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Transfiguration 2017

(Letter n°54)

“For once you were darkness,
but now in the Lord you are light.
Live as children of light.”
(Eph 5:8)

At a time when we are preparing to celebrate the feast of the Transfiguration, we suggest you might read an extract from the journal written by the Cistercian monk M. Basil Pennington (1931-2005) just before his death while on a pilgrimage in the Holy Land.

It is said that the first atom bomb was exploded over Japan, with all its deadly intent, on the Feast of the Transfiguration in mockery of the light of Tabor. Whatever might have been the comparative physical brightness of the two events, it is certain that the transforming effect of the light of Tabor was something of a wholly other order. And that transforming enlightenment and grace remains atop Tabor. The seeking pilgrim does not need the great mosaic in the apse of the basilica to experience the glorified Christ on Tabor's summit. He is there, and the transforming experience remains even as one comes down from the mountain. After Tabor we see only Christ in every man, woman, and child.

While none of us can ever comprehend the fullness and depth of Jesus' love for us personally and individually, it nonetheless remains that Jesus does have his favorites. Even among the chosen Twelve there are favorites. It is Peter, the one he chose to be the leader, and the two brothers, James, who is to be the first bishop of Jerusalem, and John, the beloved, the disciple whom Jesus loves, who were invited to ascend Tabor with him. There was no zigzag road then. Only a rugged footpath. It was a long, hard, hot climb. And they had no idea where he was leading them: Will it be all the way to the top? But they followed. Even as we must follow, all the way, if we want to truly "find" Jesus.

The opening scene of the event brings two other participants: Moses, the Lawgiver, and Elijah, the great prophet. The Jews when they speak of the inspired Scriptures often speak of them as "the Law and the Prophets." These two in converse with Jesus, draw out sentences from the Scriptures, which are leading the three chosen ones into an initial

revelation of what is to take place at Jerusalem. The three are to live through the whole horror of it; in fact one of them will be the sole of the Twelve who will remain steadfast right to the end.

If we want to see Jesus, understand what he suffered, come to know its promise, we too must turn to the Law and the Prophets, to the inspired Scriptures — now completed by those of the New Testament. Our path to contemplation begins in lectio, in letting the inspired Word of God enter us, shape us, and call us forward in faith and hope.

The three were elated by their wondrous experience. The exuberant Peter, ever wanting to take charge and do something, had a plan: Lord, let us build here three booths (those little huts, open to the sky, built by the Jews for the week of Succoth). When we have an experience of God, we so much want to capture it, hang on to it, confine it within something our mind can grasp and hold. But that is not possible. Any concept, image, or feeling that comes from us is far too confining. It would reduce the experience to mere human dimensions. The experience of the Divine takes us beyond all that. The evangelist Luke tells us that Peter speaks, this time as at others, not really knowing what he was talking about.

The Lord takes care of that. The brightness of the transfigured Christ is already beyond anything that human words can describe. The sacred writers scramble for images. If they lived in our times they might well have used the image of the hydrogen bomb or preferably some of the images coming to us from the Hubble telescope. But more is yet to come. It is the cloud that led the chosen people out of Egypt, the cloud that illumined Sinai, that filled the temple.

I like the traditional icon of the Transfiguration. Jesus stands on the pinnacle of the steep mountain, surrounded by halos of all different colors, Moses and Elijah on either side of him. And the three disciples lay sprawled out in different directions, sandals flying! Human words, thoughts, images, plans are all gone to the winds. The experience of the moment is all. And a message reverberates within them: "This is my Son, my chosen one; listen to him." This is the essential message of Tabor, this mystery of light: This man, this humble carpenter turned rabbi, from the despicable town of Nazareth, is in fact the very Son of the Most High, the Son of the all holy and glorious God of heaven and earth. He is the light, the lightsome cloud who led the chosen people out of bondage and will now lead them into the heavenly kingdom: "Listen to him."

As soon as it begins it is all over — or so it seems, for it is not a moment in time but in eternity, in the timeless time of God. At a gentle touch on the shoulder, the awed disciples dare to look up and they see only Jesus. They see only Jesus, their beloved rabbi. They see only Jesus, when they live the faith of the mountain, in every man, woman, and child.

"They kept silent about what they had seen and shared it with no one." There is a time and a place for sharing. The Son of man is now risen. Unfortunately he is not yet risen in every heart. What I have "seen" on the mountain can only be shared by those who have

ears to hear, hearts open to hear, the incredibly wondrous truth that God, the glorious God of heaven and earth, did become one with us in our humanity; the faith that can believe and give birth to a hope that can look to the joy of the Resurrection and our own transfiguration through the coming of the Spirit even through the dereliction of Calvary.

(*Journey in a Holy Land*, Paraclete Press, 2006, p. 66-69)

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Last January, the Abbot General of our Congregation decided to close the Monastery of Holy Trinity in Arizona in the United States. In his role as a Definitor, Fr Mark-Ephrem was chosen to assist the community of monks and that of the oblates who live in the vicinity of the monastery to cope with this period of transition. These past months, Fr Mark-Ephrem has therefore had to be *in situ* several times (from 2 to 11 April, from 24 April to 1st May and from 19 to 28 June).

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✠ On 6 April, Fr Mark-Ephrem took part in the Chrism Mass in Newry Cathedral.

✠ The end of April and the beginning of May were marked by several deaths:

- On 25 April, M. Bernard Charlet (93 years old), the father of our Br Benoît, who left the following day to be with his mother and his brothers and sisters. The funeral took place on 28 April in the church of le Tholonet. Br Benoît returned on 1st May.

- On 4 May, Philomena Kielty (90 years old). In the year 2000, Philomena and her husband Paddy-Joe gave us the land on which the monastery was built. Philomena used to come and pray with us every day for the celebration of the Eucharist and the Office of Vigils. On 6 May, the funeral took place in the monastery church and Philomena was buried in the monastery cemetery.

- On 8 May, Harley Breen (94 years old). A long-standing friend of our community, Harley prayed regularly with Br Éric and Fr Mark-Ephrem between 1983 and 1985, when they were at Ballykilbeg. On 9 May, the day before the funeral, our two brothers went to Dublin to pray with Harley's family.

- On 12 May, Marie McStay (62 years old), an oblate of the community. A resident of Rostrevor, Marie faithfully came to pray with the community. On 16 May, the funeral took place in the monastery church and Marie was buried in the village cemetery.

✠ On 18 May, Fr Mark-Ephrem and Br Thierry were at the « An Cuan » Centre in Rostrevor for an inter-religious encounter. Two rabbis explained the Jewish celebration of Easter to the Christians and Muslims present.

✠ From 19 to 22 May, Br Éric was in Le Havre for the first communion of Sacha, one of his great-nephews.

✠ From 24 to 26 May, Bishop Alan Abernethy, Anglican Bishop of Connor (Northern Ireland), was on retreat with us.

✠ On Thursday 25 May, Fr Mark-Ephrem was at the Anglican cathedral of Armagh occupying his stall for the Ascension Day service (which is held on Sunday in the Catholic Church calendar in Ireland).

✠ From 28 May to 3 June, Br Éric had a few days retreat and relaxation on the west coast of Ireland.

✠ From 5 to 8 June, Fr Mark-Ephrem took part in a meeting of the monastic major superiors of Great Britain and Ireland.

✠ From 12 to 14 June, Fr Mark-Ephrem was in Rome for a meeting with the Abbot General and the members of the Definitory in Italy. From 14 to 16 June, he was in London visiting our confrère Dom Bernard de Smet in the retirement home where he lives.

✠ On 18 June, on the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, Fr Richard Shannon, a priest in the Dublin diocese, made his profession as a secular oblate.

✠ After 10 years as president of Edgehill Methodist College, Belfast (a training centre for ministers of the Methodist Church in Ireland), Rev Richard Clutterbuck retired and returned to England. On 24 June, Br Thierry represented the community at an evening function in honour of Richard.

✠ On 24 June, we learned of the death of our friend John Fisher (87 years old). On 27 June, Br Éric was present at the thanksgiving service held in the Presbyterian Church in Rostrevor.

✠ On 2 July, our Sunday Eucharist service was broadcast by BBC Radio Ulster.

✠ During the week beginning 3 July, some 30 Orthodox Christians were on retreat in the village of Rostrevor. On 7 July, Fr John Nankivell (a member of the Greek Orthodox diocese of Thyateira in Great Britain) celebrated the Divine Liturgy in our church.

✠ On 11 July, for the Feast of St Benedict, our Bishop John McAreevey took part in Vespers and dined with the community.

✠ On 12 July, the editorial board of the review *One in Christ* met at the monastery. We were delighted to welcome Sr Geraldine Smyth, a Dominican sister (Dublin), Dom John Mayhead from Turvey (England), Dom Martin Browne from Glenstal (Ireland), Fr Bill Russell, a White Father (Jerusalem) and the editor of the review, John Bolger.

✠ From 16 to 18 July, Fr Mark-Ephrem was in Dublin to give a series of talks to a group of Little Sisters of the Poor.

✠ On 19 July, Fr Mark-Ephrem and Br Éric (both ecumenical canons in the Anglican Church of Ireland) were invited to the Anglican Cathedral of Downpatrick to meet the Duke of Kent.

✠ On 20 July, Fr Mark-Ephrem and Br Éric were in Belfast to celebrate the marriage of Joanne Murphy, the niece of Fr Mark-Ephrem.



*We often find it completely bewildering
to know how to understand all that God is doing and saying,
both in our times of great joy and our times of great sadness.
But the word that comes to us,
leading us on to follow Jesus even when we haven't a clue what's going on,
is the word that came from the cloud on that strange day in Galilee:
"This is my son, my chosen one. Listen to him."*

Bishop N. T. Wright