

# Reflections on the Death of a Monk

JERRY L. MERCER

Tucked away in the rolling hills of central Kentucky is Our Lady of Gethsemani Monastery. Founded in 1848, this austere order of Trappist monks is committed to silence, prayer and work. One of their ministries is a retreat house where men may go to renew their search for God. As often as possible, I drive the 70 miles from my home to the monastery for a time of spiritual deepening. Something happens to me at Gethsemani. It is too personal to communicate here. But when I listen to the chanting of the psalms, walk the grounds in silence, sit in the woods before the statue of Christ praying in agony, I know for sure God loves all creation.

At some point in my retreat I spend time in a small reading room near the retreatant's library, browsing through books and periodicals, occasionally napping. Recently while there I noticed on a table several pages stapled together. I glanced at the words typed on the blue cover:

Br. Elias Simpson  
1939-1970  
One With The Lord

At first I pushed them aside without much attention. Moments later the dates struck me: "1939-1970." This monk died at age 31 (actually 30½, as I learned later). I picked up the thin makeshift pamphlet and began to read. What I found was an intriguing story of the last hours of Br. Elias's life, written by a fellow monk. I wish to share this story with you, along with some of my reflections on Br. Elias's experience.

You should know that Elias (or Elijah) was the monastic name for Charles William Simpson. Born on December 15, 1939, he entered Gethsemani at age 17, took his solemn vows at 26, and died of cancer on June 21, 1970. The young monk was considered by his brothers a model of the virtue of simplicity.

It was in the fall of 1969 that a mobile x-ray unit made its annual visit to the monastery. Chest x-rays indicated that two of the monks needed further diagnosis. One of them was Elias. Exploratory surgery confirmed that he was already beyond human help. Elias was frightened at first, but in a letter to his brother monks indicated that God was helping him. He returned to the monastery to continue his regular routine during the time he had left. The following account of his last days, focusing on the Sunday he died, is a moving one and should be read several times in order to gain a deepened perception. The letter was not signed; the community would know the author.

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*Dr. Jerry L. Mercer is professor of preaching at Asbury Theological Seminary.*

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### THE DEATH OF ELIAS

I write this to you after a very sobering and religious experience. Our brother Elias has passed over to his true home with the Lord. I had the great grace and privilege of leading the prayers for the dying, and watching his final moments in this world. Just two weeks or so ago we were all thinking that he surely had at least another year with us, but the Lord was growing impatient to bring him home and we didn't know it. "Being perfected in a short time, he fulfilled long years, for his soul was pleasing to God. He was caught up lest evil change his understanding or guile deceive his soul."<sup>1</sup> For, just a week ago, he developed blood clots in the leg and took to bed. Then his breathing grew more difficult, and they said he wouldn't live through August. A day later they were saying July. Finally, about Wednesday, he took a sudden and marked turn for the worse and his breathing became extremely labored. The cancer was acting far faster than even Fr. Eudes<sup>2</sup> expected, and by then had entered his liver. Br. Camillus, our infirmarian, called me to come and sit by his bedside while Fr. Eudes went to get an oxygen tent to aid his breathing; it was so difficult for him to breathe that Br. Camillus was afraid he might slip away. This was Friday. I sat by his bed, held his hand and talked to him.

He said, "I didn't expect this, but He wants it. Whatever He wants."

I told him, "This is what you came here for; this is what you gave up all for. Cleave to Him with your heart in trust and leave it there in His hands."<sup>3</sup>

I began to fear that Fr. Eudes would not get back in time, because Elias was very pale already. But Fr. Eudes did get back, and the oxygen temporarily relieved his breathing. Fr. Eudes said his condition was grave and requested the community to take turns watching at his bedside. We each took an hour's watch while he steadily grew worse. His breathing grew more and more difficult, though he experienced little physical pain. He was completely resigned to God's will, and would kiss the cross he held—the cross so many before him had held on their deathbed.

The whole community experienced the tension of waiting for him to expire—more than for many others who had gone before, and all were constantly praying for him and visiting him. The love they had for him was very evident. His parents in Cincinnati were notified and they drove down immediately. His mother didn't expect to see him since he was in the infirmary and couldn't be moved, but she wanted his dad and brothers to see him. [By special arrangement, Elias's mother and sisters were admitted to his room for a long visit.]

Saturday night and Sunday morning Fr. Eudes had given Elias several shots to help him get some sleep. He woke twice in some fear, because he was experiencing fantasies that he couldn't control. Fr. Eudes told him to let them go and not to worry about trying to control them.

[Fr. Eudes] asked, "Are you at peace?"

Br. Elias answered, "Oh yes, I'm at peace."

"Then that's all that matters," said Fr. Eudes.

Br. Elias said, "I'm very groggy from those shots."

"It's not the shot, but your breathing that's making you groggy," said

Fr. Eudes, "any[way] you'll get more groggy gradually until you finally fall asleep and wake up again with the Lord."

"Oh, how wonderful!" Br. Elias replied.

On Sunday, June 21st, the Lord's Day and the Day of Resurrection, which had been preceded by three days of bleak, black, stormy weather, the whole community gathered to celebrate the Eucharist and the Death and Resurrection of the Lord. During the Mass, Br. Elias awakened from his last shot in terror—the terror of dying. I am told that at the Consecration there was a marked change that came over him. Precisely at the end of the final hymn of the Mass he began to enter his death agony. The whole community was available, and we all went to the infirmary and began the prayers for the dying. Fr. Eudes was inside the tent with him telling him that we were all there and praying with him. Shortly before we got there, he had said, "Oh, we don't realize how good God is!" It was right after the Consecration that he began to say the Our Father<sup>3</sup> with an intensity and fervor that Br. Camillus said he'll never forget. Then he wanted to say it again, after which he said, "Into thy hands I commend my spirit."<sup>4</sup> While I stood in the door of his room, leading the community in the prayers for the dying, Fr. Eudes had his head inside the oxygen tent speaking to him and saying prayers. Br. Elias was also saying prayers quite loudly and intensely, one of which was "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me a sinner."<sup>5</sup> Then Fr. Flavian<sup>6</sup> knelt beside his bed and, with his head also inside the tent, began to say the prayers for the dying to him. We finished them all, but since he was still conscious and breathing, Fr. Eudes prayed Psalm 26<sup>7</sup> for him, at the end of which he gave his last breath..

Elias's final days and last hours were a profound experience for the whole community. One could feel a unity and intensity of concern and prayer for and with him that has never before been experienced for a death here, and many are certain (including myself who knew him intimately) that he died a saint. Judging from what others have told me, I think the whole community experienced many graces at his death. Certainly I have. After his death, the sky cleared within a few minutes, and the sun shone brightly and brilliantly. Elias was buried beside Fr. Louis.<sup>8</sup>

One additional note of uncanny "coincidence": Br. Alan, who was standing near the entrance to the infirmary, told me that precisely at the moment Br. Elias drew his last breath, and as Fr. Eudes stepped out of his room and said, "He just drew his last breath," the tower

began to strike 12:00 high noon; at that very moment the Sun reached its zenith in the heavens! I leave this to your reflections, but to me, everything including Nature itself seemed to be proclaiming, “He is not dead! He is alive and in glory!”—just the opposite of what appeared to be happening. In addition, not only was it the Lord’s Day of the Resurrection, it was also June 21st, literally “Sun-day,” the day of the Summer Solstice, when the Sun “stices,” “stands still in the heavens.”

In our Resurrection and our Life.

I have mulled this letter over in my mind many times, and have even read it to my classes and some of my friends. It never fails to make an impression and always sparks discussion and reflection. Several things emerge from this account that can benefit people of faith, especially when they ponder the reality of their own death.

#### ELIAS REMINDS US OF OUR BAPTISMAL VOWS: TO LOVE AND FOLLOW CHRIST

The news of his physical condition hit Elias with force, but his response was perfectly natural and understandable. In spite of the obvious—that we all know people die—we normally seem psychologically ill-equipped to seriously believe in our own death. That Elias was a professional “religious” did not exempt him from feelings of terror upon learning of his own approaching death. As a monk he was very familiar with biblical statements on death—that on earth we have “no continuing city,” that our final destiny is in the Kingdom of God. Had Elias been, say, 75 and “full of years,” he may have been better prepared. But at age 30 he was initially dismayed and anxious. The important thing is that he was not overwhelmed by the diagnosis. He was able to gather his concerns and begin the process of reconciling them in God.

As Elias neared his death he was seemingly consoled by the words, “This is what you came here for, this is what you gave up all for. Cleave to Him with your heart in trust and leave it there in His hands.” These words seem to have been tenderly but forcefully spoken. Certainly the abandonment to God of mind, spirit and, eventually, body is the primary goal of a monastic vocation. It is also to be the goal of all baptized Christians. Every Christian is a stranger and pilgrim in this world. Every Christian moves toward complete union with God, here and hereafter. The advice given to Elias is for us all; that is, “Cleave to Him . . . leave it there in His hands.” An important insight from Elias’s experience is that it does not really matter how long a person lives if complete union with God is the final goal of living—and dying. Our lives are God’s possession. We need only learn to follow Christ and love His good will for our lives.

#### ELIAS’S DEATH TEACHES US TO LOVE EACH OTHER WITHOUT JUDGMENT, RECALLING OUR OWN HUMANITY

The monastic community was totally loving and supportive during Elias’s anxious times, especially in his bouts with “fantasies,” or wild dreams. The physician, Fr. Eudes, was extremely sensitive. His only question was, “Are you at

peace?”—and that was answered affirmatively. On that basis nothing else mattered at that moment. No expectations were laid on the young monk. There was no role to play. He was allowed to be a *human being* in Christ, with a mixture of fears and triumphs. After all, victory over death was God’s doing, not his own. The only requirement of a faithful person is to be open to God, which he apparently was.

Too often we expect people to die without fears, fuss or doubts, notwithstanding St. Paul’s view of death as an “enemy.” In its early days, my own tradition emphasized dying well. It was expected that faith enabled one to meet the grim reaper triumphantly. I think Elias’s statements and his community’s perceptions support this view. But we must avoid a smug triumphalism, especially in cases where dying is a slow process. Lingering illness sometimes breaks down our normal defenses, and when that happens something of the deeper self comes to the surface. Christians should not be put off by any expressed fears, angers or frustrations of the seriously ill or dying. The grace of God is with them, and their long battle is almost over. We should rather thank God for His grace, keeping in mind our own limitations.

#### ELIAS’S EXPERIENCE ENCOURAGES US TO FACE DEATH HONESTLY, TRUSTING IN CHRIST’S TRIUMPH

Those who tended Elias were refreshingly honest about his physical condition. As soon as it was confirmed that he had inoperable cancer, he was told. Again as he neared death, the gravity of his condition was never skirted. I especially appreciated the following exchange between Elias and Eudes: “. . . you’ll get more groggy until you finally fall asleep and wake up again with the Lord.”

A man of faith, Elias responded, “Oh, how wonderful.”

And it will be, if we take our Lord at His word that where He is now, we also will be one day. Perhaps one reason Christians are so apprehensive about death is that we do not prepare ourselves by meditating on heaven and the Kingdom of Glory.

There are those who think we should keep the news of impending death from those about to experience it. I do not share this view. The thought of going to be with one’s Lord should be a source of real strength. The idea concerning Elias—that “the Lord was growing impatient to bring him home”—affirms a basic Christian teaching that all of our experiences, including death, are redeemed by the love and power of God. God wants us home! And that kind of sensitivity ought to have force in our lives. Through God’s grace, our destiny is His Kingdom. For lovers of God, that is a happy thought indeed.

#### THE CHRISTIAN’S TRIUMPH IS IN HUMILITY

As the end drew near, Elias prayed “loudly” and “intensely.” These were not prayers of desperation—looking for someplace to land! Rather, Elias’s statements of resignation to God’s will and his prayers, including the Our Father and the Jesus Prayer, blended together into an appropriate posture for entering heaven. In monastic thought, prayer heightens the notion of one’s absolute dependence on God. Prayers at the time of death intensify the confessional aspect of Christian spirituality; that is, that we are unworthy of God except as He makes us worthy by

His grace.

Salvation is always the gift of God, never the result of good works. The redemptive process is God's doing. In one sense He is active and we are passive. If everything depends on Him, then we are stripped bare before Him. If we have no righteousness of our own, then we must plead for the free gift of His love. In another sense the salvation process shows our activity as well. We are called to respond to the grace which is given. Prayers are expressive of our dependence and our soul's desire to be obedient. Our sense of the distance between ourselves and God is bridged by prayers of faith. These prayers provide a sense of God's nearness and goodness. Intense prayer at the time of death can be a sign of mature spirituality entering its destiny.

#### OUR LIFE AND DEATH ARE IMPORTANT TO THE LARGER BODY OF CHRIST

At Gethsemani death is a community experience. Elias was loved; that is clear. He was surrounded by love. Death at an early age was seen neither as a tragedy nor a punishment (both popular notions), but as an act of grace. Remember the unidentified quote?

Being perfected in a short time, he fulfilled long years, for his soul was pleasing to God. He was caught up lest evil change his understanding or guile deceive his soul.

Such an evaluation of his life fulfills the apostolic injunction to think better of others than we do of ourselves. It is also a good example of the "golden rule" about doing unto others.

The monks joined in the Prayers for the Dying at Elias's infirmary room. They were there as brothers, experiencing Elias's death as a mixture of triumph through Christ and battle with the force of illusion—the illusion that death is final. At the moment of his death Elias represented the hopes of all Christians that we will have pleased God and be admitted into His Kingdom. The physician and the abbot were inside the oxygen tent with Elias, praying the same prayer for Elias that he had prayed for others. This is another instance where the life of the Church is intertwined with the life—and death—of its members. Each of us is a microcosm of the whole. Each of us needs the life of the whole Church to sustain our individual faith and hope.

#### NATURE IS A WITNESS TO FAITH

There is an innocence in the suggestion that nature became a sign of Divine approval at the death of Elias. With our present understanding and control of weather patterns, this notion must seem odd to many moderns. Existentialist thought, which emerged with force during the World Wars, sees nature as a neutral reality, totally unconcerned with the dilemmas of human life. In biblical thought, however, nature often cooperates with Divine intentions. Nature seems to have a hidden life of its own, rejoicing in the goodness of God and even anticipating its peculiar destiny in the Kingdom of Glory. Although the writer leaves it for us to decide, we know where he stands. For him nature bears witness to the faith of the

Church—that things are not as they appear. The monk's body may be wrapped in linen and laid on evergreen boughs. Dirt may be thrown in the open grave while the brothers pray. But Elias has joined the great procession of the redeemed as it makes its way to the foot of the throne. And so will we who serve God!

### **PARTING WORDS**

I am always uplifted after reading this fascinating letter. I have replayed it in my mind many times since I first read it on that warm spring afternoon. It served me well in my own struggle with my father's death. The letter has been for me an example of Christian care at its best.

Frankly, I hope for such a death myself: having resolute confidence in God's redemptive love and being surrounded by the support of a genuinely Christian community. Then the last line of the Elias letter will become my last line as well: "In our Resurrection and our Life." I wish the same for you.

### **Notes**

1. Unidentified source.
2. Fr. Eudes Bamberger, at the time physician to the monastery.
3. Commonly known among many Christians as The Lord's Prayer.
4. Our Lord's words as recorded in Luke 23:46.
5. A form of the Jesus Prayer, which is the heart of Orthodox Christian spirituality.
6. Fr. Flavian Burns, at the time abbot of the monastery.
7. According to the numbering system of the monastic psalter the psalm is 26; for most other English Bibles it is 27.
8. Fr. Louis, better known to many as Thomas Merton. His writings continue to exert influence in the areas of Christian spirituality and Christian ethics.