

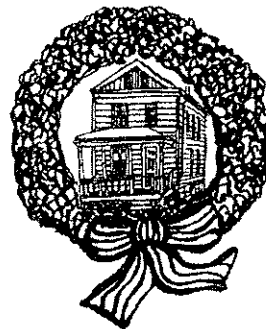
TROUBADOUR

A thread of the Good News that we feel called to print

The Newsletter of St. Francis House, New London, CT

Christmas 2023

Old and New Wineskins: An Invitation to Discernment and Celebration



Dear Friends of St. Francis House –

It is hard to believe that next year will mark the 25th Anniversary of St. Francis House. A lot has happened to celebrate and be thankful for during those 25 years. Over the last year the St. Francis House board and residents have been involved in Succession Planning to answer the question of what the vocation of the House (mission, buildings, residential and extended community) might be after the passing of the founders. It is 13 years since Emmett died and while I joke about what would happen if I got hit by the “proverbial Mack truck,” the truth is that I no longer feel called to life in community; I need retreat/art/family time to discern what’s next for me. So I am announcing that June of next year will mark the end of my residential tenure.

And St. Francis House needs a similar opportunity to discern a renewed future or to give thanks for the last 25 years and let something new be built on the work that has been so blessed by all of you. There are many exciting options for St. Francis House that can be discerned as we engage during this coming year with the many people and community groups who have been part of our life and work. All of you who read this are part of that life and work!

It was a great blessing to return to SE CT with Emmett and our children in 1998 to start the “experiment with truth” which has become St. Francis House. My parents were still alive then and our children got to know them as well as recognizing the smell of ocean air to be part of their genetic makeup as well as mine. And for the most part it has been a great blessing to be based here at St. Francis House since Emmett’s death. I think we are going to find that we need ‘new wineskins’ for the work of St. Francis House; we certainly will need a new form of leadership and management of the two buildings which have been our home base. We will keep you all informed of the ongoing discernment and hope to hear from you and have your continued support as we go forward.

A few months ago we heard from a graduate student who had read Emmett’s 1983 essay *‘Behold I Am Doing a New Thing’: Mysticism and Politics in Contemporary Christianity*. That essay was published in England the year that Emmett and I were married. Rereading it was an unexpected jolt of recognition of how the dilemmas and opportunities Emmett saw then are even more pronounced now. And given that we are looking to discern the future of St. Francis House, it seems more than appropriate to have excerpts from his essay as part of this issue of the *Troubadour*.

All best wishes to all of you for this Holiday season! Anne Scheibner

'Behold I am doing a New Thing': mysticism and politics in contemporary Christianity

by Emmett Jarrett, *Essays Catholic and Radical*, edited by Kenneth Leech and Rowan Williams, 1983

*'Remember not the former things nor consider the things of old.
Behold, I am doing a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.
The wild beast will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself
that they might declare my praise.'* (Isaiah 43:18-21)

Something new is happening in the Anglican Communion, indeed in the contemporary Christian world. There is no use looking for precedents, or digging around for the roots in the distant past. The basis of this 'new thing' is, of course, biblical, and there are no doubt analogous movements of the Spirit in every period of the Church's history, even the Oxford Movement of nineteenth-century England. But it is important to recognize the movement of which I speak as 'a new thing', something surprising which God is doing now in the Church and the world. It is quite as surprising to us as the redemption which Isaiah saw coming to Israel in captivity, something as unexpected as 'a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.'

God is acting in the last years of the twentieth century to bring about the convergence of two impulses that Christians have long thought contradictory: the contemplative impulse to prayer, and the impulse to Christian social and political action. Mysticism and politics, things we had thought incompatible in one human soul or one Christian community, are being revealed in the practice of Christians today as aspects of one another, two sides of the same human coin.

What is happening in historical terms is the reversal of the dichotomy of religion and politics. Religion since the Enlightenment has been understood as essentially a private matter, and prayer as the relationship between the individual soul and its God. Politics has been thought of as social, having to do with things public, verifiable, objective. This dichotomy reflects the rise of capitalism as an economic dogma, with political consequences which religion was not permitted to question. It is not that prior to the Enlightenment Christians held prayer and politics, mysticism and religion, to be one in the sense that we are beginning to see them as one. Rather they were related to one another organically in ways and by institutional forms which were appropriate to a pre-Enlightenment frame of reference....

The relegation of religion to the 'private sector' is most clearly to be observed in the United States. The laudable desire of the founders of the American Republic to avoid State involvement in religious controversy in a society which was from its foundation pluralistic in matters of religious expression has resulted in the privatization of religion, and with it the trivialization of religious experience. Religion is a 'personal matter' no doubt, but the personal is defined as individual or 'private', not social or political. Religion has become, in America, 'a matter of opinion', and opinions don't matter.

How far this perspective has departed from the Christian gospel can be seen in a glance at the 'text' of Jesus' first sermon in Nazareth in Galilee:

*'And [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was on the Sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written,
"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord...."' (Luke 4:16-21)*

Christians since the Enlightenment have not understood this gospel as social in its very essence because of the blinders they have worn to the unity of prayer and politics, mysticism and social concern.... But it is only in recent years that the emphasis has shifted, and prayer and politics have begun to be seen as a unity of thought and action in Christian life. This indeed is a 'new thing.' Especially in America, where the Anglo-Catholic movement has been mainly a ritualist club – the significant exception being Father [Hasting] Smyth's Society of the Catholic Commonwealth – the development of urban priests and activist congregations of a Catholic complexion committed to political action as well as prayer and spiritual growth is unprecedented. Even the Episcopal Urban Caucus [headquartered at St. Francis House from 2000-2005], regarded with distaste by a conservative Presiding Bishop, is committed to spiritual discipline as well as advocacy for the poor, to prayer groups and rules of life as well as community organizing and political action.

If the dissociation of prayer and politics occurred as a result of the breakdown of an older, more corporate perspective on Church and society, what does the union of prayer and action, the convergence of the mystical and political impulses in Christian life look like as it overcomes this false dichotomy and moves in the power of the Spirit to transform the Church and the world? What, indeed, is the name of this 'new thing' that God is doing in our midst?

It is not a new denominational division, for which Americans are notorious, but a truly ecumenical movement of Christians of different viewpoints confronting realities which call for common action. It is not a 'movement' in the sense of an organized group seeking to lead the Church down different paths. There are no 'leaders', though many would point to Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, and Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black civil rights leader, as 'ancestors'. Evangelicals such as Jim Wallis and the Sojourners would assert that it is simply 'Biblical Christianity'. The Jubilee Anglo-Catholics in England would point to its basis in Scripture and tradition, liturgy and the documents of Vatican II, and call it, perhaps, 'renewed Catholicism'....

Those of us who are priests and lay Christians in inner city parish churches see ourselves simply as Christians, worshipping God in the Eucharist, praying daily as the Church has always done, proclaiming the gospel to the poor and oppressed, being advocates for the outcast in imitation of our Savior Christ. We read the signs of the times, look for the Kingdom of God, that divine society to which we pledged our loyalty in baptism, and work out in community the implications of our baptismal commitment to 'believe in God'... and 'strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human person'.

Radical Catholics mean something different by the terms 'mysticism' and 'politics' than what the degenerative form of those words mean to the ordinary person. It is not surprising that a civilization which does not believe in God does not believe in a personal relationship with God. The word 'mysticism' is used to indicate something strange, unreal, not to be taken seriously....

[Our old friend and regular presenter at Clarification of Thought when he traveled from the U.K. to the U.S.,] Kenneth Leech, addressing a wide audience of ordinary Christians in *True Prayer*, writes:

'Prayer in itself is a human activity, something we all do. At its simplest, prayer is longing, desire, the expression of our deepest aspirations, joys, or sorrows.... The prayer of Christians is not something essentially different from this basic human prayer, but it builds upon it and moves beyond it. Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth-century mystic, believed that prayer was a natural experience and should be a common one. "It seems to me," she wrote in her *Revelations of Divine Love* (Chapter 10), "that this should be and is an experience common to us all." But Christian prayer is a specific kind of prayer; it is prayer *in Christ*. And this prayer is rooted in, and arises out of, the Christian understanding of God.'

I suggest that from the radical Catholic perspective, prayer is simply the name for the Christian's relationship with God. It is, therefore, a human relationship as well as a divine one, and has characteristics similar to those we experience in other human relationships. It is personal, a relationship between persons, because God is personal and human beings are personal, because made in God's image. But it is also social because God is social, and the social nature of human beings is what it is because we are made in the image of a social God... Prayer which pulls us into relationship with the social God inevitably pulls us out of our alienation into society with other human beings as well as God. And this is politics.

Politics is commonly thought of as a profession, the art or science of government, statecraft, administration. Some politicians are elected officials and some are career civil servants, but politics is a professional activity, and often an unsavory one. Because modern society is divided against itself, economic life is thought to be something different from social and political life. Politics is no longer the proper work of men and women who are fellow-members of the *polis*, a recognizable community. It is a special task delegated to specialists. (The overwhelming majority of United States Senators and Representatives are lawyers by profession.) Community is not involved in politics in the modern bureaucratic state. Politics is not the sphere of activity of citizens any longer.

As more and more Western social institutions break down, the absence of 'community' becomes a subject of lament in newspapers and magazines. Families have been reduced to husband, wife, and child, and the stress of putting all emotional weight on this one relationship has resulted in the break-up of nearly half the marriages in society, some of them several times over. Hospitals and schools have become so large and so unrelated to the neighborhoods and communities they serve that people not only have no control over their medical care and the education of their children, they generally get neither adequate medical care nor quality education. In the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1982 over one million citizens who are eligible to vote in local, state, and national elections have not been registered. Democratic institutions seem no longer to serve the *demos*.

But politics, properly understood, is an aspect of personal life. It is the way people work together to accomplish common tasks. In November of 1981 over half the townships in New Hampshire voted in town meetings to endorse a 'mutual freeze' of nuclear weapons. These votes have no influence on national policy, but they reflect the frustration of people with suicidal policies when they have a local opportunity to talk with one another and express an opinion.

The radical Catholic has no policy for national elections, but is committed to local institutions and community organizing. Caring for sisters and brothers is a Christian matter for us. We reject the Reagan policy of robbing the poor to enrich prosperous investors in instant profits, but we do not accept that the human right to food, shelter, society, education and medical care is a 'private sector' responsibility. The radical Catholic begins in the congregation, and sees the movement of the Spirit in building communities first in churches – for churches are the only institutions that have not yet been rendered totally impotent by a rapacious lust for profit. Local churches are places where people pray; they are also the base from which people are beginning to organize to proclaim good news to the poor and release to the captive. The radical Catholic takes seriously the proclamation of the Kingdom of God.

How, then, are prayer and politics the same thing? In practice, the same people who gather on Sunday for the Eucharist, each receiving the same amount of heavenly food from the table of the Lord as every other, are the people who go out into the community to feed the hungry, heal the sick, work for peace, advocate for justice for the poor and oppressed. They do this locally, and they are already organizing to do it nationally. It is only a question of time before they will begin to do it on an international level. The day will surely come when gatherings of Christians in international groups will be recognized as subversive by governments who want Christians to remain quiet in the face of economic exploitation, the rape of the earth's resources, and the building of instruments for the next and last holocaust.

Love of God and love of neighbor are united in the baptismal summary... Conventional religious leaders, armed with a ghetto-mentality and desiring to preserve what is left of their authority, insist on the priority of prayer, of religious activities, of worship, over what they contemptuously refer to as 'social work.'... the radical Catholic refuses to choose between prayer and action, or to slight one by saying the other is less important...

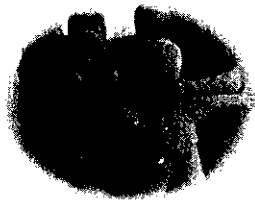
Excerpts from Essays Catholic and Radical, Edited by Kenneth Leech and Rowan Williams, The Bowerdean Press, 1983 with American English spelling and punctuation and the edits from Emmett's own copy now in the SFH Library

*Recent photos from the life of
St. Francis House: Book Sale,
Birthday Party, Witness and
Morning Prayer*

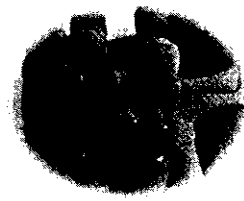


The Armistice to end the fighting in World War I began at 11a.m. on November 11, 1918. Our friend and colleague, Vietnam veteran Cal Robertson, believes that it is important to remember the original meaning of this commemoration – the cessation of fighting in the “war to end all wars.” So at 11 a.m. on Saturday, November 11 over 20 twenty of us joined him on the corner of Broad and Huntington, one block from St. Francis House. We read Mark Twain’s *The War Prayer* then sang *Song of Peace* to the tune of Finlandia.

May all wars cease and a Spirit of respect and cooperation grow among all nations and peoples. Amen.



Clarification of Thought Fall - Winter 2023



Moral Concerns and Technology

Bi-weekly Zoom on WEDNESDAY evenings starting with
6:45 pm Check In and Warm Up Question
7 - 8:30 pm Presentation and Discussion

September 21 – Ellen Adams - Introduction

Episcopal deacon, Member of the St. Francis House Board of Directors

October 4 – Adam Thomas - Artificial Intelligence

Rector, St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Mystic, CT and Author of *The Digital Disciple*

October 18 – Bruce Gagnon - War and Space Technology

Coordinator, Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space

November 1 – Adam Thomas - Social Media

Public theologian of nerdy culture on his podcast The Podcast for Nerdy Christians

November 15 and December 7– Akil Peck & Chief Brian Wright - Policing

New London City Councilor New London Police Department

November 29 – Patrick Sheehan-Gaumer & Kate Lettich - Education

New London Public Elementary School Teachers

December 13 – Ekta Khanna - Medicine

Pediatrician in New London, CT associated with Lawrence Memorial Hospital

This series has been rather different in content from many of our previous evenings of Clarification of Thought. Every day it seems our newspapers have new articles about technology and all the dangers and moral implications with which we are confronted. We are grateful to all of our presenters several of whom created Power Points as part of their presentations. Those slides are available online on the St. Francis House website
– look under *Clarification of Thought*

All presenters were asked to consider and respond to the following questions:

- 1) What do you see as the impact of technology on the topic you are presenting:
on people individually, on society as a whole particularly with respect to work
and economics and on the environment?
- 2) What are you most concerned about?

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