

## CHAPTER I

# CHARISM: A GIFT FROM GOD (WITH A GREEK ACCENT)

The barn swallows swoop through the long streamers of light that flood down from two high windows. We watch a cat play with a piece of hay. Everybody is together, resting, in a very simple, elemental prayer of gift. It's not thought out, reasoned, measured—it's just gift—God's atmosphere of gift which we know.

—Mother Agnes Day, O.C.S.O., *Light in the Shoe Shop*

Much of the beauty of the Cistercian tradition resides within monasteries themselves, as places of silence and refuge. But just as you don't have to dwell in the Holy Land to follow Jesus, you don't have to live (or even be) in a monastery to be blessed by the wisdom of the Cistercians, as a story about Thomas Merton demonstrates.

Merton was a man who embodied contradiction: a famous author who was the member of a religious order which prizes obscurity; a spiritual recluse who became renowned for his social and political views; a monk who gave his life to God but whose sins are only too well-known—thanks to the posthumous publication of his own journals.

A key event in Merton's life took place not in the silence of the cloister but on a bustling street corner in the middle of a city. Like all Trappists, Merton rarely left the abbey, but on occasion he had a good reason to venture into the world. Such an errand brought him to downtown Louisville, Kentucky, in March 1958, when he had been a monk for well over sixteen years. On that late winter day, as he reached a street corner, something amazing happened.

"I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people," wrote Merton, referring to the passersby on the street. "It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness."<sup>1</sup>

In other words, Merton suddenly realized that there was no real difference between being a monk (who was celibate and lived in a silent monastery) and being a "normal" person. He marveled over this apparently simple insight, "if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."<sup>2</sup>

Without planning it or expecting it, Merton received a kind of mystical vision or insight—what commentators have called his "epiphany." Ordinary people walking down the street seemed to be shining like the sun, and Merton's response was that he fell in love, with each and every one.

In his journal, and later in one of his books, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, he reflected on this extraordinary moment and realized that it enabled him to see the world in a new light. No longer did he consider monastic life to be a "special calling." He didn't question his vocation as a Trappist and was still a monk ten years later when he died in a freak accident. But because of that event, he began to see that being *human* mattered more than being a monastic.

In other words, the important calling is not the external label we wear but the interior truth of who we are. All people—not just nuns or monks, saints or mystics—are called into a

life-transfiguring relationship with God. This insight was a true gift that Merton discerned as a result of his seemingly random sense of falling in love with everyone on a random city street.

Why does this story matter? Aside from just being an interesting moment in a great writer's life, Merton's epiphany made a difference in his work. After that day in March 1958, Merton's writing noticeably changed. He became more engaged with the issues of the day, writing not only about pious topics like prayer and meditation but also more practical issues including the political and social controversies of his time.

He went on to revise two of his earlier spiritual books (*Seeds of Contemplation*, revised as *New Seeds of Contemplation*, and *What is Contemplation?*, revised as *The Inner Experience*), seeking to make his writing more relevant to everyone, not just monks or nuns. Merton's epiphany was an important step toward making Cistercian spirituality available to all people who seek a deeper relationship with God.

Not everyone has mind-blowing epiphanies or transfiguring insights like Merton did. But we all receive gifts from God—and it is precisely this fact, that God is by nature giving, that provides an important clue to understanding the secrets of this hidden jewel, the Cistercian path.

I like to joke that my favorite prayer is "Dear Lord, don't worry, I have it all under control!" It's funny because, in fact, I have almost *nothing* under control. The sting of the joke lies in the fact that I *wish* I had everything tightly managed. I suspect that's true for most of us. Whether we have our lives carefully organized or barely restrained, we want things even more orderly than they are, and we secretly fear that everything could descend into chaos at any time. Our finances, our careers, our families, our health—we want to have influence over it all, and we get stressed out when things don't go the way we planned them.

Here's a similar humorous line I often hear repeated in spiritual circles: "The best way to make God laugh is to tell God your plans." It seems that as much as we try to manage every

little detail in our affairs, life keeps getting in the way in small and huge ways. A flat tire. Raccoons in the attic. A cancelled flight. A sore throat. A pink slip. A divorce. A cancer diagnosis. Of course, there are happy interruptions too, but sometimes they can be as stressful as the “bad” events. When we face the uncertainties of the future, we must admit we actually have very little under control. We can plan, we can prepare, and it is prudent to do so. But the reason why we say, with Robert Burns in his poem, *To A Mouse*, the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry is because, well, they do.

Cistercian wisdom, in its simple, quiet way, offers an antidote to our near-universal addiction to control. The monks and nuns refer to the character or identity of their spirituality as the *Cistercian Charism*. We’ll talk more about this term and what it means later on in this chapter. For now, I want to focus on this notion of *charism*. It comes from a Greek word meaning “gift.” The Cistercian way emphasizes *gifts from God* as a central fact of spiritual living. The world tells us that the keys to a good life include power, authority, control, management, ambition, money (lots of it), experiences (the more the better), and, of course, owning lots of stuff. But Cistercian spirituality ignores this way of thinking almost completely.

For Cistercians a good life begins in God. God loves us. Out of that love, God blesses us in big and small ways. The blessings of God are not anything we can control, manage, or earn. They are *gifts*. Sometimes they are obvious gifts: the sheer fact we are alive or a particular talent you might have, such as an excellent singing voice. Sometimes God’s gifts come as specific blessings or challenges that help us to grow or trust God more. Likewise, Cistercians recognize God’s generosity in many of the qualities that shape their uniquely beautiful, spiritual way of life.

Monasteries are places of quiet and rest, not because monks or nuns are special people but because God has given them the gift of silence. The monastics pray several times every day, not because they are so skilled at time management but because

God has given them the gift of the liturgy (the formal prayers of the monastery, offered several times a day at different “offices” or services). Cistercians are happy, down-to-earth folks not because they have a secret insight into psychological power but simply because God has given them the gift of humility.

On and on it goes. Cistercian spirituality emerges from a recognition of God’s blessings, gifts given to us, not because we deserve them but because God loves us so very much. Part of what is lovely about a gift, any gift, is that it can create or celebrate a bond, a connection between the recipient and the giver. On my birthday, when my wife gives me a present, it’s not just an obligatory act; rather, it is an expression of the love between us—the bond of love which sustains our relationship every day, not just on the gift-giving days. I hope this is true of all gifts. Even when a salesperson sends a bottle of champagne to an important client, it’s meant to strengthen the ties of their relationship—even if it’s “strictly business.”

What is true on a human level is even more meaningful with the greatest of all relationships: the one between human beings and our creator God. A *spiritual* gift from God reveals how God offers a deeper and more intimate relationship to (and with) us. It points us back to God, the giver.

God’s gifts are always freely given. They are not rewards, or incentives, or bargaining chips. We cannot do anything to earn God’s love or grace, so we cannot do anything to make God shower us with blessings either.

So what makes something a spiritual gift? Seen with the eyes of love or faith, almost anything could qualify as a gift from God. For starters, the sheer fact that we, or anything else, exist at all is a gift. No one forced God into fashioning the universe or setting into motion the chain of miracles and events that culminated in your and my births. Our very lives, our bodies, our minds, our families, our homes, and our environment—all are gifts, given to us by a loving, providential Creator. From there, we can get more specific.

Each of us has unique abilities, interests, aptitudes, and talents. If you're thinking, "Well, I inherited my talents from my parents and learned my interests from my friends," of course you did—and those people who influenced you and shared their DNA with you were all, ultimately, given to you by God. Christians believe the supreme gift from God is, well, God's very self given to us especially in the person of Jesus Christ and in the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Jesus is our light, our compass, our inspiration, our hope. We put our faith in him for the blessings of life and for grace upon our deaths. Even in death, we trust that we can commend ourselves to the heart of God, knowing that as we pass into the silence of eternity, we pass into the safety of God's grace and mercy.

A Greek word for gift is *charisma*, which is related to *charis*, meaning grace or kindness—implied here is a gift lavishly bestowed with no concern for reciprocation, simply a joyful expression of the love of the giver. It's a particularly appropriate word for describing gifts from God. In 1 Corinthians 12:4 (NABRE), which in English reads, "There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit," the original Greek word for "spiritual gifts" is *charisma*. A "charismatic" person is someone with a particular gift, an ability to attract or inspire others. Then there's the charismatic renewal, an ecumenical movement within Christianity that stresses spiritual gifts from the Holy Spirit, such as healing, wisdom, or discernment.

I mentioned how Cistercians describe the spirituality and identity of their way of life as the Cistercian Charism. It's a lovely image. The Cistercian way is entirely a gift, a grace bestowed on those who follow this prayerful way of life. The gifts of Cistercian spirituality encompass a variety of blessings that are available to us with no strings attached. In these gifts we find the wisdom of the past—our innate capacities to grow. They instruct us to live humbly. We are taught how to give and receive love. The people in our lives are also gifts from God, living gifts who share with us their beauty and their

challenges. Of course, divine gifts are sometimes explicitly spiritual or religious, so the adventure of prayer, the mystery of silence, and virtues such as faith or perseverance—all are gifts, freely and lavishly bestowed upon us by our merciful, compassionate God.

These gifts, and all the other graces we receive, are meant to help us embody the love of God in our lives. In fact, that may be the best definition of a spiritual gift: any blessing from God, in any form, which helps us to receive, respond to, and share the ultimate gift of God's love.

None of God's gifts are unique to the Cistercian way of life. The blessings that monks and nuns enjoy are available to all who seek divine love. But the Cistercian Charism combines its graces in a distinctive way, marked by the unique beauty and silent simplicity of the monastic life. Think of the Cistercian Charism as the overall character of this particular expression of spirituality, the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. The individual elements of this particular path are the building blocks of a lovely and richly contemplative way of life.

A gift from God is a gift precisely because we do not earn or deserve it. It's free. It's not about our special abilities or worthy performance. God does not parse out the elements of Cistercian spirituality to us based on merit. They are freely available to all, available to anyone who wishes to be blessed by them.

So we do not *earn* God's blessings, but we do have a choice in how we *respond* to them. The Cistercian Charism entails more than just an assortment of blessings. It invites us to put those blessings to work in our lives for the purpose of both personal transfiguration and loving service of others. In other words, Cistercian spirituality includes a *practical* dimension. The action steps we take in response to God's love are spiritual *practices*.

While spiritual *gifts* are blessings freely bestowed on us from God; *practices* are the means by which we accept those gifts and seek to live by their blessings. What does this look like? Let's take silence, for example. The sheer existence of

silence is a gift, a blessing from God. To truly appreciate it, however, we need to ensure that we make time for silence in our lives (which is why the exercise at the end of the introduction an important starting point). Anyone can *notice* silence; even secular meditation exercises like mindfulness-based stress reduction invite us to be aware of silence. But when we choose to *pray* in a silent way, we are responding to the gift of silence with a meaningful spiritual practice, a freely embraced way of accepting God's gift.

Remember this. Every gift from God invites us to greater intimacy with God—not as something we achieve or earn but something we may simply accept. The steps we take in response to the gifts we receive are how we say yes to God's love.

Life is a gift, filled with many blessings, large or small, ordinary or extraordinary. The entire Cistercian way of life is a charism, a gift from God. The next time you feel tempted to tell God you have everything under control, take a deep breath and look for the gifts God continually bestows upon you. If you choose to follow the Cistercian path, try to see all of its elements as gifts, given to you by God. I invite you to humbly receive these gifts.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Can you name some of God's blessings or gifts at work in your life? These could be simple or exceptional, material or spiritual in nature. God blesses us in many ways.
- What does *Cistercian Charism* mean to you? Put another way, what does the gift of Cistercian spirituality mean to you?
- Try to think of two or three things (they can be simple, basic) you do to nourish your soul. Would you be comfortable calling these things "spiritual practices"?



## SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: FOSTERING A LIFE OF BLESSING AND GRATITUDE

“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace” (Nm 6:24–26). With these words, Moses blessed the people of Israel, and *blessings* have been a part of religious life ever since. Most churches typically conclude their worship services with the priest or minister blessing the congregation. Many Catholics find great meaning in asking a priest or deacon to bless their rosaries or other religious objects. One of the most common forms of religious observance, even in our highly secularized age, is taking a moment to bless the food we are about to eat.

Human beings have the ability to bless but also to curse. Even if we were imprisoned in chains, that ability could not be taken from us. To bless something is to honor it in the light of God’s love. Conversely, to curse something is to withhold our good favor or even to wish for its destruction. Most spiritually minded people see cursing as unhealthy or sinful (especially in the light of Jesus, who instructed us not to curse our enemies but to love them). Blessing, however, is a beautiful expression of care and compassion. For example, we bless those who are in need or who suffer or who struggle to live with dignity and honor even in difficult circumstances. But this ability to bless has implications in our very homes. When we give our children love and attention we bless them. When we do something special for our spouse we bless our marriage. When we strive to overcome a bad habit or cultivate a virtue we are seeking to be a blessing to everyone in our lives.

Closely related to blessing is gratitude: the thanksgiving we express for the blessings we receive. “If the only prayer you say in your whole life is ‘thank you’ that would suffice,” is a nugget of wisdom attributed to the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart. When we express gratitude for a gift we receive,

we are actually blessing the person who gave it to us. This is why you find the phrase “Bless the LORD” in scripture (see, for example, Psalm 103). How could I, a mere mortal, bless God? My blessing might be very puny compared to God’s gift, but I still can express gratitude. In doing so, I actually offer God a blessing, however lowly it might be.

“We receive the gift of God in vain if we do not use it to seek the glory of God and the benefit of our neighbor,” said Baldwin of Forde, a twelfth-century Cistercian monk who became Archbishop of Canterbury. In other words, God’s gifts are not meant to be treats for our personal pleasure. They are given to us for the purpose of spreading the love; back to God, and forward to our family, friends, neighbors, and even our enemies (Mt 5:44). One simple way to “seek the glory of God” through the gifts we receive is by the act of blessing.

“Count your blessings (instead of sheep)” is Irving Berlin’s advice for insomniacs. That’s good advice for all of us and not just when we can’t get to sleep. When we take the time to notice the blessings we have received, we can express gratitude—both as a prayer of thanksgiving (blessing) to God and by offering our own blessings to others.

This may seem hardly significant, but it’s actually a beautiful spiritual practice. Consider the blessings in your life, no matter how small. Even if your life seems currently marked by much struggle and suffering, look for the blessings between the pain, like grass growing through a crack in the sidewalk. For each blessing in your life, take time to offer a brief prayer of thanksgiving and consider that you are blessing God.

If a blessing comes from a specific person, take time to express gratitude to him or her as well. By doing this every day, you gradually will cultivate in your heart a spirit of gratitude. This in turn will empower you to offer your own blessings to others, so look for ways to do that too. It might be as simple as a friendly smile to a harried postal worker or a gift of fruit to a homeless person near your office. Of course, it could also be

a much bigger blessing. But keep in mind that every blessing you give to others begins with gratitude for the blessings you have received. It all goes back to God.