

Desert Christianity and the Eastern Fathers of the Church

This year in Daily Meditations I'm exploring my "Wisdom Lineage," the teachers, texts, and traditions that have most influenced my spirituality and teaching. (Read my introduction to the Wisdom Lineage in the January 2015 issue of The Mendicant at cac.org/about-cac/newsletter.)

—Richard Rohr, OFM

The period of early Christianity, one of the key building blocks in my lineage of faith, is largely unknown and of little interest to most Western Christians. It is a blind spot for much of the Roman Church and for its child, Protestantism. With the self-sufficiency and arrogance that has often characterized the West, we have proceeded as if the first centuries of the Christian Church were unimportant, or not a part of the essential Christ Mystery. The very things the early Christians emphasized—such as the prayer of quiet, the Trinity, divinization, universal restoration, and the importance of practice—are some of the most neglected parts of the Western Church. As I have said before, every time the Church divided, it also divided up Christ, and both sides of the divide were weaker as a result.

On a recent pilgrimage to Greece, Asia Minor, and Constantinople (Istanbul), I was immersed in theology, art, liturgy, music, architecture, and prayer that reflect one of the oldest and most mature forms of Christianity. We priests and pastors receive little knowledge of this in our religious formation. We each live in our own private enclaves, within a small and often deep Christian pond, with little access to—or even interest in—the ocean. We pretend the ocean isn't there. Mimicking the schism in 1054 AD between what are now the Eastern Orthodox and

Roman Catholic churches, we have, in effect, excommunicated one another. We are all losers.

There are two major aspects to this neglected period of the early Christian church: the Desert Fathers and Mothers and the Eastern Fathers of the Church.

After the legitimation and, some would say, the co-opting of Christianity by Constantine in 313, many Christians fled to the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Cappadocia (Eastern Turkey). We call these men and women the Desert Fathers and Mothers, and most of their names would be unknown to mainline Christians.



Early Christianity set the foundation and ground for what we would now call contemplation.

A brother who had sinned was turned out of the church by the priest.

Abba Bessarion got up and went out with him, saying, "I, too, am a sinner."

The desert Christians emphasized lifestyle practice, an alternative to empires and their economies, psychologically astute methods of prayer, and a very simple (some would say naïve) spirituality of transformation into Christ. The desert communities grew out of informal gatherings of monastic monks, and functioned much like families. This tradition preceded the emergence of systematic theology and the later Councils of the Church. In many areas of early Christianity, like Alexandria, one was required to be a monk first, before becoming a bishop.

Since the desert monks were often formally uneducated, they told stories, much as Jesus did, to teach about ego, love, virtue, surrender, peace, divine union, and inner freedom.

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Center for
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The question for us is always "how can we turn information into transformation?" How can we use the sacred texts, tradition, and experience to lead people into new places with God, with life, with themselves? — Richard Rohr, OFM

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CONTEMPLATIVE TEACHINGS FROM RICHARD ROHR, OFM



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What are Current Living School Students Experiencing?

Until three years ago, I was living in Los Angeles and working as an actress in film and television, most recently playing Natalie Teeger in *Monk*. Love and family brought me to Atlanta, Georgia, where I am now married and have two beautiful boys. The only way I was able to walk away from my work as an actress is thanks to the help of Jim Finley, my counselor for the past nine years. To be in the hands of a contemplative who is also a gifted psycho-therapist has truly changed my life.

Once my days were no longer spent on a set, I decided to go deeper with mysticism, as a path toward wholeness and greater compassion. I discovered Richard Rohr, learned about the Living School, and found out that Jim was also involved. The timing seemed perfect.

Being guided by Richard Rohr, Cynthia Bourgeault, and Jim Finley feels like I've hit the jackpot. I have never been so moved by or connected to the Trinity, to the Incarnation, and to evolution as I am right now. I've so often been brought to tears, through my Living School studies, by the tenderness of God's crazy love.

I've also discovered what one of the first-year students recently shared: "It would be so easy to be a mystic if only I didn't have to live my life." Not long ago, my controlling behavior prompted my sweet husband to ask, "When is it going to kick in?" I've committed to going to sleep earlier so I can wake before everyone else and meditate. It's not easy to pull off with small children and a marriage, but my heart knows there is no other option than to surrender to the love that holds everything together. As Olivier Clément says, "We are born to die." Daily meditation is a practice in dying to my false and habitual ways of being.

I recently took a course in teaching mindfulness to children. I hope to share what I've learned with the teachers at my children's school, so they can develop their own practice and, from that experience, help children access the silent witness that is already within. I have also begun a meditation group at my home with some other moms from school. Atlanta is very different from Los Angeles, but so far people seem to be open.

I truly have no idea what I'm doing, but here I go! The mystics who so profoundly consume my heart continually point to sitting in silence. I pray that I can share this practice with others so that they can pass it on, within their families and beyond. What a gift to be part of bringing contemplation into action!

—Taylor Howard Portman



Seeking IT Committee Volunteers

The Center for Action and Contemplation utilizes a range of tools and technologies which enable our work and message to reach constituents around the world. To strengthen our capabilities we are seeking expert volunteers to serve on the Information Technology (IT) Committee. Committee members assist in developing, monitoring, and evaluating our IT strategy through monthly videoconference meetings (travel to Albuquerque is not necessary).

If you are an IT professional with significant experience in strategy development, systems administration, and/or web-based multimedia content distribution, and are willing to offer your time and talent to support our mission, please send a brief summary of your background and statement of interest to Corinne Carmony, Director of Finance and Operations (ccarmony@cac.org) by April 15, 2015.

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Registration closes April 22 or when it reaches capacity, whichever comes first.
Additional course offerings are listed at cac.org.

Getting to Know Our Donors

My husband, Bengt, and I first met Father Richard Rohr at the Pecos Benedictine Monastery in New Mexico, where we were frequent retreatants from 1970 to 2000. In the early years, Fr. Richard had a boyish face, brown hair, and no beard.

Bengt and I had both experienced a vacuum in our lives, and Fr. Richard's interpretation of the Gospel message resonated deeply within us, filling our souls with God's spirit and truth. Fr. Richard's spoken, recorded, and written teachings guided us into a love relationship with God.

The Enneagram, which we learned from Fr. Richard, gave us insight into our weaknesses and strengths. Bengt had trouble accepting that he was an Enneagram Eight, and I, rather shamefully, accepted the reality of being a lackadaisical Nine. Nonetheless, the Enneagram taught us to be compassionate, both with our own and others' faults and foibles.

Although we have not traveled as much in recent years, we did have opportunities to go to Fr. Richard's parish mission at St. Andrew's Methodist Church in Littleton, Colorado, and later attended two parish missions in Denver.

Bengt passed away on December 2, 2014. He and I have been most grateful to Fr. Richard for bringing us, and many others, into the loving embrace of Our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Janice Strom and her husband have been long-time friends and supporters of Fr. Richard and the CAC. Janice, a retired nurse, lives in Centennial, Colorado.

CLOSE TO OUR HEARTS

We hold in prayer and gratitude these donors and those they honor with their gifts.

Barbara Brightwell—in honor of Nancy Krenek
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Sister Rose Teresa, and Marion Melius

Movies and Meaning: A Dream Space

My memories of growing up in Northern Ireland are a mixture of images of the surrounding violence and fear, and also of light-birthing visions of magic and hope on a silver screen. I am blessed that my parents taught me that art is a way of understanding, and even re-shaping, life. Cinema was for me, and remains, the place where dreams of contemplation and action might be born.

I've long dreamed of creating a new kind of festival for everyone who loves stories and light, and I'm thrilled to be curating *Movies and Meaning: A Dream Space* in Albuquerque from May 28-31, 2015. It's a delight to collaborate with my friend Richard Rohr in building a temporary community dedicated to experiencing the ways in which the ideas and images we project can make everything better or worse, for ourselves, our communities, and the planet.

We'll watch some of the most transcendent films—old and new—on a magnificent silver screen with fantastic sound. We'll make new friends, eat extraordinary food, and experience the joy of "seeing as the mystics see." We'll explore how cinema can impact the increase or reduction of real-world violence, take a field trip in the wonderful New Mexican landscape, honor local and indigenous traditions, and—because it's not your typical film festival—sometimes we might even dance!

Our aim is nothing less than transcending the myth of

redemptive violence by imagining a new story. I hope you can join us!

—Gareth Higgins



Gareth Higgins, Founding Director of Movies and Meaning, was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and currently lives in North Carolina. He writes and speaks about connection to earth and community, cinema and the power of dreams, peace and justice, and how to take life seriously without believing your own propaganda. To learn more about Gareth Higgins and Movies and Meaning, visit garethhiggins.net.

We are proud to cosponsor a gathering for contemplative lovers of stories and light

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Please visit link above for full details and registration. As *Movies and Meaning* is not a CAC event, CAC is unable to assist with registration details.

A Conversation with Shane Claiborne

Shane Claiborne, author of *The Irresistible Revolution* and Jesus for President, will join Richard Rohr and Ilia Delio in New Mexico this August at the CAC-sponsored conference, "The Francis Factor: How Saint Francis and Pope Francis are Changing the World." Joelle Chase, CAC's Director of Messaging, talked with Shane recently about the Gospel which influenced both the Saint and the Pope and how it might inspire us today. You may listen to the full interview at cac.org/events/the-francis-factor.

Joelle: You write and talk a lot about what Jesus said and did. The community you founded, The Simple Way, claims St. Francis' simple rule: "To follow the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ and to walk in his footsteps." Pope Francis seems to be emulating his namesake in this, too. What is it about this single human being—Jesus of Nazareth—that is so compelling and timeless?

Shane: What is most captivating about Jesus is that we do not just have words on paper; we have the Word become flesh. In Jesus we can see what God is like with skin on. One of my neighbors puts it simply: *con carne*, what you would say to order a meal "with meat" in Spanish. That's literally what Incarnation means—God in meat. Jesus is the perfect example of how to live and demonstrate God's love in the world. Pope Francis and St. Francis take Jesus seriously. We've lost track of what Christianity is really about, and they remind us of that.

Joelle: Why did we lose track of the Gospel?

Shane: Well, I think there are a lot of reasons. Sometimes what Jesus says isn't easy, or it seems idealistic. To live like the lilies and the sparrows and to love our enemies is daunting in a world with ISIS. The church became overly focused on theology and doctrine, so much so that we forgot the Sermon on the Mount, the heart of Jesus' teaching. We've become known for the very things Jesus spoke out against—judgment and hypocrisy.

We have also lost the sense that conversion is not just about a moment; it is a movement of the Spirit. Jesus did not send us out into the world to make believers but to form disciples. St. Francis and Pope Francis exemplify this kind

of whole-life discipleship that takes us beyond the moment of conversion into a lifelong process.

Joelle: How does lasting change happen? And what sustains you in being an agent for change?

Shane: That's a big question. One approach is to connect the Gospel to the world that we live in and not divorce ourselves from reality. We have to read the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. This makes us think about things like immigration and the death penalty, not as "issues," but as real ways of loving our neighbors as ourselves.

The Gospel is communal. We need places like the CAC to create a gravity that draws us toward counter-cultural values. Part of what community means to me is surrounding myself with people I want to be like. If we want to be more generous, then we hang out with generous people, and they rub off on us. If we want to be more courageous, we hang out with people who are risk-takers, and they sort of push us to risk more.

Part of what keeps me nourished is having deep roots, realizing radical Christianity isn't just a phase. When we were starting a community, some Benedictines came to us and said, "Hey, we've heard what you are doing, and we're really excited about it. We just want you to know we are here for you. We have been doing community for about 1600 years." God is doing something fresh and new, but it's also good to be reminded that it's not a fleeting trend.

Renewals like the Franciscan movement remind us that we are not the first. My friend, Chris Haw, has an analogy that helps me. At first I thought I was in a kayak, riding the wild rapids of a river. Then I realized it's more like being in a rowboat, facing backward as I move downstream. You have to look backward in order to go forward.

Joelle: Thank you for hanging out with me, Shane! You—and your radical compatriots, Jesus and the Francis fellows—challenge us all to greater compassion and courage.



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Sunday, August 30–Tuesday, September 1, 2015 • Hyatt Regency Tamaya, Santa Ana Pueblo, New Mexico

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Ilia Delio, OSF, shares her scientific, theological, and historical understanding.

Shane Claiborne brings his love of Jesus and in-the-trenches peacemaking experience.

Richard Rohr, OFM, weaves together Ilia's and Shane's insights in his inimitable way.

Learn more and register at cac.org/events.



Desert Christianity and the Eastern Fathers of the Church

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*Abba Moses asked Abba Sylvanus,
"Can a man lay a new foundation every day?"
The Abba said, "If he works hard,
he can lay a new foundation at every moment."*

Both Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen recognized the importance of this early, desert form of Christianity. It is a unique window into how Jesus was first understood, before the church became an imperial, highly organized, competitive religion.

The second important aspect of early Christianity were the Greek-speaking theologians. Their names might be known in Western seminaries and recognized on some church calendars, but they would be unfamiliar to most lay Catholics and Protestants: Origen, Athanasius, Basil, the two Gregories of Nazianzen and Nyssa, Evagrius Ponticus, John Chrysostom, Pseudo-Dionysius, the two Cyrils (of Alexandria and Jerusalem), and others. Their writings were formative in the early development of Christian theology—some of which we've retained and, unfortunately, many of which we've forgotten or labeled heretical.

*God loves us more than a father, mother, friend,
or anyone else could love, and even more than
we are able to love ourselves.*

—John Chrysostom

The most important things I've learned from the Desert Fathers and Mothers and the Eastern Fathers of the Church, one building upon the other, are:

- Lifestyle practice trumps doctrinal/verbal purity;
- A dynamic (interactive) notion of the human and divine natures of Christ (especially from the Alexandrian school);¹
- A truly Trinitarian mysticism (especially from Cappadocia);
- The doctrine of *theosis* (human divinization as an objective reality)² which directly follows from the interactive understanding of our human and divine natures; and
- A much more practical and sustained teaching of how to pray and keep the mind and heart at rest (as passed on especially in *The Philokalia*).

Early Christianity set the foundation and ground for what we would now call contemplation. The term

hesychasm (resting) describes this primary concern in the Eastern Church. Eastern Christians are the "Buddhists" of Christianity, as it were; the Western Church has always been more missionary-oriented, practical, and focused on academic learning. Our two approaches are quite different and obviously there are strengths and weaknesses to both. Our biggest loss has been that the East and West have not balanced one another out.

Among many of the early Fathers of the Church, there was a common belief in *apokatastasis* (universal restoration) that has totally escaped the Western Church. Most Catholics and Protestants would be shocked by the belief that salvation is cosmic and universal—the exact meaning of Christ's victory. While this early belief is validated by Scripture and the very nature of God,³ it is precisely the parts of spirituality that the Western Church has neglected.

So, in a very brief way, and by jumping over many hidden luminaries, you can see why these are essential, yet almost lost, pieces of the Perennial Tradition which are foundational to retrieving an alternative orthodoxy. The early Church was already an alternative to what was later called orthodoxy!

Eastern and Western Christianity, with their different focuses, are both important; we exclude or neglect one to our own detriment. By reclaiming the divergent roots of our faith tradition, we come closer to experiencing the wholeness and union that God desires for us.

*As it is impossible to verbally describe the sweetness of
honey to one who has never tasted honey, so the goodness
of God cannot be clearly communicated by way of
teaching if we ourselves are not able to penetrate into the
goodness of the Lord by our own experience.*

—Basil the Great

Endnotes

- 1 Amos Smith, *Healing the Divide: Recovering Christianity's Mystic Roots* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2013). I was honored to write the Afterword for this important, but largely unknown, book.
- 2 Michael J. Christensen and Jeffrey A. Wittung, eds., *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007). A magnificent collection revealing the breadth and historical record of the doctrine of divinization of the human person.
- 3 Philip Gulley and James Mulholland, *If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person* (New York: Harper One, 2003). This could and should change your view of Christianity, and thus your life.

Cover image: St. Anthony the Great (c. 251–356 AD) and St. Paul the Hermit (229–342).

Greetings,

No doubt you've heard the news already—Oprah Winfrey hosted our founder Richard Rohr on Super Soul Sunday during the show's season premiere in February. We're delighted that Fr. Richard's inspiring and challenging message was shared with a wider (and mostly new) audience through this opportunity, and that the inclusive spirituality it represents is resonating for so many!

During their on-camera discussion, Fr. Richard said, "I know that I'm an ordinary man; I've been given an extraordinary gift, [and] God can give extraordinary gifts to anybody." We are honored to be a part of sharing Fr. Richard's unique gift with the world, which is all about helping each of us discover and share our own gifts for the betterment of all.

Some of his most memorable one-liners made the rounds on Twitter and Facebook:

"If you don't transform your suffering, you will transmit it."

"The self expands thru tragedy."

"True love is a death of the false self."

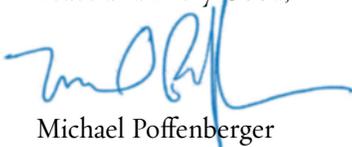
Right now, as the season of Lent draws to a close and we look in hopefulness toward Easter, we are given a yearly reminder of the pattern for each of our lives. Jesus' death and resurrection is an archetype for the human journey, how we all might traverse the path of descent into darkness, embrace our shadow and suffering, and come out the other side to live our callings with authenticity and compassion for humanity and creation. This is the topic of *Immortal Diamond*, the book Fr. Richard and Oprah discussed, which extends an invitation for each of us to enter more fully into small deaths of ego—or the "false self"—and to experience the "comfort of the resurrection" in our God-given identities.

In my experience, being human can be a confusing and heartbreaking endeavor, and we all need companions and guides to help us make sense of it. This is what CAC seeks to do—be a way-pointer. As Fr. Richard said in his interview with Oprah: "We are not the moon itself, but the finger trying to point toward the moon." We hope to walk alongside those on the Emmaus road and reassure them they are not alone, that the living Christ accompanies us at every step.

CAC staff welcomed the opportunity to meet new friends through Super Soul Sunday and shepherd them into deeper contemplative study and experience. Thanks to the generosity of CAC donors in 2013, we were able to develop and launch a course based on *Immortal Diamond*. The *Immortal Diamond* course offers a safe and nurturing environment for falling into grace and encountering real transformation through study, practice, reflection, and dialogue with other seekers. With your support, several thousand people have now taken the course, and more are signing up every day.

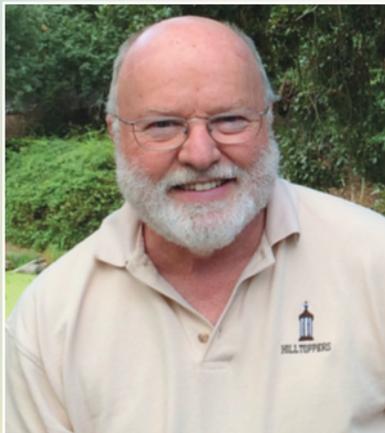
If you have been touched by Fr. Richard's words and the work of the CAC, whether in *Immortal Diamond* or other teachings, you know there are layers and layers to discover and unfold. Please consider donating so we can continue developing online courses, Daily Meditations, events, and resources that draw seekers to release their deepest selves into the sacred dance of death and resurrection.

Peace and Every Good,



Michael Poffenberger
Executive Director, Center for Action and Contemplation

P.S. Donations of any amount are received humbly and gratefully. Please use the enclosed remittance form and return envelope to send your gift to CAC, or donate securely online at cac.org/support-cac.



A WEBCAST WITH RICHARD ROHR, OFM

REDISCOVERING THE WISDOM OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Tuesday, April 14, 2015
5:00–6:30 p.m. Mountain Time

Two roots of the Christian faith—the Desert Fathers and Mothers and the Eastern Fathers of the Church—have largely been forgotten in the West. By ignoring these ancient teachers, we neglect important lessons they have to teach us, such as the prayer of quiet, the mutuality of Trinity, universal restoration, and a simple spirituality of transformation into Christ.

Fr. Richard re-introduces us to early Desert Christians and unfamiliar names from our Christian heritage: the Gregorys of Nazianzen and Nyssa, the Cyrils of Alexandria and Jerusalem, Origen, Chrysostom, and many others. By reclaiming the divergent origins of our faith tradition, we come closer to experiencing union.

Register at cac.org.

Register by Friday, April 10, 2015 to participate in the live webcast and/or to view the replay. The replay will become available approximately one week following the live webcast and will remain available for 30 days to those who register in advance.

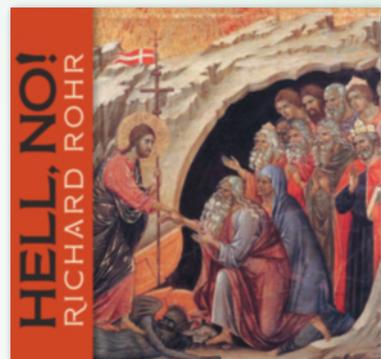
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(These talks were recorded at CAC's CONSPIRE 2014 conference.)

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