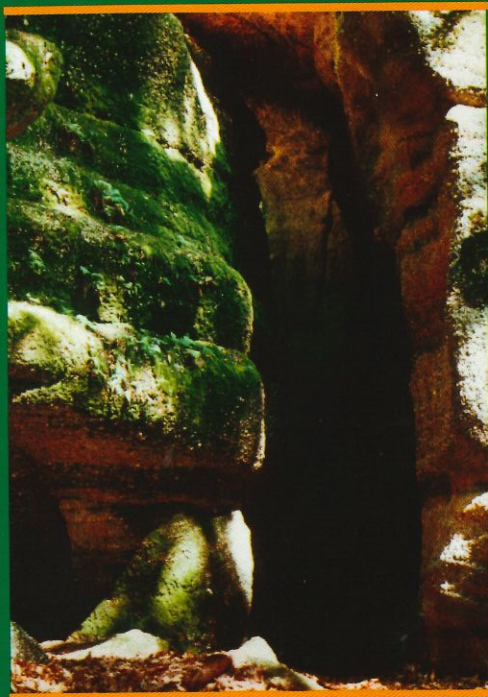


Emmanuel

APRIL

2001



*EUCCHARISTIC
SPIRITUALITY*

A Good Friday Meditation

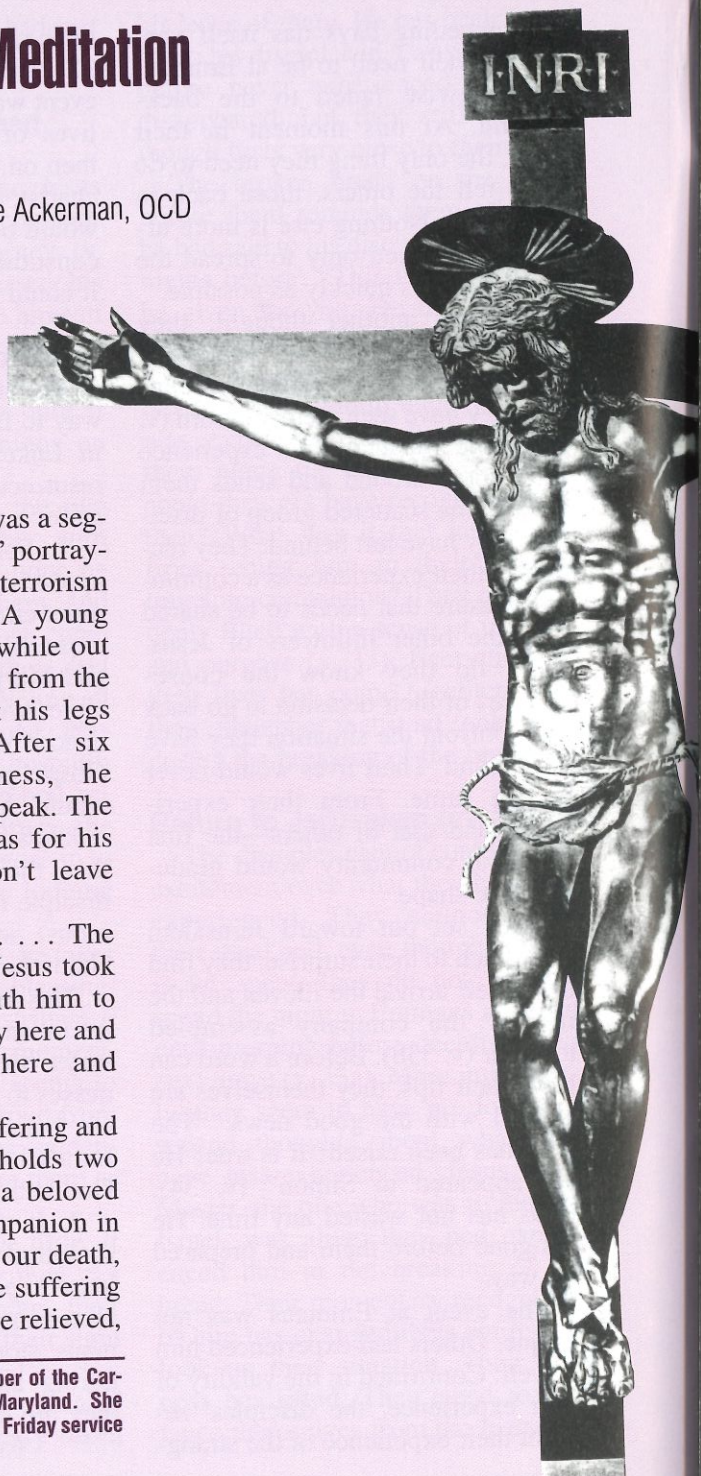
by Colette Ackerman, OCD

Some time ago, there was a segment on "60 Minutes" portraying the current brutal terrorism in Northern Ireland. A young man was shot in the legs while out on the street, and the holes from the bullets were so large that his legs had to be amputated. After six weeks of unconsciousness, he awoke too weak to even speak. The first message he wrote was for his wife. It said: "Please don't leave me."


Please don't leave me. . . . The night before his passion, Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him to pray. He asked them: "Stay here and watch with me." Stay here and watch with me.

At times of fear and suffering and sorrow, the human heart holds two desires: the longing that a beloved one will be there as a companion in our pain, our despair, and our death, *and* the wild hope that the suffering will end, the sorrow will be relieved,

Sister Colette Ackerman is a member of the Carmelite Monastery of Baltimore, Maryland. She prepared this meditation for a Good Friday service two years ago.



EMMANUEL



and the death transformed into a mercy—a redemption we can hardly imagine. We long for a beloved one to be with us, and we yearn for resurrection.

These desires and hopes are actually a description of the mystical life, the contemplative life. Our plunge (willing or unwilling) into the dark embrace of God leads us step-by-step to insight, to conversion, to hope, and to a new wisdom. As the Jesuit mystic Teilhard de Chardin suggests, the function of death is to provide the necessary entrance to our inmost self, and the consequent loss of our self-absorption in compassion for others.

Today, in our round of sacred time, we contemplate this mystery revealed in Jesus. Calvary, like other mountains in our scripture texts, is the place of God's revelation. It is here, in his passion, in his vulnerable love, that Jesus goes to the cross. It is here that Jesus enters into the dregs of our life, so to speak—the most lonely, the most painful, the most desperate, the most mysterious moments, the times when we can

understand nothing. God loves us so much as to be with us in the moment of death.

Jesus experiences this death. For Jesus, the passion means being there, staying there. God loves us so much as to be with us even in death. God has become vulnerable to us, embracing even our death and desiring to be embraced: embraced as crucified upon a cross, embraced as body broken for us and as blood poured out for us. And with that embrace, to draw forth from deep within us the humanness we have forsaken, the faith we have buried, the pledge of ourselves we have feared. Whom do we stay with as Jesus stays? What do we believe in our most desperate times? To whom do we pledge ourselves?

One of our most cherished death and resurrection stories comes from the prophet Ezekiel: the vision of the dry bones. Ezekiel proclaims: "The Spirit of God led me out to a broad plain and made me walk amid the dry bones in every direction." And God asked, "Mortal, can these bones live? Can these bones live?"

On this day of dry bones, dry prayer, even in a sense, dry bread, I invite you to close your eyes for a few moments and walk with the Spirit of God through the plain of dry bones, a place as revelatory as the mount of Calvary, perhaps an icon of our own dry world. So please close your eyes and enter the plain.

What do you see? The man with no legs is certainly here. What does life hold for him now? Will his wife stay? How will it be for them if they make love? What can they dare?

The people of Kosovo are here—their tear-stained faces, the hungry and cold children, an entire nation uprooted and bereft of any security—lost.

Our bombs are here: black holes that hold the deeper abyss of war and escalating violence.

The victims of Hurricane Mitch are here with their flattened banana plantations, reflection of a wrecked economy—desperate.

The children of the Sudan are here, captured and made slaves with no one to think of them or even care.

Those who wait on death row are here; their innocent victims are here.

Others we know are here: the friend who has betrayed us, the child who has deserted us, the one who demands more than we can ever give.

How are we present to these dry bones of our lives? Where is God's fidelity and ours in the midst of these riddles of existence? Despair, abandonment, rejection, treachery, and death—"Our bones have dried up; our hope is lost, and we are cut off."

14th-century processional banner.

And still God asks: "Mortal, can these bones live? Prophesy, mortal, prophesy: breathe into these slain that they may come to life. . . . Thus says the Lord God: O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them and bring you back. I will put my spirit in you that you may live. I have promised. I will do it."

God is there. God is here. The wisdom of the cross is "being there," "staying with." Jesus stays vulnerable and loving until the end, handing over his spirit, handing on the grace of human fidelity and love. Whom do you stay with? Will you stay here and watch with me?



one place to another. They do not plan his coming, nor could they even think of doing so. He simply walks up to them and engages them in conversation. What is more, they do not recognize him until they reach their destination for the night and gather around the table to share the evening meal.

Jesus approaches us in a similar way. Our God is a God of surprises. He comes to us in many ways and at various times and circumstances. For this reason, we need to expect the unexpected, and hope that we are able to recognize him when the right moment arrives.

3. The story, moreover, bolsters our attachment to the Eucharist as the center of Christian life and practice. The disciples at Emmaus recognize Jesus during the breaking of the bread. The eucharistic overtones of this passage invite us to examine our own understanding of what takes place during the eucharistic celebration. During this sacred liturgical action, Christ comes to us in a special way, making himself present to us through the Scriptures, in the breaking of the bread, in the worshiping community, and in the person of the priest and ministers.

The popularity of the story is directly related to the Christian community's understanding of the centrality of the eucharistic celebration for the Christian community. During it, we too are given a glimpse of the risen Christ and confirm our faith in his presence in our midst.

4. Finally, the story provides us with a good indication of what the

walk of discipleship entails: 1) The disciples set out toward Emmaus reflecting on their experience of Christ's passion and death. 2) The risen Lord, unrecognized, accompanies them on their way, engages them in conversation, questions them, and allows them to share their understanding of the events that had recently shaped their lives. 3) After listening to them, he opens up the Scriptures to them, showing them how Moses and the prophets foretold what the Messiah had to undergo in order to enter into glory. 4) He accepts their invitation to sup with them and reveals himself to them in the breaking of the bread. 5) This experience changes their lives and sends them back to share the good news with those they had left behind in Jerusalem.

Self-reflection. Listening. Teaching. Eucharist. Proclamation. These are the experiences that the disciples encounter on their journey. They are the same experiences that help to shape us as disciples of Christ today.

Summary

Following Christ entails reflecting on our experience of his presence in our lives, articulating that experience, and listening to it. It also involves finding a reflection of that experience in the Scriptures and validating it with Christ in the breaking of the bread. Finally, it means sharing with others what we have come to recognize about ourselves and Christ in the process.

All of this takes place in the context of a journey with Christ where he remains largely unrecognized, except through the eyes of faith.

During that journey, the Eucharist is a sacred resting place, where we glimpse the Lord's presence in our lives and become empowered to face our responsibilities with renewed vigor. It also is the place where we renew our commitment to be members of Christ's body and learn to live with a sense of immediacy and urgency.

This process of self-reflection, listening, teaching, Eucharist, and proclamation comprises the fundamental rhythm of the life of discipleship, one that can carry us through even the most difficult of times. The experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus bears this out. Their experience on the very day (v. 13) of Christ's resurrection has become a metaphor for the journey of faith and the great joy that comes from recognizing Jesus in the breaking of the bread.

Conclusion

We are all on the road to Emmaus. Like the two disciples in Luke's account, we are called to travel that road twice: away from Jerusalem and back again. During our journey, we are called to integrate our difficulties with the faith through self-reflection, listening, the study of Scripture, breaking bread together, and sharing. Engaging in this daily practice of discipleship effects a change in us. Even if we find ourselves at the end of the day in the same physical place, our walk

of faith gently brings us to a different place in our relationship with God.

Jesus accompanies us on this walk. He seeks us out, questions us, listens to us, teaches us, and has fellowship with us. Unfortunately, much of this occurs without our full awareness of what is happening. He seems a stranger to us, and we often fail to recognize him. Even when we *do*, he quickly vanishes from sight, leaving us with nothing but burning hearts and a deep desire to share with others the knowledge of his love for us. Jesus leaves us, but never abandons us. Wherever we journey to, he is never very far away. We are reminded of this whenever we open the Scriptures, break bread together, or encounter a stranger in our midst.

The story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is our story. It tells us that we who are anonymous in the eyes of the world are known and loved by God. It reminds us of the centrality of the Eucharist for our daily walk of faith. It depicts the life of discipleship as a process of growth that enables us to embrace community and to contribute to its well-being. It lets us know that Christ sometimes comes to us when we least expect it, during those in-between times, when we are on the way, in the middle of a journey, when our bodies (and perhaps even our spirits) are tired and our eyes too weary to see.

