



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Br Dunstan Holms: “On His Call”

Lent 2010

As I began to think about what I would say tonight, I hesitated. Although I have always been the kind of person who feels almost too much, it is not always easy for me to articulate those feelings to other people, especially when they pertain to matters of religion or to my spiritual life. It seems to me that what is intimate between the soul and God is personal and loses its singular beauty if revealed outside the discretion of a spiritual friend, rather like a perfume that loses its fragrance if opened too many times. Most of you probably do not know me, but I am happy to try and share some of my own story with you this evening.

I am not from Missouri, but was born and raised in Fairfield, Connecticut, a place, which is and always will be very dear to me. When I think of my home, for some reason I always remember it in the fall: the crisp autumn air, the beautiful foliage, the colonial and Victorian houses around the town green, the 17th century Congregational church in Greenfield Hill and of course the smell of the sea breeze from the beach. Yes, New England will always be very dear to me, but most especially because it is where those I most cherish still live, and so this seems like a good place to begin my story.

I was born in 1975, the second of three sons. My baptismal name was Matthew Scott. My family was my whole world as I grew up. I felt safe at home and never wanted to be far away from it. My world consisted of my parents, my brothers, two sets of aunts and uncles, my paternal grandparents and our pets. We all lived close together and spent many happy hours together. It would take too long to recount all our memories here, but I assure you, I remember them all and treasure each of them in my heart, simple things like waiting with mom on the front steps for dad to come home from work, how dad used to give us our baths at night and how nice it felt to be tucked into bed afterwards, all nice and clean with the smell of fresh sheets under our damp hair, or how mom loved to sing and dance as she worked in the house and when she used to try to get me to dance, I would just stand there holding her hands, and she would say laughing, “he dances just like his father.” I remember our sandbox in the backyard and how I used to sit on the counter while grandma worked in the kitchen. I felt so loved. I was blessed to



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be raised in such a loving home. Yes, I felt safe and most happy when I was with my family, and when I was not home, I was painfully shy. We were working class and did not need money or material things to be happy. For us happiness was found in time well spent together. It was here where God planted the seeds of faith and charity in my heart. It was here where I was first taught to love God and my neighbor as myself.

As far back as I remember, I have always had a close relationship with God. His presence was ever near, and at every moment, no matter where I was or what I was doing, I knew God was with me. I shared all my thoughts with him and gave him my heart.

Even in grade school, I felt drawn to pray and to be alone with God. I made a little altar in my room where I could do this, and I put a little pillow on the floor in front of it. I can see it still, a little latch hook pillow with a white sheep, a red bow around its neck, and a green background. On the altar, I put a blue cloth, my favorite color, a small statue of our Blessed Mother holding the Infant Jesus, which was a Christmas gift from my religion school teacher, two candles and several holy images. Crucifixes tended to frighten me at that time, and I shied away from looking at them so I did not have one there. But I loved our Lady very much and had many images of her. I would even save my lunch money to buy them.

As I mentioned at the beginning, I have always felt that spiritual matters are private and, thus, even as a child, when I wanted to pray, I would go up to my room in secret, as the Gospel says, and pray. I would kneel on my pillow in front of the little altar and say a rosary or just spend time with our Lord and Blessed Mother. I loved saying the rosary and would fall asleep saying it in bed each night. Gramma said her rosary every night too, and she taught me how to pray it. My favorite mysteries were the joyful ones, then the Glorious mysteries because of our Lady's Assumption and Coronation. I loved the saints, and I loved reading about their lives in the secret of my room from my encyclopedias.

I lived a very sheltered life in our home. My parents loved us and created a home where my brothers and I were shielded from the worries of the world and could be innocent. I was always sensitive, shy and of a nature that wanted to please others and that, of course, included God. I wanted to be good and do what was right in his eyes.



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This was a very happy time for me. Life was simple, pure and happy. I felt loved and close to God. I loved the Lord and wanted to serve him well.

The happy simplicity of my childhood would fade away slowly as adolescence approached, a not so happy time for me. I was not ready for the changes that would occur during those years. I had always attended public school, and life suddenly became more complicated. Because it had always been my desire to be good and to do what was pleasing to God, I was afraid. I was afraid of finding sin and wanted life to remain as it had been before. My attempts to lead a Catholic life in a secular school made me vulnerable to the cruelty of my peers, and those who did not punish me for this, put me on a pedestal and expected me to be perfect. I could please no one. One small example that might seem trivial to us now as adults, but was nevertheless very painful for me as a child, was that I never used profane language because I knew it was wrong and offensive to our Lord. My classmates set to taunting me to swear, which I would not do and thus incurred their mockery. Like my mother, I have always been sensitive and governed by my feelings, but like my father, I am quiet and reserved and do not express them easily. I tended to hold things in like a ship that takes in water until it capsizes and sinks, quietly accepting whatever came my way without thinking of defending myself. To me even just anger and self-defense seemed contrary to what the Lord asked of me. I wanted to be good to everyone, even those who hurt me. During those years, I found great comfort in the stories of St Peter on the sea such as when our Lord chided Peter for not trusting in him when a storm threatened his boat or when Peter tried to walk to Christ on the waves. It was only when Peter took his gaze off Christ that he began to sink into the deep. I knew if I were to get through this period of my life, I would have to put all my trust in the Lord and never take my eyes off him. And this I did and was often able to find great comfort in very painful situations. I knew no matter what happened, God was always at my side, and at the end of the day I always had my home to go back to.

At school among my peers, the carefree faith of my childhood was turning into a battleground. I had to struggle constantly to live what I knew was right. I was swimming upstream. Though it was painful, I did not want to conform because I did not want to displease our Lord. The cruelty of my peers and my non-aggressive and weak nature,



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eventually made me turn inward. In such a battleground, my faith hardened, and I became fixated on sin and judgment. I learned to be a harsh judge of myself and other people. Having lived a sheltered life in a good and loving home, I had no understanding of human weakness or the world around me, but I judged it nonetheless, and harshly. I failed to understand at that time the difficulties that come with free will and how the heart of God aches for sinners to accept his healing mercy. Afraid of finding sin, wounded by the pain I endured at school and weary of conflict, I learned to create walls around me and other people. And so, like a Greek tragedy, while trying to flee from sin, I embraced it in my ignorance, for I had learned to close myself off from the rest of the world. I was no better than the Pharisees of the Gospel, men who lived a life of religion on the outside but whose hearts were empty of true charity. I always tried to be kind to people, but I was so cautious not to let anyone outside my home or my small circle of close friends into my life. I was afraid how anything new in my life would change or hurt me.

Religious externals became very important to me, but I did not understand that they are nothing if they do not increase the love in one's heart. One year my little brother's birthday fell on Good Friday, and he wished to celebrate it on that day. I did not go to the restaurant with my family, thinking it irreverent to celebrate a birthday on Good Friday. This was the day our Lord showed us the greatest example of love, and I, home alone, meditating on his Passion, failed to learn from it. I believed in my vanity that I was giving our Lord water to drink on the Cross, but in truth, I was the bystander who gave him vinegar on a sponge. To this day, it pains me to think that I did this to Adam, who is the kindest and best of all people. He was only a child, and what a hardened Christian example I showed to him. Sins against charity grieve our Lord the most because they hurt those he loves and wishes us to love. They inflict wounds in someone's heart and can cause lasting pain. How could I have been so blind? Where did I learn such severity? It was certainly not at home because our parents were always models of kindness and gentleness. I would have served the Lord better had I gone and had a light meal for charity's sake because an act of pure love is always more pleasing to our Lord. Isn't this the moral of St Scholastica's story? Knowing her death was near, she implored her brother, St Benedict, to stay with her through the night. The Rule



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forbade him to stay away from his monastery overnight, and he therefore refused his sister the one comfort she most desired. Scholastica then prayed to God, who recognized the pure love in her prayer and sent a storm to prevent Benedict from leaving her. God answered Scholastica's prayers because she showed greater love, and so the Lord was better served by this breach of the Rule for charity's sake more than if Benedict had returned home as the Rule prescribed.

I remember another occasion that illustrates how blind and judgmental I was. When I was a sophomore in high school, I attended a retreat and judged one of the participants in my mind, wondering how someone like that would be on a religious retreat. That evening, there was a sharing session, which was done in strict confidence. When it came time for this girl to speak, she spoke of her home, how she lived alone with an abusive and alcoholic father. She was afraid to go home and was turning to alcohol and drugs in her distress. I was so ashamed of myself and was filled with pain at the same time for this girl. Though I did judge, I was still a person of sensitivity and other peoples' pain affected me deeply. It is just that I most often removed myself from the world by building walls in my attempt to get through my own trials and had little knowledge of what went on in the world around me. In my naivety, I believed all homes were happy like my own. I did not understand as Dostoevsky says in *Anna Karenina* that happy families are all alike, but every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. I realized I had no idea what one goes home to or what a person has lived through. In my hard heart, I only knew it was wrong to abuse drugs or alcohol. I did not understand that people turned to such things in their pain, fleeing from the despair of their suffering and sadness. That was an important lesson for me, but it would be years still before I would have a true and lasting conversion.

Throughout this period, I continued to find comfort in God and believed he was calling me to a life of prayer and union with him. I did not want, however, to be an ordained priest. For me, the call was more personal, more intimate. I felt called simply to listen, seated at the feet of Christ like Mary Magdalene. I will continue to reference her story tonight. As I refer to her, it is according to a medieval tradition that saw Mary



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of Magdala, Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus and the penitent woman in the home of the Pharisee all as the same person.

I knew God did not intend for me to preach, but to listen, to join my heart to his in quiet prayer and reflection. During the fall of my sophomore in high school, I made a retreat at a local Brigittine convent where I confided my feelings to a Franciscan Friar. He told me about the Cistercians. I realized the monastic life was exactly what I had longed for. I knew at that moment what I wanted to do after high school, and I wasn't going to let anything deter me. I began a prayer schedule, which I would observe for the next three years, waking up extra early each day to say the liturgy of the hours and to recite the 15 prayers of St Bridget in honor of our Lord's Passion. At night, I would do some spiritual reading, usually a text by a Cistercian father and a reading from the Imitation of Christ, say my night office and then fall asleep with my rosary. Though I found comfort in prayer, I know now that I was nothing more than a Pharisee because my faith was selfish. What good was my prayer if my heart had shut out the world, if I had built up walls with only enough room for me and for God? God does not give grace so we can hold onto it greedily like Judas and the money bag. We are meant to share it and increase God's love in this broken world.

The fall of my junior year of high school, I became acquainted with a Cistercian abbey in Quebec and arranged to spend my summer vacation there. I was given permission to finish school early, and my parents drove me up to Quebec at the beginning of June to stay in the monastery. Those three months when I was 17 seemed like a dream. I was at peace. Spirituality was no longer a battle because I was living with others who sought God. Previously, I never had the experience of having a friend who shared my faith. Now, I shared the life of the novices and participated fully in their life, their prayer, studies and manual labor. Every night before the evening chapter, the novices had forty-five minutes of adoration in a private chapel within the enclosure. I flourished there spiritually. I used to think how perfect it was on those summer nights when the sun was still setting, and falling asleep after a long day, close to God in the silence of my heart, I could smell the lilacs that bloomed outside my window. I was happy. After so many years of being bullied because of my beliefs, I was in a place



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where I could be at peace with them. When it was time to go home to begin my senior year, I was heartbroken. I did not know how I would last a whole year. I had found my pearl of great price and would do all that I could to purchase it in due time. The abbot said I could return the following summer after graduation, and he would tell me on the feast of the Assumption if I could begin my postulancy.

My senior year was the best of my high school years. Music, especially singing continued to be very important for me. I made more time for friends, went to my proms, got my drivers license and was confident my future was set. I also did a month exchange with my French class to Nimes in the south of France. I thought this would be my last opportunity to see the world. And so the year passed quickly. I graduated high school in June 1994, and one week later, I was tearfully saying goodbye to family and friends, thinking I would not see many of them again. The abbey was French speaking and very far from the home I loved so very much. There were no vacations or month days, and we observed a very strict cloister. My parents drove me up to the abbey and were warmly welcomed by the nuns who helped run the guesthouse. This was good for my parents because the nuns could speak English while none of the monks could. They were able to make my parents feel welcome. I was blessed to have the full support of my family.

This was without doubt one of the most important periods of my life, a time when our Lord would bless me with certain graces that still guide me today. I entered the Cistercians in June 1994, two weeks after my high school graduation. I completed a one year postulancy and a two year novitiate. The separation from my family was very hard, and since I am not the sort of person who can hold back tears, I shed many. Fr Abbot used to laugh and tell me he was going to give me the name Mary Magdalene at my clothing ceremony because she had a reputation for crying a lot. But I was very happy too. It was love that drew me to serve God in the monastic life. On August 15, 2004, the Feast of Our Lady's Assumption, I received the blue smock of a postulant. That same day, one of the older monks, Pere Laurent, passed away after a battle with cancer. A few days before, the whole community gathered around him. I was sat next to his bed and held his hand. I remember, he looked at me, smiled and said, "aime le Seigneur" or "love the Lord". I treasured those words and took them into my heart. I can still hear his voice



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and see the smile on his face when I recall that moment. He was radiant with love and peace as he waited for the Lord to take him home

People used to ask me if the strict cloister was confining. I never felt that. If anything, it was liberating. It was the place of my encounter with Christ, and everything we did there, had the intention of only bringing us closer to Him. There were no worldly distractions. Sometimes, in summer, I would sit up on the hill under the apple trees and watch the village below. I felt perfectly content and fulfilled therein, comforted by the presence of God.

This does not mean life was always easy. Community life is both the great joy and cross of monastic life. This can be very painful for someone who is as sensitive as I am, and of course, I recognize, it is equally hard for others to live with someone as sensitive as I am. I soon became acquainted with St Therese of Lisieux and read everything I could read about her, including all her own writings, such as letters, plays, prayers and poems. We even had a private chapel dedicated to her where I loved to pray. St. Therese's autobiography became a rule of life for me. She became for me a constant spiritual companion, a kindred spirit. Everything she said was what I wished to live and be. Like her, I felt small and weak, utterly dependent on God. I knew that in the humble routine of our daily life, God could do great things through our small acts if we performed them with great love. Yes, everything was grace, St Therese believed, if done with great love.

In our cloister was a replica of the grotto of Lourdes. The word penitence was written under our Lady's feet. One day, while praying before this shrine, thinking of the word penitence, it occurred to me that we could offer our sufferings to lend a helping hand to those who were slipping away from the communion of saints or who suffered in their daily lives. I began to offer all those stings and unpleasant circumstances of daily life to our Lord for the sake of those he loved and who needed his help. But still the world seemed so foreign to me, and I had very little understanding of those needs for which I was trying to intercede.

During this period, I was still fixated on sin and punishment. I seemed to count the minutes from when I received absolution to when I sinned the next time. I would get



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discouraged. For me, it was very important that I not only appear loving or humble on the outside but that I feel it sincerely on the inside. I remember going through a very difficult trial at one point and prayed and prayed for God to give me the grace to bear it patiently. After a time, I began to lose trust. Then one day after lunch, returning to my cell, I got mad at God for the first time in my life. I said it was cruel for him to make me carry crosses I felt in my selfishness I could not bear. I was mad God did not immediately provide the grace for which I had been praying. I was angry because in the Gospel Christ said if an earthly father will not deny his child something good for which he asks then our Father in Heaven will not refuse us the graces for which we ask. It was the first time in my life I had argued with God, and I was scared. I did not know what to do or how to make amends. So I did what I always did. I built up a wall between God and me. Without God in my heart, there could be no goodness in me, and I was full of emptiness, pain and sadness. This went on for some time. Then one day, desperate in my aridity, I went to my choir stall and knelt. I asked our Lady, whom I had always loved and trusted so much, for help and randomly opened a book to a page from a prayer book. My eyes fell upon this beautiful prayer of St. Bernard of Clairvaux:

“When buffeted by the billows of pride, ambition, hatred or jealousy, look at the star, call upon Mary. Should anger, avarice, or fleshly desire violently assail the frail vessel of your soul, look at the star, call upon Mary. If troubled on account of the heinousness of your sins, distressed at the tarnished state of your conscience and terrified at the thought of the awful judgment to come, you are beginning to sink into the bottomless gulf of sadness and to be swallowed in the abyss of despair, then think of Mary. In dangers, in doubts, in difficulties, think of Mary, call upon Mary. Let not her name leave your lips, never suffer it to leave your heart. And that you may more surely obtain the assistance of her prayer, see that you walk in her footsteps. With her for a guide, you will never go astray; while invoking her, you will never lose heart; so long as she is in your mind, you will not be deceived; while she holds your hand, you can not fall; under her protection, you have nothing to fear; if she walks before you, you will not grow weary; if she shows you favor, you will reach the goal.”



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I felt our Lady comfort my soul, and I knew then what I had to do. There was a hermit visiting our community. He would come to hear our confessions throughout the year. I went to him, opened up my soul and told him everything. He told me two things which have been imprinted on my heart ever since: First, “holiness is not moral perfection, it is accepting God’s mercy into our misery and frequently.” Second, he quoted Romans, saying, “God enclosed all men in sin so that he might show mercy to all.” His words and absolution hit me like lightning. It resulted in one of the greatest moments of grace I have ever received. It was a true moment of lasting conversion in my life, and tears just streamed from my eyes. I had felt so far from God those past few weeks, and for years I had been overwhelmed by the weight of sin and the harshness of the world. Suddenly I felt absolutely inundated and illuminated with Christ’s healing love and mercy. At that moment, I understood the heart of Mary Magdalene weeping at Christ’s feet in the home of the Pharisee. As I wept, I understood her tears did not spring from a feeling of self-loathing or from the burden of her sins. She wept because of the love our Lord lavished on her so generously, a love, which she had never experienced before, and that was how I felt in my tears. My faith changed forever at that moment and remains so to this day. My focus shifted from sin and judgment to love and mercy. I understood that I was indeed called to be love, to share the abundant love and mercy of our Lord with others, to be a peace maker and a face of Christ’s love for my neighbor both known and unknown. I wanted to spend my life learning to love as Christ does.

My whole outlook on life changed. Though we must ever aspire to be perfect and never seek sin, I understood we will fall, but we need only throw ourselves into Christ’s arms, and he will take us back for he only wishes us to be safe and close to him. I learned that God can transform our tears of repentance into diamonds and melt the stone of our hearts into gold to ransom lost and suffering souls. If God’s mercy is given so freely to us then we must share it generously too. With that gift of mercy disappeared my judgmental nature. My own experience with weakness had taught me at last not to judge but to have compassion and pity on the weaknesses of others, realizing there was nothing I might not do myself if I were in someone else’s shoes. Life is hard, and now I can only feel pity when I see someone struggling. Christ understands how hard this world can be.



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Though sinless, he shared our life here on earth. He asks nothing of us that the Father did not ask of him.

Our Lord's love and mercy became the focus of my faith, and so I went through the Bible and copied by hand many passages that spoke of our Lord's mercy: The story of Zachaias, the Centurion, Mary Magdalene, St Martha, the man born blind, the woman at the well, the woman caught in adultery, Nicodemus and others. I was especially moved by the story of the good thief. Through a single confession of pure love in his final hour, he was able to erase his entire criminal life. I opened the little book with an excerpt from St Therese's autobiography. At that moment, I felt I could have written them myself. I will translate her words for you here:

“Since Jesus has ascended to Heaven, I can only follow the tracks he has left behind, but how luminous they are, how fragrant! I need only turn my eyes to the Holy Gospel. As soon as I breathe in the sweet perfume of Jesus' life, I know to what side I must run. It is not to the first place, but the last. Instead of advancing with the Pharisee, I repeat, filled with trust, the humble prayer of the publican. Most especially, I imitate the conduct of Magdalene. Her surprising or rather loving boldness, which charms the heart of Jesus, ravishes mine. Yes, I feel it, even if I had on my conscience all the sins that could be committed, I would go, my heart broken with repentance, and throw myself into the arms of Jesus, for I know how much he cherishes the prodigal son who returns to him.”

That was in my second year within the abbey, and those graces have been a light for my soul and a lamp for my steps ever since. The graces that took root here would one day reveal themselves even more powerfully, which I will mention at the appropriate time.

I was at the Cistercian abbey for a little more than three years, but it would take too long to tell you all my memories tonight. At 21 years of age, my spirituality was mature, but I had never worked on my human development. In truth, I was still very much a child and about as naïve as one could be even in one's early twenties. Having gone from a very sheltered home into the strict Cistercian cloister, I had limited knowledge of life and the world for which I now felt I was called to be a loving and



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attentive advocate. Though I loved the monastery, I began to have longings about furthering my education, and I had a yearning to teach. Leaving the abbey was the hardest thing I ever had to do, but I knew that there were things I would have to do before I could truly consecrate myself to give my heart to God. Spiritually, I was ready. Humanly, I was not. I would need to reconcile myself and rediscover the world so that I could truly learn how to love my neighbor with true compassion. I was still at an age when I could go to college, and I felt it was important to leave the abbey for a while. Saying goodbye to the brothers was heart rending. I remember looking at myself in the mirror for the last time wearing my white habit in the sacristy. Then I went to my cell, folded it up and left it on my neatly made bed. I cried for days when I got home. Just the noise of talking at dinner upset me. I felt utterly lost outside the monastic routine. Though I had only been gone for three years, those three years of seclusion from the world made me feel like I had never been in the world before.

Spiritually, this was to become a time of trial for me, but it would be a necessary trial to help bring to completion the great grace I had received in the abbey. When I left the monastery, I could not adapt to parish life. The monastic liturgy was so beautiful and fulfilling. Here, all the parishes had liturgies that spoke to many of the faithful but not to me. Once more I found myself in a world that did not share my beliefs, and I no longer had the support of spiritual friends to support me. If anything, I left mass feeling frustrated.

It happened also at this time that my older brother and his wife were married in the Episcopal Church. My parents started going with them, and this upset me. It was sad going to Christmas mass by myself while my family went to a different church. If ever I said anything about this, my family told me I was judgmental. I did not know how to speak the truth with love. The mass seemed to frustrate me more and more. Also, as I was getting older, and in my desire to love all people, I began to question certain things about the church, things that seemed harsh to me. In my quest to love others, I had gone to the other extreme and was becoming a relativist in my attempt to embrace all people. I saw how hard the world is and how people struggle, everyone just looking to be happy, but making mistakes as they sought it in empty worldly ways. It filled me with pain to



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see people unhappy or suffering from the choices they made. I cannot judge them but only feel pity for them. In my weakness, I sacrificed Truth for beauty, true godly charity for relativism. I began attending services at the Episcopal Church with my family, and I crossed over. I left the Church by my own free will.

In 1999, I went to Westminster Choir College to study sacred music and organ. I met many people from different places, cultures and backgrounds. I found that I was a person my peers would come to when they needed someone to talk to. Though I may not have had any wisdom to offer, I did my best to listen to them, to be attentive to their feelings and to love them as I believed in my heart Christ would have.

After two years at WCC, I went to Rutgers and graduated with a degree in Classics and German. I spent my junior year abroad in Germany. There, I came to understand that the Truth was in the Catholic Church and that Truth cannot be compromised. I was troubled by things that were occurring in the Episcopal Church. Even if the local Catholic liturgy did not appeal to me, I knew that the miracle of the mass still occurred there, and that the Catholic Church held the Truth and had fullness. I also knew that my heart belonged to God and to no one else, but I could show my love to him, who was invisible by loving those near me as he does. I started to attend the Catholic mass again, but I did not receive communion. My respect for the Church was such that I would not communicate unless in a state of grace acknowledged by the Church. And since I had chosen to leave according to my own free will, I had sinned greatly in disobedience.

I prayed for a long time over this. I knew that by baptism, I am called to obey our Lord by obeying His Church on earth. Christ placed His Church over me so that I might follow in His steps and find salvation. If I question the Church, I know my duty is to listen and ultimately comply in trust, setting a good example for those near me. I had sinned through disobedience. After months of careful reflection, waiting to see that my intentions were honest and sincere, I knew I had to ask for God's grace and forgiveness, like the prodigal son. I was at mass one day where a Franciscan was presiding. I spoke to him after and asked if he would hear my confession. I confessed everything, my whole life. After receiving absolution, I felt cleansed. I realized what it was to be separated



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from grace and I never wanted to be separated again. God had given me a second chance.

I had separated myself from God's grace through willful disobedience. I do not feel crushed, however, by my experience as I once may have. I regret the sin but rejoice in the grace that God granted through the reconciliation and lessons learned. Growing up requires a journey of every person. Deep down, there is some part of each of us with which we must contend in order to achieve our complete potential as children of God. I believe this was the experience of Jonah who descended into the abyss, contended with the whale and resurfaced a new person. In order for me to run freely in the ways of love, I believe I had to contend with these things.

The fruit of this whole experience for me was knowledge of the human condition. In my youth, I was judgmental and rigid. I condemned others without understanding. Life was about sin and punishment. When I had received the great grace of my confession in the abbey, I was no longer judgmental but still had no knowledge of the suffering in the world because of the walls I had built up during the painful experiences of my adolescence. My experiences after leaving the abbey taught me to see and understand human frailty and to have compassion on it. Without false humility, I take my place at the table of sinners, thanking God each day for His immeasurable mercy. Without God, I know there is no good in me, and I can do no good without God. But if I can let go of what pains me, and fill that emptiness with Christ, he can love through me.

And now? There is still too much to say but not enough time. After college, I went on to teach, where I truly felt fulfilled. But at the same time, I knew my heart belonged to God. If only I could find a way to be both a monk and a teacher. God, in his goodness, led me to Saint Louis Abbey.

My heart was finally ready for what God had been asking of me. When I first entered the Cistercians at the age of 18, I was very much like Noah locking himself up in the arc, but without the animals. Now I return holding in the arc of my heart the many faces I had seen, the pains and sorrows of the complicated world I had finally come to understand and love. My own crosses and sorrows taught me compassion like Dido in Vergil's Aeneid. She speaks my favorite words in the whole epic: "Non ignara mali,



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miseris succurere disco.” “Not a stranger to sorrow, I am learning to help those who suffer.” Like Dido, I, too, have learned from my own pain, to be attentive to the needs and feelings of others. This Lent, let us turn our attention to our Blessed Lady of Sorrows. What an infinite ocean of compassion and tenderness she must have learned as she stood at the foot of the Cross and when she held the lifeless body of her Son in those same arms which once protected him from Herod’s soldiers as they fled into Egypt. Dear Lady of Sorrows, may the piercings of our own hearts teach us also to love our neighbor more and more and our enemies as ourselves.

The Gospel, too, teaches me compassion. Christ does not say sinners need a judge. He says, like the sick, they need a doctor. A doctor can only prescribe the healing remedy when he knows what causes his patient’s pain. Likewise, we can only help a sinner or someone who struggles with the difficulties that come with free will if we understand what has caused or is causing his pain. For me, the only remedy I can see or recommend is to love that person with gentleness, patience and loving kindness because that is what everyone in this world wants and needs whether he is a child or an adult. Everyone wants to feel loved and appreciated. As an educator, I find that is the key to being a good and effective teacher. But one can love badly too, and it important that we root ourselves in Christ in his holy Church so that our love can be honest, good and pure. Only then can we fulfill St Augustine’s command to love and do what you will.

Do I believe then in love? Yes. Is it always easy to live love? No, and I fail more often than I succeed. The older I get, the more I want to defend myself, the more I want peace in my own life and no more crosses. But this is not how it can be, and I need to let go and let Christ take over. I recognize, however, that it is only in my selfishness, when I turn away from the Lord and willfully say no to love that I fall into despair and my crosses become heavy. In those times of weakness when I say no to love, I am unable to recognize our Lord standing right there before me with the simple remedy I need most. I find myself in the garden with Mary Magdalene. In her great sorrow, she, too, could not recognize the risen Lord standing before her. It was not his face, but the love in his voice, the gentle way he must have always called her by name that melted her heart and made her recognize him. I am always moved when I hear that Gospel read. I try to



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imagine how gentle and sweet must have been the way he spoke her name as he does each of ours. Although I do not hear our Lord's voice directly, it is always through an intermediary, some angel he sends to me, like the hermit in the Cistercian abbey, the Franciscan Friar to whom I revealed my heart or a very dear brother and spiritual friend here in the abbey. Through their example of love and goodness, our Lord has been able to make me recognize him again. This love, when I accept it, is enough to bring down the walls of my heart like the jubilant cry of the Israelites that brought down the walls of Jericho. If we listen closely we can hear our Lord's voice as sweet and gentle as he spoke to Magdalene. The Lord, in his goodness, has left us all that we need in his Holy Church, especially the sacraments, to strengthen us in love. In the end, it does not matter what great deeds we have done, what causes we fought for. In the end we will be judged solely on how much we have loved. No matter what I do in life, the only lesson I wish to learn is to love better. And whenever God should wish to take me from this world, I want the Gospel story of Magdalene at the home of the Pharisee to be read. If in the years I have left, God, through his healing mercy, can transform the heart of this once Pharisee into the heart of a Magdalene, then I pray the only thing one might say of me when I am gone is that if his many sins are forgiven, it is because he, too, loved greatly. Good thief, holy worker of the last hour and blessed Magdalene, pray for us here tonight that we, too, may hope against all hope and learn true and lasting charity. Amen.