

# Building a monastery of the heart



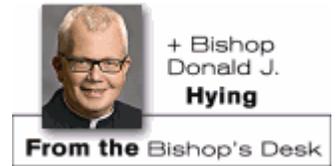
Bishop Hying's Column

Thursday, Aug. 13, 2020 -- 12:00 AM

Last week, I was blessed to lead the annual retreat for the Cistercian Nuns here in our diocese.

Our Lady of the Valley monastery in Prairie du Sac has been a sacred place of contemplative prayer, cloistered life, and beautiful peace since it was established in the 1950's.

This community of Sisters radically dedicated to God through a life of prayer, silence, and work is a blessing for all of us. Being with them was a privilege and a grace.



## Four degrees of love

St. Bernard of Clairveaux breathed new life into Cistercian monasticism in the Middle Ages during the 11th century and monasteries began all over Europe in a refreshing movement of spiritual fervor.

Being with the Sisters last week inspired me to revisit some of St. Bernard's writings which have much to teach us today about the spiritual life and prayer, as we move ever deeper into God and the mystery of His love for us.

"Love is the fountain of life and the soul which does not drink from it cannot be called alive."

This quote inspired me to revisit my favorite reflection from St. Bernard, "Four Degrees of Love."

In our movement towards God, we pass through four levels of loving.

The first is loving ourselves for our own sakes. In some ways, this first stage is one of self-absorption; life is centered on me -- my wants and needs, my opinions and will, my need to control.

Without grace and transcendence, we can get stuck in this first level of myopic ego.

If we truly seek to be fully human and alive, we come to realize profoundly that life is not essentially about us.

The second level is loving God for our own sakes. We begin to believe and pray. We find consolation in the practice of our faith.

Peace and joy come our way as we study the Scriptures or serve the needs of others.

In this stage, we have begun to move towards God, but we are still the center of our religious practice.

To put it frankly, we love God for what we get out of it.

At this level, we can easily become discouraged and abandon prayer altogether if we do not feel comforted or strengthened or when our petitions of intercession seemingly go unanswered.

The third movement is loving God for God's sake.

We have persevered in the practice of faith and prayer; we have experienced the dark night where God seemingly withdraws all consolation and light.

We have discovered that pursuit of a relationship with God is our highest good, no matter how we feel or even if we seem to be getting nothing out of it.

To reach this level, we need much purification and suffering, as we move beyond the limits of self and seek God who is both a mystery beyond all understanding and yet dwelling within us through the wonder of sanctifying grace.

One would easily think that this loving God for His own sake is the highest level, but St. Bernard offers one more.

Loving self for God's sake takes us back to the beginning, but we now love ourselves in God, purified of selfishness and ego.

We see our own human reality from its deepest identity, that we are beloved children of God, purchased with the precious Blood of Jesus Christ and anointed in the Holy Spirit.

This fourth stage is the fulfillment of the greatest commandment of the Law: Love God with your whole heart, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.

In the end, we can never love God or others from a position of self-loathing. Otherwise, we will project onto others our hatred of self.

## Pathway to the Lord

St. Bernard's Four Stages of Loving is a sure pathway to the Lord.

Moving from self-centeredness towards transcendence, allowing the love of the Lord to invade the fortress of the ego, to break down the walls of fear, shame, hatred, and sin, is to become the person God has called us to be from before all time.

The beauty of the final stage is that we do not come to hate ourselves or lose ourselves in the spiritual quest.

We discover who we are and then make a radical gift of self to God and others.

In my pastoral experience, I have often encountered people who were on the cusp of a spiritual breakthrough, but in that precise moment of surrender to God, they held back out of fear. They could not make the leap of faith.

Afraid that a life of faith would somehow hurt them or demand that they become a radically different person or that they would lose their sense of self, they would withdraw from the divine initiative. In one sense, they were absolutely right.

The spiritual path to God through Christ requires the death of our false self, the surrender of sin and egoism, the loss of an indulgent autonomy. This journey is not for the faint of heart.

On the other hand, the spiritual life sets us free to believe, love, and give ourselves away. We come face to face with the paradox of the Gospel.

To find our life, we must lose it, to live, we must die, to rise, we must be nailed to the cross.

Whether we live a cloistered existence or are out in the world, we must build a monastery of the heart, grounded in Christ, built on love and faith, where God gently but persistently brings us to Himself.

---