

Spirituality Shoppe Newsletter

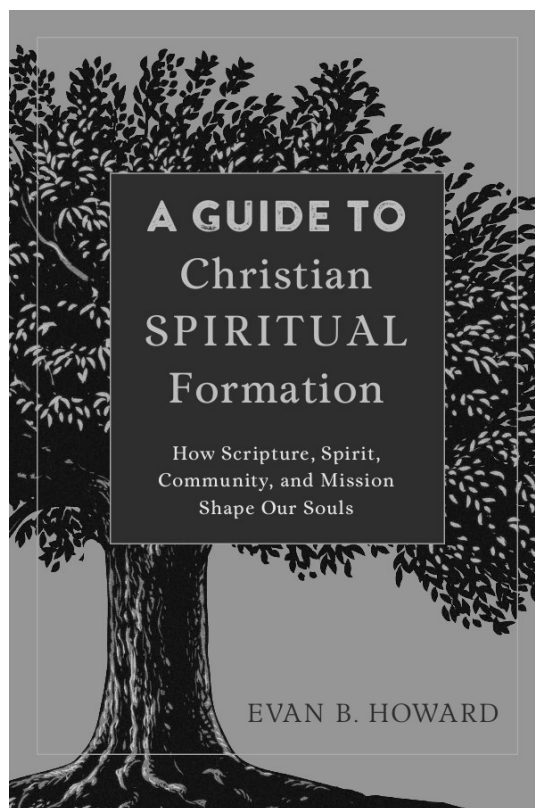
Volume 22 No.2

June, 2018

It is a lovely, clear-blue-sky day here in Montrose. But then most days are like that this year. It is lovely -- and scary. We have already had some serious fire damage on the Western Slope of Colorado and locals are concerned about this tinder box on which we live. Lack of spring runoff has also made this the driest year on the Uncompahgre Plateau that folks can remember. This means that the ranches are in trouble. The pasture on our ranch is very small and is already drying up. The streams that would normally water the cattle are not running. Thankfully, the property has a few underground springs flowing, though at a less-than-usual level. The rancher who leases our land let his cattle out onto the pastures a couple of weeks ago in hopes that some rain may fall and provide what is needed for a ranching season. We trust God both in bounty and in drought but there are lessons to learn in each of these seasons. Right?

When I last wrote (February) I was in the middle of teaching a local class on *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation* and organizing books and files and contacts (I still am organizing). I finished that class and then went on to teach my usual class at Fuller Theological Seminary on “Monasticism(s) Old and New.” The Fuller class was especially rich. It was an anointed group of students. More than one student expressed sincere gratitude for their life-changing experience of participating in this class. In the end, some of the students gave me good support for some of my ideas regarding reworking this material for non-seminary folks. I look forward to seeing how this next season plays out.

I was able – until ranch work, a wedding (our daughter Terese is now married!!!), guests, and then providing music for two funerals required my attention – to continue my studies in medieval monasticism and the relationship of monasticism to socio-political engagement. Indeed, now that some of the dust has cleared, I have returned to those studies with



renewed determination. A number of years ago I mentioned to Cheri that perhaps the primary element on my life “bucket list” is writing a theology of new monasticism. It is a worthy project and one which I am uniquely equipped to accomplish. But this kind of project requires many years of faithful effort. Please pray that I run my race well.



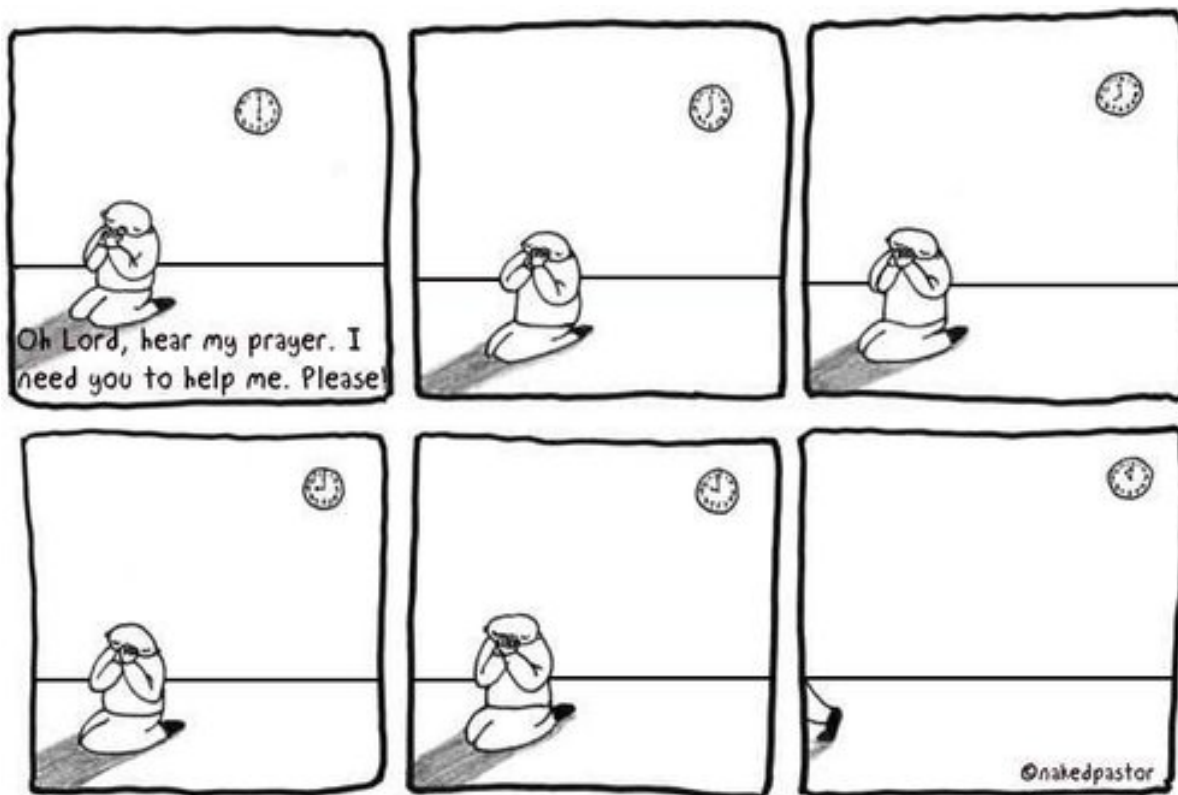
I have also given attention this past month to my website (spiritualityshoppe.org). I, along with my website manager, have taken steps to secure the site for international communication. We also are in the final stages of redesigning the site to make it more attractive and user-friendly. We all (Evan, the Spirituality Shoppe board of directors, the web designer, other random conversation partners) feel that the first step in Spirituality Shoppe’s next step forward is to develop a good system for resource delivery. Although we have a lot of fun ideas for new resources and have received a number of requests, we do not know just yet what resources to prioritize. There is talk of new videos, audio recordings, online classes, even a creative “game” of spiritual formation. But what all of these require is an attractive, easy to use website that governs the delivery of all this material. By the time you receive this Newsletter I suspect you will be able to subscribe to the website. Go to spiritualityshoppe.org, look on the home page for the subscription form and you will be able to receive notifications when new content is added to the site.

The Ministry of Intercession: Medieval Monastic Style



So why is it I am studying an obscure topic like medieval monasticism? Because I think we have much to learn from the various expressions of what is termed “religious life” in the Middle Ages. In our NewsLetter this month I want to give you one example of medieval monastic wisdom: their approach to the ministry of intercession.

I have long been inspired by, and at times drawn towards, a ministry of intercession. Yet even in writing this sentence I feel a bit embarrassed. I hardly ever sign up for the “prayer team” which offers to be available to pray with people for healing or other concerns. I am shy to voice my prayers in prayer gatherings. When I am at home in my prayer cell I am often more confused than confident during my times of “closet prayers” for others. But still I can sense the call. I read stories of prayer warriors like Rees Howells (see *Rees Howells: Intercessor*) or I read guides to intercession like Dutch Sheets’ *Intercessory Prayer: How God Can Use Your Prayers to Move Heaven and Earth* and I am sincerely moved. I wish only . . .



So often, however, it just doesn't seem to “work” for me. I pray and neither heaven nor earth move—as least as far as I can tell. I try to muster up the “passion” in my prayers like I see in so many others, but it's just not real. I can identify intellectually and somewhat empathetically with the people for whom I pray, but honestly it feels pretty lame. And yet. . .

That's the problem. There is always “and yet.” I just can't seem to leave it. And every once in a while there is this droplet from heaven and a prayer is answered—clearly answered. You know, more than just funny

circumstances. Furthermore—and perhaps more significant still—there are what I am calling my *long term* answers to prayer. I have prayed for some big things for many years—developments of spiritual formation in the church, a rise in new monastic expressions, the integration of different streams in the body of Christ, and so on—and I now am seeing the answers to those prayers. I could just attribute all this to “trends,” but I am not sure that would be fair. I may not be the only one who prayed about this, but I was burdened to pray for a long time and now I see a different world. Come on, Evan, let’s give God some credit, OK?

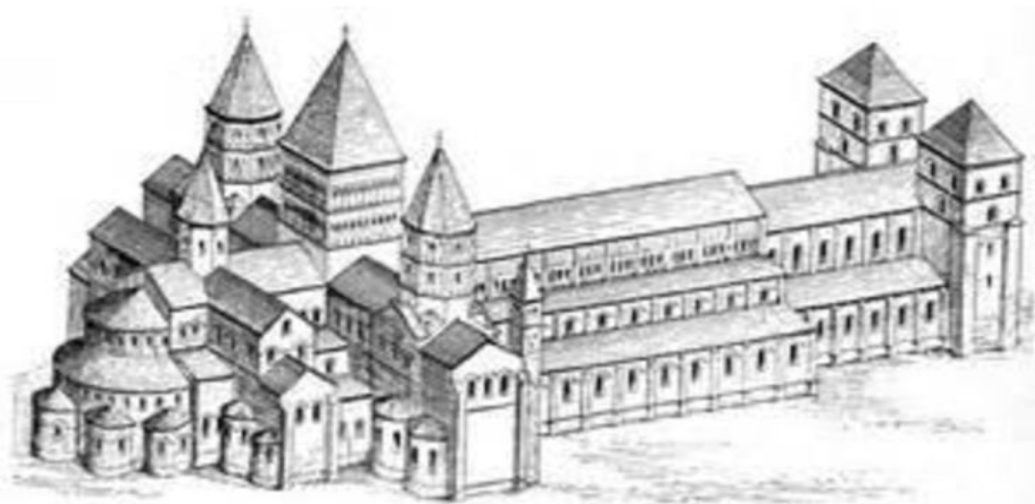
So, in short, I am burdened to hold up individuals and the Church in prayer, even though I can’t seem to “get my act together” around this ministry of being an intercessor. Perhaps, I ask myself, I have just not invested myself deeply enough into the time or the methodology of some model of intercession. Perhaps I am old and dry and full of thorns which are choking out the fruit from my prayer-branches. You probably know just as well as I those accusations (or truths?) that Satan uses to beat us with.

Of late, however, I have found encouragement from an odd place, from tenth and eleventh century European monasticism. By the end of the ninth century wars had left Europe fragmented and many monasteries were given over to the control of nobility that were more interested in exploiting land and labor than in the pursuit of God. Under the influences of Otto I (912-973) and a revival movement within some monastic communities, interest grew in the development of expressions which, as early monastic documents stated, were to be free from “outside” control. The hope was to establish a monastery which would be free to govern its own affairs according to the Rule of Benedict without undue interference from secular princes or church hierarchy. This hope was fulfilled in the foundation of the monastery of Cluny in Burgandy.

Author C. H. Lawrence tells the story of the monastery’s beginnings: "In 909, when Duke William III of Aquitaine decided to found a monastery on his Burgundian estates, he sought the advice of Abbot Berno. Duke and abbot set off together to reconnoitre a suitable spot, and Berno chose the richly wooded valley of Cluny. William protested that the site was his favourite hunting ground, but Berno was inexorable: 'which will serve you better at the Judgment, O Duke, the prayers of monks or the baying of hounds?' So William yielded, and Berno became the first abbot of the new foundation." The monastery of Cluny was established with explicit freedom from the influence of princes or bishops. Furthermore, William charged the monks, in the charter through which he deeded the land to the foundation of the monastery, “that the venerable house of prayer there may be faithfully filled with prayers and supplications . . . and that prayers, requests, and entreaties may be assiduously addressed both for me and for all those . . .”



From its inception, the monastery of Cluny was charged with a ministry of intercession. In time, Cluny and the many monasteries that followed in its path (and indeed, society as a whole) began to see monastic prayer as part of an essential threefold social fabric. The rulers fought for the common good, the laborers worked for the common good, and the nuns and monks prayed for the common good. We today, in our modern disenchanting perspective have a hard time comprehending how important villages and kingdoms saw the role of monastic prayer. One observer wrote of Cluny that “of all monasteries in the Latin world Cluny’s power to free souls from the power of demons is the strongest. The frequency of the performance of the Mass is so powerful there that hardly a day goes by on which their sacred business does not tear souls away from the power of evil spirits.” People saw the Clunaic form of monastic prayer as spiritual warfare, holding the enemy at bay, freeing people for salvation, and preserving the kingdom of God in the land. Clearly this is a ministry of intercession, a ministry that persevered for at least two centuries in Cluny and much further in their daughter monasteries.



Abbatiale de Cluny- Benedictine monastery, founded in 910

- Sparked a new seriousness about the faith and the Church
- Adhered to a holy lifestyle
- Most of building destroyed during French Revolution

And yet – and now we are getting closer to my point – there is little description of any powerful *experience* or *method* of intercessory prayer. I have read accounts of the monasteries and I find little descriptions of their inner

prayer life, particularly of the passion of their intercessions such as are used to describe the pleadings of Catherine of Siena a couple of centuries later. You just don't read about their about their approach to intercessory prayer. Well, except one thing – the liturgies. What we do read are descriptions of the prayer rituals that governed their intercessions. We find the language of prayers, the litanies of names and the Scriptural passages which are invoked in their petitions. And mostly we learn *when* they prayed. *Often*. Really often. So often, in fact that they were later accused—and probably for good reason—of straying from their guide, the Rule of Benedict. But I believe that part of the reason for this is that they saw themselves as playing an important role in society. And this role was not fulfilled through any particular experience, but merely through the faithful and regular performance of their prayers. Their faith was placed in God through the vehicle of the simple act of prayer: offered again and again, day after day, for the sake of God's people. It had to get boring at times. I have prayed with monks in monasteries at 4:00am before. Sometimes it is really boring. Yet when we look at the history, over two centuries Europe became more Christian than it had ever been before.

Now that is worth considering.

When I was in one of my worst seasons of doubt and drought I read a passage from theologian Karl Barth's little book on prayer. "Perhaps we doubt the sincerity of our prayer and the worth of our request. But one thing is beyond doubt: it is the answer that God gives. Our prayers are weak and poor. Nevertheless, what matters is not that our prayers be forceful, but that God listens to them. That is why we pray." Those four sentences gave me the strength to keep going, to keep praying, even when I wasn't sure I was doing anything of value.

What if I see my place as an intercessor not as one who spontaneously "moves mountains" or heals people right on the spot, but rather one who—in solidarity with many others—holds the world before the presence of God. What if I view my experience of intercession not in light of the emotions or results of a few hours or even a

week, but over years and years, perhaps more like the apostle John writes: "Another angel, who had a golden censor came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censor, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake." (Revelation 8:3-5) My prayer? Just one more pinch of incense – that ends up producing thunder, lightning, and earthquakes.



I am ready to choose a practice of intercession. Most mornings I go to my prayer spot and recite the Lord's Prayer and a number of other prayers for individuals and groups. Sometimes I sit and just think about them. But I choose day after day to offer my meager prayers of intercession. And I am encouraged by the intercessory ministry of the Clunaic monasteries. And so each day I remind myself why I pray:

"We come here to offer our prayers, God, because of You, even though we will never fully understand You here on earth. You are the Creator who set the natural laws in place, and yet at times You choose to intervene in human history by transcending those laws. You bend yourself to our prayers at times when we plead, and yet at other times You wait for centuries to respond to the cry of your people. You predict, and even plan, the future, and yet somehow you leave us free to choose--usually. You promise to answer our prayers and then give us reasons why our prayers are not answered--at times. Scripture and tradition give us confidence to trust *that* You will be actively present in every situation of life, and yet neither gives us any certainty regarding *how* You will be present. Your knowledge is ultimately unknowable and so we readily admit that we do not know how we ought to pray. We realize that our freedom and choices are exercised within Yours. We acknowledge the reality--and the logical inevitability--of evil, and yet we choose to believe that Your Goodness and Love are so great that this present evil is perhaps better understood as a mere absence of Your Beauty. We acknowledge the complex creativity of Your world, O Creator. Your space and Your time are not our space, our time. And yet in Your grace You reveal Yourself to us, insofar as we are able to perceive You in Your Holiness. Holy, Holy, Holy Lord. We pray to You, not because of who we are, but because of who You are and we trust that the Spirit, who intercedes according to God, will intercede in the midst of our weakness with sighs too deep for words."

The Lord be with you

May our God--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--make all things new in your life and in the lives of those you love.