SOCIETY OF SAINT JOHN THE EVANGELIST
Cowley

Credo

*What does it mean to **believe**?*

We cannot see the things of God *in the light of the world, we need another light. Jesus takes us apart that we may see. He delights to reveal divine glory in seclusion. He calls, and it is a joyous day when in His light we see visions of God."*

– Richard Meux Benson
Founder, SSJE

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about us

We are a community of men in the Anglican/ Episcopal tradition living in union with God – and that *changes everything*. **Read more: SSJE.org/whoweare**

cover

The icon depicted is known as the *mandylion*, or holy "cloth" in the Eastern Church and "the Holy Face" in the West. It belongs to a category of iconographic prototypes deemed "not made by hand," traditionally believed to have originated through direct contact with the face or body of Jesus. All point toward the mystery of the original "image (*ikon*) of the invisible God," Jesus Christ. The version featured here is written (and held) by Br. Keith Nelson.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Earlier this summer, the Reverend Sarah Coakley led our annual community retreat on the subject of risk. Using earlier members of the Society – such as our founders, Father Benson, Father Grafton, and Father O'Neill, as well as some others, such as Father Johnson, Father Waggett, Father Slade, and our beloved Brother Paul Wessinger – Dr. Coakley examined how risk has played an essential role in the history of the community from the very beginning. Each morning she challenged us to take seriously the risks with which we are being invited to wrestle on a daily basis, as well as to renew our willingness to take risks.

One of the greatest risks, of course, is the risk of belief. I think we will all admit, belief is a risky thing, especially when so much around us contradicts the very things we claim. The thing is, belief is not about claims being proven true. Our word "belief" comes to us from an earlier word meaning *confidence in a person or thing*, as well as *holding something dear*, or *putting our trust in something or someone*.

Beginning with this issue of *Cowley* we are going to be exploring the essentials of our belief – in this larger sense of what we hold dear, what we put our trust in – over three successive issues. Our exploration begins with this issue, in which we take up what it means to believe. In the following two issues, we will ponder how God engages with us, and then what it means to belong.

As a parish priest I was often struck by one of the prayers I recited at funerals: "that … we may be gathered to our ancestors, having the testimony of a good conscience, in the communion of the catholic

A Letter from the Superior

Church, in the confidence of a certain faith, in the comfort of a religious and holy hope, in favor with you, our God, and in perfect charity with the world …"

If I were to begin to say what I mean when I speak of belief, I would start there. Belief is about having confidence in a certain faith. Here I take the meaning of the word *certain*, not as *particular* but *firm*. This faith is not, for me at least, a private opinion. It is rooted in something much larger than me. It is rooted in the faith and practice of *the catholic Church*. Such a faith has consequences. It demands that I live with a *good conscience*, knowing right and wrong; it gives me a sense of purpose and *a holy hope*; it requires me to live *in perfect charity with the world*.

While there are many in this world who live with a good conscience, knowing right and wrong; who live lives of hope; and who are in perfect charity with the world, the thing which sets us apart as Christians is that for us, these are a product of our confidence in Jesus Christ.

By inviting you to explore what it means to believe, it is our hope that you will be more "ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15).

Please know how grateful we are for the gift of your friendship.

Faithfully in Christ,

James SSJE

James Koester, SSJE
Superior

The sensorium of the Monastery Chapel on Memorial Drive can be overwhelming. The smell, the silence, and the interplay of light and darkness confront the senses the moment the door opens. They immediately tell my body to stop, to slow down, to absorb, and to sink in. Stepping into a place where the walls are steeped in incense and immersed in generations of prayers prayed and psalms chanted, I find the constant demands of life shifted into a new perspective. Belief seems to come more easily in this space. God's presence seems more tangible surrounded by the wood, stone, and light. For almost twenty years, SSJE has been a place of retreat and friendship for me. Even after I moved across the Pond more than a decade ago, SSJE still feels like home to me. It has held me in great joy and deepest sorrow. It's a place where God has been both present and silent, where discernment has seemed both easy and impossible, and where I feel known and loved for who I am. The sensorium of the Monastery embodies all of these things and more. It is a place I can trust, a sacred space in which the world stands still.

As much as I long for the busyness of the world to hush, that's not what the gospel teaches us belief is about. The gospel of John is distinct amongst the gospels – and even Paul's writings – in how it describes belief. Belief is never a noun. For John, belief is always a verb made up of a number of actions: believing, knowing, seeing, abiding, remaining. For the writer of the Fourth Gospel, belief isn't an intellectual exercise, but a fully embodied trust of our lives to God. Believing is an action we do, not a noun that we possess. As a verb, believing not only demands something from us, but also involves a relationship with someone else in whom we trust (God). That John uses this verb, *to believe*, almost one hundred times emphasizes its significance and the challenge John presents to us.

When I enter the Monastery Chapel, I often assume that I need to stop acting in order to enter the space fully and to reconnect with God, who can feel so far away when life becomes overwhelming. My assumption all too often has been that the silence, the smells, the light and the darkness are moments of *inaction*. I come to the Chapel – even online these days when trans-Atlantic travel is difficult – in order to stop the action and flurry that distracts me from God.

But John's gospel challenges

A Letter from the FSJ

my assumption. It suggests that the sensorium of encounter is precisely where the action begins. The actions of prayer, sacrament, word, silence, and psalm enacted in the Monastery across each day encompass some of what belief means for me. These actions encountered in the daily rhythm of prayer form the seeds of belief that embolden me to go into the world and enact the gospel. John's gospel tells us that the whole purpose of the story and the signs within it is "so that you may believe" and having believed, may love, forgive, serve, and know forgiveness and peace. I don't have to be in the Monastery space to tap into this web of belief. The stability of monastic life – the intentional and radical act of abiding and remaining (two of the central verbs from John's gospel) – and the knowledge that even across an ocean I can be part of that rhythm of prayer, fuels my believing and offers ever-tangible hope in an unstable, demanding, and overwhelming world. Thanks be to God for the SSJE community and the active, visible, Johannine witness that they offer, encouraging belief not only within the sacred sensorium on Memorial Drive, but well beyond it.

Jenn Strawbridge *is Associate Professor in New Testament Studies and Caird Fellow in Theology at the University of Oxford and Mansfield College, Associate Priest at St Andrew's Headington, Canon Theologian of Blackburn Cathedral, and a Wiccamical Prebend of the Diocese of Chichester.*

Consider Joining Us

The Fellowship of Saint John is comprised of nearly 1,000 men and women throughout the world who desire to live their Christian life in special association with the Society of Saint John the Evangelist. They have a vital interest in the life and work of the Society and support our life and ministries with their prayers, encouragement, and financial gifts. 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: SSJE.org/fsj

praying with the

Old Testament

The whole of scripture is a gift from God.

Lucas Hall, SSJE

"…Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad. Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am." – John 8:56, 58

With these words, recounted in John's gospel, Jesus startles the crowd with whom he speaks by claiming the status of divinity. He speaks of himself as an eternal being, not bound by the constraints of mortal time. He similarly speaks of himself as the fulfillment of the long-awaited hope of the people of Israel, going all the way back to their forefather Abraham.

Understanding the relationship between the New Testament and the Old can be very challenging. It has been a challenge for Christians from the first centuries of the Church; deep misunderstandings gave rise to some of the tropes of various historical heresies, which often still impact our thinking about God and scripture today.

But the whole of scripture is a gift from God. Though it can be daunting and challenging, engaging with the Old Testament as a wellspring of prayer can illumine truths about God, the Church, and ourselves, in ways we may never expect. This article will explore several ways that readers today might draw from the Old Testament treasures both old and new.

Encountering God in the Old Testament

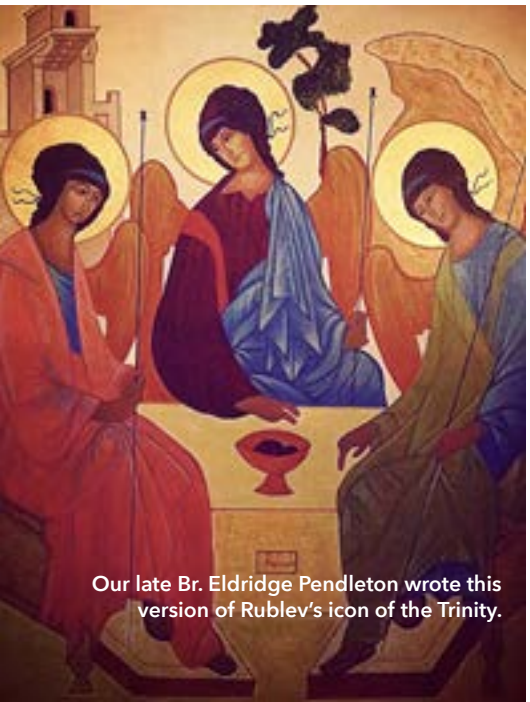
"Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever." This doxology, in its various translations, is one of the single most common prayers offered throughout the entirety of the Church. It is a refrain chanted throughout the daily cycle of the Brothers' common prayer. It's quite a short statement, densely packed with fundamental Christian theology: praise is offered, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is declared, and the eternal existence, presence, and glory of God is proclaimed.

This is instructive for us, as we can look at this doxology and begin to understand the Christian belief about the nature of God. If the Holy Trinity, one God, is eternal, we can look to the Old Testament and expect to find signs of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, at work in the world and in the stories of God's chosen people.

And this is what we find when we look into the Old Testament. From the first chapter of Genesis, it is God's Spirit rushing over chaos at the creation of the world. The prophetic vision of the Ancient of Days and

the One like a Son of Man in Daniel 7 is universally held by the Church to describe a vision of God the Son. Psalm 139 speaks of one's inability to flee from God, in which the psalmist asks, "Where can I go then, from your Spirit?" The prophetic literature repeatedly mentions God's Spirit being put upon the prophets, and those whom they anoint, as an indication of God's blessing, protection, and power dwelling within a person. It should not surprise us to learn that the inspiration for the Rublev icon of the Trinity – perhaps the single most famous depiction of the Holy Trinity – is taken from an episode in Genesis 18, when heavenly beings (sometimes described in singular, sometimes as three beings) visit Abraham and Sarah to promise them a son, Isaac.

Most fascinating to me, though, is the figure of Wisdom in the Old Testament. She is praised as one to desire, follow, and chase after. She is also described as creating the world alongside God, begotten of God but before all things, a being of simultaneous power and delight in Creation. The Church has long associated this figure with Christ, particularly as seen in the description in John's gospel of the *Logos*, or in English, the Word. Listen to the words of Wisdom in Proverbs 8: "Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth … When [the LORD] established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race." Compare this with the prologue to John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."



Our late Br. Eldridge Pendleton wrote this version of Rublev's icon of the Trinity.

Both these terms, Wisdom and *Logos*, refer to a being that may be described as the ordering principle or agent of existence, both from the beginning of creation and into the present, continually guiding and shaping the order of existence. The names themselves, Wisdom and *Logos* (from which we get our word, logic), share similar meanings. The description of

Wisdom as a desirable bride matches well with the description of Christ as a bridegroom. Our understanding that this figure of Wisdom is not some mysterious other being, some bit part in the heavenly drama, but the very same Christ – the eternal *Logos*, present from the beginning, dwelling with the God from whom he was begotten – begins to illumine a real sense of the eternity of the Trinity. Through careful reading, we see that the Trinity is not some Christian invention, but rather a continuation of the theology for God revealed in the Old Testament.

This understanding opens an invitation for our prayer. Prayer may be many things, but it must include some acknowledgment, some recognition, of the presence of God. Prayer is, first and foremost, about encounter. When we behold these truths and remember the doxology proclaimed so universally throughout the Church, which affirms the eternal reality and glory of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – we can begin to glimpse that glory, and in beholding, offer that prayer all the more.

Types and Symbols for the Church

Encountering God's presence in the stories and events of the Old Testament assures us of God's eternity through the past. But the Old Testament is not solely a documentation of past events. The longed-for hope of God's victory and salvation is a recurring theme of the Old Testament scriptures; for Christians, this serves to point us back to the truths of the New Testament, and chiefly, the central hope expressed in the Gospel of Christ. This way of reading has been called "typology" throughout the history of the Church. Typology finds in the Old Testament early "types" or symbols for truths that are further expounded in the New Testament. A typological understanding of the Old Testament can provide helpful context and imagery that may enrich or renew our entry into these truths. In my own experience, well-trod parables and passages of the New Testament can become dry, and the infusion of the typology of the Old Testament can bring new and exciting life to truths that have become dulled through repetition. Let's look at a few examples from the Old Testament to see how they may point us toward the message of Christ's Gospel, perhaps even with greater understanding.

One of the most well-known types of the Old Testament is found in Isaiah 6, a prophetic vision of the Temple. In this vision, Isaiah beholds seraphim in the presence of God, chanting a song of God's holiness and glory. The temple fills with smoke, and Isaiah laments, for he has seen God even though he has sinned and has "unclean lips," and so is in terror. But a seraph takes a burning coal and touches the coal to Isaiah's lips, and declares that Isaiah's guilt is no more. These images were, for the Church, clear types pointing to the Eucharist. The song of the seraphim became a Eucharistic hymn, still used today, and the symbol of fire (as the presence of God that purges away the sins of the penitent and restores them to holiness) remains a potent and enlivening symbol of what Christians do and experience in taking communion. In

this understanding, the Eucharist is not merely a shared meal, not merely the special privilege of the already-holy, but also a comfort to those who grieve their sins, burning brightly with the love and mercy of God. Further, just as Isaiah is now prepared and urged to speak prophetically to the world, so too are we dismissed at the end of the Eucharist to love and serve God, each of us commissioned for prophetic witness in our own world.

Another famous type in the Old Testament is in Genesis 22, the story of Abraham's binding and near-sacrifice of Isaac. This is a disturbing story for many, and difficult to understand in light of proclamations of God's love. But when we see this near-sacrifice of Isaac as a symbol, pointing to the sacrifice of Christ, we might begin to understand. "Look," the story seems to say, "look with fear and trembling at the horror of sacrificing a child. Behold the faith of both Abraham and Isaac in this story. Trust in these grim moments that God will provide the sacrifice. Trust that God knows the pain of your own sacrifices, for this too is a Father who has offered his Son." This is how we may understand the stories that disturb us; when we look on the suffering, the self-emptying, the sacrifice of Christ, we can begin to understand anew the anguish of such a thing.

A third example comes in the story of Jael, found in Judges 4 and 5. This is a less well-known story, but one that has both the power to disturb and the power to offer clarity. Deborah, a judge of Israel, and Baruch, her general, lead an army against the Canaanites, led by the general Sisera. The Israelites are victorious, but Sisera flees and escapes, finding the tent of Jael and her husband, with whom he is allied. Jael, an Israelite herself, welcomes Sisera into her tent, where he falls asleep. Upon his falling asleep, Jael takes a tent peg and hammers it through his skull, killing him. When Deborah and Baruch learn of this, Deborah praises Jael and sings a song of the Israelites' triumph over their enemies. This is challenging. The violence of the story, the subterfuge, the deceit, are difficult to embrace. But a few words in Deborah's song give us more: Deborah, in praising Jael, refers to her as "blessed among women."

This is not a common phrase in scripture; it only occurs three times. First, in the song of Deborah. Second, in the book of Judith, whose story is so similar to Jael's that some scholars regard Judith as a sort of novelization of the older story of Jael. And third, in the first chapter of Luke's gospel, at the visitation of the Virgin Mary to Elizabeth. This last example, at first glance, seems like the odd one out; the visitation is a joyous story of new life and reconciliation, not one of death and strife. But Luke borrows this familiar phrase deliberately; he is comparing the victory of Deborah and Jael to the joy of Elizabeth and Mary. Like Deborah with Baruch, Elizabeth maintained the strength of faith in the face of Zechariah's doubt, and they were given a son, John the Baptist. This triumph of faith then gives way to the more hidden, less expected, and greater, more final victory of Mary and her bearing of Christ. Through a subtle linguistic call-back, Mary is positioned not as a docile and passive participant, but as a victor, who, through clever cunning, undermined and defeated

The Old Testament contains meaningful stories of God's work in the world, and meaningful signs that gesture toward the fundamental truths of Christianity expressed in the New Testament.

the head of the armies who threatened God's people, just as Jael did. This inversion of expectations, this proclamation of victory in surprising ways, serves to flesh out the theology of the Incarnation. It is not just a joyful surprise, but a great triumph in the battle for God's people and the whole creation.

This typological understanding of the Old Testament has been a major stream of the theology of the Church from the earliest days. More recently, this method has fallen out of favor to some degree in the Western Church. Concerns of misappropriating Jewish identity as an exercise of anti-Semitism are significant, and come from an admirable place. There are various modern practices – such as so-called Christian seders, the use of the shofar (increasingly common in evangelical circles), and even various hymns in the Episcopal *Hymnal 1982* that appropriate medieval Jewish and later Hasidic music for Christian worship – which come from more benign intentions while yielding deeply inappropriate results, representing a colonization of Jewish identity and religious practice. These practices are very clearly not "ours" as Christians. Conversely, the Old Testament scriptures, and our finding the truths of Christianity within them, stem from the maelstrom of conflict and honest disagreement within Israelite religion in the first century. With the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, only two branches of this religion were left standing in any significant numbers: the Pharisees, becoming what we now call Rabbinic Judaism, and Christianity. This resulted in intense conflict that spanned the next few centuries, and this conflict became severe persecution lasting more than a millennium, beginning shortly after the Roman Empire's adoption of Christianity. We can, and should, lament this evil. But we shouldn't lament honest disagreement about truth and meaning; indeed, approaching these disagreements with both honesty and charity is how genuine, abiding respect, rather than a distant and polite tolerance, can

be forged between those who disagree. And embracing the Church's own interpretation of the Old Testament without turning it into a cudgel to harm others is a way for Christians to embrace the genuine Israelite roots of our religion without crudely colonizing the religious expression of our Jewish siblings. There is no Church without the Old Testament; it is the story of how the Church has understood itself, as heirs of the covenant, and so as ones who can learn from the stories of the ancient Israelites in their own striving after God.

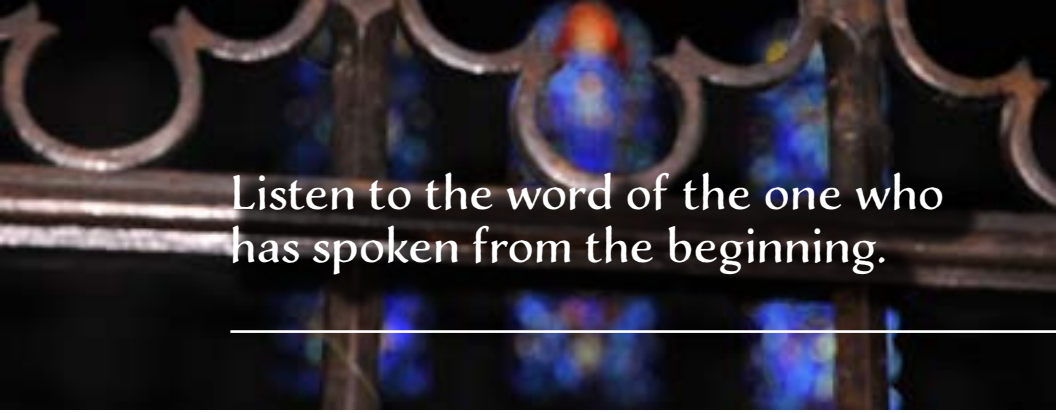
Stories for the People of God

The Old Testament contains meaningful stories of God's work in the world, and meaningful signs that gesture toward the fundamental truths of Christianity expressed in the New Testament. Likewise, the Old Testament can be made our own; the stories of God's people in the past can help us understand our own lives, both as individuals and as the Church.

In his poem, "Batter my heart, three-person'd God," John Donne, the Elizabethan-era priest and poet, speaks of himself as a town, held by an enemy and longing to be conquered, liberated, retaken by God. In his book, *War Songs of the Prince of Peace*, our principle founder, Richard Benson, writes of the psalms, "if we recognize Christ as the true Psalmist … the abstract and earthly idea of deliverance from enemies is transformed into the Personal consciousness of the triumphant Redeemer." Both of these understandings illumine one possible way of approaching these stories of old, of battles and wars and monarchs and prophets: we may begin to think of ourselves, as individuals and as the Church, as the holy land, the temple, Mount Zion, Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God. When we understand ourselves in that way, much of the violence of the Old Testament that is so initially off-putting can be a real reflection of our own strife.

There is one story in 1 Kings 18, of the prophet Elijah, where he competes with the prophets of Baal to see whose God can set a pyre ablaze and prove who is more powerful. Elijah is the lone prophet of the Lord, while there are hundreds of prophets of Baal. Elijah's God is the victor. Up until this point, the story is relatively benign, if a bit fantastical, to modern ears. But then, Elijah has the spectating crowd seize the prophets of Baal, and put them to death. This is far more challenging. But if we see the land and people of ancient Israel as analogous to ourselves, we can begin to look deeper.

If we speak of our own inner lives, the striking violence here becomes a clarion call. The SSJE Rule calls the Brothers to "ruthless self-examination" in all areas of our life. As we wrestle with our own inner complexity, we can draw strength and comfort from imagery like that found in this scene: the firm faith of the singular prophet, victorious against the idolatrous crowd, itself suggestive of the many voices we may hear within our own hearts day by day. The encouragement, then,



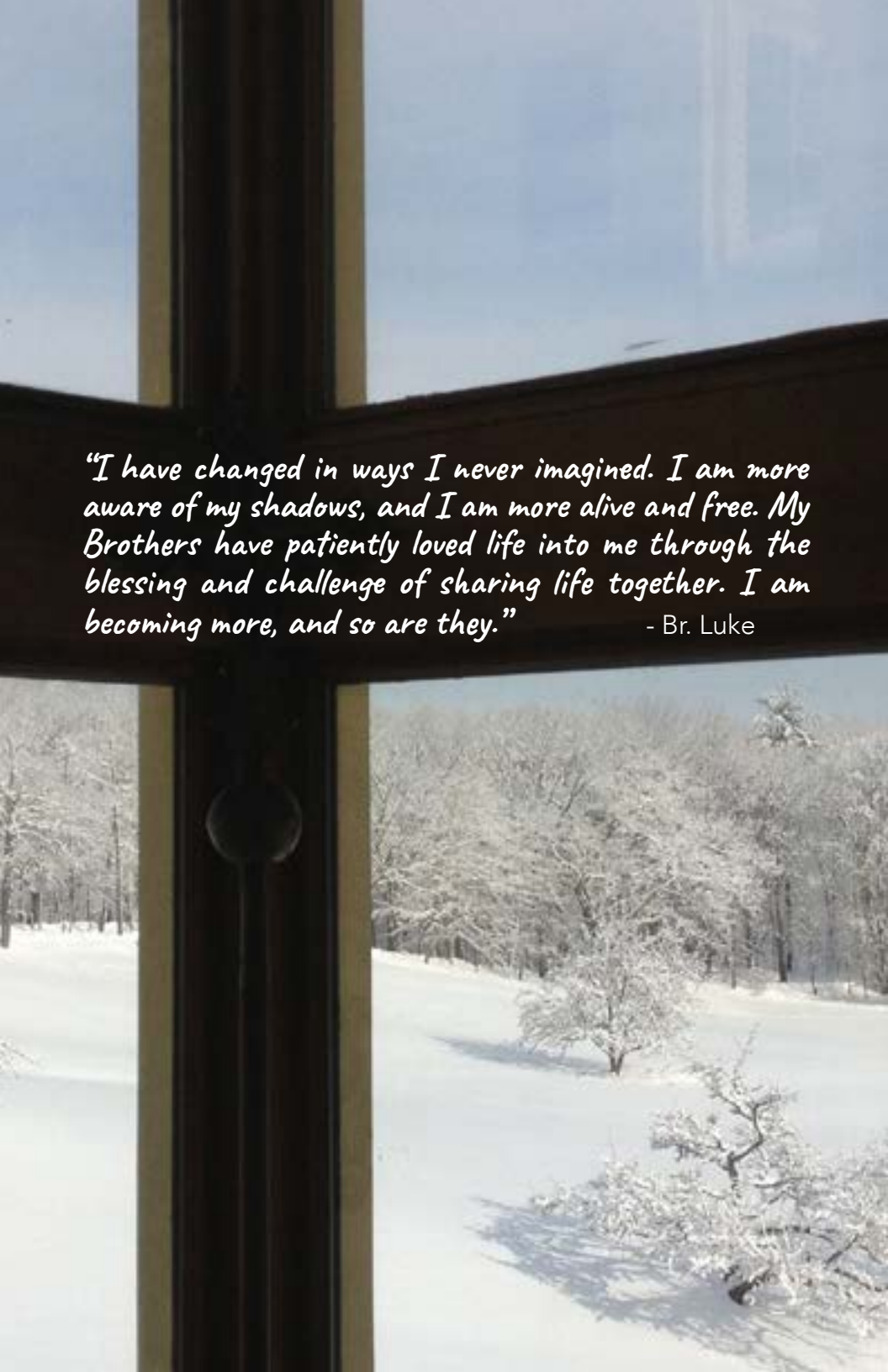
comes from Elijah's actions: to extinguish these voices which draw us to our idols, whatever they may be, and to hold ourselves to account. The promise here is that God will not abandon us, even when we feel outmatched and the circumstances seem dire. By trusting in God, and extinguishing the false flames of the many temptations we may face, our pyre will burn brightly, for all the onlookers to see.

Similarly, an interpretation might be given not for our own personal sins, but for the body of the Church. We are no strangers to the scandals of abuse that have rocked Christian institutions; here we may learn from the uncompromising and confident faith of the prophets, who so regularly held their own people, their own political and religious leaders, to account. They did not do much looking outward, at foreign peoples, but rather focused their attention inward, on their own, so that the offering of the people of God would be a pure one. We too can learn from this, faithful to Christ's teaching to pluck the log from our own eyes before we judge the speck in the eyes of others. This is the prophetic voice the Church needs in every age. Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that we may learn to speak prophetically by looking to the example of the prophets.

Go and learn what this means

The Old Testament scriptures are, in many ways, deeply foreign to the contemporary Christian's life. But this distance should not dissuade us from engaging; it should encourage us. It is our very lack of familiarity with these texts that can make them such a promising avenue for the voice of the Spirit to awaken us through our reading. The shocking circumstances of Christ's birth, death, and resurrection should confirm to us again and again the need to be challenged, surprised, and disabused of the same expectations we may bring. Delving into the scripture that Jesus himself used in his own prayer, even in his dying breath, may take us to places we didn't expect, and in doing so, draw us nearer to the One in whom we dwell. If we are prepared to recognize it, the Old Testament can be a ripe opportunity to sit at the feet of our teacher, listening to the word of the one who has spoken from the beginning.

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



"I have changed in ways I never imagined. I am more aware of my shadows, and I am more alive and free. My Brothers have patiently loved life into me through the blessing and challenge of sharing life together. I am becoming more, and so are they." - Br. Luke

"It's hard not to look at the ground as you walk, to set your sights low and keep the world spinning, and try to stay grounded wherever you are." So John Koenig, author of *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, defines his neologism *astrophe*: the feeling of being stuck on Earth.[1] "But every so often you remember to look up and imagine the possibilities, dreaming of what's out there."[2]

What an amazing paradox: being grounded in a specific time and place and yet being able to look up and stare *across* time and space into the abyss of infinity. Pondering this, it dawns on me anew how mysterious life is. Even though we live in the age of information, where science is at the helm driving us to truth, the more intelligible life becomes, the more it seems to mystify me.

Maybe this response is connected with my own neurodivergent brain-type. I've never been able to fully grasp mathematics or reason scientifically. Even in the discipline of music, which was my area of study, the analytical thinking required for theory and composition were difficult for me. While my own struggles to comprehend have never obstructed my acceptance that the latest advances and discoveries in these fields are true, they have perhaps made me more aware than others of the limitations of such systems of information. The world is full of mysteries, even in realms where facts rule the day. For all the amazing things that we now know about our world and ourselves, there remains much that we have not yet discovered, which we may never be able to explain.

Mystery is not separate from belief, but a vital part of it. It's too easy to fall into the trap of placing mystery and belief in opposition, as we would knowns and unknowns, fact and fantasy. But mystery is much more, well … *mysterious* than that. It's not the absence of knowledge. Mystery is the spark that ignites our curiosity, drawing us beyond ourselves to explore another part of life's grandeur, sometimes in ways that are (for the time being) ineffable.

During the season of Epiphany we read about ordinary people who experienced extraordinary things, which set them on the journey of belief to recognize the likeness of God in the face of Jesus. What

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1 Koenig has composed an entire "dictionary" of these newly minted words, which he's collected into his *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* (Simon & Schuster, 2021).

2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1SkepihYLE&t=11s

greater mystery can we imagine than this proclamation? Yet this mystery is one that has been repeated across the continents, across the centuries. The wise men from the East journeying to see this baby king, the Spirit of God descending upon him like a dove in the waters of the Jordan, the changing of water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana, and His transfiguration on the mountain[3] – these mysteries all made an indelible impression on those around him. Thomas, seeing Jesus risen from the dead, at the invitation to touch his wounds, cried out, "My Lord and my God!" You may remember Jesus' response, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."[4] Perhaps our belief is the greatest mystery of all.

My prayer for each day of my life is that I may see Jesus manifest in the fullness of creation, including my neighbors – those who bear with me despite my own gaffs and seeming contradictions, and those who are strangers that I've only witnessed from afar. (I am a mystery; so are they.)[5] I pray that I may wonder at the mystery of this beautiful creation and let it teach me about love, compassion, empathy, and the glory of God. May I remember to "look up" and behold the mystery of God drawing me more and more into belief, a lifetime's journey. And may I, in the words of our founder Richard Meux Benson: "…not live upon the earth that I may be in heaven, but so to live in heaven that I may show myself to be a temple of God upon the earth!"[6]

3 Matthew 2:1-21; Matthew 3:13-17; John 2:1-11; Mark 2:1-9

4 John 20:24-29

5 SSJE Rule of Life, Ch. 27

6 Richard Meux Benson, *A Cowley Calendar* (London: Mowbrays, 1932).

"Three Strange Magi"

Keith Nelson, SSJE

Belief Simmers

Belief simmers in my imagination,
teased and tickled
from Oneness to Being,
from Silence to Dancing.

And so, I believe…

I believe in rain,
so holy and healing,
dissolving away all
sense of division.

I believe in trees,
rooted so deeply in ground,
leaves whispering
a promise of wellness.

I believe in birdsong,
sung so sweetly an offering,
calling us ever home
from yesterday and tomorrow.

I believe in sunshine,
so radiant of itself,
at play on the water
with long shadows to guide us.

I believe in smiles,
without cause or explanation.

I believe in Peace and Joy,
where understanding never treads.

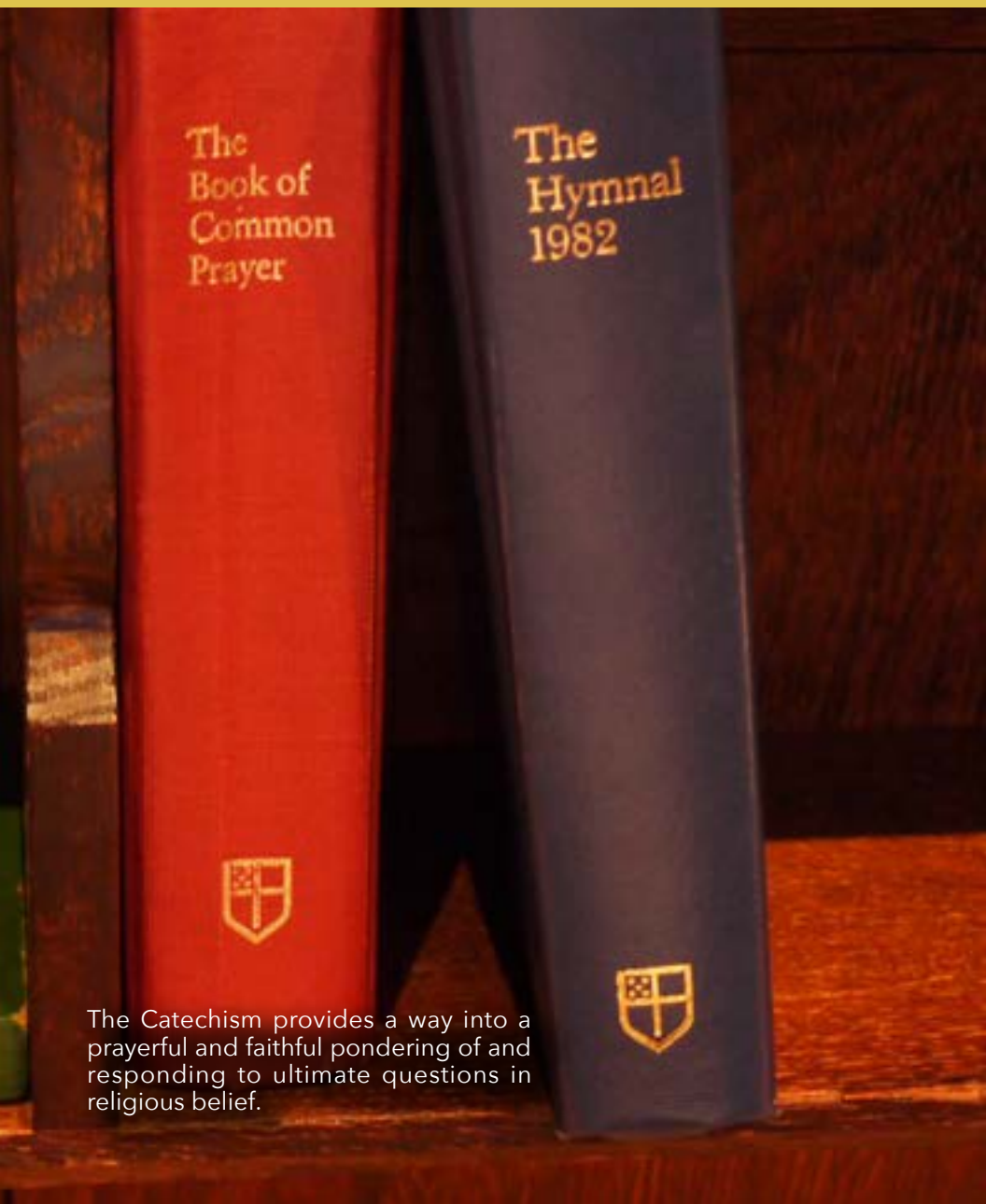
I believe in Silence,
giving birth to all
This Goodness.

And I believe
in
Goodness Dancing.

Nicholas Bartoli, SSJE

Questioning the Faith

a view through the Prayerbook Catechism



The Catechism provides a way into a prayerful and faithful pondering of and responding to ultimate questions in religious belief.

Jonathan Maury, SSJE

"Questioning the faith," this article's title, holds within it two possibly contradictory meanings. Consider the paradox implied in the word "questioning": does it mean questioning *in* the faith or a questioning *of* the faith – or *both*?

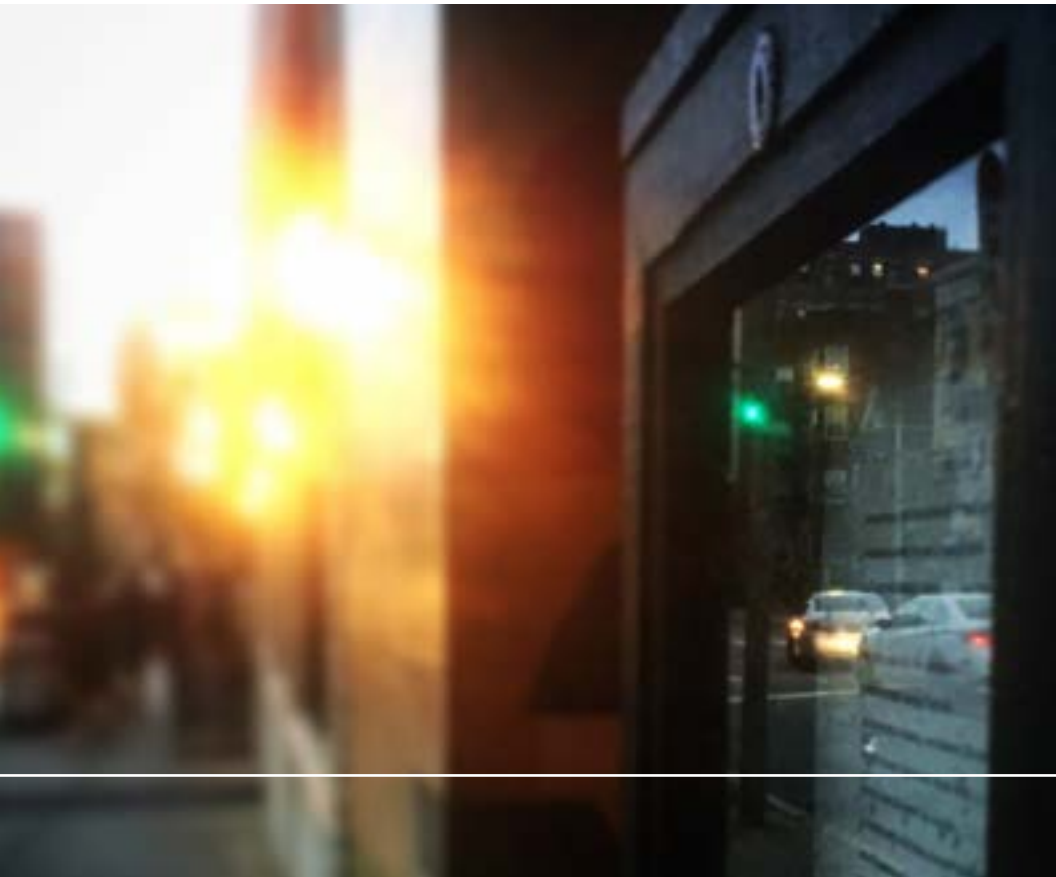
And furthermore what do we mean by "the faith"? Is the faith a collection of beliefs and doctrines, the teachings of an organized religion? Or is the faith something more: a series of practices, a tradition, a way of living? When Jesus asked the question, "Who do people say that I am?" Jesus sought to draw both a *confession* and an *act* of faith from his disciples, based on his teaching and example. How does Christ now prepare us to respond to such a question? How are we called to engage with the faith that has been handed down to us, especially when our own experience might be as riddled with questions as with certainties?

In this article, I want to share an oft-overlooked treasure for navigating this challenging terrain: "An Outline of the Faith commonly called the Catechism" in *The Book of Common Prayer 1979* (pages 845-862). As the opening statement describes it: "This catechism is primarily intended for use by parish priests, deacons, and lay catechists, to give an outline for instruction. It is a commentary on the creeds, but is not meant to be a complete statement of belief and practices; rather, it is a point of departure for the teacher, and it is cast in the traditional question and answer form for ease of reference" ("Concerning the Catechism," BCP, 844).

The two technical terms *catechism* and *catechist* are derived from the Greek verb *katecheo* which means "to teach or instruct *by word of mouth*." Literally it means to "sound down," i.e. to learn exactly by sounds (meaningful repetition); to learn by nuanced repetition.

In the early Church, a person who hoped to be baptized was received as a catechumen and entered into a period, often three years in duration, of intensive instruction or *catechesis*. Catechists would teach the seekers in their own words, drawing on their experience as members of the Christian community and its practice: the appropriation of the (Hebrew) scriptures, the received apostolic tradition of Jesus' first disciples, and the common worship and prayer realized and enacted *in* the risen Christ present in their midst. Only after such instruction were the catechumens baptized into Christ's death and rising, and admitted to the Eucharistic Mysteries.

Catechumenal instruction prepared the candidates to speak from *their* own mouths answers to the questions which would be asked of them in the baptismal rite. Thus, the questions, which the catechumens had brought to their catechists during the time of oral instruction, were asked in turn of the baptismal neophytes anew, as they were washed in water and signed with oil of chrism, sacramentally symbolizing their new life in the Holy Spirit as members of Christ (BCP, 307-308). The rote repetition of questions and answers that we hear in each iteration of the Baptismal Service actually derives, then, from a prior live exchange of real teaching and questioning that the catechumen would have engaged in before being deemed ready to baptized.



In later times, as infant baptism became the norm, catechetical instruction was deferred until "the age of reason" was reached, and such instruction was offered in preparation for the rite of confirmation, which is a personal reaffirmation of Christian belief and commitment accompanied by the laying on of hands for strengthening in the Holy Spirit.

Printed catechisms – cast in question and answer format – came into use as an outline of instruction in the Church's teaching and practice during the Renaissance/Reformation era. I myself was instructed in the 1928 Prayer Book's Catechism during a course of catechesis (or "confirmation classes") prior to my own examination by Bishop John Burgess and "the apostolic rite of laying on of hands in Confirmation" on June 23, 1963, at age twelve.

While my attachment to the Prayer Book Catechism dates to the earlier version, the 1979 Prayer Book has played an even more important role in my own life of formation, as well as in the historical ministry of SSJE. Our own late Brother, Robert (Bob) Greenfield played an important role in combining the 1928 short Catechism with several additional "Offices of Instruction" into the form we find in the 1979 Prayer Book, skillfully employing his personal theological insights and amplifications in this work.

As a candidate hears the questions and responds with the answers of the Catechism, the candidate questions their way into the faith.

Today, these expanded and enriched texts still guide the sharing of and instruction in the life of faith that govern the practice of preparing candidates for Baptism and Confirmation. This mutual questioning by catechumen(s) and catechist(s) explains, then, how the Catechism is useful in the first half of our paradox: questioning *in* (into) the faith. As a candidate hears the questions and responds with the answers of the Catechism, the candidate questions their way into the faith.

There remains the other side to the paradox, questioning *of* the faith, which is brought into play by the concluding portion of "Concerning the Catechism": "The second use of this catechism is to provide a brief summary of the Church's teaching for an inquiring stranger who picks

up a Prayer Book" (BCP, 844). Yet it is not only the "inquiring stranger" who might find this summary of the Church's teaching an aid to belief and understanding. I propose that longtime members of the Christian community can also benefit from engaging with this "summary of the Church's teachings."

In this regard, the Catechism borrows the method of the Apostle Paul in his letters to the young churches. Paul often asks questions of his converts to prod them to seek new depths and nuances as they grow in the faith of Christ. In the Epistle to the Romans, Paul presents challenging questions addressing the concerns of Christians in an often hostile world filled with many conflicting "gospels." "Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Romans 6:3). In his own responses to this and other rhetorical questions, Paul provides "answers" from the scriptures, the history of the people of Israel, and his own experience of conversion. His answers parallel the faith life of Christians in every age.

It's important to note that, in his writings, Paul avoids use of the word "faith" as a noun, as a list of intellectual or philosophical propositions to which assent is made. Paul's teaching rather reflects on "faith" as entailing active engagement in a personal relationship with the living God in Christ. For Paul, faith is a verb, a word connoting the inward and outward actions by which we respond to God's initiative of love in bringing us into being and making us a new creation in Jesus Christ.

We often speak colloquially about "believing" in Christ, a word which carries an emphasis on our mental assent to certain *beliefs*. In the Pauline spirit, I would rather coin the term "faith-ing," to describe our active response to the questions and questioning which arise as we are drawn into eternal union with divine Being. Faith is active. The never-ending inquiry of our "faith-ing" asks that we continually return to the fundamental questions of being and life which are so graciously interwoven into the Catechism's teaching. In the Catechism we learn that questioning is not an opposition to faith, but an act of faith. The questions which "An Outline of the Faith" poses are primarily those asked of us and by us as our faith seeks understanding.

The Catechism provides a way into a prayerful and faithful pondering of and responding to ultimate questions in religious belief. Consider how the headings alone provide a theological progression of topics: *Human Nature; God the Father; The Old Covenant; The Ten Commandments; Sin and Redemption; God the Son; The New Covenant; The Creeds; The Holy Spirit; The Holy Scriptures; The Church; The Ministry; Prayer and Worship; The Sacraments; The Christian Hope*.

In its treatment of each of these topics, the Catechism provides a way, a point of departure, for the ongoing dialogue of "the Faith" with the sciences and cultural diversity, with adversity and strife, with dying and death. To take one example: in *Human Nature*, human identity as created

in the image of God is not tied to a particular creation myth/history or to the concept of "original sin." Rather human likeness to God is based on a theological anthropology set in the context of freedom "to make choices: to love, to create, to reason, and to live in harmony with creation and with God." Similarly, in *The Christian Hope*, the concepts of heaven and hell are removed from traditional cosmologies as "places"; instead they are defined as states of relationship based on choice: "By heaven, we mean eternal life in our enjoyment of God; by hell, we mean eternal death in our rejection of God."

In these and myriad ways "An Outline of the Faith" offers a structure and foundation for the prayerful questioning *of* our faith. This resource is one that even the most educated and established Christians might find worthwhile to engage in their own life of prayer and formation. Consider the questions as a starting point for prayer and reflection, a way of opening a dialogue.

Frequent reflective engagement with the Catechism is a worthwhile and rich means for our continuous "faith-ing," as we seek to question, engage, and live out our faith in confident hope and trust.

Q. *What, then, is our assurance as Christians?*

A. *Our assurance as Christians is that nothing, not even death, shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen* (BCP, 862).

spotlight on

Students

Brs. Lucas Hall and Todd Blackham with Gabriel Colombo and Sharon Christner, this year's Monastic Residents. Sharon is a first year student at Harvard Divinity School, and Gabe studies architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

Monasteries and universities, monks and students, have had a long association. Founded deep in the heart of Oxford University, England, SSJE made the quick decision to locate near Harvard University upon its arrival in the United States. Sharing life with students has always been one of the hallmark charisms of our society.

A dozen or so young people and a few monks bathed in the glow of computer screens on a Saturday night might not sound like the most obvious manifestation of that charism; but surprise, delight, and a desire for more were common themes in the feedback about the online student groups hosted by SSJE Brothers during the previous academic year. Sharing life together took on new urgency as well as new forms in the face of remote learning and an absence of physical presence.

Emerging from the restrictions of the pandemic has allowed us to embrace again and more deeply a shared life by welcoming student residents to live alongside us in the Guesthouse of the Monastery. Praying our lives through their eyes enlivens the way of life we've adopted; and the joy of sharing the goodness of this life with young people at such a formative stage is a blessing they can carry for decades to come. Look for plenty of upcoming opportunities to join in and support our work with students, who hold a special place in our hearts.

– Todd Blackham, SSJE

We Brothers appreciate hearing readers' responses to *Cowley*! We invite you to let us know your thoughts on this current issue.

"I have just finished reading and digesting slowly the Fall 2021 issue of COWLEY ("Hospitality") that features that subject on many levels, for example:

1. *On-line worship – waving to people listening in order to pass the Peace;*
2. *Making use of computers and ZOOM to enrich our life in God and Christ; I've never thought of that possibility, being not overly friendly with computers;*
3. *An open door on-line, making ourselves at home under all circumstances; my life has been with manual typewriter and carbon paper, and I'm not a touch typist; rather I'm using the Biblical method, 'Seek and ye shall find.'*
4. *A virtual 'Come and see' visit on line.*

There is so much more that I could say, I being not a bit at ease with computers. Thank you for opening new doors for me in my own pilgrimage. I believe my father was an associate of SSJE; I am one of the Associates of the Order of the Holy Cross and just turned age 92."

– Richard L.

"This is a topic close to my heart, most especially during these past years of turbulence. I reside in Central TX and am a Benedictine oblate with Douai Abbey in Woolhampton, UK as well as a supporter of SSJE. Over the years I have noted how Douai and SSJE share the same spirituality within very similar rules. Benedict had a very sharp focus on hospitality which I believe is what saved Europe 1500 years ago in the midst of the Dark Ages. He charted the way to cities by describing healthy communities as well as physically offering safety and shelter. But there's a still deeper force at play, for which our world is in desperate need. True Hospitality. The hospitality of which Benedict writes is welcoming the 'other.' To openly offer shelter, but, more importantly, to accept them as they are. How much better a world we would have if that was the current practice vs. demeaning or disgracing anyone holding a different view than our own. In contrast, while Benedict describes listening to the youngest first to gain fresh perspective, our world crushes threats to the status quo of those who have the most. All this to say, thank you for offering this topic for our consideration. I am especially hungry for this focus on greater acceptance while living in a community which is working diligently to silence voices. My prayer life and advocacy have never been stronger! "

– Pam H.

We have been given the gift of
life, all of which we are invited
to practice in God's presence.

we need more than

SPIRITUALITY

Curtis Almquist, SSJE

the practice of the presence of God

If the notion of a "spiritual practice" claims your attention, something meaningful is going on within you in your relationship to God. Something has awakened in you a desire to give some of your much-in-demand energy to the life of your spirit. This is wonderful.

And yet, is it *necessary*? In your rhythm of life, if you find yourself struggling to focus sufficient time, on a daily or regular basis, on your relationships with family and friends, a good diet, adequate rest, physical exercise, stimulation of your mind, enjoyment of a hobby and pastime, a volunteer activity … *and* a "spiritual practice," then you may have inadvertently put your relationship with God in a box. If you find yourself "making time for God" in the schedule of your day or week, your practice might be impoverished. It's not that you need to give *more* time to your spiritual practice; but rather that you might need to broaden your sense of what a "spiritual practice" is. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read, "In [God] we live and move and have our being" – all of the time. There is no "spirituality" demarcation.

The concept of spirituality or a spiritual practice does not seem to have been in Jesus' vocabulary. Jesus lived his whole life in God's presence. Whether Jesus was alone in the wilderness or amongst the multitudes; whether he was sharing a meal or healing a wound, whether he was praying or comforting or confronting, whether he was walking or sleeping, Jesus lived the entirety of his life practicing God's presence. And Jesus

gave his life *for us* to live our own life "abundantly." He did not speak of our living an "abundant *spiritual* life"; rather, Jesus gives us the promise of his presence, and power, and provision in the whole of our life – the whole shebang.

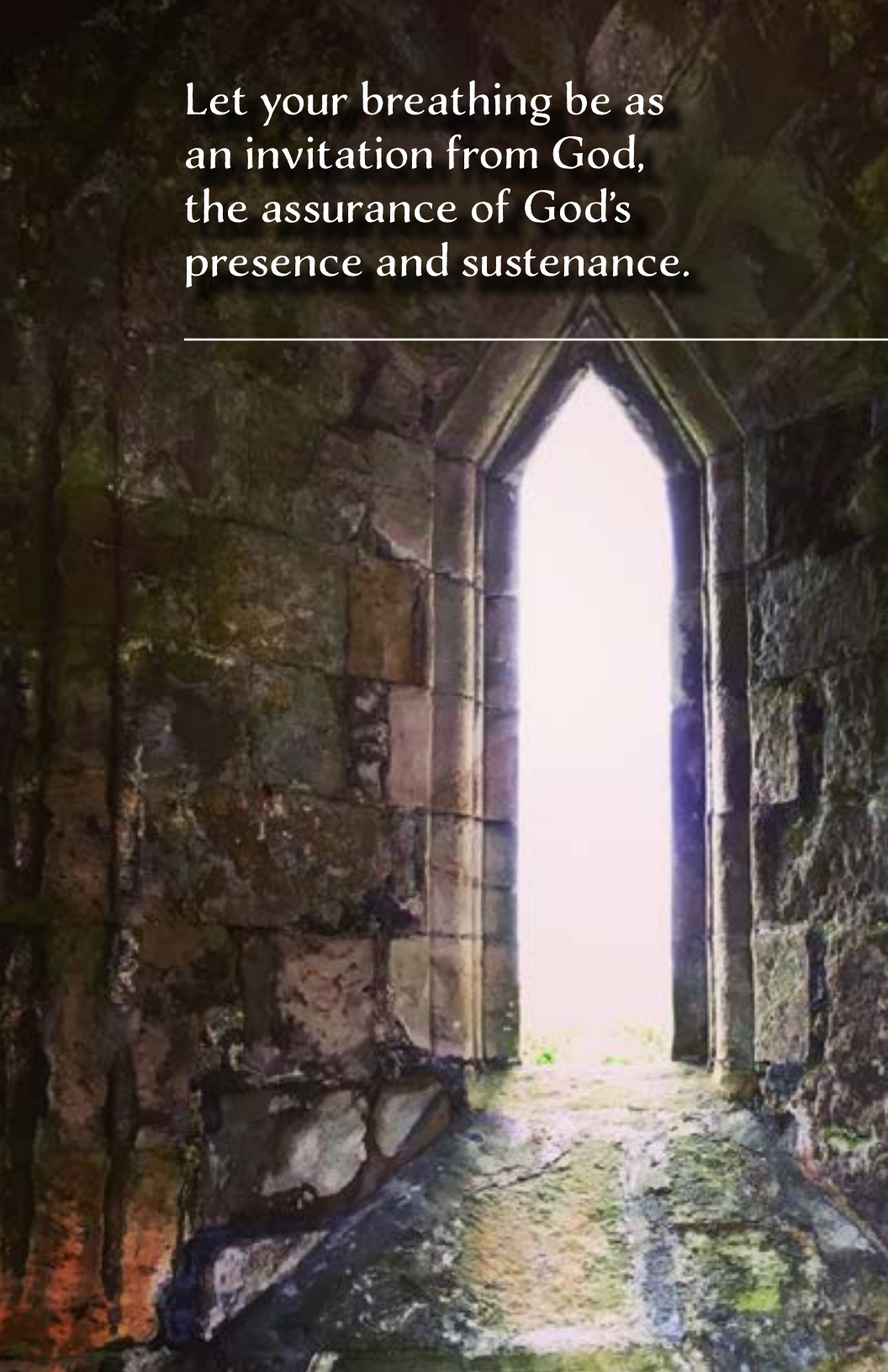
Jesus models for us what this abundant life can look like in his own relationship with the God whom he called "Father." Jesus claimed his own "oneness" with God, and Jesus invites us into a parallel relationship with himself. He prayed to God that we be one with him: "I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one." This unity with God extends into every corner of our lives. It has no limits. The adjective "spiritual" – *spiritual* life or *spiritual* practice – is much too small. We have been given the gift of life, *all* of which we are invited to practice in God's presence.

A French monk of the 17th century is one of my heroes. This is Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection (1614-1691), who had been a young soldier in the Thirty Years War. He survived a near-fatal injury that left him quite crippled and in chronic pain for the rest of his life. He had no formal education and was, by his own estimation and others', quite clumsy. He entered the Carmelite monastery in Paris, where he became the cook.

Brother Lawrence was soon sought after by monks and outsiders alike, not because of his culinary abilities but because of the beauty of his soul. He practiced the whole of his life in the presence of God, and his countenance teemed with God's light, and life, and love. We read in a testimony compiled after his death, that he was never hasty nor loitering, but did each thing in its season, with an even, uninterrupted composure and tranquility of spirit. "The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament." This is not spirituality; this is the practice of the presence of God in all ways and in all times.

Where the term "spirituality" may be of helpful and creative use is in our doing some linguistic mining. The English word "spirituality" comes from the Latin *spiritus*: breath. In the Vulgate – Saint Jerome's fourth-century Latin translation of the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible – the Latin word *spiritus* is used to translate the Hebrew word *ruach* and the Greek word *pneuma*, both translated as "the breath of life, the Spirit of God."

Knowing that the English word "spirituality" draws its pneumatic force from God's Spirit, and that God's Spirit is linguistically described in the scriptures as "breath," the pattern of our own breathing really opens a passageway of experience. We breathe in-and-out, in-and-out, in-and-out, in-and-out… continuously, for as long as God gives us breath. In the beginning – as we read in the Genesis creation account – God breathes into our nostrils, and we become a living being. To be alive on this earth we must breathe unceasingly, and that is as true of the soul as it is of the body. Let your breathing be as an invitation from God, the assurance of


Let your breathing be as
an invitation from God,
the assurance of God's
presence and sustenance.

God's presence and sustenance. Take Jesus at his word that he is with us always, to the end. Within this past year I have companioned several beloved people as they breathed their last breath and died. I have taken great comfort in their being ventilated by the Spirit as they moved nearer into God's presence, from where their life began.

Practice the presence of God. This is the only "spiritual" practice we need. And we need it very deeply, to our core. Let your breathing be a living, ongoing reminder of the closeness of God's presence with you all of the time: in your waking and sleeping, when you are still and when you are on the move; in times of great gladness and in times of great stress; when you are working, or weeping, or laughing, or waiting. Pray your precious life by breathing in God's presence. God is with you always, as close as your breath.

"All things are possible to one who believes, they are less difficult to one who hopes, they are easier to one who loves, and still more easy to one who perseveres in these three virtues."

– Br. Lawrence

Choristers of Saint Augustine's Church

From before the 1870's until the early years of the twentieth century, many of Boston's African American population lived on Beacon Hill, where early members of the Society ministered to them. In 1884 a Sunday School for Black members of St. John's, Bowdoin Street was opened. This was followed shortly afterward with a trade school and finally a church, soon to become known as St. Augustine's Mission. Begun in a rented storefront, the congregation soon outgrew the space, and a new, larger church was built in 1888. This photograph, taken in the 1890's, shows two choirboys standing in the new St. Augustine's Church. By 1908 most of the congregation had moved from Beacon Hill to the West End of Boston. At the same time Boston's expanding subway line cut its way under Beacon Hill, and St. Augustine's was sold and torn down, to make way for the new subway tunnels. In 1908 the congregation joined the congregation of St. Martin's, and a new parish (the Parish of St. Augustine's and St. Martin's) was formed, where members of the Society ministered until the 1970's.

Over the Thanksgiving weekend, the Brothers made a pilgrimage to Beacon Hill. We discovered the various sites of the Mission House, where the community lived, as well as the original sites of the St. Augustine's Trade School, and St. Augustine's Church. As we contemplate the role which risk has played in the history of our community, we are considering ways in which to engage with risk in our ministry today. These two children are silent witnesses to a time when most African American Episcopalians in Boston attended a church served by members of the Society. This photograph presently sits in my prayer corner, along with my icon of the Mother of God. As I gaze at these two images, I often ask: *Lord, what is your invitation to me today?*

James Koester, SSJE

This Epiphany hymn tune was composed in honor of Brother Luke Ditewig's Ordination.

Sean Glenn, SSJE

The Life Laid Down Is Taken Up Again

Text: Carl P. Daw, Jr.
Music: *Ditewig*, Sean Glenn SSJE

12.2.2020
Cambridge, MA

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The Legacy Society *of* SSJE

"On December 11, 2009, at around 9:00 PM, during my first retreat on Memorial Drive, I was 'surprised by joy.' I know that this dramatic, unexpected, and utterly life-changing experience would not have been possible anywhere else, without the gentle, loving, wise, and intelligent guidance of the Brothers there and the powerful spiritual presence that emanates from the very stones themselves. I have included the Society in my will as an expression of my most heartfelt gratitude and as a means of helping to ensure that, far into the future, others may find the joy and peace that I found at the Monastery."

- Christopher Rivers

While our Annual Fund covers the cost of the day-to-day functioning of our life and ministry, SSJE's Legacy Society promises stability for the long term. This undergirding support ensures that the next generation may be reached, inspired, and transformed by the work and witness of SSJE.

For more information please contact legacy@ssje.org

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SSJE Annual Fund Update

James Koester, SSJE

"Our Society's founder, Father Benson, once commented that it was a great privilege and responsibility to watch the slow work of God. He compared it to the work of astronomers. The astronomer must be watchful, not merely taking note of observations, but watching and responding, much as the Magi did. Their watchfulness led them on a journey, in which, ultimately, they met the Christ child. Like the astronomer, the monk is dedicated to a life of watchfulness, which enables us to recognize God's movements and discern a response.

As a community of watchers, we invite you to share with us in this life of watchfulness. We rely on your support and ask you to consider a gift at this time. In that way you can join with us in this ministry of watching and enable us to respond to where God is urging us to go at this time. We thank you for your prayers, your companionship, and your financial support."

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The Rev. Dr. Sarah Coakley led our annual retreat in late August and early September in Cambridge on the **theology of risk** through the lens of particular points and people in SSJE history.

In September, we marked the **Season of Creation** with special collects and intercessions and by celebrating St. Francis on Sunday, October 3.

As a **postulant for ordination, Br. Keith** has served as a hospital chaplain in Clinical Pastoral Education part-time from September to December at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center.

Through September and October, we concluded the Sunday Eucharist with **an invitation to gather in the Guesthouse Garden** for conversation over iced tea and cookies. Our postulant Michael and monastic residents Sharon and Gabe hosted these receptions.

In October, **Br. James** led a retreat for **New Hampshire diocesan clergy** at the St. Methodios Center.

In October, **Br. David** led a workshop about the **freedom of Christ** and how to find freedom from our disordered attachments in life. This is being made into a video series.

Led by **Brs. Geoffrey and Jack**, we **tended our gardens** in Cambridge and at Emery House together. Br. Todd made crabapple jelly from Emery House and with Br. Keith made a pawpaw cake from trees in the enclosure garden.

Over several weeks, **Br. Nicholas** led a small group in contemplative prayer and discussion of the book ***Experiencing God Directly*** by Marshall Davis.

We continue a **monthly gathering for the Fellowship of Saint John** with reflection, questions, and prayer. Recent leaders include Brs. Jonathan, Geoffrey, Jack, and Todd.

Br. Curtis released an **audio series** on **"Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit,"** available on our website.

Br. Luke taught **"Embodied Lament"** using movement and music.

Br. Sean led a small group on "Sufficient Grace: **Praying with the Calling of Illness**."

Br. Jim taught in "Loving the Questions," a **discernment program** for the **Diocese of Western Massachusetts.**

Br. Sean taught on daily prayer for a class at **Boston University.**

In November and December, we began **welcoming local collegians** to join us on Tuesday evenings for the Eucharist, supper, conversation with a few Brothers, and Compline. **Brs. Lucas and Todd** coordinate this outreach to students.

We took a break from reading in the refectory for much of the pandemic. In November we began reading ***Dew of Hermon: Life with the Cowley Fathers at Oxford*** (1938-1947) by Brother Paul (Wildred T. Jenner).

Br. Curtis spoke at **The Summit,** a **gathering of lawyers** in Florida sponsored by Atticus, Inc.

Brs. Luke and Lucas hosted **seminarians** for a retreat at Emery House including an Evensong at sunset outside round a fire and a guided walk. Brothers will invite a

small group for an Advent retreat in Cambridge.

Occupational therapist Zara Harris spent a day teaching the community about **AD/HD in adults**.

Br. Jim is producing **a new podcast series "Angels in the Architecture"** that explores buildings, liturgy, sacraments, colors, and vestments throughout the year.

Br. David led an **Advent Quiet Day** for The Front Porch at St. John's, Tallahassee, Florida, by Zoom.

For **Thanksgiving and Christmas,** we welcomed a small group alongside us in the Guesthouse and for the feast to share the celebration.

Br. James shared guided reflections on **Praying with the Icon of the Nativity** this Christmas.

Formation *in practice*

What does it mean to believe? Belief is not something we think, but something we do: it's the ways we experience God's presence in our life; it's the ways we engage with the scriptures and other sacred stories; it's even the ways we question our faith.

We invite you to plunge deeper into your own assumptions about what it means to believe. Use these questions to spur your reflection & prayer, or in conversation with others.

- What other words are synonymous with "belief" for you?
- Who has inspired belief in your life? What did they do or say that inspired you?
- What actions engage or express your beliefs? How do you feel you are embodying belief?

We see in biblical stories that belief can look a lot like wrestling – as in the Genesis story of Jacob and the angel.

- How might you practice the presence of God in times of pain, suffering, questioning, boredom, sadness, anger, uncertainty . . . as well as joy, excitement, passion?
- Do you experience God in your body, or at certain times and places? What does it feel like to have an embodied experience of belief?

Sometimes belief means leaning into mystery – that which we *cannot* know.

- How comfortable are you with mystery?
- How does the presence of mystery deepen or challenge your journey of belief?
- Read Luke 24:13-35. Is this story true for you? What does it mean for this story to be "true" or not?
- Our founder Richard Meux Benson said: "They [the Magi] had come to Him who was the Way, the Truth, and the Life. None can come to Christ at Bethlehem and go away as they came." How has your belief in Jesus placed you on a new route in your life and faith journey?

ONLY LOVE CAN UNDERSTAND
what God gives and reveals through Jesus.

- SSJE Rule of Life

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