

God Will Be Their Light: Reflections on the Abbey Center Conference*

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Since what follows are my impressions of the Abbey Center Conference which took place at the Abbey of Gethsemani in October 22-25, 1992, the reader stands forewarned that objectivity may be lacking. Is this what really happened during those crystalline days in the Kentucky autumn? A news report of the event would be concerned with the list of those present, the topics discussed, and the format of the conference, and I will include a skeletal description of such. Since the conference was intentionally structured to be inconclusive and open-ended, a mere news report would betray the conference.

The problems of the world were not solved. In fact, the participants felt, at times, as frustrated as every other group or institution feels when it tries to get something going on a rational, humanly integrated level. And yet, something did occur which defies objectivity and clean articulation. So, I have chosen to go impressionistic, to follow my feelings and to express my fantasies about that seminal weekend. My guess is, though, that some, if not many, who were there will be able to identify the event at Gethsemani by what I write. And even if my impressions do not square with theirs, still, there will be enough common ground to stimulate their own recall and to get them to write their own report for others to read.

The Abbey Center for the Study of Ethics and Culture was born in June 1988. Inspired by Jane Norton's vision of gatherings of signifi-

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cant or concerned people discussing pivotal issues, the Abbey Center Board, up to ten people of divergent backgrounds, but all of whom were attracted by the idea of meeting at the monastery, held numerous planning sessions about the large conference to be sponsored by the Abbey Center in October 1992. We produced a mission statement, set up trial one-day conferences in various institutions (mostly universities), and began to rouse the interest of distinguished persons. After several false starts and much refining of the idea, we determined to invite four anchor persons who would dialogue certain issues in front of an audience (who would also participate) made up of people who had taken part in one of the ten one-day conferences. But what to discuss?

We engaged Joe Engelberg of the University of Kentucky at Lexington to moderate the discussions along the lines of his highly successful Integrative Studies Method. The topic could be history, religion, politics, truth, or whatever. A text is read and distributed—a gnostic text, usually poetry or something poetic—which immediately situates the topic in its most basic form, and to which other topics can easily relate because of the utter simplicity and clarity of the statement. The following is an example:

To pursue integrative thought
we need to consider
that to every statement
there exists a domain
over which the statement
may be said
to be true,
and a domain over which
it may be said
to be false.
Integrative study
focuses
on the domain
over which a statement
is true.

Joe always insisted in his own groups that no professional labels interfere, no posturing pollute what anyone had to say. Rather, what was said had to come from one's own experience. Encyclopedic knowl-

edge was undervalued here. Personal wisdom gained from the school of hard knocks made one shine. Because Joe's integrative method was approved by the Abbey Center Board for use during the conference, the personalities of the participants themselves remained in the forefront of the discussions. Many topics came up for consideration, such as the formation of communities and the history of communities. But ultimately, these were subordinated to the leading persons in those communities. The conference rarely got theoretical. The personal witness and the individual achievement were always prominent.

Archbishop Rembert Weakland. Archbishop Rembert Weakland easily dominated the conference. To overestimate his gifts and his integration of them across a varied and brilliant career would be difficult. He moves with ease through pastoral work, spirituality, economic issues, music, art, and literature, while maintaining a sharp eye on the gospel tone (or lack of it) in the city and nation.

Having been invited as an anchor participant of the conference, Weakland spoke often and well, enlightening all of us with his insight. He has been described as the keenest intellect among the American bishops. Predictably enough, he was uncomfortable with the Integrative Studies Method because it seemed to him so out of focus. At a preliminary planning session he had raised the question, "What is the goal of the conference?" He related to Joe Engelberg's texts only insofar as they introduced a workable topic whose discussion might possibly bring a reasonable conclusion. Without any hesitation, he persuasively structured the crucial discussions of the third day around a list of seven topics:

1. Shifting worldviews: From the anthropocentric to a more environmental/ecological consciousness.
2. Impact of technology on the human person.
3. Shifting relationships between women and men.
4. Tensions between individual and community.
5. Spiritual awareness in contemporary culture.
6. The contribution of monastic and contemplative life to the human community.
7. Plurality in the modern world.

Without a clear agenda to guide him or anybody else, Weakland, nevertheless, found the mind of the group, if not its heart, and consistently lent the clarity and energy of his own thought to the proceed-

ings. He was well received and admired by everyone. One must consider the calibre of the gathering to appreciate the archbishop's contribution to the conference. For even among such invigorating people, he stood out as a giant. People may be well known in our society because they seek to be. They sniff out those issues and plant themselves in places to speak about them where they know they will get coverage. But the archbishop is not one of these. His gifts are of such a quality, and his use of them so straightforward, that our Church and our educated public must know of such a one.

Rosemary Haughton. Though Marian Wright Edelman and Edmund Pellegrino were invited to the Conference as anchor participants, they could not come, the former due to Washington political commitments (we were about to elect a president) and the latter due to ill health. We depended, therefore, all the more heavily on Rosemary Haughton to mend the breach in our damaged inner circle.

Rosemary came to the conference with the reputation of having authored several books of penetrating theology. Coming not from an academic institution, but from Wellspring House, a home-shelter for victimized women and families in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and before that, from an experimental community in Scotland, and before that, from her large family household in Yorkshire, she brought to the conference some vigorous thinking not conceived in an ivory tower. How rock-hewn the marriage is in Rosemary's life between experience and conclusion, we were to learn only later. At the beginning of the conference she carried herself with energy and an immediate grasp of the problems the conference tried to tackle.

From the start, Rosemary and the archbishop assumed the role of partners in the enterprise. Though they both tend to be analytical, she was neither threatened by him nor cowed. It was so refreshing to watch two pros complement each other, as if they had been doing this sort of thing for years (which they probably have in their respective circles). She, too, showed considerable frustration at the aimless commencement of things, but that did not deter her from rolling up her sleeves, as it were, and doing some gritty work in order to make things happen. A natural magnet for the discontented elements of the conference, she voiced her concern not for herself only, but for those she immediately came to represent.

Though Rosemary is a natural leader, she did not assume the same kind of commanding role in the conference the archbishop did.

She wasn't interested in that. I noticed that she usually went for an alternative view, not meant to dislodge or redirect the trend of things, but to aid, abet and otherwise enrich the scenery along the road. Her comments on the Dudley Street Community in Boston, as well as her caveats on the Mondragon phenomenon in Spain, both voiced very smartly, indicated her independent spirit. She may be politically correct in her views, but if she is, she arrived there on her own, and not because she was following the lead of others.

One could not help but remark on the antiphonal work of Archbishop Weakland and Rosemary Haughton. Not only did they tend to see different aspects to the same problem, but they enlarged the views of the other conference participants on almost every question by expressing their own plausible arguments. Instead of thinking that one was wrong and the other right, you thought that the question needed further study before you yourself could make a judgment, unless, of course, you also knew the given situation at depth and had already formed an opinion. The richness of views forced us to think.

The complexity of issues such as the maintenance of identity through rapid social change, the place of religion as catalyst or block to social reform, and the paradox of shared common experience within a framework of broad cultural diversity, all served to present few if any solutions to any of the long list of topics brought to the three-day conference. We tried to clarify the question and the problem before attempting any solution. Frequently we broke through to a wisdom of sorts, which itself defied any close systematic thinking. We were forced to conclude, tacitly, that there exists at this time, no structure of belief, no bedrock conviction about the makeup of society (for example, should we continue to tolerate the gap between the rich and the poor?), no one interpretation of the history of our Western culture that most of us are willing to endorse. The plethora of meanings attached to our experience of the world today is simply too heavy for our accustomed constructs to support. To be an entrenched conservative today involves one in such inextricable difficulties of class stratification and privilege as to be downright embarrassing except for the most obtuse. And to be a runaway liberal with never a thought to turn back to see what I have just set irrevocably on fire is less and less possible. The stakes have become too high. Stymied at both ends of the scale, we find it more and more difficult to block the inevitable tide of fragmentation.

Yet, the willingness to come together to address these impossible issues, and to stay together for the weekend without demanding clear answers or breaking up into mutually hostile camps, says much more about the cultural climate of hope than the personal virtues of the participants. We experienced, but were not able to identify, a more prior substratum, a more bonding faith (in what, we could not say). This unspoken assent to what is now forming but not yet able to be labelled emerged in the only way it could—by personal witness. In the individual journeys of those who were willing to speak, we heard stories similar to our own. Sometimes, we had to admire the courage of another while we acknowledged failure. At other times we applied a spot of mercy to our guilt-ridden hearts when we lived in the shortcomings of another's shoes. We hesitated. We resisted this phenomenon of sharing because we were too sophisticated to succumb to hero worship. But by Saturday afternoon, in the small groups, the conviction kept growing that the agonies and the wonders of our particular crucifixions were, if not universal, then common enough to be owned and trusted. We began to trust one another's experiences, and admit that they, in some way, were our own. A culture forming? A metaphysics aborning? A child's attempt to pen the word humanity?

Among the witnesses which moved me the most were:

E. Glenn Hinson. His abortive struggle to remain a moderate, if not liberal, voice at Louisville's Southern Baptist Theological Seminary is well known. (He now teaches at a new Baptist seminary in Richmond.) Glenn spoke often and well, always in balanced phrases with a halting delivery. Here was a living example of how hard one must work and to what extent one must suffer to remain in the liquid marrow of the bone, and not in irredeemable ossification. Polarization of a violent and strident kind is a frequent product of our current crisis of identity. People defend and maintain absurd positions from the past, which may or may not have been legitimate then, and sweep away every other consideration, including truth, in order to clear space around their new idol. Everyone must worship there, or they are figuratively hacked to pieces. Not a few Churches are guilty of this most unchristian behavior. The only response that includes God in the picture is the kind Dr. Hinson offered—a still, small voice of reason and heart. It is only too easily extinguished, and all the more precious for those who can strain to hear it amidst all the din.

Beverly Anne LoGrasso. From Cleveland, and working in social justice programs for the diocese, Beverly brought a feminist corrective to almost all the proceedings. Her accent and her voice were irresistible to me, a hopeless Easterner with an ear for vocal timbre and the relish with which regional accents maul vowels. One had to enjoy her sound or perish, since she spoke up often. Still, her consistency and earnestness, and her penchant for thinking out loud were fresh and appealing, at least to me. She was another example of the patience of woman. When shall we hear and understand?

Janet Guerin. A graduate of Spalding University, Janet is very articulate black woman from Louisville. She, too, brought a corrective to the discussions—this time, not the feminist perspective, but the challenge to professor types to speak in something clearer than academese. Like aviator control, she constantly appealed to the group to come out of the fog and land. But she was so bright and perceptive, that her taunts, good natured as they were, veiled a Socratic lesson: if your theses are so arcane that only specialists can understand them, keep working until you can communicate simply. Otherwise, stay in your research center. The group heard her and did not take itself too seriously. The lessons we did learn could not have been learnt without her.

Lawrence Cunningham. From Notre Dame, Larry had wonderful stories to tell about his experiences in Florence and elsewhere. It's not so much what he said, as who he is, that counted. He is a brilliant writer and teacher, a veritable mine of information about just what you happen to want to know at the moment. His booknotes for *Commonweal* illustrate my point. The love of monasticism over many years has made of Larry an acute observer of the church scene. For he seems to make of monastic life a buoy in an otherwise open sea. He refers to it quietly, but with the glow that a golden lamp has in dim light. Larry brought to the conference's attention the value that the monastic life enjoys in his own estimation. The presence of the conference itself at the Abbey of Gethsemani, enfolded as it was around the monastic schedule, spoke more about the monastic influence on the participants and on their ideas than any formal address could have done. For one so centrally placed in the Church, Dr. Cunningham's ongoing tryst with monasticism has its own significance. As the conference progressed, the monastic theme became more and more pronounced.

John Miller. Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church at Hilton Head Island, John brought to the conference his own concerns about the mainline Protestant Churches and the pieces of them which keep breaking off to the right in obscurantism. Not that the heavy lunges by the Vatican against the flank of more progressive thinkers in the Roman Church disturb him any the less. John, too, is a frequent visitor to monastic retreat houses, has come to do theology around the Psalter, and is altogether intrigued by the quaint stance, but deadly accurate aim that monastic life brings to the Christian bow. He is eager to learn more about this unrecorded tribe of monks and responded to the invitation to the conference with the eagerness of a safari hunter. (He also is a serious and dedicated fan of Archbishop Weakland.)

Richard Getty. A psychologist of some renown in the South, Richard gave one of the most impressive interventions that I heard at one of the small-group meetings. We had identified the fields of interest where we wished to direct our energies. Richard and I both chose the group which would discuss the contribution of monastic and contemplative life to the human community. What Richard said amounted to a poetic and altogether humanistic definition of the human person, replete with fantasy and imagination intact together with the boldest kind of science. He had kept silent until now. But here was rare energy, just sitting there, waiting for the moment to speak—and, everyone listened.

Geralyn Wolfe. President of the Abbey Center Board of Directors, and the dean of Christ Church Cathedral in Louisville, Geralyn has been from the beginning of our enterprise a prophet and a lawgiver. She could put ready hands to fix up a mess. But she could also make us lift up our eyes to distant hills in true inspiration. Her description of the parish in South Philly where she worked so hard to build a community was, at that point, therapeutic for her in the current struggle to be all things to all in Louisville. Pioneers like Gerry need the support and the uplift of others to lift up their arms if they are to pray and point the way for the rest of us. But one wonders, will she herself cross the Jordan?

Barbara Thomas. As one of the principal architects of the Abbey Center's Mission Statement, Sister Barbara is a much sought after spiritual leader and administrator in her large congregation, the Sisters of

Charity of Nazareth. She nevertheless consistently gave great chunks of valuable time to Abbey Center business. I came to believe in her belief. I was not surprised then to hear her give a brilliant and emotionally moving description of her vision of the new world she sees emerging from the confusion of our present situation. In fact, the Abbey Center project itself is her sacrament of the new awareness and the reformed consciousness which alone can propel the best of the past into the future. Her love of Gethsemani and what it stands for, even though it has disappointed her through the years of renewal and experimentation, has been rejuvenated. Gethsemani and the monastic life have proven to her their ability to adapt and to include, to reach out open arms to those who only need a welcoming gesture. So strong is her belief that she carries around her a great aura of power for goodness and confidence in the human family.

By now, in this list of personalities, it will have become clear that while individual issues were tackled and brought to new understanding, the most important thing about the Abbey Center Conference was the people themselves and how they interacted. In this sense, the conference was unique and unrepeatable. What board members like Tom Mullaney had been saying all along came true: the conference is the people themselves. They will bring their own reforming and repentant selves to the meetings. It is not what we say or conclude to, but what we experience together that is important. And so it was.

In the end the witness of humbled and hard-working personalities showed how our world is actually making it through this present crisis of identity, and how these people, as leaders in their various institutions, are bringing about slow and unheralded change. While we have very little to show on paper, major shifts are taking place in our culture with a definite preference toward a more respectful integration—an integration that allows larger and larger numbers of the human family to share in the benefits of an expanding culture.

Even as St. Gregory the Great wrote the *Dialogues*, a work about the saints and miracles of the sixth century Italian South for a people depressed and dispirited by the chaos of the invasions, so we, too, find ourselves turning to models of promise and distinction in an otherwise discouraging scene full of personal failures and betrayals. This, I believe, is the way to interpret Fr. Matthew Kelly's wonderful, entertaining and endearing verbal portrait of his friend Thomas Merton on

Saturday evening. This, too, is the way to view the autobiographical testimonies of Rembert Weakland and Rosemary Haughton on Sunday morning at the conference's closing. It seemed the only response to make after the long list of problems and challenges and unresolved questions that were unearthed and experienced during those days. The archbishop described the by now classic journey of the gifted and charismatic person having to switch fields of interest and service not once but several times. Rosemary Haughton's sharing, however, delivered a shattering wound to all present. For her story about personal and institutional betrayal and bankruptcy is a paradigm for our time. All that is left to her is her faith in herself and the Gospel she believes in. A more towering twentieth-century miracle cannot be imagined, and yet it is all the more horrible and untouchable because no one of us would want to share her pain. The conference ended, not in euphoria, but in sober confirmation that the cultural crisis has hit home, and that the only heroes around are the wounded ones. But then, is there any other way to Christ's resurrection?