

Christian yoga: A Lent of loopholes

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [May 1, 2007](#) issue

Once again it was a Lent of loopholes, of minor sacrifices deferred by family travels and travails and of minor irritations unredeemed, so that as Palm Sunday drew near it caught me in need of a new beginning, in want of a jump start. I found that jump start in *Unfolding the Mystery*, a new book of monastic conferences on the liturgical year by Dom Hugh Gilbert, O.S.B., abbot of Pluscarden, the Scottish Benedictine abbey reborn in 1948 from its picturesque medieval ruins.

The book requires some explanation, for a monastic conference is a genre of its own. Not exactly a sermon, nor a speech, nor a symposium, it is essentially a personal exchange between a spiritual father or mother and the Christian souls under his or her care. To be translated successfully into literary form it must, like the fourth-century *Conferences* of John Cassian or the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, retain the flavor of informal and even intimate conversation. The reader thus feels drawn in and willingly assumes the place of the monastic seeker who asks, "Give me a word, father, how shall I live?"

In *Unfolding the Mystery*, the conversation centers on the experience of the liturgy, and the pressing question is this: How shall I live according to the Christian calendar? How do I know that sacred time is real? More to the point: How can I meet Christ in the corporate prayer of the church? What is this strange lassitude that makes me loosen my grip on Lent and lose myself in wool-gathering before the divine altar? Give me a word, Father Hugh. And so, with cheerful frankness, he does.

He begins by acknowledging, as Cassian does, that the monk is, like the rest of us, habitually sunk in a torpor of "unacknowledged, unrepented sin, sleep, depression, anger, deep grievances, habitual irritation and . . . sheer business." Prayer is the most natural activity in the world, but we have become most unnatural. Prayer is the rational occupation of a human being, but we are rational only by fits and starts. We begin to recover our senses when the divine word of a psalm or familiar prayer "rescues us from our own word"; when patient love offered to a vexing neighbor works its subtle alchemy; or when a sharp desire, implanted by the Holy Spirit,

makes us realize that to pray is not just a monk's business but a real human need. Though we may be ceaselessly caught up in vain imaginings, unceasing prayer (see 1 Thess. 5:17, Rom. 12:12, Eph. 6:18, 1 Cor. 1:4, 1 Tim. 2:8 and Luke 18:1)—whether embodied in the chanting of Jesus' name, the regular service of the altar, the daily cycle of the hours, the sudden impulse of the moment, or the great seasons of the Christian year—is ready to meet us at every turn, and turn our face toward the vision of God which is our true end.

“He lay in a crib so that you could stand at the altar,” Abbot Hugh writes, expanding a Christmas saying from St. Ambrose. To stand at the altar is to return to God from the torpor of self-regard and, in praying the intercessory “prayer of all for all,” bring the whole world along for the ride. “This is the work of God,” Abbot Hugh observes, “and we are co-opted into it. It's the work of leading the world into God's joy. Of itself this is completely beyond us. It is a supernatural work and we [are] unworthy workmen with a seemingly limitless capacity for spoiling His purposes. We are afraid of the way of surrender, afraid of the way of love. We are full of misgivings. But ‘he lay in the crib’ and we have been brought to the altar.” And while we are here, he suggests, we do well to use the traditional bodily postures: standing, above all, in honor of the resurrection, but also kneeling, bowing, prostrating when the occasion requires it, and sitting at attention, not like a couch potato but like David when “he sat before the Lord” to ponder astonishing news. One hears the voice of the abbot urging the brethren not to lean too much on their misericords during vigils, while reminding his readers that they will find in the liturgy a Christian yoga of unsuspected variety and depth. If Christian yoga seems too arduous, there remains “the adoration of exhaustion. There's nothing left in me. All I can do is throw myself down and worship. No other prayer but my body. But that'll do.”

The unfolding mystery of which Abbot Hugh speaks is the paschal drama, the tale of the Son's dying and rising and ascending with humanity to the Father, a tale retold in the small circle of the monastic day, again in the wider sphere of the Christian week, and again in the cosmic cycle of the Christian year—an archetypal pattern made real by the power of the Holy Spirit, inexhaustible renewer of exhausted hearts. From the 40 days of Lent, whose knots and loopholes tell us that we are still in our sins, we reliably do make it to the 50 days of Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, where we hear the final word God wants to say to us.

The Easter Monday prayer *Vivendo teneant!*—which Abbot Hugh renders “May we hold on to this in our lives!”—sums up his monastic wisdom. The Christian regularity

for which monasticism provides a template, daily rehearsing the paschal mystery, singing the psalms until they repeat in the heart, sitting at table with the same companions over the same unremarkable food, all this repetition leads not to boredom but to joy—objective Christian joy, the precise opposite of happiness on demand. We are to be sunk in joy whether we like it or not. Joy is, in Abbot Hugh's words, a "Trinitarian conspiracy." His conferences make one glad to be caught in the net.