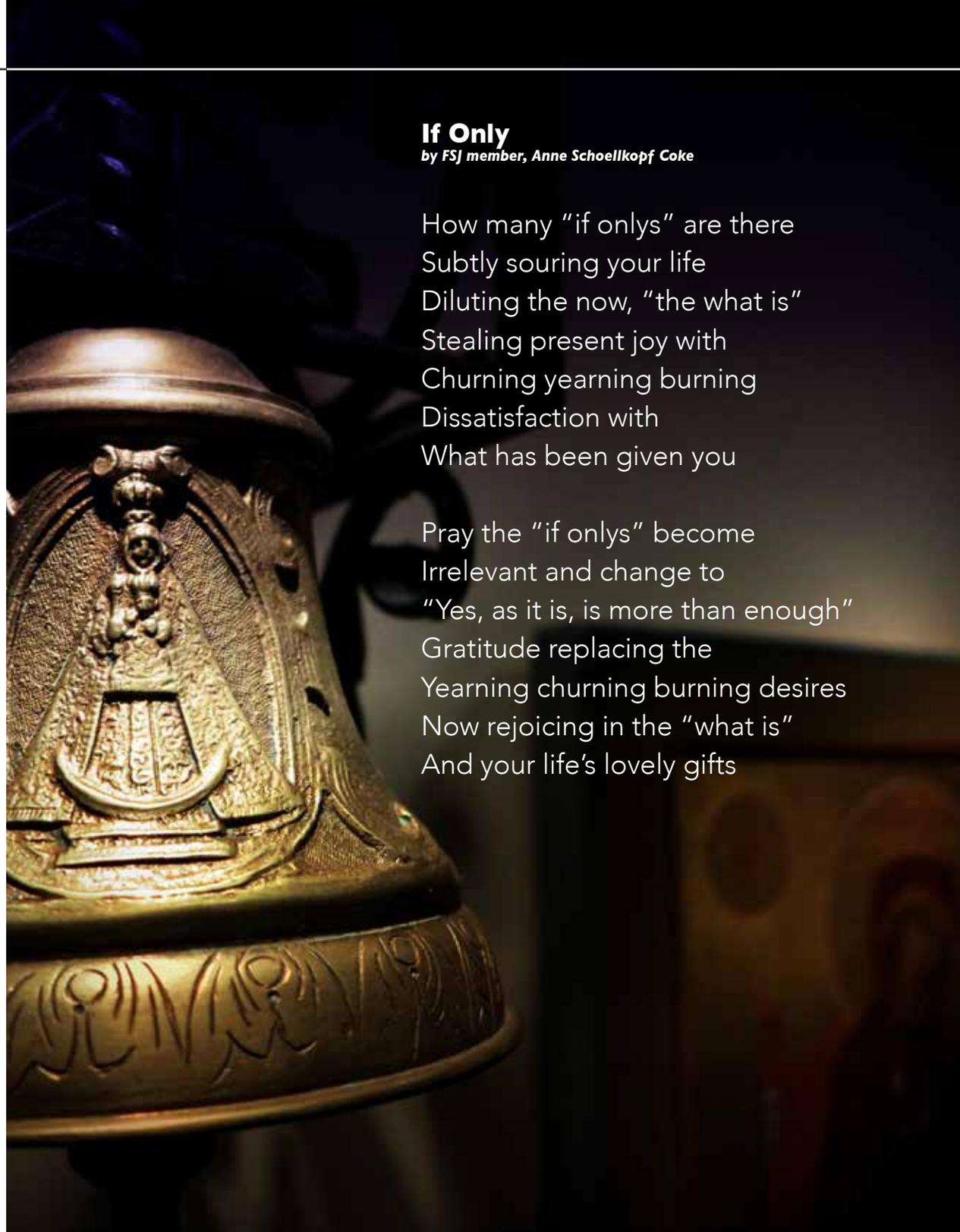
**Claim your calling.** All of us are missionaries with a distinct set of gifts and abilities, with unique accesses to specific people and places. What are you being called to do or be as you live into *God's* future? Our portfolio in life changes. What your life was about 5, or 15, or 50 years ago may be quite different from now. The fact that *God* has extended your life into this day is a sign of your vocation, your calling, that *God* has for you a mission that only you can fulfill. If you find yourself immobilized, overwhelmed by the extent of the need that

## If Only

by FSJ member, Anne Schoellkopf Coke

How many "if onlys" are there  
Subtly souring your life  
Diluting the now, "the what is"  
Stealing present joy with  
Churning yearning burning  
Dissatisfaction with  
What has been given you

Pray the "if onlys" become  
Irrelevant and change to  
"Yes, as it is, is more than enough"  
Gratitude replacing the  
Yearning churning burning desires  
Now rejoicing in the "what is"  
And your life's lovely gifts



surrounds you on every side, you have overextended your reach. You must be you: who, and what, and where you are. Your calling is within your scope. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Be a bush if you can't be a tree. If you can't be a highway, just be a trail. If you can't be a sun, be a star. For it isn't by size that you win or fail. Be the best of whatever you are."<sup>3</sup> We never retire from our vocation; our vocation simply changes with the passages of life.

We have an innate, God-given craving for a meaningful life. Meaning-making happens in the context of life as it is – not as it was, or could be, or as we may think it should be, but in life as it is. The dawning of each new day brings a fresh invitation to co-operate with God's intentions for that new thing God is doing.

In Psalm 85 (v. 10-11), the psalmist prays:

Mercy and truth have met together;  
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.  
Truth shall spring up from the earth,  
and righteousness shall look down from heaven.

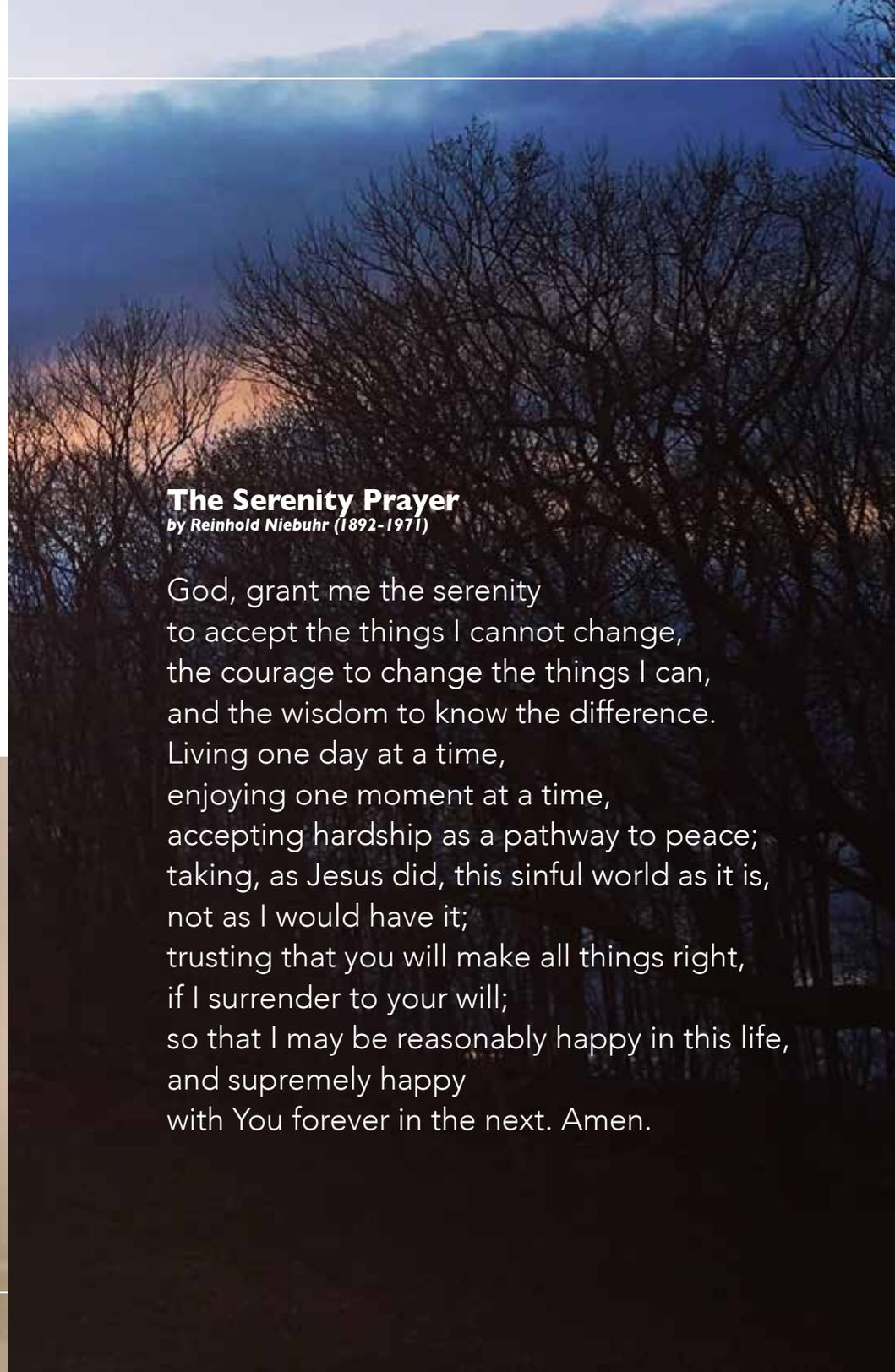
Whatever struggles the days ahead may hold, you will find meaning by playing your own part within God's future. 🙏



## **The Serenity Prayer**

*by Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)*

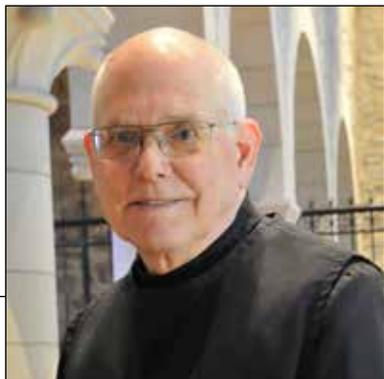
God, grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot change,  
the courage to change the things I can,  
and the wisdom to know the difference.  
Living one day at a time,  
enjoying one moment at a time,  
accepting hardship as a pathway to peace;  
taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is,  
not as I would have it;  
trusting that you will make all things right,  
if I surrender to your will;  
so that I may be reasonably happy in this life,  
and supremely happy  
with You forever in the next. Amen.



# The Call of Christ in Our Time

*Guidance for Christian Leaders*

David Vryhof, SSJE



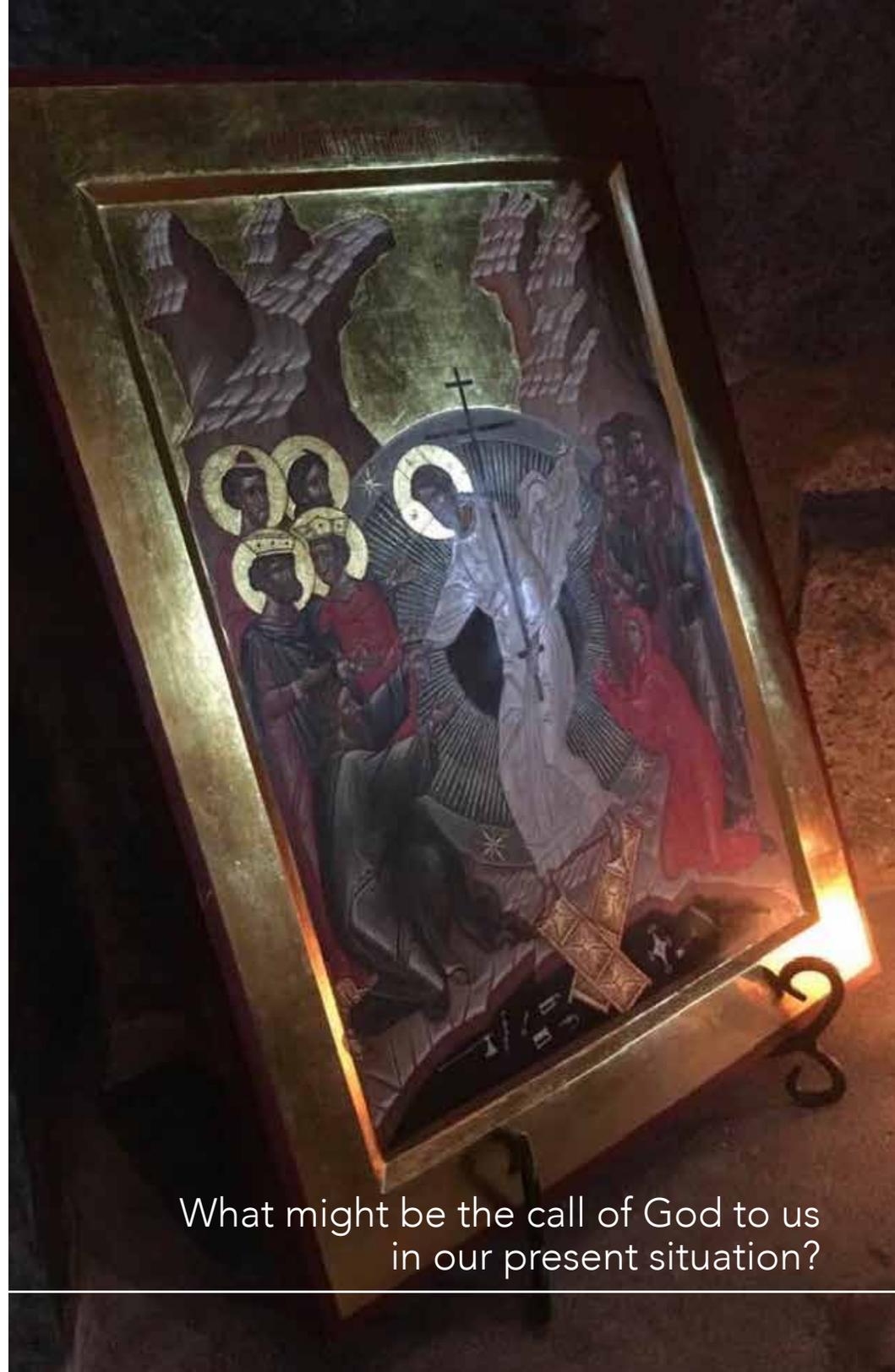
In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Saint Ignatius proposes a prayer exercise to help us consider “the call of Christ.” He asks us to imagine a charismatic leader, chosen by God and revered by all, who calls people to join a movement to end poverty and disease, and to do away with ignorance, oppression, and slavery – in short, to address the evils which beset humankind. The invitation comes with a warning: whoever chooses to follow must imitate this leader, by laboring in the day and watching by night, so that afterwards they may share in the victory just as they have shared in the work. Ignatius imagines that, in spite of the sacrifices, most people would want to follow a good and kind leader with so noble a purpose.<sup>1</sup>

The second part of the exercise is to apply these same criteria to Christ: to listen to his invitation, to count the cost of following him, to commit ourselves to endure whatever hardship might result from our labors in his service. If we are inspired to follow a human leader, Ignatius reasons, how much more reasonable is it that we should follow Christ and join his mission for the salvation of the world?

The purpose of the exercise is to prepare our hearts to be ready to receive and respond to God’s call as it comes to us, moment by moment, at each stage of our lives. So we ask ourselves: what might be the call of God to us in our present situation?

Not long ago a group of Christian leaders, representing both Protestant and Catholic traditions, met to discuss this very question. They agreed that a Christian’s identity in Christ precedes every other identity – nationality, political party, race, ethnicity, gender, geography. We are followers of Jesus before anything else. If this is true, and “Jesus is Lord” and Caesar is not, what message

<sup>1</sup> David Fleming, SJ, *Draw Me into Your Friendship: The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* (Saint Louis, MO: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 82-87.



What might be the call of God to us  
in our present situation?

## **"RECLAIMING JESUS"** *a summary*

**I. We believe each human being is made in God's image and likeness. Racial bigotry is a brutal denial of the image of God in some of the children of God.** Therefore, we reject the resurgence of white nationalism and racism in our nation... and commit ourselves to help dismantle the systems and structures that perpetuate white preference and advantage...

**II. We believe that we are one body. In Christ there is to be no oppression based on race, gender identity or class.** Therefore, we reject misogyny, the mistreatment, violent abuse, sexual harassment, and assault of women... and the oppression of any other child of God.

**III. We believe how we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick and the prisoner is how we treat Christ himself.** Therefore, we reject the language and policies of political leaders who would debase and abandon the most vulnerable children of God...

**IV. We believe that truth is morally central to our personal and public lives....** Therefore, we reject the practice and pattern of lying that is invading our political and civil life...

**V. We believe that Christ's way of leadership is servanthood, not domination...** Therefore, we reject any moves toward autocratic political leadership and authoritarian rule...

**VI. We believe Jesus when he tells us to go into all nations making disciples. Our churches and our nations are part of an international community whose interests always surpass national boundaries...** Therefore, we reject "America first" as a theological heresy for followers of Christ. While we share a patriotic love for our country, we reject xenophobic or ethnic nationalism that places one nation over others as a political goal.

is there for us and for our nation?

I hear a rallying cry in the document that came out of these discussions, entitled "Reclaiming Jesus: A Confession of Faith in a Time of Crisis." On the facing page you'll find the key points they identified.<sup>2</sup> "Reclaiming Jesus" is a message for us to proclaim and to live, a message that reflects principles that lie at the heart of our Christian faith. Here is a vision and a cause to which we can give our lives.

An *authentic Christian spirituality* must take into account these types of concerns. It is an inadequate and unbalanced spirituality that is only concerned with our practice of prayer or our inner spiritual growth. Our union with God in prayer should move us into the world to truly love our neighbors and to seek their well-being. We have to find ways to get our hands dirty addressing the messiness of our world.<sup>3</sup>

We cannot do this alone, of course. Jesus reminds us that "apart from him, we can do nothing" – and that we will also need *one another*. We need to deepen our trust in God. We need to find companions who share God's vision and who can support and challenge us to remain faithful to our call. We need friends who will help us practice what we preach, and who will model for us right speech and actions. We need to establish a pattern of daily prayer and meditation; without it, we know we may well miss the mark. We need regular contact with poor and suffering people in order to listen and understand their needs (and to safeguard against imposing what we think is best). We need a friend or friends with whom we can unburden ourselves, people who can help us avoid traps and make wise choices. We need rest and recreation, physical exercise and a commitment to health, ongoing study (especially of social realities), and a sense of humor. All this we need to be a "new people" in Christ, capable of addressing the real needs of our time.

We also need help in facing our fears and uncertainties during such a tumultuous time as we are experiencing right now. We need God and other people to reveal to us the *invitation* or *opportunity* embedded in each of today's stark challenges. We need to be reminded of all the ways our lives are *connected*, to inspire us to seek the common good. Our future and the future of our world depend on this. 🙏

<sup>2</sup> Full statement and resources available at [ReclaimingJesus.org](https://ReclaimingJesus.org).

<sup>3</sup> The faith leaders specifically denounce attacks on immigrants and refugees, and the neglect of the well-being of low-income families and children.



## Swimming in Meaning, Rooted in God

*A conversation about vocation  
with Br. Keith Nelson*

**Q: Take us back to the beginning. When did your monastic vocation begin?**

I had no formal religious upbringing before the age of nine, when my family moved from a little suburb in southern New Jersey to a suburb of Birmingham, Alabama. It was a huge cultural shift – and culture shock – for all of us, from minor things (like learning I had an accent) to one big thing: we began to go to church for the first time. I had grown up on a rich diet of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Greek and Roman mythology – great story traditions that informed my play as a child. When I encountered the Bible and the story of Jesus for the first time, I took to it like a fish to water, in part I think because of the groundwork that had already been laid in my heart and psyche by those stories. The difference, of course, was that this particular hero was God, who desired a relationship of love with me, personally, and that there was a whole community of people living out this great Story, capital S. Learning that was hugely horizon opening and ground shaking for me. I was baptized when I was ten.

As I got older, I continued to have a close relationship with Jesus, but I also began to have some questions. In my Southern Baptist context, there was very little experiential understanding of the Trinity, while, at the same time, there was a pronounced theology of atonement. This meant that I couldn't really understand the relationship between God, the Father – who seemed frightening – and Jesus, with whom I had a great personal relationship. I couldn't make much sense of that as I entered my teenage years. I also began to pick up on a current of pretty nominal Christianity around me: a lot of Christians who professed faith, but whose actual behavior seemed at a disconnect to their Sunday church belonging.

In high school I took a world religions class and was exposed to Buddhism. My young, spiritually thirsty mind found in Buddhism so much of what I was



looking for and which I didn't see in the Christianity around me: an emphasis on practices that transformed the human heart and mind; genuine compassion for all beings; an understanding of the interconnectedness of the created order. All of these things were really exciting to me. As a result, Jesus sort of went into hibernation for me.

When I got to college, I dove head-and-heart-first into Buddhist meditation practice with the zeal that only a college freshman can manage. I quickly figured out that I wanted to major in Religion. My knowledge of Christianity grew, but only from the neck up. I still had unfinished business with Jesus, but a robust meditation practice had replaced church. My junior year, I studied abroad in India, spending six months in a place called Bodh Gaya, a major Buddhist pilgrimage site, and five months with a Tibetan studies program in a place in Northern India called Dharamshala, the center of the Tibetan population in exile. The gentleness, compassion, and wisdom that I met in many Tibetans – especially in Tibetan monks and nuns – was really real and life-changing for me. It inspired me to undertake a project of interviewing around fifty Tibetan monks on their experience of monastic identity in contemporary (late twentieth-century) India.

When I came back to the U.S., I considered the possibility of a Buddhist monastic vocation. I ended up being steered in a different direction by one of my professors at Kenyon College, Royal Rhodes. He was probably the first person I'd ever met who really lived and breathed Christ. He was also close friends with a Benedictine monk named Columba Stewart, who lives at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. Under Royal's tutelage, I decided to make my senior thesis a comparative project, looking at Tibetan Buddhist

monasticism and Benedictine monasticism.

As a result, I spent the Thanksgiving week of 2003 at St. John's Abbey, talking to a dozen monks and joining them for their Thanksgiving meal. It was an incredibly eye-opening experience, one which proved disruptive to my – everything. Before this, I had met a few isolated individuals – like my college professor – who were openhearted Christians, clearly transformed by their faith. But I'd always thought that they were the exception – like exotic animals. Over the course of that week, and through those conversations, I discovered a community of people focused on Christian practice and who were, in fact, dedicating their whole lives to it. They were the real deal. They were following the way of Christ in a monastic setting. That week's experience planted some important seeds for me. My heart was touched.

**Q: How and when did those seeds begin to grow?**

After college I taught for two years at a Roman Catholic boarding high school in a tiny county in northeastern Connecticut. I still identified as a Buddhist, but I'd been so intellectually immersed in Christian theology that they hired me to teach a couple of courses: "Mysticism and Meditation" and "The Mystery of Suffering and Death." The experience of living in that full-time residential community planted further important seeds. Being required to attend Mass with the students was also pretty significant: seeing other people come together on a regular basis as the body of Christ, to participate in the ritual of the Mass together, awoke a little voice in me that said, "I think I want that."

At the end of two years, I came to Cambridge to attend Harvard Divinity School, anticipating doing academic work mostly within Buddhist studies, with the possibility of some continued comparative work on Christian monasticism. Once I got to HDS, one of the really important missing pieces came alive for me. I met students who identified as Christians, who were really deeply engaged with the Christian tradition, and who practiced meditative prayer, but who were also unafraid to ask good, hard questions about their faith. Most of them were Episcopalians.

I also took a couple of courses with Professor Karen King, studying the New Testament and the non-canonical gospels, including the Gospel of Thomas. That was like entering the same living room, but with all the furniture arranged differently. It deepened my relationship to the canonical scriptures in surprising ways, and I just began devouring the Bible like I had in my childhood.

One night in that second year, working late on a term paper for a theology course on the Incarnation, I was reading Athanasius in the library. I read the phrase, "Christ came to center our senses in himself." It's a line that may not

be particularly inspiring out of context, but in the context of my life, somehow, all the meanderings of my past up until that moment came together in that single phrase – and I suddenly knew that I needed Jesus, that I needed to experience the Eucharist on a personal level, that I needed to go to church. I called up my teaching assistant and said, "I think I need an extension on this paper. I seem to be having a reconversion experience!" She agreed that was a pretty good reason for an extension.

It happened that, directly across from the room where I was living at the time, there was a poster for SSJE with all the service times. I had actually never seen it before – my eyes had seen it, but I hadn't computed what was in front of me – until I came home late that Friday night from the library. Suddenly I saw it, and I was completely taken aback: "What's this? An Episcopal monastery?" A few days later, I went to the Monastery for the first time. I took communion. And it felt pretty inexpressible – like an electric shock went through my body. It was this very real, embodied confirmation that this is what I was looking for.

Long story short: I began an impassioned conversation with SSJE about monastic vocation, and ended up coming as a postulant. This was in 2008. I was twenty-six. In truth, I just wasn't ready. I had too many questions about other possible ways of serving the church, as well as about having a vocation to teach. And so, after six months, I left.





I had a really wonderful day with God  
in this community yesterday;  
let's do it again today.

**Q: How was the experience of leaving?**

It was really hard. There were so many things that, on a deep, intuitive level said, “This is the right place for me.” Yet at the same time, those other questions felt like they weren’t going to go away unless I got the answers I needed. So, with some considerable difficulty, I left.

I did a bunch of things after that: I fell in love. I started teaching English to adult Chinese immigrants. I started doing some part-time church administration. And I became a part of a church community called The Crossing, which was incredibly formative for me.

Those were also years in which many of my friends started stepping into forms of professional leadership. I had a really close college friend who became a rabbi. A few friends entered the ordination process or started down the path to becoming seminary professors. Watching these friends step into their vocations was for me an experience of mutual joy, as well as a slightly bittersweet recognition that each of these didn’t seem to be my vocation. I continued to long for something more that I couldn’t quite pinpoint in my own daily life and work. There would be moments where God would very gently whisper, “Maybe monastic vocation.” But I would tell myself, “Oh, I tried that, remember? It didn’t work out. Now I’m trying this different path, so just stick with it.” There was, maybe, a little lingering narrative of failure attached to leaving the Monastery. I wasn’t able to hear that whispering voice for a while. But then I finally did. I felt ready to turn my thoughts and questions back in that direction.

I reached out to Br. David Vryhof and asked, “Could we take a second look at monastic vocation for me?” At the same time I was beginning that

conversation with the community, I was also living in an intentional community house associated with my church. That was really good practice for returning to life in community. I came back to SSJE as a postulant in February of 2014.

**Q: How was the return?**

I went through the same sorts of things that all postulants go through. I tried to approach the experience with “beginner’s mind” and beginner’s heart, even though I had done it before, because I recognized that I was doing this at a really different stage in my life. I was twenty-six the first time; I was thirty-one when I came back. A lot had happened for me in those years.

The second time around was much less of a roller coaster ride. The dramatic inner experiences, shifts, and dramas I felt from day-to-day were not nearly as intense as the first time around. I received a lot of gentle, daily confirmation: “Yes, I made the right choice. This is where I want to be.”

I also felt a willingness to take things day-by-day. The first time around, I was pulling the radish out of the ground every day, to check and see if it was growing. “Are you *growing*? Are you going to be a radish?!” The second time around, I was able to take things more slowly: “I had a really wonderful day with God in this community yesterday; let’s do it again today.” I felt the freedom just to be present to each day as it unfolded until it was time to make the decision whether or not to become a novice.

In the first year of my novitiate I spent nine months living at Emery House and had some trials with loneliness – a not uncommon experience as men grow into celibate life. But the gift on the other side was a deeper

self-knowledge, and a capacity for solitude with God. Then, beneath that, a desire to give myself to God in that way, which was affirming.

**Q: In July of 2019, you made your Life Profession. How was that decision?**

Momentous, naturally. And incredibly joyful. I made my pre-profession retreat in England, with a community of Anglican Benedictines, Mucknell Abbey. At the beginning I just strolled through their flowering meadows with a dazed grin – like it was my honeymoon with Jesus. Then for almost nine days it was overcast and drizzly. One afternoon my melancholy started to get the best of me. An irrational foreboding insinuated itself: would vowed life be an endless succession of flat, overcast days in my heart? But I was jarred awake – spiritually – by a line from our Rule in the chapter on Life Profession: “Only by depending on God for the grace of perseverance, fixing ourselves by faith in God’s unwavering commitment to us, can we risk taking vows which bind us forever.” Christ was my joy, and that joy did not depend on the weather – outer or inner. As if in reply, the sun rose full and bright the next day. I was ready – as ready as one ever really is – to embrace a life “full of meaning in union with God.”

During the rite of Life Profession, when I put on the silver ring that is a sign of our espousal to God, I repeated the words we all say: “Christ is my life and my joy.” It was then that everything came full circle. I had arrived home.

There was a time – before I came back to the community – when I was unsure if that would actually come together for me. I didn’t know if I would be able to make the choices to enable me to live a life that was saturated in meaning in the way I thirsted for. I knew I needed to live a life swimming in meaning, rooted in God. Yet I also discerned that it was impossible for me to do so in my own strength, on my own. I needed community, a place to call home.

There are, of course, “cloudy days,” outer and inner. Unhappiness visits this life, as it visits every child of God. But in the midst of that, I know in my heart that I am living a life that is full of meaning. That is the hidden sunlight that gives me strength when my heart is overcast.

**Q: What’s the greatest joy of this life for you right now?**

I know myself to be loved. I am beloved by my God and I am loved by my Brothers, who reflect God’s love to me. I think of 1 John, “We love because he first loved us.” I feel strengthened to love those who are hungry for meaning, and to pass on the meaning the Spirit has given me, by the love streaming into me from God and from this community. 🙏



## SSJE Annual Fund

One of my favorite passages of Scripture is from Revelation: “And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new’” (Rev 21:5). It seems to me that this is a time not only of *unmaking* but also of *making things new*. That is certainly true for us Brothers as we seek to re-imagine our ministry anew in this very different world. In many ways, this is exactly what Father Benson, our

Founder, was talking about when he said, “The necessary thing for us is to set about old things in a new way.”

As my Brothers and I set about new ways to offer our ministry amidst multiple crises and challenges, we keep these words in mind. We also keep in mind the incredible outpouring of prayers and support which so many of you, our friends, have provided us. Our primary purpose, that of living in union with God, remains our focus, yet in these days we must set about that in new ways, as we cooperate with God in the remaking of the world.

I invite you to join us as we re-imagine our ministry and set about old things in a new way by supporting our annual fund with a gift.

As ever, we are grateful for the gift of your abiding friendship.

- Br. James Koester, SSJE



## Legacy Society of SSJE



### Leave a Mark of Love on Your Life

A bequest is a gift which leaves a lasting legacy upon the SSJE community. As a stabilizing block in SSJE’s foundation, these funds are crucial in nurturing the vitality of the community and ensuring its ability to meet needs not yet anticipated and emergency causes.

Just over one hundred people currently populate SSJE’s Legacy Society. If SSJE has left a mark of love on your life, might you consider a legacy gift in your own estate planning?

“Because love, given and received, lasts beyond the grave.”



980 Memorial Drive  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
U.S.A.



 printed on recycled paper

Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
**PAID**  
Osterville, MA  
Permit No. 3