Society of Saint John the Evangelist
Cowley

Community

*What does it mean to **belong**?*

All of us are called by God to belong to communities of PERSONAL COOPERATION *and* INTERDEPENDENCE, *which strive to nurture and use the gifts of each and see that our basic needs are met.*

- SSJE Rule of Life
"The Witness of Life in Community"

in this issue

Community

*What does it mean to **belong**?*

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about us

Our community was founded more than 150 years ago and draws on deep Christian monastic roots dating to the fourth century, yet SSJE is no dusty relic. We don't live in the past. Nor is monastic life some form of retreat from reality. In fact, for those who are called, monastic life is our way of most deeply engaging our lives; it's a life that calls upon the whole of our selves, in which we can offer ourselves back to God and to God's mission. We hope that our way of life will bear witness to the world today, teaching people to pray their lives, and spreading Jesus' message of peace, justice, dignity, and love to a world hungry to hear it.

cover

An intimate moment along the Charles River, captured by long-time friend of the community, Appy Chandler, hints at what it means to belong and evocatively reminds us: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20).

A Letter from the Deputy Superior

Dear friends,

Belonging can be beautiful. As I've reflected on my own journey of vocation, the question in my twenties seemed primarily to be: *Who* am I? But as I approached thirty, it was replaced by the question: *Whose* am I? The latter is a question about community: Who are the people alongside of whom I am meant to work, grow, undergo real conversion, and bear the fruit that God intends? How beautiful it felt when God drew me, in response to that question, to belong to this Society. There are surely parallel experiences in your own life.

But belonging can also be complicated. In pursuit of belonging, one risk may be that the complexity, dynamism, and mystery of an individual person becomes flattened, distorted, or worse. One facet of a person may be made to stand for the person herself. In search of belonging, as our Rule cautions, individuals may unwittingly "seek refuge in passivity and conformity," or succumb to false messages from the group's members or authority figures. A deadening or unquestioning uniformity may be the cost.

An opposite risk may be to avoid the commitment, the dedicated participation, and the life-giving challenges that come with accepting identity alongside others. The freedom and independence that come with resisting a label or keeping options open are tempting. But in this choice, we discover, there are other costs: without belonging, certain kinds of solidarity and real transformation may elude our grasp.

In the pages of this issue I hope you'll find what I have found: a refreshing, balanced, nuanced, and thought-provoking exploration of belonging as a path to larger life in Christ. Brothers name inherent risks and tackle complex questions: how to live a committed faith even as we disagree with the behavior or values of other Christians; how to honor the identities that make us different while remaining members, one of another, in the Body of Christ; how to abide in community when going it alone would seem so much easier; and how to follow Jesus, as a Christian, in a way that is equal parts open-hearted and single-minded.

By God's grace, our community continues to act – in the words of our Rule – as "a beacon drawing others to live in communion." The Monastery Guesthouse and the Chapel have been full of friends and retreatants during these summer and fall months. While it is a joy and an honor to once again exercise a robust rhythm of in-person hospitality, it is also something more: a holy and necessary reminder that we as Brothers and you, who participate in our life in countless ways, belong to one another. These mutual bonds of prayer and service enable us to fit together, in St. Paul's image, as "living stones" being "built into a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2).

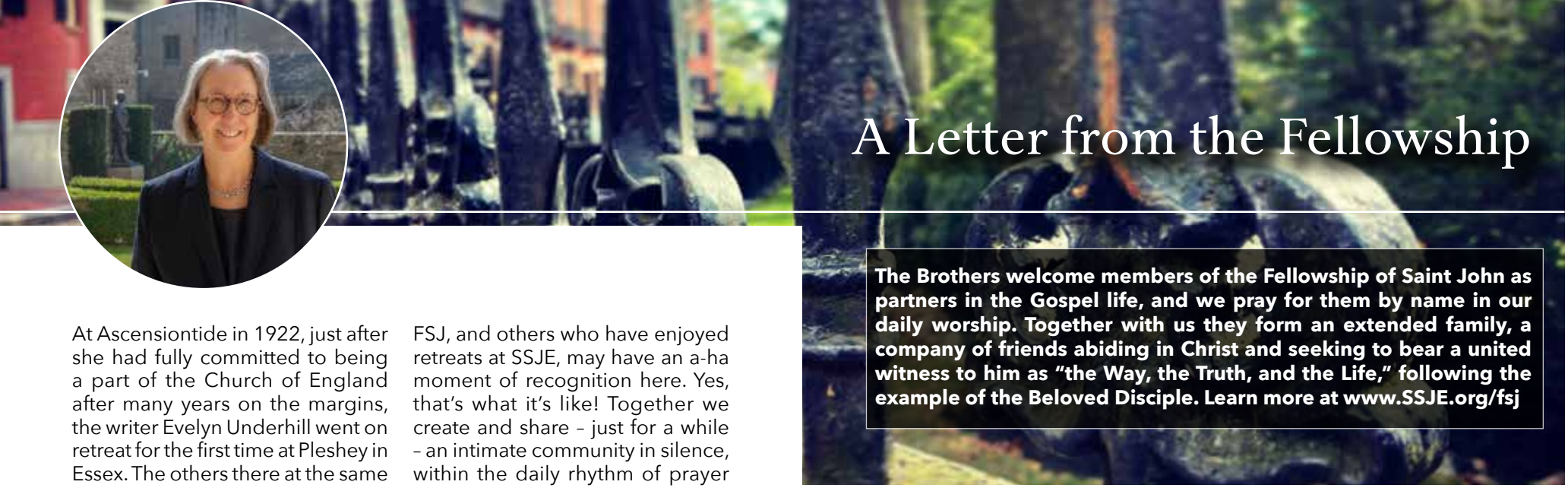
We have had powerful recent occasions to renew and celebrate our belonging to Christ as a brotherhood. In June, our Brother Lucas Hall made his profession of life vows in our Society, becoming by our estimate (at age thirty) one of the youngest life professed members of a religious order in the Anglican Communion. And this summer, we celebrated the clothing as a novice of Br. Lain Wilson. These liturgies embody the graces and challenges of belonging for us. We both "wonder at the risk of such a decisive choice" (as we say of Life Vows) and recall the day we each put on the black habit of our Society – a bold visual statement of our incorporation not just into this community, but into the lineage of those who have followed Jesus on the monastic way throughout history.

It is humbling to know and feel that we belong: that the threads of our being are woven into a fabric so much bigger than we can comprehend, and all for the fulfillment of God's purpose. Wherever you are, in the midst of whatever challenges and joys, we pray that you discover and re-discover in them how deeply you belong to God. May we all, in our unique ways, become beacons of belonging in a fractured world.

Faithfully in Christ,

Keith Nelson, SSJE
Deputy Superior

Br. Keith Nelson is SSJE's Deputy Superior, and he is filling in for our Superior, Br. James Koester, while he is on sabbatical this Fall.



A Letter from the Fellowship

The Brothers welcome members of the Fellowship of Saint John as partners in the Gospel life, and we pray for them by name in our daily worship. Together with us they form an extended family, a company of friends abiding in Christ and seeking to bear a united witness to him as "the Way, the Truth, and the Life," following the example of the Beloved Disciple. Learn more at www.SSJE.org/fsj

At Ascensiontide in 1922, just after she had fully committed to being a part of the Church of England after many years on the margins, the writer Evelyn Underhill went on retreat for the first time at Pleshey in Essex. The others there at the same time were schoolteachers from the East End of London, whom she did not know. After the experience, she wrote:

> The intense silence seemed to slow down one's far too quick mental time and give one's soul a chance. To my surprise a regime of daily Communion and four services a day with silence between, was the most easy, unstrained and natural life I had ever lived. One sank down into it, and doing it always with the same people, all meaning it intensely, and the general atmosphere of deep devotion – for the whole house seemed soaked in love and prayer – cured solitude and gave me at last really the feeling of belonging to the Christian family and not counting except as that.[1]

Many of us who are members of the FSJ, and others who have enjoyed retreats at SSJE, may have an a-ha moment of recognition here. Yes, that's what it's like! Together we create and share – just for a while – an intimate community in silence, within the daily rhythm of prayer and meals. The monks, whose home the Monastery is, provide the stability of that daily rhythm, with consummate hospitality and gracious friendship, that enables this.

And then, Covid. For so many of us, this has been a solitary if often intensely busy time. My own experience may be a particularly unusual one, in that I have lived in a community of one sort or another for most of my life, so a deep engagement with others, while simultaneously carving out a positive sense of solitude in the midst of that busyness, has always been a part of my life. I have deeply missed community: not only regular retreats with the SSJE monks but also the eating, worshiping, and exchange-of-ideas communities that form part of daily life in my current college setting.

This has been loneliness rather than solitude. It has felt like I was being thrown back onto my own resources and they were, frankly, a bit thin. Worship with the monks online has been one gift, the writings of Evelyn Underhill another. I have long admired and studied her work on mysticism; I found myself turning now, with new eyes, to her essays on prayer.

Underhill's spiritual trajectory was to go from a deeply individualistic prayer life to an appreciation of community and the importance of corporate worship (her last big book was titled *Worship*). I have, through the pandemic, been going in the opposite direction – and perhaps many of you have, too? Underhill prompted me to meditate on the possibility that "the real and vital communion between souls is invisible and spiritual – so deeply buried that we can think of it as existing unbroken below the changeful surface of daily life."[2]

This pandemic time has been a lesson for me in learning to trust that we are indeed all bound together through prayer. It's not just a matter of whether we are gathered or dispersed as worshiping communities, but the very truth of spiritual communion – "the fact that we are *not* separate little units, but deeply interconnected." It is through prayer that "we seek communion with one another on an invisible plane and through a common surrender to an invisible love" as Underhill put it.

The notion of being knit together in communion and fellowship, to borrow the language of the collect for All Saints Day, has begun to take on new meaning in the light of my spiritual quest during this pandemic time.

Jane Shaw *is Principal of Harris Manchester College, Professor of the History of Religion and Pro-Vice-Chancellor at the University of Oxford*

1 Evelyn Underhill, *Fragments from an Inner Life* (Morehouse, 1993) 112-113.

2 Evelyn Underhill, "Life as Prayer" in *Collected Papers of Evelyn Underhill*, Ed. Lucy Menzies (Longmans, Green and Co., 1946) 56.

communities of

Transformation

Todd Blackham, SSJE

When I was invited to come to the Monastery to test my vocation as a postulant, I received a packing list. It was sparse. In part, there is simply a limitation on space. I used to have a one-bedroom apartment with all the furnishings of home. Moving into a new home, which I would be sharing with a dozen others, meant that there were some things I didn't need, some things that just didn't fit, and some things that I would learn to live without. These were all outer manifestations of inward dispositions as well. To enter this community meant that there would be some things I didn't need to provide for myself, some that just didn't fit in this particular configuration, and some ways of being that were superfluous to this life. I never got the sense that I had to pretend to be something I'm not, but there has been an ongoing negotiation of learning what belonging to a community of transformation is like and how it will ask me to grow and change.

A sense of belonging often conjures up feelings of acceptance, unconditional love, being "at home." Those are healing balms for anyone, and especially for those who have felt marginalized and isolated, even shunned. If you've ever "found your people" or discovered a "chosen family" you know what this feels like.

We are invited to know this kind of belonging in our life with God. Belonging is at the heart of the promises of Christ who said, "when I am

lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). The completeness of Jesus' loving embrace cannot be overestimated. Jesus' own parables describe God who searches, and seeks, and scours to bring everyone home and every part of them back into his love. And yet, his is not a static, fixed embrace that leaves us unchanged. In fact, Jesus first pointed to the transformation of a grain of wheat that falls to the earth and dies so that it bears much fruit (John 12:24). It is only by planting, entrusting the seed to the earth and the process of transformation, that it is able to become more than just a single grain. Jesus doesn't wait for us to be perfected before he accomplishes the work of reconciliation, but he reconciles us first so that we may be transformed into the creation we were always meant to be.

Entrusting ourselves to that kind of transformation is a daunting and risky prospect. Being accepted and loved are the first and foundational conditions that have to be in place if a person can endure the pangs of growing into new life. There are true horror stories of people whose lives have been traumatized and deformed by violent forces which imposed their will on them under the guise of formation, training, or development. It's no wonder that many people are suspicious of anything that smacks of a requirement to change, to leave something behind, or to choose to go without. And yet, that is part of the invitation of stepping into God's love. Certain things simply cannot abide in God's loving presence. Some appetites and desires, wrongly directed, will block us from God's love. They must be transformed and brought into their true likeness if they are to persist.

A captivating image of this kind of transformation comes in C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*. He shares an imaginative vision of the afterlife, in which the people from earth find themselves getting off a bus at the foot of a mountain. As they progress upward, the passengers instantly become aware of how physically insubstantial they are, like mere shadows. As they try to walk along the grass it feels hard and unyielding to their wispy feet. They find that those who have progressed up the mountain have become substantial and bright. And these bright spirits come to help the new arrivals on their journey farther up and further in. Each of the new arrivals faces some barrier to their progress, usually tied to a disordered attachment, a misunderstanding of how life on the mountain works.

In a particular vignette, one of the new arrivals appears to be carrying a lizard on a leash like a little pet that he wants to keep with him. The lizard has since been interpreted as the man's lust, but it could really be any little pet sin that we know isn't the kind of thing that can go up the mountain, yet which we have a hard time letting go of. The bright spirit approaches the man, offering a solution. He will kill the lizard for the man but only with his permission. All manner of excuses are offered about why the lizard doesn't need to be killed: he'll behave; look he's asleep; I'm just not feeling well right now; maybe if you had just killed him without me knowing. The lizard tries to ingratiate itself to the man by promising to behave, questioning how he could possibly live apart from his pet. But, in the end, the man concedes to the bright spirit, whimpering, "God help me, God help me."

When the bright spirit finally closes his burning hands around the lizard, the man groans and shrieks with pain. The bright spirit tells him that it will hurt, but it won't kill him. Finally, the lizard lies dead on the ground and just when the observers think the end has arrived, the man suddenly begins to grow solid and splendid like all the other bright spirits. Liberated from his pet he finally takes the form he was destined for. And not only that, but what once was the shameful lizard grows bright and solid as a golden stallion to gloriously gallop the man up the mountain.

I'm captivated by the full arc of transformation this man experiences. The fear, denial, and negotiation are so palpable; as is the thrill and surprise

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of a resolution that is more than we can ask or imagine. Lewis' playful description of resurrection and redemption mirrors so well the notion of life-long conversion that is a hallmark of the Religious Life. Although this was framed as a single event, I think it's exactly the kind of transformation that we can expect in a community of sanctification; that is, a community with the intent of utilizing the crucible of life together as the conduit to further purify and strengthen its members.

Transformation is a process that may repeat over and over as new levels of integration are reached. Some moments may be more painful than others, and the progress may not be strictly linear, but the transformation is palpable. Our Rule of Life speaks directly of this sort of pain when it says, "we expect emotional and spiritual trials to be part of the experience of the novitiate; many stages of genuine transformation are marked by experiences of confusion and loss." What we also say in our community is that the taking of vows only sets us on the path of an ongoing and unending novitiate. We are never done transforming, no matter how far along the path we come.

I can confirm that the novitiate can bring deeply felt, unexpected challenges. I was clothed as a novice in our community on the first Sunday that we were closed to the public, in March 2020, at the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic. So many of the natural aspects of learning to grow into conversion of life were super-heated for me in the crucible experience of the pandemic. While my context may have been unique, I know I am not alone in this experience. Many people experienced the pandemic as a sort of cage that forced them to confront and work through – rather than deny and avoid – the interior struggles that made themselves known. This is exactly the kind of opportunity that allows anyone confronting a new way of being, to do the hard work of transformation. And, in so doing, to set new patterns for engaging when life presents new trials of spiritual growth. The novitiate isn't meant to simply end when a sufficient level of harrowing has occurred. It inaugurates a perpetual stance of readiness to adapt.

And this ongoing novitiate is entirely meant to be lived in the context of a community of belonging. Which is to say that a person will need help and support, just as the man on the mountain did. Community like this is more than a simple affinity group; it offers a way of becoming more fully who God has created us to be. It is also a risky venture. There are several critical components to engender such a community of transformation, namely: trust, solidarity, and compassion.

Now, most of you reading this will not be members of a religious community. You will not have entered into a formal novitiate. And yet, your ongoing life of transformation in Christ is also an "ongoing novitiate" of sorts. And so too do you have communities of transformation waiting to support you. You are likely already situated in some network of community where all of this can happen. Family is perhaps the closest example: a grouping of people bonded together, of various ages, abilities, and temperaments. But, in a family, not everyone may share the same values. Different life experiences will color their attitudes. Even birth order will shift the perspective of siblings. It's always fascinating to me the way my sister, three years younger, can have memories of the same events I recall, but painted with a completely different palette. Workplaces, teams, music groups, and other communities are the fertile ground for mixing with those with whom we find ourselves in friction and with those who can support us in reaching new levels of integration and wholeness through transformation.

Communities are complicated ecosystems. There is risk involved in belonging, and it should not be counted as failure when inevitable frictions appear. Varied levels of trust will always exist between members of a community. It may not be possible that all members of a community will be able to support a person equally, but having a few trusted people is vital for each of us. In fact, the intimacy and vulnerability required for this kind of transformation can usually only be shared with a few others at a time. Everyone in the community can lend their prayerful support, and a few are needed to be present in more deeply intimate ways. These intimates need to be able to offer solidarity in the face of the trials and pain involved in transformation; not stoic detachment, nor enmeshed co-dependence, but a solidarity of spirit that is willing to acknowledge the reality of the suffering and abide throughout. They should also be able to affirm and mirror the victories won along the way. This kind of solidarity refuses to put someone through an ordeal that they have not successfully navigated or that they are unprepared to support in its duration. Too many forms of coercion and abuse have been perpetrated by those who demand others undergo a process of change that they would not choose for themselves.

There is a blessed hope in belonging to a community of transformation. Although it presents certain limits, like that packing list I received, it also offers a trajectory of increasing freedom and generosity. My Brothers often present me with opportunities for transformation in the form of

what seems like regular human friction. They are also the source of support and healing for me. If I had not had particular Brothers to lean on and trust during difficult, confusing, and painful times of disillusionment and conflict, I would not have had the fortitude and resolve to actually confront my own dispositions and let God transform them. I would likely have chosen an easier, softer way that offered accommodation and comfort, but not healing and growth. The process of transformation is inherently uncomfortable. It's a process of tearing down and building up, like working out a muscle or training to play an instrument. Like so many things, the effort pays dividends in the end.

Are there people with whom you find yourself at odds, or who challenge your worldview? Rather than dismiss or avoid them, you may consider how they offer an opportunity for you to reflect on your own responses, challenge your own patterns, and consider new ways of engaging. Conversely, look for support in those people who can do more than just commiserate with you, but really trudge through alongside you to the path of transformation. It's entirely possible that in your constellation of relationships people will alternately fill both roles. Finding our guides up the mountain will help us to discover the courage to face the difficult experience of crucifixion and resurrection; dying to old ways of being and adopting new life. Belonging to a community of transformation offers more than the sum of its parts. It is a foretaste of the unending dance of the communion of saints and the self-giving love of the Trinity.

Catch the Life

"I feel deeply loved. I feel loved by my Brothers and I feel really deeply loved by my God. I feel strengthened to be and to do all of the things I'm called to be and do here by the love streaming into me from God and from this community." – Br. Keith

We invite you to visit **catchthelife.org**
and learn more about our life and vocation.

an open letter to those who are

Spiritual-Not-Religious

A heartfelt invitation to explore faith in community.

Michael Hardgrove, n/SSJE

Christianity is so much more than you think

In my mid-twenties, I considered myself a lapsed Roman Catholic who was spiritual, yet not religious. I loved Jesus Christ – I mean, a cross hung above my bed – but if you were to call me a Christian, I would cringe in disgust. If you are either a lapsed Christian, or someone who identifies as spiritual-not-religious, you may know exactly what I mean.

Yet after a long and tumultuous ten-year journey, I now proudly call myself a Christian. The name of "Christian," however, has a profoundly different meaning for me now than it once did; so much so that I am now a novice in an Episcopal monastery.

The critiques against Christians as a group are certainly warranted. In my perception, there are a whole lot of "wolves-in-sheep's-clothing" out there. We live in a culture where the Bible, and even the name of Jesus Christ himself, is shamelessly used as a mere prop by self-serving charlatans and politicians, who cherry-pick scripture out of context for their own nefarious ends. There is admittedly a huge disconnect between Christianity as it often appears in the world and the true teachings of Christ. However, we need to look a little deeper to see that the true message of Christ is still spreading in the hearts of humble believers all over the world – yet sadly, it rarely makes the headlines.

To mistake cultural Christianity – which can appear more like a nationalistic identity than a religion – for authentic Christian community is a common misconception. Tradition teaches us that the Christian Church is not merely an institution, but is the mystical Body of Christ. St. Paul writes, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). The profound failings of the Christian Church to emulate the teachings of its exemplar throughout history are profound, to say the least. Yet, the core of Christianity is not "institution"; the core of Christianity is Jesus Christ.

In the Gospel according to John, Jesus prays to God before he is to

I had gotten the religion of my birth all wrong.

be crucified, saying, "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one" (John 17:11). Christianity is a religion that affirms our profound unity as a human family and the radical equality of all people. Theologian Richard Rohr asserts that the forgotten reality of the Incarnation "has the potential to reground Christianity as a natural religion and not one simply based on a special revelation, available only to a few lucky enlightened people." He reminds the reader that "the essential function of religion is to radically connect us with everything (Re-ligio = to re-ligament or reconnect). It is to help us see the world and ourselves in wholeness, and not just in parts."[1] For this we need one another. As one of my Brothers here at the Monastery likes to say, "salvation isn't a solo activity."

During my time here at SSJE, I have become increasingly aware of how interconnected our lives are and how, as human beings, we are deeply dependent on one another for support and encouragement along the spiritual path. In Christian community, with Jesus as our guide, we should help each other navigate the winding moral caverns of human life, in all its frailty and messiness. This is a true function of a religious community.

For me, being part of a church congregation was my first step in slowly realizing that I had gotten the religion of my birth all wrong. Before, when I'd looked in from outside the Church, all I could see was how so many people who called themselves Christians were doing it wrong. Once I actually engaged with them, in community, I discovered the most amazingly loving people, who showed me that there is no one right way to be a Christian. In fact, even making mistakes is a part of the growing edge for those walking the Christian path together. There are many Christians who are anything but stuffy and repressed. On the contrary, I've met some of the most open, most compassionate people through the Church. Having a shared theological framework to express my inner experience of God has been invaluable to the growth of my identity in Christ. This is something that I did not experience in my previous spiritual communities and meditation groups. Former Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey wrote that the praying Christian is part of "the people of God in all places and all ages. Divisions of place and time, of culture and of our unhappy separations may hinder but do not destroy the unity in Christ of those who know their prayer to be in Christ."[2]

The Christian Church is far from perfect. However, Christians are an incredible group of people to wrestle alongside and to grow with as we tackle all the complexity of life together. If you're waiting for a time when Christianity is going to meet a high expectation for how a religion should be, you may be waiting for the return of Christ. Please don't mistake my invitation as some self-righteous claim of moral authority: the last thing the world needs is someone telling others that their faith or their spiritual seeking is invalid. The Church is the mystical Body of Christ, and Christ encompasses all of humanity, his sacred and beloved children. Where, when, and how you worship God is not the point, in my mind. But, I have come to realize that we need one another in our pilgrimage. The words of St. John in his first Epistle are as relevant today as they were when he wrote them:

> Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. (1 John 4:7-13)

When we stand in the mess of life with others, acting in love for the sake of Christ, we can get a taste of the divine life now – on earth as in heaven.

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1 Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a forgotten reality can change everything we see, hope for, and believe* (New York: Convergent, 2021).

2 Michael Ramsey, *Be Still and Know: A study in the life of prayer* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2012) 67.

a letter from the
Editor

Jim Woodrum, SSJE

When a man is discerning a call to the monastic way of life, one question that we pose to him at the very beginning of the process is: "How well do you handle conflict, either one-on-one or within a communal structure?" While some men take this question in stride, there are others who seem a little surprised at the notion that monks in a monastery occasionally lock horns. I'll admit that when I was an inquirer, the idea of conflict was not on my radar. There is often a romantic notion that monks abide together in a state of peaceful bliss, upheld by a common love of Jesus that diminishes strong wills, competitiveness, and ego.

But if we're honest, there are no communities of love – whether they be familial, fraternal, or spiritual – that are not touched by the reality of conflict. At first, breakdowns in communication, misunderstandings, differences in needs, or opposing perspectives can all seem like failures. In reality, however, communities of belonging are often ones that give assent to the same ideals that we aspire to and help to provide us with what we cannot provide for ourselves on our own. The SSJE Rule of Life teaches, "Christ in his wisdom draws each disciple into that particular expression of community which will be the best means for his or her conversion."

We do not enter this world ready-made. As soon as we experience light, and our lungs are cleared, our first instinct is to cry for help as loudly as we can. The warm, dark, safe world that we have known in the womb has passed, and we are now confronted with a new reality. Every stage of our life from birth to death has elements of learning, changing, and at times dependence on others.

Community life is no different. From when we arrive at the Monastery as a postulant (a word that means "one who asks questions") until the day we die, we are continually growing into the person that God created us to be. The tools God gives us to grow into that identity are often acquired by our engagement with others in community. "The first challenge of community life is to accept wholeheartedly the authority of Christ to call whom he will. Our community is not formed by the natural attraction of like-minded people." While we may have some gifts that overlap, each of us has other tools that are unique to our own skill set.

Saint Paul speaks to this: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." He goes on to compare Christian community to a body with many parts with different functions: "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" Very few of us can walk on our hands or write with our feet. I may have a gift for music and singing, but I'm not adept in composing music like my Brother Sean or an eloquent poet like my Brother Nicholas. While I enjoy taking photographs that have an iconic feel, I'm not gifted at iconography like my Brothers James and Keith. Each of us has our own unique gifts which we share with one another in community. That's where we grow in our ability to see that each member of a community is a gift. "We are given to one another by Christ and he calls us to accept one another as we are."

I also depend on my Brothers in areas where I am inadequate, either to teach me what I do not know, or to carry the burden of areas for which I am ill-equipped. It is a lesson in humility to acknowledge what I am unable to do, and to encourage my Brother to guide me when I am unable to see clearly. "We are also called to accept with compassion and humility the particular fragility, complexity, and incompleteness of each Brother. Our diversity and our brokenness mean that tensions and friction are inevitable woven into the fabric of everyday life. They are not to be regarded as signs of failure. Christ uses them for our conversion as we grow in mutual forbearance and learn to let go of the pride that drives us to control and reform our Brother on our own terms."

Life in community teaches us about the love and grace of God as it helps us to grow into the fullness of our place in the Body of Christ: accepting our limitations, giving freely of ourselves when we see a need, and recognizing that we belong to one another through our Baptism, as we continue to journey with Jesus toward the hope of glory.

Psalm 46 — God's defense of his city and people

1 God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved,
and though the mountains be toppled into the depths of the sea;

3 Though its waters rage and foam,
and though the mountains tremble at its tumult.

4 The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our stronghold.

5 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

6 God is in the midst of her;
she shall not be overthrown;
God shall help her at the break of day.

7 The nations make much ado, and the kingdoms are shaken;
God has spoken, and the earth shall melt away.

8 The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our stronghold.

v.1 "...this is a national psalm, evidently a collective thanksgiving after victory over an enemy."

v.2 "An excessive literalism has led some commentators to attach this psalm because of these lines to an earthquake that hit Jerusalem during the First Temple era, mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. The hyperbolic description of mountains collapsing into the sea is hardly a realistic depiction of an earthquake. It is more likely that the images are metaphorical: 'Even when the whole world around us falls apart, we trust in God's help and do not fear...'"

v.5 "There is no actual river in Jerusalem, but there is a partly underground stream, the Shiloah, that provides a water source from the Gihon spring east of the city."

v.6 "After a long night of seige, ridden with terrors, God intervenes in a figurative daybreak to rescue His people."

The Book of Psalms, Robert Atwell, 162-3

our refuge
our strength
our stronghold

Psalm 133 — The Blessedness of Unity

1 Oh, how good and pleasant it is,
when brethren live together in unity!

2 It is like fine oil upon the head
that runs down upon the beard,

3 Upon the beard of Aaron,
and runs down upon the collar of his robe.

4 It is like the dew of Hermon
that falls upon the hills of Zion.

5 For there the Lord has ordained the blessing;
life for evermore.

v.1 "This poem is a kind of idyll celebrating harmonious life together in a fruitful land. A sense of quiet rapture is conveyed at the outset through three words of emphasis – "look" (hinneh), and then twice "how" (mah).
< Look, how good and how pleasant
is the dwelling of brothers together. >

v.2 "In the Israelite world, as in ancient Greece, rubbing the hair and body with aromatic olive oil was one of the palpable physical pleasures of the good life."

v.3 "The 'coming down' of the oil from head to beard is picked up in the 'coming down' of the beard itself – a beard of evidently prevedical amplitude, that of the first high priest – over the opening of the robe. The full beard is presumably an image of vigor and abundance."

v.4 "Now we have a third 'coming down' – the dew of the northern mountain. The dew is understood to be an agency of fruitfulness, especially important in the long dry season, when no rain falls."

The Book of Psalms, by Robert Atwell, pp. 462-3.

Jesus prays that his followers "may become completely one, so that the world may know that (the Father) has sent (him) and have loved them just as (he) has loved (the Son)." John 17:23

Psalms 46 & 133

colored pencil (2022) – **David Vryhof, SSJE**

Through faith we can come to know again the original blessing of belonging to God.

Belonging

living in God's contentment

Geoffrey Tristram, SSJE

When a new man joins our community, the first few months can be quite bewildering for him. There are so many new things to learn, and so many new Brothers to get to know. "Where do you keep the spoons?" "What do you do on the Sabbath?" But after a while there comes this happy moment when instead of saying "you" he says "we"! He no longer feels like an outsider looking in, but has begun to put down roots and begins to feel at last that he *belongs*. And with belonging comes a deep *contentment*.

In order to thrive we all need to belong. I used to travel a lot in the Middle East and North Africa, and whenever I began chatting with a local, the first thing they would do is take out photos of their family. They expected me to do the same. They wanted to get to know me, so the first question was "show me your family." "Who do you *belong* to?" Our fundamental identity has to do with belonging.

Not to belong is a terrible thing. What must it be like to be expelled from your country, your land, your home? To be exiled, to live as refugees forced to wander from place to place, having nowhere to call home? For me, there have been few images so heartbreaking as those pictures of Ukrainian men, women, and children forced out of their homes and villages, forced away from their very country. The pain and fear visible on their faces as they seek a place of safety has, I am sure, touched all our hearts. To be exiled is a terrible thing.

This very theme of exile, of not belonging, courses through Holy Scripture. One of the most poignant images in all of Scripture is the story in Genesis of the Fall. Through their acts of pride and disobedience,

Adam and Eve have ruptured their relationship with God and no longer belong in Eden. So, God drives them out of the garden, and they become wanderers in an alien land. This story expresses a universal truth about the human condition: our shared sense of alienation and loss.

To see this, we need only look back at these past few years. As well as the loss of life we have witnessed in Ukraine, we have all known personally the confusion and loss of these years of pandemic. So many of us have lost loved ones and have ourselves been seriously ill.

There is perhaps no place where we experience alienation and loss more than in our broken relationship with our beautiful world. Years of abuse and exploitation have led to the current climate emergency. We no longer feel at home and at peace, either with each other, or with the land, or with the rest of creation. We no longer *belong* as we did. And with that comes the loss of that deep *contentment* which is the fruit of belonging.

This theme of lost contentment is beautifully expressed in the work of the 19th-century English poet A. E. Housman. I love his collection of poems entitled *A Shropshire Lad*, written in 1896, amidst the beautiful Clee Hills which border England and Wales. My favorite poem is the fortieth one, where the sight of those distant hills evokes within the poet a deep feeling of melancholy, nostalgia, and longing for his true *homeland*:

> Into my heart an air that kills
> From yon far country blows;
> What are those blue remembered hills,
> What spires, what farms are those?
> This is the land of lost content.

I think I love this poem because it reminds me of my first experience of God, when I was perhaps five years old. I would love to sit in my bedroom and stare out over the rolling hills in front of our home in Sussex. I remember how beautiful the hills were as they stretched out into the blue horizon. But I also felt a sadness, a longing. Somehow, I wanted to become one with those hills, which seemed to call out to me. It was, I believe, my first experience of God calling me home. My Welsh roots led me to discover that wonderful Welsh word, "*hiraeth*," which cannot really be adequately translated, but which perfectly expresses that deep longing for home, that feeling of nostalgia for heaven, that "land of lost content."

The Old Testament describes with searing honesty what it is like to be cut off from God and alienated from creation; to live as spiritual exiles. But bubbling up at the same time, are images of hope for restoration and reconciliation; of coming home. These beautiful images of hope are so often linked to the natural world. They are about making peace, and living in harmony with natural creation. They speak prophetically about the end of wandering and the promise of putting down roots

again – of belonging to the whole of creation. The very first Psalm tells us that we will know contentment again if we put our roots down into the law of God, "like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in due season." Micah has that beautifully irenic vision where one day, "nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid" (4:3-4).

These scriptural images of hope for restoration and reconciliation reach their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. On the cross, Jesus reconciled God with humankind and humankind with all of creation. Through faith we can come to know again the original blessing of belonging to God and recover that divine contentment which is God's desire for us. This is expressed very memorably in the words of the Episcopal Rite of Baptism, in the words spoken at the signing of the cross with oil on the newly baptized person: "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and *marked as Christ's own forever*." We who were driven out of Eden are now marked as Christ's own forever. We who were once destined to wander the earth as aliens are now welcomed *home*, to belong to God forever.

So how might we, who belong to God through faith and Baptism, receive the fullness of that contentment which is God's gift to us? In my own life of prayer, I have found inspiration and encouragement from Saint Paul. At times, Paul's prayer would express his deep desire and longing for Christ, and at other times his prayer would be more contemplative and mystical. I love his letter to the Philippians, where he speaks quite intimately about his life with God. There is a remarkable passage where he writes, "For I have learned to be content with whatever I have" (4:11-13). Paul is not speaking about happiness or joy, for which he uses different Greek words. He is using a very particular Greek word, *autarkes*,

We are content because we are living in “God’s contentment.”

and this is actually the only time this word is used in the whole of the New Testament! What does Paul mean by *autarkes*? The contentment Paul is describing by this word is essentially a profound gift which is not dependent on external circumstances. For even though he was suffering in prison, this contentment keeps welling up from within, like a spring of living water. “I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty.” Nothing can take away this profound inner contentment, this gift of Christ within. There is a deep strength and permanence expressed by the word. He writes, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” This contentment is a grace and gift from God, often experienced as something of a surprise! It is this contentment experienced by Paul which is perhaps the most wonderful gift of belonging to God. We are content because we are living in God’s contentment.

In my own prayers, I experience and try to deepen this gift of contentment in two quite different ways, which I hope you may find helpful in your own life of prayer.

Firstly, I come to God with my longing and *desire*: that yearning for God which I first felt as a child, gazing at those “blue remembered hills” in Sussex. Saint Augustine famously wrote to God, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till we find our rest in you.” This prayer of longing is how I express my love, I think. I don’t need to say fancy prayers, but simply pray the prayer of desire. I sometimes start this kind of prayer by saying aloud Psalm 63:1-8; “O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you…” Or Psalm 42: “As the deer longs for the water brooks, so longs my soul for you, O God.” The Benedictine monk Sebastian Moore wrote, “Desire is not an emptiness longing to be filled. Desire is a fullness longing to be in relationship. Desire is love trying to happen.” That rings true to me. Come to God with your thirst. Bring to God your heart’s desire.

Secondly, and quite differently, I sometimes come to God not with my desire, nor with any emotion, but simply in silence and stillness. I sometimes start this kind of prayer with Psalm 62, verses 1-2: “For God alone my soul in silence waits…” Or the lovely verses of Psalm 131: “I still my soul and make it quiet like a child upon its mother’s breast.” Or I will

sit still and simply breathe deeply and rhythmically, drawing in God’s Spirit. Or I’ll stare at a candle in awe and wonder. I sit silently and enjoy sharing in God’s contentment. Perhaps you might like to read Philippians again and experience for yourself the deep contentment which pervades the letter, and ask God to make it your own.

In the *Rule* of our Society, we read that “people are hungry for good news that life is full of meaning in union with God.” To be in union with God, to belong to God, gives us our truest identity, and our deepest contentment.

Vocations

spotlight on

Our two newest novices, Br. Michael Hardgrove (left, with Br. Luke) and Br. Lain Wilson (right, with Br. Keith).

This past year has been remarkably eventful for the development of vocations in our community. With joy, we witnessed the clothing of two new men as novices (Michael in February; Lain in August). We celebrated the Initial Profession of Br. Todd in March. And in June, we rejoiced at the Life Profession of Br. Lucas. With each of these commitments, we marveled anew at, in the words of our Rule, "the risk of such a decisive choice."

Each of these stages in the development of a man's vocation offers us as a community, and those who journey alongside us in community, the chance to meditate on the continuous, abiding, and progressive call of God to *all* of us in the Christian life. As Br. James reflects below, these milestones also offer us a chance to align ourselves anew with our fundamental identity as Christians:

A clothing ceremony is probably the most dramatic of all the rites of passage that a Brother of the Society undergoes in his time in the community, except perhaps for the last rite of passage, his funeral. We actually see a man change, literally, before our very eyes.

Having put on, and taken off my own habit, thousands of times, over the last thirty years, I find this putting on of the habit for the first time so moving. It is especially moving watching him as he fumbles and searches the fabric for various hidden buttons, and snaps, and tries to wind and knot the cord with as much dignity as possible. Getting dressed, in a strange outfit, in public, with everyone watching, is actually much more difficult than you might think! In that moment, it is just an awkward and cumbersome suit of clothes. But as we say in our Rule, the habit "is dense with meaning, [and] a source of joy."

At one point in the service another Brother gives the habit to the postulant saying "let the habit remind you of the baptismal gift of your union with Christ. You have put him on; he clothes you with his own self."

In the midst of all the fumbling and searching, when it feels like you are all thumbs; when you are totally focused on trying to put this darn thing on; when everyone is watching, and you feel like a fool, something else, that is probably the farthest thing from your mind, is going on. You are putting on Christ. We have put on Christ in Baptism, our Rule teaches us, and the habit can remind us of our present union with him.

It is this language of clothing which the author of Colossians uses. "[You] have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new." Immediately after that passage we read:

"As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

We can be clothed in love because, in our Baptism, we have been clothed in Christ. To put on Christ is to put on, not a suit of clothes, that can be taken off at the end of the day, or when they need to be laundered, but to put on a way and a pattern of life. To put on Christ is to take off one way of life and put on another. It is to take off one set of clothes and put on a new.

For the Christian, these are the clothes given to us in the waters of Baptism. These are the clothes we are called to wear, not some of the time, but all the time. These are the clothes which set us apart and make us identifiable.

Clothing is about much more than fabric, especially when that clothing is Christ. It is about compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, and love.

I wonder, next time you meet someone you have never before met, will they ask if you are a Christian because somehow, they can see you are clothed with Christ?

Br. Todd Blackham (left, with Brs. Jack and Sean), and Br. Lucas Hall (seen here with his sister and nephew).

identity & belonging in the

GREAT SACRAMENTS

How actually does one belong to a faith community?

Jim Woodrum, SSJE

"If I want to be a follower of Jesus, do I have to identify as a Christian?" I was asked this question recently by a friend of mine (a member of the Millennial generation) who's been exploring the teachings of Jesus. The question startled me. It startled me because it caused me to consider two concepts that are closely related to belief and the ways God engages with humanity: identity and belonging. It never occurred to me that someone on the verge of faith might have reservations about identifying with or belonging to the large, diverse population we call "Christian." Her question led me to ponder: How actually does one belong to a faith community of so many denominations, each with its particular, nuanced take on what being a Christian means? What does it mean to belong? What does it mean to claim this identity?

The Challenge of Identity

My own questioning led me to ponder the meaning of "identity" itself. I started, as I often do, by turning to my dictionary, to see what meanings the word itself holds within it. Two definitions of this word stood out to me. The first defined identity as "the distinguishing character or personality of an individual: *individuality*." This definition instantly drew to my mind the many people I have known in my life who stood out in a particular way, either in personality, dress, or interests in peculiar genres of art, music, literature, or poetry. These people have been either refreshing – aiding my ability to look at something in a different way; or off-putting – individuals who somehow were not coherent with the reality of the world that I was familiar with. Such people often seemed dangerous, as if any association with them *could* be risky to mind, body, and spirit.

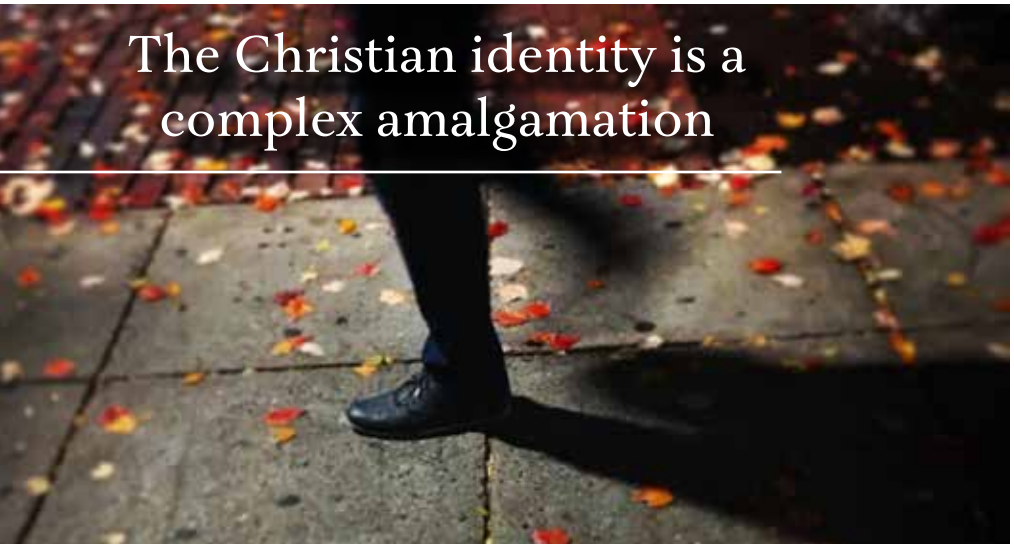
I am reminded of the classic, off-color film from 1985 by John Hughes, "The Breakfast Club." In this movie we witness the story of five teenagers from seemingly different tribes who are thrown together by the fate of Saturday detention at their high school. At the start of the movie, it seems unlikely that the complex amalgamation of angst-ridden teens would render anything positive. During the course of the day, these very

different teens are required to write an essay about who they think they are. By the end of that day, they have found a new and complex tribe, in which each identity remains distinct and yet in which, through sometimes difficult periods of sharing, a new group dynamic is also created.

This brings me to the second definition of identity that stood out to me: "sameness in all that constitutes the objective reality of a thing: *oneness*." In contrast to the individuality of the first definition, here sameness and oneness seem to draw us to the concept of tribe and the reality of being given an identity by particular markers that many others hold in common. Growing up during the span of three decades, I have had friends who identified with different sub-identities such as hippie, punk, preppy, and grunge, to name a few. What looked like the individualizing characteristic of each group seen from the outside, was no doubt what felt like it contributed oneness to the group from the inside.

So, what light could this deeper sense of the complexities of "identity" shed on the question of belonging to the Christian faith? When it comes to thinking about the multifaceted nature of Christianity, neither definition on its own feels complete. While individual expressions of the Christian faith are certainly distinct and say something about someone's expression of engagement with God, there remains a common group identity that binds us all together in one Body. This has been true from the very start. Most first-century followers of what Jesus called "The Way" identified with a practicing faith community whose adherents were also working out what it meant to belong to that particular community of faith.

We see this visibly expressed from the very beginning with the four gospels, as each is positioned as an expression of the life of Jesus' ministry shared for a specific audience, from the vantage point of a distinct



community with its own distinct identity. Matthew's gospel was written to address the Hebrews, Mark addresses Gentile converts, probably located in Rome, and Luke addresses the Greeks. John's gospel, a more theological volume, was written in Greek with strong Semitic overtones. Yet even this gospel is shaped by its overarching purpose: to offer evidence of certain signs which prove that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who leads us to eternal life.

Just as the group label "Christian" can be broken down into diverse denominations and belief structures, so too even our concept of the "gospels" as a group is shown to hold four diverse groups, each belonging to their own specific sense of identity and driven by their own expression of that identity. Each community had individual characteristics, and each gospel attempted to unify its community with a vision of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.[1] Each gospel addresses for its specific audience the questions: What does it mean to believe? How exactly does God engage with us? And, what does it mean to belong?

Today, all Christian denominations, regardless of their particular branding, embrace and identify with all four of the gospels, which we tend to see as a uniform whole. With our distance from the gospel worldview and its pressing concerns, we've lost touch with some of the nuances in which they addressed the specific concerns of their individual communities. Yet even today the Christian identity is a complex amalgamation of both definitions of the word identity, granting believers a sense of identity through both individual and tribal identity markers. To belong to the Christian faith is to claim a unique individual identity in the world, as well as to claim to belong to a group of like-minded others.

Identity Today

While we would like to think that the gospels clear up any Christian's identity questions, we know that, in our modern world, we still grapple with questions of identity. In fact, our questions about "identity" seem not to be solved these days, but to be splintering further. In the subcultures of our modern society, the meaning of conforming to a particular tribe is changing, particularly in the generation known as "Gen Z" (the generation born between 1997 and 2012). Never before have we seen a generation who find conformity to a particular tribe to be so incompatible with their life experience. Gen Z is revolutionizing the concept of identity by breaking down existing identity markers and embracing new, diverse identity markers as attractive and aspirational. Certainly, we see this in the rejection of gender binaries as an absolute and the embracing of non-binary identities, with Gender Queer being equally relevant to male and female binaries.

To this generation, the more identity markers you have, the more the

1 Wayne Jackson, "Examining the Four Gospels," *Christian Courier*. Retrieved July 19, 2022, from https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/273-examining-the-four-gospels

As a follower of Jesus with my own diverse and at times complicated identity, where and how do I belong in this equally diverse and complicated realm of Christianity and the Church?

uniqueness of that identity should be celebrated – as even that uniqueness is a unifying quality rather than one of alienation. Ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, gender binary or non-binary, neurotype, and being differently-abled are just a few markers that can culminate into a unique identity. In today's terms, this new way of forming a sense of identity might be referred to as intersectionality. In a recent book, *Gen Z, Explained: The Art of Living in a Digital Age*, four eminent scholars from Britain and the US set out to demystify this generation. In contrast to previous generations, who sought to identify with particular tribes, Gen Z has sought release from particularities of tribe and embraced identity as multi-faceted or *intersectional*, which the authors define as : "a term to indicate that many pieces of your identity interact to become more than the sum of each part, with tangible effects in how we are perceived and treated in society as a result of the specific interplay of those pieces."[2]

When we bring these definitions and images back to the question of belonging to the Church, we begin to see similarities to a "Breakfast Club" model of identity, juxtaposing individuality and oneness. To be Christian is, in its own right, a complex and diverse identity, and yet it begs the further question of how we as individuals belong to and within the wider Church: As a follower of Jesus with my own diverse and at times complicated identity, where and how do I belong in this equally diverse and complicated realm of Christianity and the Church? And what does such "belonging" entail?

2 Roberta Katz, Sarah Ogilvie, Jane Shaw, and Linda Woodhead, *Gen Z, Explained: The art of living in a digital age* (University of Chicago, 2021).

I'm going to answer these questions from my own sense of identity, from the answers offered by the group within the Christian Church to which I feel I belong. In Anglicanism (the particular form of Christianity to which the Episcopal Church adheres) we see the questions of identity and belonging addressed in what the catechism refers to as the two great sacraments of the Church: Baptism and the Holy Eucharist. Baptism is defined in the catechism as: "the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ's Body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God"; and the Holy Eucharist as: "the sacrament commanded by Christ for the continual remembrance of his life, death, and resurrection, until his coming again." These two sacraments create our identity and enact our belonging.

The Sacrament of Baptism

My own Baptism occurred in the context of another Christian denomination, the Southern Baptist Church, to which I belonged in my childhood and teenage years. In this tradition, Baptism is seen as a symbolic act testifying to a person's mature decision to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Baptism was not seen as essential for salvation but as one way that a person declares "Jesus is Lord."

In the Episcopal Church, Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body, the Church. All people of any age (including infants who are sponsored by Godparents and supported by the local congregation) are welcome to be baptized; we believe in one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins (therefore for us it is essential), and believe that the bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble.

The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) each record, in slightly varying degrees, the story of Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan River by his cousin John the Baptist. While Baptism has its roots in the purification rituals of Judaism (one of three initiatory rites always performed upon proselytes), Baptism in the gospels was a rite that Jesus first took part in that foreshadowed his death and resurrection and would be the foundation of Jesus' ministry as he taught how God would bridge the chasm caused by original sin. In each account of Jesus' Baptism, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus and a voice from heaven was heard to say, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22).

Jesus' Baptism made manifest to us (and I would say also to Jesus) his identity – not only who Jesus was, but also to whom Jesus belonged. In emerging from the baptismal waters of the Jordan River, a familial relationship was officially pronounced by the one Jesus called "Father."

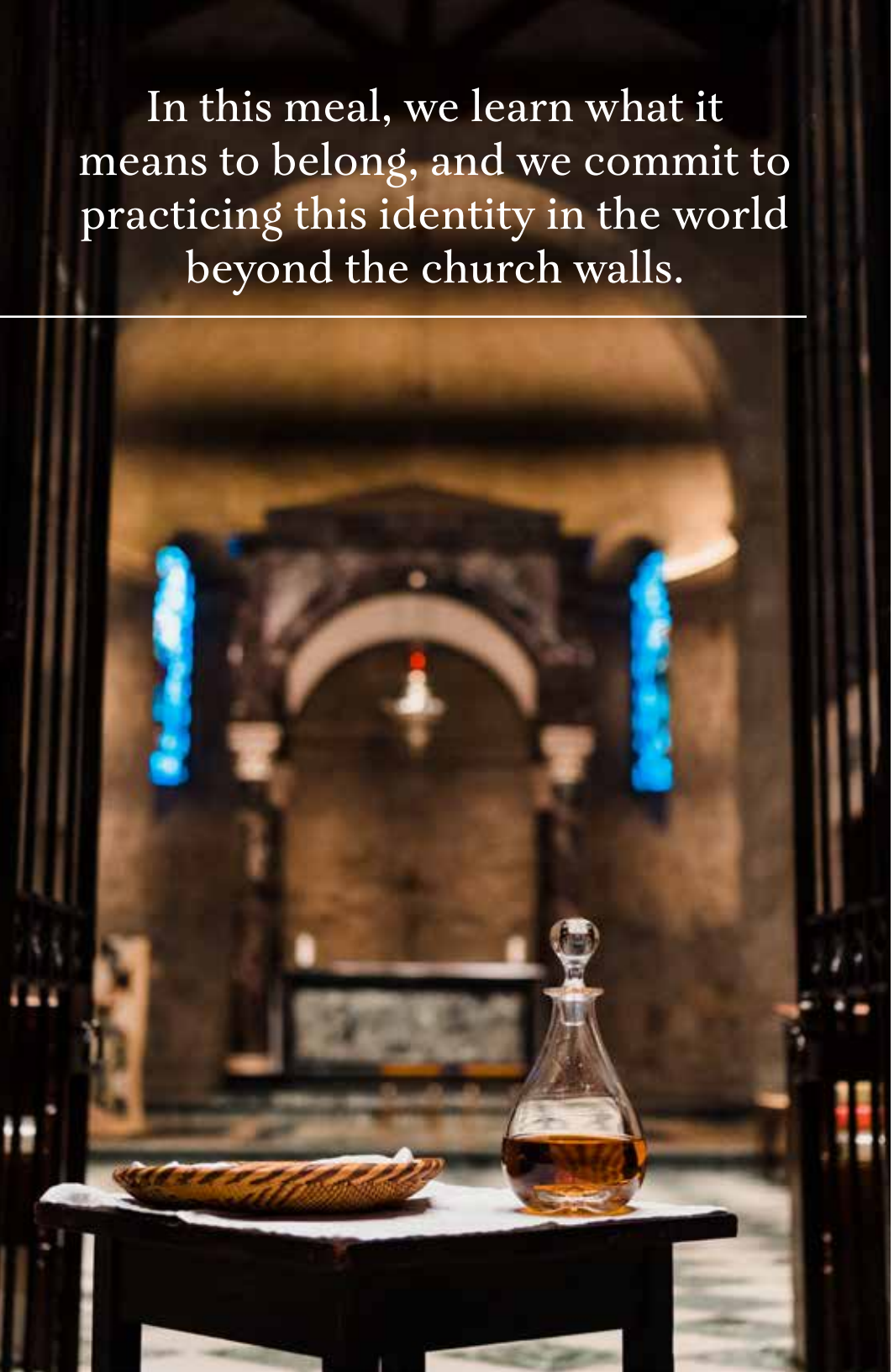
In the sacrament of Baptism, we follow Jesus' example. We claim our identity as his followers when we are baptized into his death and resurrection. The catechism explains this beautifully, saying that in Baptism we are adopted by God as his children and made members of Christ's body, the Church, and thereby become inheritors of the kingdom of God. In Baptism, we actively identify as God's people in the way that God identifies with us through the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist

The second of the great sacraments of the Church is the Holy Eucharist (also known as Communion, a word that shares the same root word as "community"). In the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, we come together as a community. We experience and express who we are as we listen to God's word through Scripture; participate in the prayers for ourselves, the Church, and the world; confess our sins, and then partake in a holy meal of bread and wine. This meal is not simply an act memorializing Jesus' death and resurrection, but through its consecration is the way Jesus is made present to us in flesh and blood. In the Eucharist, we participate in Christ's body – the Church – while becoming more like him by consuming that flesh and blood hidden under the forms of bread and wine.

The very first time I attended a service in an Episcopal Church was Christmas Eve of my sophomore year in high school. I had been invited by my then-girlfriend to attend the service with her and her family. I had not been looking to change to a different church tradition. To be honest, I was curious and just thought it would be neat to hear the church bells ring Christmas in at midnight. Little did I know I was about to have an experience that would change my relationship to Jesus for the rest of my life. When they came to what was called the "Liturgy of the Altar" in the bulletin, it made an indelible impression on me. Something happened that was both mysterious and palpable. When I went to college, I made the switch to the Episcopal Church and attended a parish where I learned about the "Real Presence" of Jesus in the Eucharist. Before I even knew why, I had encountered in the Eucharist a profound experience of my own belonging, which was strong enough to make the Episcopal Church my home.

Like Baptism, the institution of the Holy Eucharist by Jesus is recorded in the synoptic gospels (Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:17-20). He shares a final meal with his disciple on his last night alive, telling them as he breaks bread and shares a cup of wine, "This is my body and this is my blood, whenever you eat and drink it, do this for the remembrance of me." But this is not the only time that Jesus meaningfully shares a meal with his followers, using it to show them how they belong to him and to one another. Most of the disciples' post-resurrection encounters with Jesus occur in the context of a meal, repeating the precedent of the Eucharist set by Christ before his death. One of the most dramatic of these is recorded in the gospel of Luke when two disciples walking to Emmaus encounter a stranger to whom they convey the sad events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion. When sitting at a meal with them, the stranger breaks bread, and in that instance, the disciples recognize that it is indeed Jesus, whom until that point they had not recognized. The shared meal became the context for their gradually unfolding recognition of his identity, and theirs. So it is for each of us who experience this shared meal over our lifetime in the Church.



In the Holy Eucharist we identify as a community as we partake of Jesus' body and blood together, and we commit to love and serve the Lord as we go forth from our gathering, seeking to serve Jesus in the faces of all around us. In this meal, we learn what it means to belong, and we commit to practicing this identity in the world beyond the church walls.

Identity and Belonging Go Hand-in-Hand

As the concepts of identity and belonging are conjoined, so the tradition of the Church teaches us that the sacraments of Baptism and the Holy Eucharist go hand-in-hand. Baptism and Eucharist are not sacraments that are experienced in isolation, but form two parts of the whole. Baptism is the initiatory rite in which we are introduced to the community of Christ's body as a member, and the Eucharist is the rite in which we receive sustenance as a member of that body on our own pilgrimage of formation. As the human body requires food to grow and sustain us each day, so the Eucharist is meant to give us the fortitude we require to grow fully into the identity we take on in Baptism. The founder of our community, Richard Meux Benson once wrote: "As each touch of the artist adds some fresh feature to the painting, so each communion is a touch of Christ, which should develop some fresh feature of his own perfect likeness within us." And that seems right: in Baptism we are restored to the image originally given to us by our Creator, and then within this renewed mark of identity, we strive with each Eucharist meal to let God continue to refine God's perfect image in us.

These questions of how Baptism and Eucharist inform one another and shape the Christian's life in Christ are not confined to tomes of theology or the history books. In fact, they are live questions in our own moment. The Church has been grappling for the last couple of decades with the question of what is being called the "open table." Open table is the practice of welcoming all people to receive the Holy Eucharist, regardless of their baptismal status. The Church has always taught that people who have come to faith, and desire to belong to a Christian community, must undergo a period of *catechesis* (from the Greek word *katechein*, meaning to teach) – to be prepared through instruction for the initiatory rite of Baptism. In Church tradition, the Eucharist has always been reserved for those who have undergone the baptismal sacrament, which marks their full membership in the Church community. As someone with a neurodivergent condition who takes comfort in structural sequences, I resonate with such a view, which gives a natural order to the life-changing process of claiming my identity in Christ, being sustained with the divine food of Jesus' body and blood, and being supported in Christian community.

Yet, there are others who have experienced the practice of limiting Communion strictly to the baptized as an act of exclusion. It has often been posited that offering the Eucharist strictly to the baptized feels dissonant with the witness of Jesus in the gospels. The gospels are filled with instances of Jesus sharing table with different people, especially

those who were not deemed worthy because of purity codes set forth by the Temple priests. One story that is recorded in the synoptic gospels recalls a scene where Jesus is sitting at table with Levi (the tax collector) and a group of his friends. When the Pharisees and Scribes observed this, they questioned Jesus' disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answers them with compassion and directness, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance." In Matthew's telling of this story, Jesus adds, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" How can we invite people into our houses of worship, share with them the good news of Jesus' radical hospitality, and then deny them from receiving the very essence of Jesus at the altar rail?

Moving the Font to the Center

With such charged and passionate questions, definitive answers will never be arrived at with ease. In fact, throughout the history of the Church, such questions have often only created further divisions. This is tragic, since the gospel message of Jesus was one of reuniting God to God's creation and uniting us to one another. All of us are recipients of the mercy and grace of God, and Jesus gives us to one another as kin. When I experienced my first Eucharist in 1987, I do not recall a pronouncement of Baptism as requisite for receiving Communion with the rest of the congregation that Christmas Eve. And, even though I had indeed been baptized, my understanding of what that meant was radically different from those who accompanied me to the altar rail.

I often wonder whether the question about "open table" needs to be reframed, especially when the sacraments begin to become stumbling blocks in people's relationship with God. For those of us who have undergone a period of catechesis, the image of the Font at the door is familiar, as it symbolizes our passing through the waters of Baptism into a community of faith, to be strengthened by Jesus in the Eucharist. In a sense, Baptism is the sacrament from which all other sacraments proceed. But for those who are new in our midst, without the benefit of understanding the traditional sequence, a verbal or written pronouncement of exclusivity might be placing an obstacle to the possibility of someone's relationship with Jesus. Rowan Williams once wrote: "If I fail to put someone in touch with God, I face another sort of death, the death of my relation with Christ, because failing to 'win' the neighbor is to stand in the way of Christ, to block Christ's urgent will to communicate with all."[3]

I am attracted to the idea of moving the Font, figuratively to the center of the church, where it will invite wonder and inspire questions from those who are new in our midst. Liturgically speaking, we might do well at the

3 Rowan Williams, *Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in one another* (Boston: New Seeds, 2007).

How can we invite people into our houses of worship, share with them the good news of Jesus' radical hospitality, and then deny them from receiving the very essence of Jesus at the altar rail?

beginning of our services to explicitly invite the un-baptized into the possibility of relationship by welcoming them to explore Baptism as the means of full communion in the Church. I have often loved the inclusion of the asperges (the sprinkling of the congregation with baptismal water) as part of the Eucharistic Rite, bringing awareness of the sacrament of Baptism tactilely through the senses. Another way might be to invite all who are interested in Baptism to a brief introduction to the sacrament at the junction between the Liturgies of Word and Altar, after the Peace. This could be facilitated in the Parish Hall where coffee hour occurs, with the rest of the congregation joining following the service.

And finally, it might serve us well to consider the question: "Does Eucharist have a function on both sides of the font?" I have been a witness to many examples where the Eucharist has actually served as the pathway to Baptism. While the reverse route seems dissonant to those accustomed to the tradition of the Church, I have not heard a testimonial from those who have traveled it that this trajectory has cheapened or eroded their sense of identity and belonging or their ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ. In fact, it's quite the opposite. Those who have entered by this means say their experience of inclusion in Altar fellowship was the very reason why they were drawn to this particular community of the faithful. Being fed by Jesus at the table made them want to become a part of the family, which made the prospect of Baptism more urgent.

My own first experience of the Eucharist was akin to this. While I wasn't sure why I had such a powerful experience of Communion at the time, I was certain that I had found home. I knew I belonged before my own sense of identity came into focus. And I continue to grow into that identity, the identity of my Baptism, with each piece of bread and sip of wine, as I continue to be formed more and more into the person God has created me to be.

In the chapter of our Rule of Life entitled "Our Founders and the Grace of Tradition," it says: "Faithfulness to tradition does not mean mere perpetuation or copying of ways from the past but a creative recovery of the past as a source of inspiration and guidance in our faithfulness to God's future, the coming reign of God." As we Anglican Christians continue to discern these contemporary questions of identity and belonging, it is my prayer that we may strive to facilitate with ease those who are seeking relationship with God through Christ. I pray that our Great Sacraments may support them to know, as Christians, who they are and to whom they belong.

a letter from our Readers

Thank you so much for sending me a copy of Cowley. I am a retired academic (college professor/administrator), and one of the joys of this stage of life is the time to read, ponder, and dare I say "inwardly digest" those many meaningful works I was unable to peruse during my working years. I wanted to jot down a few thoughts for you and your confrères.

***Br. Jack**, Your essay on your stutter blew me away because of your honesty and your vulnerability. I am trying to learn to be vulnerable to others but ego gets in the way, so reading your essay was truly a revelation. I do not stutter, but I have managed to have four different cancers over the past three years. The lymphoma led to a leg amputation, thus my challenge is evident to others just as yours is when you stutter. "It may sound crazy to say that I am grateful to God for my stutter, but it is true." Have I actually said/thought that I am grateful to God for my cancers. No – not there yet. But I know that cancer has made me grateful in a way I never was before, has made me aware of my blessings as never before.*

***Br. Sean**, I am looking for words to express the effect of your essay on me, and I am still searching. "The calling of sickness" is not the only startling, arresting phrase you use in the essay ("fake piety and tainted humility," "scandalizes my sense of self-reliance") but it is the one that I am still pondering, and the more I reflect on my past four years of various cancers, the more I believe you have been led to a profound truth. "Thank you" seems inadequate. I have made several copies of your essay; I will share one with Beth who has just had a stem cell transplant for multiple myeloma and Cathi, also facing a bone marrow transplant for her myelofibrosis.*

***Br. Keith**, Your essay is challenging for me, but it takes me to a place I don't want to go. In spite of your lovely poetic words ("the rust of apathy, the mildew of complacency, or hard packed crust of denial") I land in a place not of grief but of numbness. The desecration of our world has left me numb in a place beyond grief. Like the little Dutch boy who put his finger in the dyke to staunch the flow of water, each morning I dutifully carry our peelings, parings, and coffee grounds to the compost. It feels so little but so needed.*

Thank you again for the Cowley. As you can see, the issue had a great impact on me. And thank you to your community for your ministry to the church and the world.

God bless –

Clark H. (Texas)

Thank you to all those who shared feedback on the Ascension issue of *Cowley*. Your comments inspire, bolster, and challenge us.

Retreats
at the Guesthouse

Upcoming Program Retreats

Living with Grief
Nov. 10-13
Led by Br. Curtis Almquist

The Advent of Patience
December 16-18
Led by Br. Jack Crowley

Singing our Lives in Christ
January 12-15
Led by Br. Sean Glenn

Upcoming Self-led Retreats

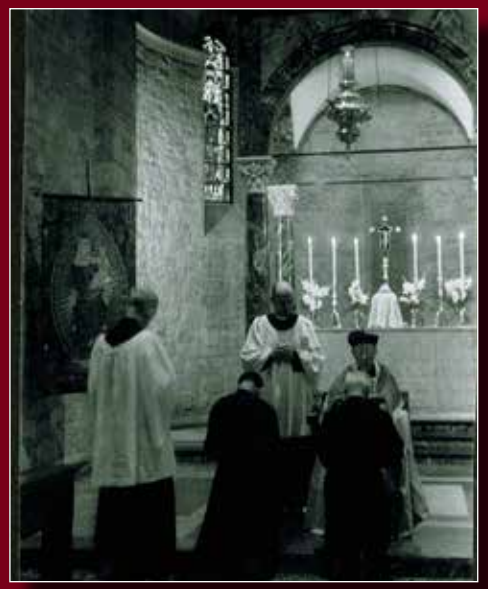
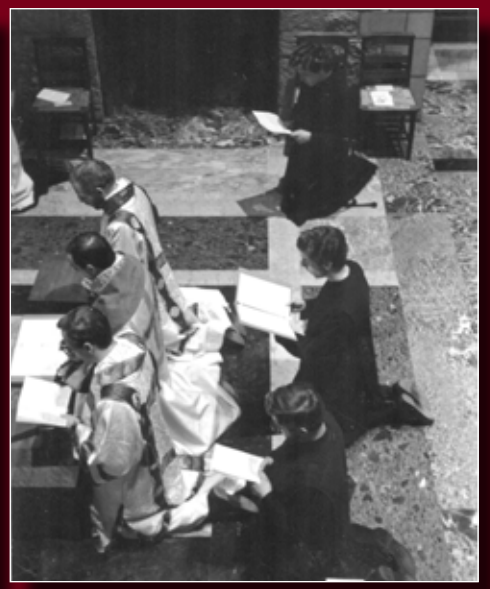
Jan. 5-8
Jan. 20-22
Jan. 24-29
Feb. 21-26
Feb. 28-5
March 14-19
March 21-26
March 28- April 2
April 12-16
May 9-14

learn more & register at **ssje.org/retreat**

explore why we love being monks

catchthelife.org

Society of Saint John the Evangelist

A Sacrament of Solidarity

In recent months, our community has been blessed to celebrate all three of our initiation rites: the clothing of a novice; a first or "initial" profession; and a final or "life" profession of the religious vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience. This rare confluence has offered us opportunity for sacred remembrance of the mystery of our belonging – to Christ and to one another. While these rites have been with the community since its beginning, their forms have been adapted and altered to express what belonging signifies in the present moment. An archival photo [*left*] of Father Superior Granville Williams and Novice Master Earnest Banner, receiving novices, provides a striking contrast to our current rite. Now, a circle of all Brothers joins the Superior (himself wearing only the habit) to present the cassock, scapular, and "thrice wrapped cord," and we vocally share in the reception and blessing of the new Brother. In similar fashion, during Professions, a habited circle of brethren now surrounds a candidate for profession, and we all join in the examination and witnessing of the vows with the Superior. (Compare with the image above [*right*], of my initial profession in 1986, under Superior Brother Tom Shaw). These changes represent our growing understanding that belonging to Christ in the SSJE is a sacrament of solidarity with all members of his Body and all the scattered children of God.

Jonathan Maury, SSJE

Raining

Rain in great torrents
floods the senses,
and saturates land and sky.
Everything is raining.

I want to stand
under this falling sea
offering all of me as thanksgiving.

I want to submit
to the crushing weight of wave after wave
pulling me down into oblivion.

I want to melt
in this living water,
dissolving into ripples of nothingness.

Rain in great torrents
saturates land and sky and me.
I want to become
the rain,
and everything is
raining.

Nicholas Bartoli, SSJE

This block print is a reflection on my Profession of Life Vows, which fell on the feast of the martyr Bernard Mizeki, who famously carved crosses into some of the trees of a grove, which locals thought was inhabited by spirits, to demonstrate Christ's universal presence & power. The background was inspired by the grain of lumber, dead wood. The circle is a representation of my profession ring, the symbol of our life vows, and the image within depicts Bernard offering praise to Jesus, enthroned among the living leaves and branches and "reigning from the tree."

block print (2022) – **Lucas Hall, SSJE**

The Legacy Society *of* SSJE

Last winter I drove round a northern region and sloshed through cemeteries with a Brother to find ancestors' graves so he could pay his respects. It was a privilege to companion him, listen to his stories, and imagine together how geography shaped lives. We reflected on these ancestors' courage and generosity in the face of what we knew of their challenges. We returned with further gratitude for those who have gone before us and the gifts we have inherited.

We Brothers are grateful for present gifts to the Annual Fund and for gifts in the Legacy Society, which are invested to help our stability for the long term. Together they allow us to maintain our facilities, ensure our ministries, and support our life. Please consider including SSJE in your estate planning. This generous undergirding helps enable courageous work and witness for the next generation of SSJE.

Luke Ditewig, SSJE
Assistant Superior

For more information please contact legacy@ssje.org

SSJE *friends*

Annual Fund Update

Over dinner in the refectory, she asked: "Have you had any fun cars?" I paused, thought, and said: "No." A Brother beside me said, "What about your dad's VW Bug?" I laughed, both thinking of that car and in gratitude for being known and reminded of my own stories.

I feel I belong as I become known, as I show up and am seen, share stories and am heard. It happens over meals talking and in silence, over long stretches of time and in particular moments. Sharing stories of our experience, the world, and scripture, helps build relationship.

I am grateful to hear stories from so many who connect with SSJE. Some are in the moment after worship, in the Guesthouse, and while teaching groups in-person and online. Some people I have seen over and over, building links over the years. We help each other journey. I also love meeting others for the first time. Some have worshipped online with us or read "Brother, Give Us a Word" from around the world, and now are coming or writing directly to connect and share.

I am grateful to see folks meet and enjoy each other, with SSJE as their common link. There is a special relationship from the shared silence of retreat as well as incorporating monastic wisdom at home. We pray for this wide company of friends.

What has prompted you to share your stories? To listen to the stories of others? What helps remind you of who you are? How do you feel connected to us and to others through our worship, silence, and resources? Giving to support our life helps us hold space to listen deeply to many, to both ask and answer questions, to companion others round tables and in healing silence. Thank you for being part of our wider community. Please consider a gift today. **– Luke Ditewig, SSJE**

friends@ssje.org | (617) 876-3037 x. 55 | ssje.org/donate

Partners in Mission: TryTank

Over the past few years, the Brothers have been delighted to partner with a joint project of Virginia Theological Seminary and the General Seminary, called TryTank, which is spearheaded by Lorenzo Lebrija. TryTank describes itself as an experimental lab for church growth and innovation. They work with partners around the Church and around the world, to tackle problems facing the Episcopal Church in creative ways.

We've been delighted to partner with TryTank over the last year in tackling one specific problem: the growing number of congregations with no one to minister to them on Sunday morning. Of the almost 6,000 congregations of the Episcopal Church, 1730 of them have 29 or fewer people on an average Sunday, and many of these congregations do not have a clergy person present every Sunday. TryTank's experimental solution was to offer SSJE Brothers as "Virtual Preaching Monks" during the seasons of Advent, Lent, and Holy Week. Brothers recorded sermons that could be used in a service where a preacher was not available, or as a resource for adult forums.

The experiment was a resounding success. In its initial Advent run, TryTank hoped to serve a few dozen congregations and ended up with 484 participating congregations. In Lent, they opened the program to other denominations as well. We look forward to offering "Virtual Preaching Monks" again this Advent.

Over the summer, we worked with TryTank on a second experiment, this one called "Virtual Retreat." We worked with sound engineers to create a mini audio visit to the Monastery, complete with silence, prayer, and song (recorded in 8D Spatial Audio). This virtual retreat hopes to capture the peace many find in our monastic environment, now available to anyone, anywhere. (Listen at https://www.ssje.org/rest)

It is deeply meaningful to us to be working with these partners who strive to do old things in new ways. We look forward to future collaborations with this lab for innovation.

"One would think that an innovation lab working with monks is a bit odd, but on the contrary. From the onset, they have been a powerful partner. The Brothers' approach to discernment and spirituality has been a holy influence on our work. Every time they add something to an idea, it definitely makes it better. The richness of the content they provided in the Virtual Preaching Monks resource was amazing. When we first announced the program in Advent 2021, we thought we'd be lucky to get 40 congregations. We ended up with almost 500. When we announced the second version in Lent, it surpassed 700. That right there shows the respect the Brothers have in the wider Episcopal Church. Thanks to their efforts, smaller congregations now have access to deep theological content during our holy seasons. The Church is better because of them. I consider myself fortunate to work with the Brothers and very much look forward to future collaborations."

– Lorenzo Lebrija

Br. Jim and Fr. Lorenzo shared a Facebook Live conversation on "Praying at Home" during our 2021 Lenten series, "Come Pray."

Formation *in practice*

We hope that in reflecting further on the topic of ***belonging****, you will find it meaningful to share in discussing these questions with others.*

Communities of Transformation

Who is your community of transformation: the people alongside whom you are called to grow, undergo conversion, and bear fruit?

How have you experienced the transformation that community can bring: its tensions and challenges, as well as its joys and rewards?

Are there people with whom you find yourself at odds, or who challenge your worldview? How do they offer an opportunity for you to reflect on your own responses, reframe your own patterns, and consider new ways of engaging?

How do others in your community carry the burden of areas for which you are ill-equipped? What gifts do you bring to community, which assist others to grow and thrive?

Identity & Belonging

Do you identify as a Christian? What does that identity mean to you?

When have you known the contentment of belonging to God?

What was your own journey to the Font and to the Table of God?

How do the Sacraments inform and shape your sense of identity and belonging?

What do you think about the proposal of the "Open Table": allowing people to receive the Eucharist before Baptism? Do your think the Eucharist should have a function on both sides of the Font?

"For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." – Matthew 18:20

God dwells in the center of every man, an unseen, largely unknown strength and wisdom, moving him TO BE HUMAN, TO GROW AND TO EXPAND HIS HUMANITY *to the utmost of its capacity.*

– Christopher Bryant, SSJE (1905-1985)

For more about the Brothers | **SSJE.org**
Curious about our life? | **catchthelife.org**
To share these resources | **SSJE.org/cowley**

SSJE

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