

APPENDIX 5

Presentation Notes on The Contemplative Tradition

From Cassian to Main:
Meditation and the Christian Tradition

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The title of this talk is 'From Cassian to Main' but it could just as easily be 'From Main to Cassian'. This is so because we can't learn about John Main's personal journey to meditation without learning about John Cassian's own journey. These two journeys, one at the very beginning of the tradition and the other during our lifetime, are key moments in what Fr Laurence calls the 'living line'. This living line is not an accumulation of theory or doctrine. It's a history of real persons who searched for and found a way to pray and a way to be.

Fr John told his own story quite beautifully in the very first book he published on meditation, *Christian Meditation: The Gethsemani Talks*. Based on talks he gave in 1976 at the invitation of the monks of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, this little book remains one of the best introductions to meditation in the Christian tradition. It captures with simplicity and authority Fr John's discovery of the contemplative roots of Christianity, a discovery he shared with extraordinary results.

The book charts for us very briefly some of the key milestones in the unfolding of the tradition, from the fourth-

century Desert Fathers and Mothers in the wilderness of Egypt and Palestine, to John Cassian who imported the Desert wisdom to the West in the early fifth century, to the development of Western monasticism through Cassian's foremost pupil St Benedict and his *Rule* promulgated widely in the sixth century, to the anonymous and amazing *Cloud of Unknowing* in the late 14th century, to the English Benedictine Augustine Baker's *Holy Wisdom* in the 17th century, and so on. Through all this time, the Eastern Church kept contemplative practice at the centre of the church, by nurturing the prayer of the heart, the Jesus Prayer. And, of course, that tradition's repository of wisdom, the *Philokalia*, remains a great and constant companion for our journey.

John Main's own rediscovery of the tradition began when he was introduced to the practice of meditation and the mantra in Malaya during his stint in the Foreign Service in the mid-50s. It was a practice he was discouraged to pursue after he became a monk at Ealing Abbey in 1959, for the reason that such a practice was foreign and not part of the Christian tradition. He described the ensuing period as a desert. It was not until the early 70s when Fr John was serving as Headmaster of St Anselm's, a Benedictine school in Washington D.C., that he was able to verify the Christian roots of meditation and the practice of the mantra. He came back, he said, on God's terms not his own.

As a way of trying to help a young visitor answer questions about the history of Christian mysticism, Main was drawn back to Baker's *Holy Wisdom*. And here he found a way back to the wellspring of the tradition in John Cassian. Fr John wrote that Baker's 'frequent reminder of the emphatic insistence St Benedict lays on Cassian's *Conferences* sent

me to them seriously for the first time.’ And it was here in the *Conferences* that, he wrote, ‘I arrived home once more and returned to the practice of the mantra’ and meditation.

Reading these still extraordinarily fresh *Conferences* ourselves, we can share just a little of the joy and relief that John Main must have experienced as he sought to anchor his own intuition and insight deeply in the Christian tradition. What I would like to do here is to summarise briefly some of the key points of affinity between Cassian and Main, explain a little about Cassian's background and experience, and then look more closely at *Conferences Nine* and *Ten*, the conferences on prayer, which you have read in preparation for this School.

For John Main, Cassian provided both a Christocentric theology of prayer that is absolutely rooted in the Gospels and he provided a practicum of prayer, the how-to. More than anything, he made prayer clearly a matter of personal experience and personal discipline, not a matter of theory or doctrine. Cassian brought to his discussion of prayer the existential authority of one who prays, a real person who really prays.

For Cassian, both the theology and the practice of prayer are rooted in the central Christian truth, that God is and dwells within us (through the Holy Spirit which Christ has given us) and the central Christian paradox that we must lose our life to find it. As John Main understood, it's not ‘a person’ must lose his life, it's ‘you’ must lose your life. *I* must lose my life. And that is not just the ultimate loss of death, but also the daily sacrifice of all that is self-bound, the need to give back the ‘possessions’ which were never really ‘ours’ in the first place. It is the leaving behind of self

that Jesus says is necessary if we are to follow him. Similarly, we must also lose our prayer to find it, lose the comfortable tradition, the familiar images, the piety, and the self-concern. But what we find instead, in the silence and solitude and stillness of meditation, is the most beautiful fruit of prayer: poverty of spirit.

This is not poverty in the sense of destitution or absence. It is poverty in the sense that there is really only one thing to know: the presence of God within us. This is a condition of simplicity that demands, as Mother Julian says, 'nothing less than everything'. It is, as Thomas Merton has described, 'a clear unobstructed vision of the truth', an intuitive grasp of who and what we really are, not what the false self lures us to imagine. It is recognition that by ourselves we are nothing, that only in God through Christ do we live and move and have our true being.

Fr John said that it is out of the reality of this poverty that we 'pass over'. He said that for Cassian the spiritual journey was a passover – from sorrow to joy, isolation to community, fear to love, from false self to true self. And the vehicle for that journey is our prayer. So the poverty, according to Cassian, becomes a 'grand poverty' because it gives us the truth, the simple gift of simply being, being in the presence of the Love that floods our hearts.

CASSIAN'S BACKGROUND

While we don't have much definitive information about John Cassian's early life, he was born in c. AD 360 to a well-to-do family living, most likely, in what is now Romania. He spent the last years of his life in Marseilles. This is where he wrote his great works, including the *Conferences*, and where

he died in the early 430s. In between the well-born youth and the prolific old age, were the extraordinary experiences in Palestine, Egypt, Constantinople, Rome, that shaped his life and teaching – teachings through which he set the course of Western monasticism and laid the groundwork for the contemplative tradition we practise today.

In keeping with his genteel origins, Cassian was well educated and studied the classics, but he was clearly a seeker after God. Sometime in his twenties, he left family and possessions behind, journeying with his friend Germanus to Bethlehem where they joined an established monastery 'in search', as John Main describes it, 'of a living tradition' of life in Christ. Instead, they suffered what Cassian described as 'grievous loss from the mediocrity of the manner of life there'. Still seeking a better way, Cassian sought his Abbot's permission to visit the monasteries located in the deserts of Egypt.

There in the desert Cassian and Germanus found not more institutionalised mediocrity, but a practice of faith and a way of life so fresh and so consonant with the Gospels that they remained, not for the few months the Abbot gave them permission for, but for more than 10 years. Here in the deserts of Skete, and deeper into Nitrea, where at the peak of the movement more than 5000 monks lived in caves and huts across the Nitrean Valley, they found the first Christian hermits, whom we know as the Desert Fathers and Mothers. And among the many were the great elders, the abbas and ammas, including Abba Isaac, whose lucid and uncompromising teaching on prayer forms the heart and culminating wisdom of Cassian's *Conferences*.

Cassian and Germanus made one appeal to Isaac: Tell

us about prayer, unceasing prayer. John Main described them as listening with growing rapture as the holy man spoke, realising that 'at last we have found our teacher'. As they listened, their hearts burned within them as he spoke of ceaseless prayer. And their response was wholehearted: 'This is what we must do!'

While it is obvious that Cassian's personal experience with the desert teachers was the single most influential source of the *Conferences*, there is no other source for desert wisdom than the Gospels themselves. Indeed the best way to capture the essence of desert wisdom and Isaac's discourse is to go back to the teachings of Jesus on prayer, especially in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount that our prayer must not be merely outward. It's not about appearing holy. It is about learning the courage of solitude in our 'private room', in the inmost depths of our hearts. Prayer is interior. It is not about 'babbling on', since God knows what we need before we ask him. It is not about seeking personal or material wellbeing, not about indulging in self-centred anxiety. It is about setting our minds and hearts, in loving attention, on God's kingdom first and always.

There is perhaps no greater distillation of the desert way of life, its humility, simplicity, charity, its aversion to piety, pretension and self-consciousness, its hesitancy to judge and scorn, than the life of Jesus himself and the great teaching in Matthew chapter six. And there is no clearer foundation for the practice of meditative prayer and the example of poverty of spirit that Isaac shares with Cassian and which Cassian shares with all who encounter these beautiful *Conferences* – John Main in the 1960s and you and me today.

THE CONFERENCES

Let's look briefly but more closely at these two *Conferences* themselves. Again the desert setting is compelling; we can imagine the two young pilgrims at the feet of the elder. Isaac begins *Conference Nine* with a paradox about prayer, so we know we're off to a good start. It's the paradox of perseverance and tranquillity: doing and being, trying and letting go, effort and grace. Basically he says there's a reciprocal and inseparable relation between the two. In a little parable of prayer (and of course life) he says, you can't have peace unless you work at it and you can't work at it unless you have peace.

The key, as always, is humility: approaching prayer not as a personal achievement, but as a simple act of faith. One of the things any reader notices immediately about Isaac's description is his amazing and astonishingly modern grasp of the human experience. There's not an emotion, a mood, a tendency, he leaves out as he describes the struggle to achieve purity of heart through prayer. He goes on in chapter 5 to outline the special dangers, the distractions, and temptations that keep us from the simple practice of prayer. He doesn't just list the obvious faults like lust or blasphemy; he gives a far more sophisticated analysis of those things that often masquerade as virtues, especially what we might call the 'vanity of doing', with all our self-conscious, self-centred distractions buzzing around that vanity.

Isaac continues his discourse by identifying the four basic types of prayer: supplication, vows and promises, intercession, and thanksgiving. He says the prayer that combines all of these is, of course, the Lord's Prayer and does a very

nice line-by-line explication, culminating in the pivotal reminder in Chapter 24 that the prayer is not about you. It 'contains no request for riches, no allusion to honours, no demand for power and strength, no mention of bodily health or temporal existence'. But Isaac's key point in this description of prayer is that there is still a loftier stage, what he calls in Chapter 25: the 'wordless prayer that transcends all human understanding and is distinguished not by voice or tongue or word'.

Later, Isaac concludes this discussion in Chapter 35 with one of the loveliest passages of all:

Before anything else, we must carefully observe the Gospel command which says that we should go into our room and pray with the door shut.

And here's how we fulfil that command:

We pray in our room when we withdraw our hearts completely from the clatter of every thought and concern. We pray with the door shut when, with closed lips and in total silence, we pray to the searcher not of words but of hearts.

This is, of course, a beautiful conclusion to *Conference Nine*, but as our boys realise it's a little short on the *how*. How do we get there from here? So it's back to Isaac for *Conference Ten*. Cassian gives *Conference Ten* tremendous dramatic shape and intensity, setting the stage for the second meeting with Abba Isaac with a telling little desert vignette.

It so happens that Cassian and Germanus are visiting at the time of Epiphany. And one of the traditions of Epiphany is sending out from Alexandria, the state capital of the Desert, a Festal Letter announcing the date of Easter and

delivering a little message. It so happens that the subject of that year's message is the heresy of anthropomorphism, which envisions God in the form of man because man was made in the image of God. The letter, Cassian points out, was not well accepted and wasn't even read aloud in other communities; the one our friends are visiting is the exception.

It so happens that in this community lives a venerable old monk named Serapion who outstrips everyone in virtue and holiness. Hardly a scholar, he is a very simple monk who has lived a very simple life of devotion. As the letter is read aloud, the monks hear about the incomprehensible nature of God never to be apprehended by eye or conceived by mind. The old monk is greatly shaken. He hears the message and accepts the truth, but oh the pain! Bewildered and abandoned, he bursts into tears and cries out at the end of Chapter 3: 'They have taken my God from me. I have no one to hold on to, no one to worship, no one to speak to.'

And so with this very poignant backdrop, Cassian and Germanus make their way back to Isaac. Isaac speaks to them of the incident they have all just witnessed with great sympathy and compassion. He uses it as an example of the maturation, almost always painful, that we all must pass through if we are to say with St Paul: 'If we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know Him so no more.' (2 Cor 5:16) And just as we must leave self behind to find our true self, we must leave 'our God' behind. And we must leave 'our prayer' behind as well. Isaac goes on to underscore the fact that prayer is not about fixating or grasping on to an image, it's about going beyond all images. It's about purity of heart, the state in which we are emptied and open to God. Not a god as a thing 'out there' but as a

reality within – God who dwells in us.

In Chapter 7 Isaac goes to the most powerful example of all, the prayer of Jesus in John's Gospel. The truth is that we do share in the same spirit, the same love. We are 'so united to him,' Isaac says, 'that whatever we breathe or think or speak is God'. We can't find without what is within, and we can't find what is within without stripping away all that is false. Our life already is continuous prayer; the Spirit has already been breathed into our hearts. To know this we only have to stop and look and see.

Germanus then occupies the entire 250 lines of Chapter 8 with one question that can be distilled into one word: How? Isaac offers in the Chapter 9 (mercifully only 12 lines long) an astute response that basically says I cannot really tell you the right answer until you have the savvy to ask the right question. And so in Chapter 10 we get down to the nitty-gritty. There is something that you can do, he says. And he introduces the formula of continual prayer, a teaching he says that was delivered to him by the oldest Fathers, and divulged only to a few. That's not because it's so difficult or hard to master, but only the few have the purity of heart and courage of humility to receive it. It's not about being smart or well born. It's about humility.

The method he offers is to use a single phrase. The one he recommends is: 'Oh God, come to my assistance; Lord, make haste to help me.' (Ps 69:2) The single phrase is not a magical incantation; it is merely a tool against distraction, 'a coat of mail, a strong shield', he says. We don't have to worry about what it says, because it contains all things. And because God already knows all things, our job is not to tell him anything. Our job is, in simplicity and faith, to empty

ourselves of ourselves, of the detail and distraction of self that occludes the simple, living truth. And so in the practice of the poverty of one verse, we become 'grandly poor', in unity with the God who is Love and who lives in all.

Germanus and Cassian are happy to hear about all this, but they're still impatient. Germanus' questions at the end of *Conference Ten* remind us of Fr John asking his teacher in Malaya: How long will this take? What can I expect? How will this work? The wise Hindu swami, just like the wise Christian abba, had just one response: Say your word. Do your work. I said it was simple, I didn't say it was easy.

Isaac begins with the paradox of persistence and tranquillity, of effort and gift, responsibility and grace. And, in a way, he ends with it as well. Despite all distractions, we need to persist in the simple faith that the peace of Christ is already within us. But we know we cannot be ever mindful of the gift of that peace, we can't begin to live out of it, unless we persist in our prayer. Say your word. Do your work. Be always mindful of who you truly are in God and who God truly is in you. That, as Fr John, says is what you are born for.