



Ascension Press
The Promise Series

The Promise 2021

*To seek the presence of Jesus Christ in the people, things
and circumstances of life through stability, obedience and conversion of life.*

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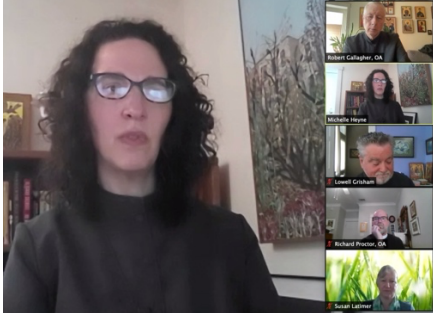
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The 2021 retreat of the Order of the Ascension was done on Zoom





Introduction

Sister Michelle Heyne, OA
Retreat 2021

The following reflections were offered during the 2021 retreat of the Order of the Ascension—instead of meeting together for a week at the guest house of an Episcopal convent in New Jersey, we got together for a couple of hours on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. We said Morning Prayer together and heard a reflection each day on one element of the Benedictine Promise: Stability, Obedience, and Conversion of Life. We received the life profession of Sister Liz. We managed some liturgical and logistical hiccups. We spent some time in guided reflection and some time catching up with one another. We also attended to the Order's common life in Chapter and recognized our Brother Jeremy who has been too ill to be with us. All in all, the typical elements of Christian community, with some joy, some sadness, some humor, some irritation, some mundane business, all grounded in prayer and our commitment to both the Risen Lord and one another.

It's been two years (May of 2019) since the members of the Order of the Ascension have been able to gather in person for annual retreat. In 2020, the pandemic was a couple of months old and we realized we needed to cancel the upcoming retreat. We did so, while also failing to do anything in particular instead. My guess is our not getting together was a function of the extreme anxiety and technology overwhelm many clergy were experiencing. It was also probably due to both a failure of planning, and a failure of imagination of my part—the false choice available at that time seemed to be between doing nothing or creating a terrible electronic facsimile (shall we sit in silence for four hours staring at all those little Zoom heads??) It's a good reminder that when we see only two choices, we're almost certainly wrong.

In choosing to come together in retreat this year, we were reminded of the importance of ongoing connection and of continued reflection in community. We also know this is not ideal. In some ways, meeting over Zoom is quite seductive: retreat only lasts a couple of hours and we can then spend the day as we like; there's no airfare involved; the bed is significantly more comfortable at home than it is at the convent; our spouses and children may be less grouchy because we remain available to them; etc., etc.

But of course, it also means we can sidestep the incarnational realities. We can avoid truly retreating or creating time apart. We can mute the annoying speaker. We can sit passively, even checking emails or texts without anyone being the wiser. We don't need to modulate our voices in common prayer, listening for the rhythm that emerges from the whole—our own rhythm and volume is all that matters. We can avoid the difficulties inherent in making life in community a priority. We can perhaps more easily sidestep our need to seek Christ in all persons when that person is relegated to a couple of inches on a screen and not taking up physical space in our own physical space.

In the end, while we can accept the reality of separation and the need to make do with what is, we also need to accept that Christianity is a communal and earthy, corporeal faith, grounded in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We need one another. We need to pray together, break bread together, and we need at least some of the time to actually touch the wounds of Christ reflected in our brothers and sisters.

None of this is to denigrate the good that has come from our learning how to make use of technology to foster greater contact and inclusion. The Order of the Ascension has been holding monthly Zoom meetings to provide for education, social time, Chapter, and spiritual development. We will continue to do that and we are blessed that this easy option is available. Similarly, most parishes will continue to stream services and make use of technology in new ways, to better enable their mission. This is good and important work.

And, we still need to gather together in three dimensions—to re-learn ways of being together in all our inconvenient, delightful, annoying and life-giving humanness, and to re-learn how to pray in community.

The Benedictine Promise is of great help to all of us in this. Through the stability of our prayer and the people that make up our communities; through the obedience found in our listening to the Holy Spirit, to Scripture, and to one another, we learn what is true, what is needed at this time and in this place, and we open ourselves to holy conversion of life. Sadly, there will not be perfect in this world. We don't get to control much. But we can choose each day to enter more fully into the life of God. I hope these reflections provide some new ways for you to understand Stability, Obedience, and Conversion of Life in your own lives.



Stability

Brother Lowell Grisham, OA
May 3, 2021

Yesterday after lunch, Kathy and I happened across a delightful episode of one of those PBS series that's set in a small village in England, and when it was done, I announced to her, "Well, I need to go upstairs and write a little talk on Stability."

I wish I had a picture of her facial reaction. She cocked her head a bit to the right; her eyes fairly glistened; she let out the slightest, almost inaudible giggle and produced a mile-wide grin that carved the deepest dimples in her cheeks. "So," I said. "You don't think I can write a little talk on Stability?"

"Oh, you'll do fine."

I started walking, but stopped in the next room and returned. "So, you don't think I'm very stable?" I queried.

"No, you're stable," she said matter-of-factly, as she put some placemats into the drawer. I decided it was probably best for me to leave the mystery right there where it lies.

So... when I first began to encounter the Benedictine commitments to stability, obedience, and conversion of life, a person from my childhood came to my memory as a metaphor for stability.

I'm one of those rare ordained birds who was brought up from birth in the Episcopal Church. My home parish of St. Peter's, Oxford, Mississippi was something of an extension of my own home. I felt completely secure in that place of belonging and of being known. The liturgy and life of the church formed in me naturally and deeply from childhood.

Like every other Episcopalian in Oxford, I learned the Church Year in fifth grade from Mrs. Whiteside, the toughest teacher in Sunday School. It was her custom at the end of the class year to give each of her students a handmade cloth bookmark with a different cross on it, and to teach us about the different crosses of our tradition. Mrs. Whiteside gave me a bright green bookmark with a Celtic cross sewn upon it, and I treasured that gift. In 1982, when I went to Jackson, Mississippi, to consider a call as rector for St. Columb's parish, the large Celtic cross overlooking that church seemed like a confirmation blessing from Mrs. Whiteside, and I took that call with a certain gratitude and confidence.

St. Peter's, Oxford, was a nurturing place for planting the faith. Mrs. Truss taught us the hymns in Junior Choir. And my priest, Mr. Gray, became the icon for me of what a faithful pastor is. As Bishop Duncan M. Gray, Jr., he later ordained me deacon and priest. That church was a place of belonging and stability for me as a child, where I felt loved and valued. Except for... Miss Dolly Falkner.

She was John Falkner's wife; he was a modestly successful author and brother of William Faulkner. Miss Dolly stood ramrod straight, a slim, stern Southern lady, always meticulously dressed, usually with gloves and

generally wearing a hat. Always there, on the aisle, second pew, Epistle side. And... well, I got the feeling she did not approve of children.

I remember one day running with a shriek around a corner into the main hall of the education building and freezing suddenly at the sight of Miss Dolly looking down upon me with utter scorn and dismay. I did not want to be on her radar. In Miss Dolly's presence, I prayed to be like a submarine, silent and invisible.

Well, I grew up, and eventually St. Peter's sent me to seminary. Three years in New York, and I returned home to be ordained deacon. It was like returning to a nurturing womb, warm with love and welcome and pride. The nave was packed with all of the people of my childhood and youth, all of the other parents and extended family that had raised me. I was so happy. Walking down that aisle was like walking through a tunnel of familial love. As I neared the chancel steps, I remember being struck at how small the place seemed after being in the big city. That chancel rail was so low!? I used to be able to stand up behind it completely hidden in my angel's costume for the Christmas pageant.

I processed to my assigned place, and turned around joyfully seeing the happy faces of my past. And then my eyes went to ...the second row, Epistle side, on the aisle, right there where she could see me. Miss Dolly! And, maybe I imagined it, but I thought she looked happy.

That's when I just about lost it. I had to turn toward the altar to catch my breath and wipe my eyes. Her presence touched me like nothing else on that ordination day. She was there. She had always been there. All my life, Miss Dolly had been there in her place in church – second row, aisle, Epistle side. Faithful. Rock steady. Predictable.

When I encountered the Benedictine promises, Miss Dolly became for me the metaphor for stability. Just show up.

But lately, that notion has lost some of its luster. Or maybe it's just shifted a bit for me. Just showing up isn't quite enough. Because sometimes there is so little of me that is really there. I'm present, okay, but I'm thinking about what's next. Or I'm making up something I want to write, or thinking about some way to straighten out something or somebody. Especially me.

So lately, I'm thinking of stability more in terms of what the old spirituality called "recollection." It is recalling that God is here, now. Fully, completely. In the present moment, in the present circumstances. God is not more in the past or in the future or in some special place and time than God is, right here, right now. You recollect Anthony Bloom's words from our OA Rule, "You do not need to seek [God] elsewhere, ...[God] is here, and if you do not find [God] here it is useless to go and search for [God] elsewhere because it is not God who is absent from us, it is we who are absent from [God]."

So I'm paying more attention to my breath. On my intake of breath, I like to imagine I hear God's voice speaking to me personally, saying, "Lowell, I love you," as I receive the gift of life and breath from a loving Creator. And as I breathe out, I hear my own voice responding, "Dear God, I love you too," returning that gift of life with gratitude.

And I'm trying to accept everything in the present moment as a gift from God, the sacrament of the present moment. Even the rotten stuff that I would prefer to avoid is God's presence, if the cross is to have any personal meaning in our lives.

I'm also trying to imagine God experiencing human life through me. It's the only unique thing I can give God, and I think it makes God happy to live human life through me, even when I'm shrieking and running down the hall.

God is always right here. Right now. Second row, epistle side on the aisle, just in the corner of my vision. Showing up. God is always showing up. And smiling. Divine eyes, glistening with love like a mile-wide grin. Hoping. Encouraging. Breathing life into each of moment. Inviting our best effort. "Oh, you'll do fine."

"So, God. Do you think I'm very stable?"

"Oh Lowell. [*slight giggle*] Don't worry about it. Just breathe."



Obedience

Brother Scott Benhase, OA
May 4, 2021

The first degree of humility is obedience without delay. - Rule of St. Benedict

The Bible story begins with disobedience, not obedience. God instructs Adam & Eve to eat anything they want in Eden with one exception: the fruit of one tree. Genesis doesn't specify how long it was between God's command and Adam & Eve's disobedience. My hunch it was at best a few hours. How long was Moses on the mountain top before the Israelites were fashioning a golden calf? Did David delay long once he spied Bathsheba on her roof? Disobedience, it seems, comes naturally.

Benedict knew that if a community gathered around the truth of God in Christ were to be faithful, then they needed to learn obedience. But he didn't advocate a blind obedience to capricious orders. He understood obedience as a response to God's grace. In Chapter 3 of the Rule, Benedict says the whole community should be called together to discern a course of action. He insists everyone should be heard, even the youngest, "for the Lord often reveals to the younger what is best." After hearing from all, the abbot discerns what reflects "prudence and justice." But even this isn't arbitrary. The abbot, after all, is also subject to the Rule.

Benedict understood how central obedience was to Christian community. As our own Rule tells us: *It is our communion with one another that creates the context for holy obedience. In communion, listening, and discernment, we seek God's will. In communion, hope, and decision we seek to obey and act. We need an obedience that is not grudgingly given, that does not foster, as Benedict wrote, "a grumbling in our hearts," but rather an obedience that intentionally places us vulnerably open to the communion of saints. This is how we bear the seal of Him who died.*

We who exercise church leadership are called to such obedience. Benedict didn't expect perfection. He was clear-eyed about human frailty. Yet, he stated no one would be a leader who didn't first demonstrate a commitment toward obedience in their own life. One can't expect obedience from others without first exemplifying it in one's life.

When parishioners see us giving ourselves to obedience then they're invited to do likewise. The opposite is also true: when they see us leading in ways where obedience is held loosely or ignored, then they'll probably follow suit. Yet, when we practice obedience, trust grows in our leadership and that's our strongest currency in the parish. Trust takes years to develop, but in a few moments, it can be done in through our disobedience. Our modeling obedience builds trust in the people we lead. They might disagree with us, they might even be angered by a sermon we preach, or position we take on an issue, but they will trust us if we model the practice of listening to God's word, to the Church's prayers, and to our neighbor's voices.

When I was first ordained, I thought obedience to God would come through grand, spiritual things. But in riffing on Keble's phrase the "trivial round," I learned the mundane things of parish life can have a profound effect on faithfulness. In Jesus' words: "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much (Luke 10:16)."

Parish life can be hectic. The urgent can distort the important. The problem in front of us at one moment can mask the larger vision to which God may be calling. Obedience then serves as a great gift to us. It slows us down because it requires listening on so many levels: to Scripture, to our prayerful cries, and to our neighbors' longings. We will often have to insist upon such obedience in the community, because the church like so much in our culture desires the quick, tweet-like answers.

Human nature hasn't changed since Benedict's time. Today, however, we know more about the complexities of the human brain. Research shows that people who believe they're experts on a particular topic tend to become rigidly unwilling to listen to alternative points of view, even if they aren't the experts they believe they are. This is called "Belief Perseverance," the tendency to stay with a particular belief even when evidence suggests otherwise. These insights frame for us just how hard it is to be obedient. Our frames of reference are distorted by what Francis Spuffurd calls the "human propensity to f**k things up (*hptftu*). I engage regularly in *hptftu*. I'd like to think because I've worked so hard on my emotional intelligence; because I'm so tuned into my implicit bias and belief perseverance, that I'd be above all this. Since I know what's happening inside of me, then none of this would apply to me. Nope. I know my own tendency when other people challenge some belief I hold. Rather than exercising Benedictine obedience, listening deeply, I often ignore them and begin to form a rebuttal to their position. It's a lifetime spiritual practice to do otherwise.

Jon Katz in his book, *Running to the Mountain*, tells of his midlife crisis. He didn't belong to any faith tradition, but he was experiencing a spiritual longing to discern a greater purpose in life. So, he decided to buy a cabin on a remote mountain in upstate New York, live there, and listen to his life. To do this, he left his spouse, teenaged daughter, and his home in suburban New Jersey. He ran to the mountain with the collected works of Thomas Merton and his two Labrador Retrievers, Julius & Stanley. Life on the mountain was more challenging than he had expected with a bitterly cold winter, a mice infestation in his cabin, and his personal isolation. He also discovered a truth about his dogs. He'd always seen Stanley & Julius as well trained. In suburbia they were models of obedience. He could take them walking off-leash on the hiking trails near his home and they'd always stay by his side. But on the mountain, he discovered they'd run after anything that held the promise of being food. He'd call them, but they wouldn't come. This was a great shock to Katz. His dogs had become different animals once they were removed from their disciplined context.

Humans, to be sure, aren't Labrador Retrievers. The Bible does call us sheep, but we have enough in common with both for this story to resonate. We know when we stop listening to God in the Scriptures, in the prayers of the Church, and in the voice of our neighbor, we often stumble into disobedience and begin to lose touch with our identity and purpose in Christ. We hear what we want to hear and disregard the rest, as Simon & Garfunkel sang in *The Boxer*.

Clergy are just as susceptible to disobedience as anyone else. The voices bombarding us daily aren't often the voice of grace. More often, they're the voices of envy, shame, or of workaholic self-justification. When the voices we listen to are not the voice of the God who declares unmerited grace, then we tend to create God in our own image. We'd all like a god who looks and acts like us, who shares our prejudices, proclivities, and politics. Thankfully, God won't cooperate with us.

The most powerful prophylactic against disobedience is a listening soul open to the thrust of grace in their lives, who have the gift of people around them who love them enough to tell them the truth. Benedict knew that to be true. And, in our hearts, we know it's true as well. It just seems like we need to relearn it each day.



Conversion of Life

Brother Robert Gallagher, OA
May 5, 2021

You can only be saved by Jesus Christ.

If you want to understand conversion of life, the goal of it, the means of it, you start there. You begin with remembering Jesus Christ. You continue with the knowledge, the stance, that you can only be saved by Jesus Christ.

Identity

You are not saved by being white, or Black, or Asian. You're not saved by being cis or trans, by being straight or gay. You are not saved by the NRA or the Brady Campaign. You are saved by Jesus Christ.

Three people. Friends, maybe 4 or 5 circles out.

A 60-year-old Black woman. When she's on Zoom, she has a Black Lives Matter poster on the wall behind her. She's the chair of the African American Advisory Council of the police department. She's played a role in improving police practices. She's helped recruit and support an increased number of Black officers. And her sense of truth and justice have had her in a struggle with the defund-the-police city council.

An amateur crossdresser porn model. On how she deals with people who get aggressive or nasty with her -- "Some people are kinda quirky and come off in a weird way, but if I know that's how they are, I just roll with it. I'm never aggressive with anybody ... only defensive if attacked. And never ever mean. ... I'm an open book and strive to always be honest and forthcoming here, because it's just who I am."

A Marine Corps and civilian firearms instructor. He works to reduce the number of firearms deaths by suicide. He had learned that 60% of deaths by firearms were suicides. 37% murder (mostly around drugs, gangs, and domestic abuse) and 3% other causes.¹ His commitment to protect others has him working alongside gun safety supporters to reduce the number of suicides.

Each person is a mix of given and chosen identities. Each must cope with various groups of people angry about their identity and the related behaviors. For example, the Black woman must deal with the hate of white racists as well as the extreme disdain of more "progressive" whites and Blacks.

¹ In 2017, six-in-ten gun-related deaths in the U.S. were suicides (23,854), while 37% were murders (14,542), according to the CDC. The remainder were unintentional (486), involved law enforcement (553) or had undetermined circumstances (338). Public perception generally underestimates the number of suicides giving more attention to mass shootings. Depending on which definition used the number killed in mass shootings is relatively small, in 85 or 373 in 2018. Pew Research Center - <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/16/what-the-data-says-about-gun-deaths-in-the-u-s/>

Each person, someplace along the line, decided that their primary identity was a stance that transcended some other true part of who they are. They took a stance of love that showed itself in striving for truth and justice, kindness and compassion, and protecting human life.

I remember as a child hearing my father comment on the new enthusiasm of his siblings about being Irish-American. A world of songs, dances, jokes, and legend. Dad said, "It's enough for me to be an American." It wasn't so much a dismissal of their new interest as it was about how he defined himself by something more central. Something he had fought for, seen others die for, and that he wanted in a quiet way, to live for.

Children of God

All of us make decisions about our identity. We give ourselves to a uniqueness, a web of characteristics that defines us. For us in the Order we have a particular central identity. One that infuses and drives all the other elements of who we are. You might think of this too as a set of concentric circles.

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. (1 John 3:1a)

³for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. (Colossians 3:3-4)

For us, you and me, the primary identity is that we are children of God (you are free to phrase it differently). It's the central circle. Given by grace and sacramentally secured in baptism. It is our life and witness in a world that has a weak grip on Reality.

Identity seems to be one of the driving anxieties of our time. A kind of obsession. The more uncertainly we feel about being simply a child of God, the more desperate and insistent we seem to get about all sorts of lesser identities. And that obsession takes us into a place and onto pathway. At the moment, many people seem to seek places and paths of resentment and impatience. We want vindication.

Vindication

Often bound up with the issue of identity is our desire for vindication. A desire for vindication that overrides our desire for community, reconciliation, and love. We are desperate to be right. Even we, who like to think we know what's going on, and believe that at the center is our being a child of God, even we seek being right and long for vindication.

Michelle and I walk two times a week. Every so often we'll have a three-minute argument over who is right about some fact or how we recall an event some months earlier. We get very certain and insistent.

We all seek vindication. In big ways and small ways.

Priests and laity forced from parishes want to hear that what was done to them wasn't right. Black Americans want to hear that their anger is justified. White Americans want to hear that they are good people. It seems like everyone wants total acceptance and no one is willing to offer that to everyone else.

We are a nation tired, worn out by all the blame and accusation. The blame and accusation heaped upon us. Even the blame and accusation we heap upon others

And what is our vindication?

The psalmist wrote,

*But at my vindication I shall see your face; *
when I awake, I shall be satisfied, behold in your likeness (Ps 17:16)*

The psalmist pleads innocence, wants God to look for justice, and claims he has been faithful to the law. He has been assaulted by the wicked and pressed hard. He wants the Lord to bring them down, to deliver him. We cry out “Give us justice as we understand it. Let us know that what we have suffered was wrong and that those responsible will be judged. Bless our views, our way of seeing things.” And God responds, “I love you. See my face.” God is so disappointing sometimes!

Conversion of life

And finally, what we are offered isn't justice or justification. What we receive is the face of God. And we are offered the path of conversion of life.

I must be ready to pick myself up, and start all over again in a pattern of growth which will not end until the day of my final dying. And all the time the journey is based on that Gospel paradox of losing life and finding it. ...my goal is Christ.
Esther deWaal

Our contemplation begins with fact and truth. We each have many identities that fail to save us. We each carry our brittleness, fear, and resentments as useless baggage.

My primary identity is that I am a child of God, beloved by God, and by the grace of God a member of the Body of Christ which offers me a pathway. A life of sacramental grace, daily common prayer, and routine contemplation. There is a second range of identity that is all wrapped around the first. All about guiding me on that pathway of grace. I am a priest, parish development practitioner, a Professed Member of the Order of the Ascension, and a friend of Michelle Heyne. And outside that are the lesser identities. All acceptable. Unless they try to move to the center.

Conversion of life is both a place and a pathway. We decide to stand in a particular place. We decide to set out on a specific pathway. We accept the center, and we decide what goes around that to live and express it, to support and guard it.

we know that we abide in him and he in us ... God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. (I John: 4:13 and 16b)

We are in a world, and a church, desperate for change. That's always a dangerous time. Individuals and society are inclined to go off the rails at such moments. Our understanding of the change, the conversion, that is needed is often driven our lesser identities, our grievances, and our desire for vindication. Yet it remains that our conversion, and our pathway, have one end—we are saved by Jesus Christ—and one route—we lose life to find life.