



## OPENING OF THE CONFERENCE

JEROME THEISEN

It is an honor for me to open this conference and to extend to each of you a heartfelt welcome! Since I represent the world of Benedictine women and men, I am aware that my welcome is not only personal but representational, offered on behalf of some 27,000 Benedictines in the world.

All of us here have an interest in holiness and a history of holiness. During these days of the conference I am sure we will revise and expand our notion of holiness. The conference promises to be important for our own personal history of holiness as well as for the history of holiness in our two traditions. Let me beg your indulgence if I introduce this conference with a reference to a few markers on my own path in search of holiness. I trust you will not find them so different from your own markers.

I was born in a small town in central Wisconsin (U.S.A.) where the townspeople generally served the needs of the surrounding farming community. There were four churches in town: Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, and Free Methodist (when I was young I thought the word "free" meant no collections; later I learned it had something to do with governance). My first grade public school was located right across the street from the Methodist church. During my grade school and high school years I had friends in all the churches except the Free Methodist Church; at least at the moment I cannot remember any persons from

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*Jerome Theisen was the Abbot at Subretoria Dell'Abate Primate in Rome, Italy, at the time this paper was delivered. Unfortunately, Abbot Theisen passed away unexpectedly this past September.*

THE ASBURY THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL  
FALL 1995, VOL. 50, NO. 2  
SPRING 1996, VOL. 51, NO. 1

that small community.

I learned that Methodists were not supposed to drink, smoke or dance, but I knew Methodists who did all three and more. I heard good music coming from the church: organ music and hymns, but of course I never visited the church or attended a service. This was dangerous and forbidden, so I was made to understand from my Catholic education. Yet, I recognized holiness (I didn't use the word) in many of my Methodist friends, teachers, and acquaintances. They were upright persons with a sense of civic service. At Memorial Day and other civic services, the Methodist minister prayed spontaneously with eyes closed; this impressed me since I was used to the Catholic priest with his formulary prayer. I noticed too that the Methodist ministers moved from congregation to congregation very often, maybe every five years, and I noticed that some had beautiful daughters, but undateable, at least in my mind.

Early experiences are important for all of us, and I learned that holiness (I didn't use the word) is found beyond the pale of the Catholic Church, and this was confusing since at that time we Catholics still lived under the impression that extra *ecclesiam nulla salus* was literally true, and we knew, or we thought we knew, where the true church was to be found.

Well, to get on with the story of the markers, three years after high school I entered the novitiate of Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. The year was 1951. I entered with the idea that it was a reward to the monastery. I had the impression that I was already holy and that I only needed to be recognized as such. I certainly did not come for conversion. I thought the monastery was a place of holiness, prayer, and peace; in short, a place of holy people. I saw it as a separate world, a place for super Catholics, not the run-of-the-mill persons in the outside world.

It took me a while to become disabused of my first understanding of the monastery. I should have changed my opinion the first day, but I didn't. Only gradually did I discover that the monastery has its share of crabby, selfish, angry, lazy, and you-name-it monks. Of course, I saw that it was also a place of self-giving, generous, prayerful, and colorful monks. Holiness was mixed with unholiness in the persons around me. This was demonstrated even more clearly to me when I came to Rome in 1954 to begin theological studies. The monks I met were a mixed lot, but I discovered that some did not even regard me as a genuine Benedictine (my monastery was too involved in pastoral care and education).

The next step was to discover that holiness and unholiness existed in a certain mix in myself. Theology helped in this discovery; at the time I read a lot of Lutheran and Tridentine theology, but I also had time and distance (a long way from home) to reflect on my own monastic life. What I found in my fellow monks I also found in myself: pride, anger, stinginess, lack of self-giving, passions of all sorts. The monastic life did not eliminate these. And, of course, to present the other side of the story, monastic life presented many means to improve in holiness.

In the 1960s when I began to teach theology, I was impressed by the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. This is not the place to critique his total system, but three features are clear in his thought: his love for the world, his vision of God's presence in all aspects of the universe, and the centrality of Christ in the movement of love. The

writings of Teilhard and the documents of Vatican Council II, especially the document called *Gaudium et Spes*, gave me a clearer vision of the holiness of all life. I could no longer make such a sharp distinction between life in the church or in the monastery and life in the world. I found holiness in all aspects of life.

The 1960s, of course, were years of freedom to test all traditions and thoughts. I am speaking here especially of the American and Catholic experience. Political, social, and conciliar events offered Catholics the opportunity to look afresh at all aspects of Catholic life and thought: liturgy, marriage, religious life, ecumenism, theology, etc. They were heady days as one found gospel values and holiness in many circles, not necessarily confined to the church.

I was impressed by the goodness, shall we say, holiness of all creation. But then a strident note was heard, actually it was there all the time. It was the experience of the assassination of President Kennedy, the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., the marches for civil rights, the embroilment in the war in Vietnam. Holiness pervaded the world, but also violence, lack of freedom, war, sickness, and death.

The 1970s gave me a more sober view of the holiness and the evil in the world, both in myself and in the world at large. I had not given up on the basic vision of the goodness of the universe in which we live, but the vision was more realistically coupled with a vision of the inherent sin of the world. Perhaps, I thought, violence, both intended and unintended, was the basic sin of the world.

In the 1970s and 1980s, especially after my election as abbot of my monastery, I became more appreciative of the methods of the monastic movement. I came to realize that the practices of the monastic life had something to do with the reduction of violence and the growth of holiness. Through a rhythm of community prayer, *lectio divina*, fraternal service, silence, hospitality, study, and manual and/or mental labor one is immersed in the realm of holiness which is the realm of God and Christian love. Monastic life is not a life apart from the Christian community; it is a life centered on Christ and his love for the world and the human community. The monastic practices are designed to put one in constant contact with the source of the universe.

This in short is my journey of 63 years, 43 of which were spent in monastic life. My perception of the journey, especially in the last 43 years, has gone from holiness to unholiness, just the opposite from what one might expect. Whereas I began monastic life with the idea that I had little to improve in my state of holiness, I have come to the point where I perceive in myself an underlying unholiness, a basic need to overcome violence, anger, self-centeredness, and mediocrity. Perhaps this gradual discovery is itself holiness. It is certainly humility and a transition that Saint Benedict himself understood. He said in chapter 4:62 of the *Rule*: "Do not aspire to be called holy before you really are, but first be holy that you may more truly be called so" (*Non velle dici sanctum antequam sit, sed prius esse quod verius dicatur*). Are self-knowledge and truth other names for holiness?

Saint Benedict seems to teach—and we will hear more about this from other speakers—that there is a double process afoot in the monastery and in the monk. One is a process of perception, the other is a process of reality. The two need not be the same; maybe they seldom are. In any event we see that Benedict allowed for a process of

holiness and he acknowledged that there could be actual holiness in the present life; one need not wait for a life to come. In the present life one can move close to God, one can move in the realm of God.

During this conference we will hear much about the coincidence of Methodist spirituality and Benedictine spirituality. We will not be the first to notice the parallels. This was pointed out in a recent book by Father George Tavard. He said: "...elements of monasticity have remained in the Churches of the Reformation...In the sixteenth century itself, the monastic ideal found a refuge of sorts in the Spiritual Reformation when small groups of people who believed themselves especially chosen by God hoped to experience holiness and to find heaven in their very life on earth through the close fellowship of their communities. Subsequent movements of reform and renewal were still led by a search for a quasi-monastic ideal as is notable in Lutheran pietism, in the *Unitas fratrum* under the guidance of Count Zinzendorf (1700-1760), and in the Methodist movement under the impetus of John Wesley (1702-1791)." (*The Church, Community of Salvation. An Ecumenical Ecclesiology* [Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992], p. 126).

I close with a bit of humor from a Minnesotan writer, Garrison Keiller. At one point in a short story he described the pitcher of a baseball team: "God had never granted Little Jimmy's prayer request for a good curveball, so this fine Christian boy got shelled like a peanut whenever he took the mound, and one day Ronnie Decker came back to the bench after an eternal inning in centerfield and said, 'First Revelations 13:0: Keep the ball down and throw at their heads.' Ronnie is Catholic, and they have more taste for blood, it seems" ("Was there ever a Methodist bullfighter?," in *We Are Still Married* [New York: Penguin Books, 1990], pp. 100f.).

What we are about this week is not an impossible task. It is one already foreseen by scholars but not carried out in great detail, or at least not to my limited knowledge. Our conferences and discussions this week should remedy this situation, at least in part. I wish all of you a pleasant journey into the realms of holiness.