

Features

Rochester priest climbs ladder of prayer in new book

By Lee Strong

In his new book, *Seeking the Face of God*, Monsignor William H. Shannon uses a Zen saying to help explain contemplative prayer: "If you understand, things are just as they are; if you do not understand, things are just as they are."

"We are all — all of us — contemplatives at the root of our being," the Rochester priest writes. "At the root of our being we are one with God, one with each other, one with the world in which we live. Spending time in the silence of contemplation must not, therefore, be looked upon as a means of achieving this unity, but rather of recognizing that it is there...This is the way things are whether we understand or not."

To help people understand contemplation and recognize this unity, Monsignor Shannon's book outlines an approach to prayer that can lead to contemplation. The book is designed as a guide for anyone sincerely seeking to become aware of the presence of God, or, as the priest refers to this presence, the face of God.

Monsignor Shannon is a widely known Thomas Merton scholar and editor, having supervised the publication of Thomas Merton's letters, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, and a study of Merton's writings about prayer and contemplation, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*. The priest's studies of Merton have obviously influenced his approach to contemplation.

At the same time, however, the book is very much a personal account of the priest's experiences with prayer, and his revelations about his own struggles help to make the book easy to understand.

"I spent a good part of my life believing that I couldn't pray, that I had to do it myself," Monsignor Shannon revealed in a recent interview. "That was something depressing for a priest — someone who's supposed to know something about prayer."

Through studying the witness of Merton and of people with whom the Trappist corresponded, Monsignor Shannon realized that even as he doubted his ability to pray, prayer was going on within him because God was within him. "What I needed most was to be silent and truly aware of what was going on in me," he writes.

Monsignor Shannon further realized that contemplative prayer — as opposed to vocal or devotional prayer — is something that can only be given by God. "Prayer is something I can move myself to," the priest noted. "Contemplation is becoming aware of God. It's only something God can give me."

But although contemplation is something that can only be granted by God, the individual must "dispose himself to it" through habitual prayer.

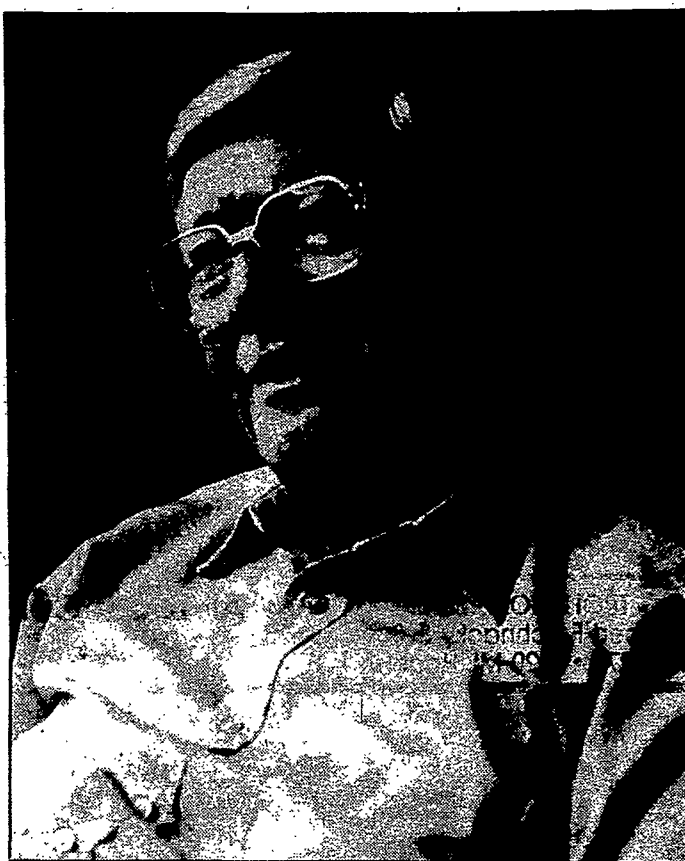
Having discovered a method of prayer that worked for himself, Monsignor Shannon was motivated to write a book on prayer because he felt "people have been searching for an approach to spirituality and they couldn't find something appropriate for themselves."

The problem for him and these people, he explained, is that the Catholic Church over the last few centuries has emphasized a prayer tradition that is not congenial to all people. This tradition developed after the Reformation in response to a Lutheran tenet that faith alone is the way to spirituality. On the other hand, such Catholic methods as those outlined by St. Ignatius of Loyola were action oriented forms of spirituality stressing good works and effort.

Monsignor Shannon found, however, that trying to make himself pray, rather than allowing prayer to take place naturally, only caused frustration and a sense of failure. "The more

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Monsignor William H.



I intrude myself into the prayer experience, the less God is able to act in me," he noted.

The method of prayer Monsignor Shannon discovered is the *lectio divina*, or the reading of sacred books. Although the elements of this prayer existed in early Church traditions, the specific method was outlined by a 12th century Carthusian monk, Guigo, in a letter called *The Ladder of Monks*.

In his book, Monsignor Shannon elaborates on Guigo's method — the prayer ladder — and its four rungs: reading sacred writings, especially the scriptures; meditating on the reading material to discover the truth it contains; prayer of praise for what God has done; and contemplation — dwelling in the awareness of God's presence.

The ladder analogy is an apt one, Monsignor Shannon said, because "prayer naturally flows out of reading Scriptures and reflecting on them. Once you have the word of God, once you've thought about what it means, you're naturally moved to praise God. Contemplation, when it comes, is the fulfillment."

The daily practice of the first three rungs of the ladder leads a person to be open to the presence of God, and, according to the priest, through this to an "habitual awareness of the love of God."

After discussing the progression through these rungs on the Guigo's ladder in the first seven chapters of the book, Monsignor Shannon then adds another rung to the ladder: social action.

"Oneness with God also lets me recognize my union with others — we are all one in God," Monsignor Shannon explained. "Once you see that, that's dynamite, because once you recognize that essential unity you can not shirk responsibility to and for others."

Merton, he noted, fled to the monastery to escape people, but through contemplation discovered that he had to face both his own problems and the problems of society. These problems thus became one of the major focuses of the monk's writings.

Monsignor Shannon, however, does not stop at this point, going on in the concluding chapter to link contemplative prayer with non-violence.

"Contemplation is seeing things as they are and letting them be," Monsignor Shannon said. "Non-violence says to let people be as they are, and not to harm or violate them. Non-violence is synonymous with unconditional love, and this love flows from contemplative experience. I have to love them because I am one with them."

In this chapter, the priest then compares contemplation with Mohandas Gandhi's ideas about non-violence — which, Monsignor Shannon points out, the Hindu leader developed after studying the Sermon on the Mount. The irony of a Hindu discovering non-violence through Christian writings, the priest noted, is further enhanced by the fact that Gandhi's writings then influenced Christians, including Merton, to consider and adopt non-violence.

Monsignor Shannon's book creates a ladder of Gandhi's ideas to parallel Guigo's ladder, but acknowledges that Gandhi's ladder is an artificial construct. "The reason I created the ladder was simply to form some kind of pictorial link between Guigo and Gandhi," Monsignor Shannon explained. "But I did say because Gandhi's ideas must be taken as a whole, you would have to carve that ladder out of one piece of wood."

Discussions of Gandhi and non-violence in a book on prayer make sense in light of the monsignor's explanation of contemplation, and he makes the connections seem so obvious that when he says he can not see "how one can be truly contemplative without at the same time being nonviolent," his meaning is clear.

The book's only flaw — and it is a minor one — is the disruption caused by a chapter on key biblical words and themes, which follows the chapter on meditation. Recognizing this as a potential problem, Monsignor Shannon said he had considered including a note of explanation in the book about the chapter,

but instead, includes a brief note at the beginning of the chapter saying that it is "a kind of appendix to the previous one."

"I chose to include that chapter because when you have an idea what the writer was trying to say you can understand him better," Monsignor Shannon said. This understanding will help with meditation, he added, because "one needs to know what (the writers) mean otherwise you might get something from Scripture not meant to be there."

He further noted that the chapter only discusses seven themes that struck him as significant to a discussion of contemplation. Those who have studied scriptures could skip over the chapter and read it later, he said, although treating the chapter as an appendix and reading it last might actually be a good idea for anyone reading the book.

Despite this flaw, the book is a valuable contribution to contemporary discussion of prayer and contemplation, especially because it resurrects a form of prayer that, as Monsignor Shannon noted, "went underground after the Reformation."

In addition, Monsignor Shannon's book challenges the understandings of prayer and people's relationships with God that have dominated Church thinking since the Reformation.

"We've been brought up in a dualist view of reality — I am here and God is there," he noted. "That view doesn't make any sense to me. Apart from God, I'm nothing. We all find our identity and reality in God."

Such a dualist view leads to compartmentalizing life so that spirituality is kept separate from other activities, Monsignor Shannon said. "Spirituality is not a compartment of our lives — something we do at certain times," he noted. "It is simply our lives lived in awareness of God."

"One of the fundamental notions of Merton is that you must never compartmentalize your life," the monsignor concluded. "Get rid of the compartments and live a whole life."

Retrouvaille program set for Rochester in September

The next Retrouvaille program in the Rochester area will begin the weekend of September 16, 17 and 18. The program offers help to couples who are experiencing difficulty in their marriage, in hopes of healing that relationship.

Couples who register will participate in a weekend experience at the East Avenue Inn, 384 East Ave., Rochester, from 7:30 p.m. Friday to 5 p.m. Sunday. The group will then continue to meet for six evening sessions following the weekend.

The weekend, which is presented by three married couples and a priest, offers hurting

couples time away from the distractions of home or a job to concentrate on themselves and their marriage. Many aspects of relationship are addressed, including building trust, forgiveness and healing. Retrouvaille is a Catholic program, but it is open to couples of all faiths. A \$20 fee is required upon registration and a donation is requested at the end of the weekend as well.

Since the first program in Rochester back in April, 1985, Retrouvaille has ministered to more than 120 couples.

Call (716)621-2901 for information.

Volunteer drivers needed for group helping seniors

The Regional Council on Aging (RCOA) is currently in need of volunteer drivers to be available one or two mornings each month. RCOA sponsors a group for older people on the first and third Fridays of the month from 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. at the Church of the Incarnation, East Ave., Rochester.

Drivers with a safe driving record, current insurance and registration and a reliable vehicle. RCOA can provide reimbursement for mileage and flexibility to fit personal schedules.

Call (716)454-3224, ext. 124, for information.

Application deadline nears for mental-health scholarship

The Mental Health Association in New York state has announced the availability of the Edna Aimes Mental Health Scholarship. Students in their third or fourth year of college or in graduate school who are planning careers in mental-health-related, human-service fields are eligible to apply. The scholarship winner will receive \$1,500 at the association's annual

meeting and conference in Poughkeepsie this October.

Applications are due by September 2, 1988. For information or an application form, contact the Mental Health Association, One Mt. Hope Avenue, Rochester, N.Y. 14620, (716)423-9490.

St. Joseph's

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recently finished building project, and that this debt will be repaid through operating funds. The interest from Arnot-Ogden Memorial Hospital's \$12 million endowment fund will be used for operating expenses, but the principal will not be used to help defray St. Joseph's debt, Douglas said.

Douglas said that many key decisions still need to be made, including how services will be divided to eliminate duplication and wheth-

er any layoffs will be necessary.

"Layoffs, if any, will be minimal because there are many openings right now," Douglas said.

He added that the move was necessary in order for both institutions to survive.

"Survival is the best word to use. The health-care industry is under siege right now, especially in small communities like this one," Douglas said. "We have to be united. These two hospitals have a quality of care second to none in a community this size. When you have these things going for you, it's best to bind together."