

VESPERS

Evening Prayer from the Office of the Dead

a monastic mystery by

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Also by Brother Bernard Seif and a part of this series:

(2001). *Office of the Dead*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc.

(2002). *VIGILS from the Office of the Dead*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc.

(2004). *MORNING PRAYER from the Office of the Dead*. Martinsville, IN: Bookman Publishing. [*MORNING PRAYER* was republished in 2008 by iUniverse, Inc.]

(2006). *DAYTIME PRAYER from the Office of the Dead*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc.

This book is a work of fiction, based on seminal ideas drawn from the life of the author. The characters and situations in this monastic mystery are the product of the author's creative imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any medical or psychological information provided herein is a part of this fictional work and is not presented as a form of diagnosis or treatment.

To Mike and Dolores, my dear brother and sister-in-law, each of whom has found a unique path to God.

PROLOGUE

That person makes my blood boil! The others do too. All that Holy Roller talk. I'm sick of it. There are going to be some changes made.

Water softly lapping at the shore offered a gentle contrast to the inner storm that was raging. Disjointed thoughts continued to feed an ever-increasing inner fire.

What about me? I've got some spiritual qualities too. What's the difference between what I do and what that type of person does? It's clear that I need to take things in hand and not just wait for them to change.

A huge pile of gray boulders, darkened with age and ceremonial use, appeared timeless and immovable in the path of the more-than-agitated person. They loomed above, outlined by the rapidly fading daylight.

Faith can move mountains; certainly these boulders can be moved. I can also move a few people, perhaps to another dimension. Praying them out of my life may do it--just like magic! There are some other options too.

A storm was brewing. Gathering clouds obliterated any hope of seeing the sun finish setting. Palm branches began wobbling in the breeze like scores of drunken kites. They slapped against the trunks of the trees over and over again.

My shrink says I have ego problems. What a laugh! She's the one with the problems, not me. The last one said that I was threatened by the success of other people in my life. I'm the one who has been successful. What do I care about them?

A jagged spear of lightening vaulted through the sky and illuminated the beach for miles around. The thought came in that instant also.

Maybe I'll have to kill someone. That might just fix everything.

CHAPTER 1

It wasn't a great Abbey church but a simple monastery Oratory. The chant did not resonate within the stones of a cavernous edifice, but rather reverberated gently within the wooden panels of the small building. The arched hip roof of the barn-like structure seemed to gather the voices together and then offer them back to one another in unison.

“O Wisdom, O Living Word of God, you touch all of creation with your strong yet tender care. Come and show your people the way to live good and holy lives.”

Advent--the monastic community was already well into another new liturgical year--and soon Christmas would follow. The community loved the “O antiphons,” as they were called. One was sung each day in the octave prior to the Solemnity of Christmas—Christ made human in Jesus and in each person.

Evening Prayer, more commonly known as “Vespers,” was chanted together or prayed privately, when necessary, at each sundown. Before and after “Mary’s Canticle,” which was sung in gratitude for the graces of each day, a brief phrase or “antiphon” was chanted. During the eight days prior to Christmas every ancient antiphon always began with the word “O,” thus the name O antiphons.

Each O antiphon added a name for the Messiah after the O. On December seventeenth, the beginning of the octave, the Messiah was honored as Wisdom.

The monastic community of about five monks and nuns needed all the wisdom they could muster. The monastery numbered *about* five members because life happens—even in a monastery. People move in for a while to test their vocations—to see if they truly belong—and

may move out again. Sometimes they are voted out. This is a painful process but usually the candidate eventually realizes that his or her dismissal is for the best.

Guests who come for retreat or for a simple day of prayer change the number too. Friends of the monastery sometimes visit or pray with the community, which adds to the ebb and flow. Life happens, and sometimes death happens, but let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Toward the end of Morning and Evening Prayer there is a series of petitions or intercessions, prayers for the various needs of the world. Those who celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours (the "Divine Office" or simply the "Office" in older parlance) are called by the Church to remember all the needs of God's people in a special way at these times.

The Vesper liturgy allows for a pause wherein those celebrating this Office can offer spontaneous prayers for the sick, the dying, the needs of others. These are offered in a general way but people can add specific names to the intercessions if so led.

"For all the sick, especially for our Brother Benedict," whispered Sister Scholastica in her soft but distinctly clear voice. Her salt and pepper hair tucked neatly under the band of her simple dark blue veil, Sister Scholastica measured "close to five feet on a good day" as she typically put it. The veil, gray tunic, and blue scapular which was worn over the tunic, were a mix of ancient and modern. The garb on the body of the monastics dated back to the Middle Ages; the modified veils of the nuns an expression of Church changes since Vatican Council II.

Sister Scholastica entered the monastery in her forties and had taken her solemn or perpetual vows only months before. She seemed so very happy. It must be admitted that one or two of her sisters and brothers in monastic life sometimes wondered about her background prior to entrance, but the nun was rather tight-lipped about that.

She had taken a Postulant (a candidate who has already made a one-month Observership and who returned to try out the life in earnest) under her wing last year and even this person, Anthony, didn't get anything specific out of her.

Just as Clare, a woman on retreat for several weeks at the Salesian Monastery, was opening her mouth to pray for the needs of the poor, a bell frantically rang out in the distance. The only other bell in the complex of three buildings was in the main house. The Oratory was a separate building and there was a bell there to call the community to prayer but it was the *house* bell that was clanging.

Sister Jane de Chantal was Prioress, in charge of many things, especially when Abbot Francis was away. She calmly and quietly slipped out of the Oratory to check on the reason for the sounding of a bell which usually called people to meals or to community meetings (called "Chapter" because a chapter of the Rule was read at the beginning of the gathering). The others continued praying, a bit distracted but trying to remain faithful. Such is the stuff of monastic observance.

Usually cool and unshaken, Sister Jane returned hurriedly and whispered something into the Abbot's ear. An Abbot or Abbess is the leader and symbol of unity in a monastic community. A Prior or Prioress assisted in the process.

Brother Francis, the Abbot, was just giving the final blessing at the end of Vespers. He left immediately rather than staying after the ceremony for a few moments of quiet prayer as was his normal custom. The others followed, perhaps more out of unmortified curiosity than in an effort to help if needed.

There was indeed an emergency. Brother Benedict was lying on the floor by the stove in the kitchen area of the monastery great room, just below the bell rope.

Sister Jane and Brother Francis could see that the little monk was breathing. He had wandered out of his room, just off the great room, which contained kitchen, dining area, and living room, and then stumbled. Brother Benedict had lost about fifty pounds during the recent months of his illness. His short gray beard, which used to give him a gnome-like appearance, now added to his elderly *persona*.

“Let’s check for broken bones before we move him,” mumbled Brother Francis, more to himself than to anyone in the now filling room. He gently prodded and poked the man who was his senior by about ten years in age, but much his junior in monastic life. Brother Benedict had been married and a father to one child prior to his entrance into the monastery about fifteen years ago. This was unusual but not impossible, especially after the changes ushered in by Vatican Council II.

“Everything accounted for?” quipped Sister Jane. She had a way of dealing with important matters without over-reacting.

Brother Francis nodded and then addressed Brother Benedict: “How are you feeling?”

“Just a little light headed but I’ll live.”

As if reading the Abbot’s mind, Sister Jane turned one of the small refectory benches which Brother Benedict had made on its side as Brother Francis lifted the monk’s legs and propped his feet up with the pine bench.

“That’ll get the blood back into that thick Irish brain of yours.”

Brother Benedict smiled. “You say the most consoling things, Abbot.”

Everyone in the room let out a collective sigh of relief. It looked as if the crisis was resolving—for the moment. When would the next one occur?

Five minutes passed.

Young and strong, Brother Matthew gently lifted Brother Benedict up upon the Abbot's instruction. They slowly and carefully walked toward Brother Benedict's room. The door was open and the light was on. His old wooden rocker, dark with age, had a copy of a Mrs. Pollifax mystery book on the floor next to it.

"I see you're still into heavy theological tomes Brother," joked Brother Matthew.

"Oh yes, Mrs. P. has a beautiful soul, not to mention her skills at solving mysteries. When I was a young boy and wondered about some spiritual matter I would ask the Sister of Mercy who came to town to teach us catechism on Sunday mornings in central Pennsylvania various questions. I'd ask about what happens when we die, for example. Usually Sister would tell me that 'it's a mystery.' That gets old! So have I, come to think of it. Anyway, Mrs. P. has a way of helping me understand spiritual and earthly mysteries. But I think I'm soon to discover the mystery of what happens when we die very personally."

Matthew, tall with short brown hair, was in his late twenties and did not have a lot of pastoral experience. He did, however, possess barrels of compassion and common sense. He tried not to interrupt the older monk's flow of conversation, even though it made him personally uncomfortable.

"Please tell Brother Francis that I was just stretching my legs while you folks were at Vespers and got dizzy. No need for him to make a special visit. I have this little hand bell right here, plus a telephone, if I need anything more this evening. I'd like to take a little nap now."

"Sure thing Brother. Sleep well."

The same large bell that disturbed Vespers less than twenty minutes before rang out with three loud peals. It was time for the evening meal. Brother Matthew closed the door as Brother Benedict pulled the covers up close to his partially bald head.

The community had gathered in silence around a long oak table. After the food was blessed everyone sat down; someone turned on a DVD player. Some nights soft music played as they ate without speaking. Sometimes a spiritual talk boomed out of the boom box. Tonight was a spiritual talk night.

The topic was a commentary on the Salesian *Spiritual Directory*, a small guide for the inner attitudes suggested for the various activities of the monastic day, i.e., rising, meditation, Liturgy of the Hours, Eucharist, meals, recreation, silence times, etc. This five hundred year old manual was utilized as a spiritual tool by the various branches of the spiritual family of Saint Francis de Sales and Saint Jane de Chantal, the Salesian family.

The speaker was talking about the attitude a community member was encouraged to develop toward the sick, especially members of one's own monastery. The members were encouraged to regard the sick person as someone through whom the community was given special graces. They were to do their best to provide for the needs of the ill monastic and reverence Christ in him or her, specifically the suffering Christ.

All of this was specifically mentioned in their rule of life before it had been updated; now it was simply implied more than directly written about. No one thought that such an attitude toward the sick was un-monastic or improper, but somehow it was to some degree left out of the "new" Rule.

Sister Jane stifled a laugh as she swallowed her peppered mashed potatoes. She was having a flashback to a comment Brother Benedict had made shortly after the revised Rule was handed out to the members. It was more streamlined and the book itself was thinner, having been purged of the barnacles that creep into a five hundred year old document over the years.

“Maybe next time we can just publish it with perforated pages. That way we can just rip out what we don’t want as time goes by.”

The nun’s thoughts turned to her monastic brother’s illness. He was probably dying. No one wanted to say it out loud. They might even need to look into Brother Benedict’s placement in a nursing home. He was getting harder to care for and perhaps the incident this evening indicated that it was dangerous for him to continue living at the monastery. He, of course, would remain a member of the community unto death.

Her musings ended when the CD player was turned off and the community stood up to offer the final prayer of thanksgiving for the meal just received. Sister Jane couldn’t quite shake, however, a slight feeling of foreboding, especially with the Abbot about to embark on one of his journeys. She would be in charge and the burden felt heavy on her apprehensive shoulders—unusual for her.

CHAPTER 2

After dinner activities included doing the dishes and setting the table for the morning meal by those who had not cooked that evening. Those who did were able to wash up a bit, and eventually everyone joined in community recreation. A few played Uno, a high-spirited card game which allowed the monastics to let out their competitive sides and even seek revenge—for an hour or so. Clare, at the monastery for an extended retreat, sat contentedly in a ratty overstuffed chair and sketched in her large spiral-bound art tablet with colorful acrylic pencils. She was gifted in many ways, and might become a permanent gift for the community.

A few snores wafted down the hall from Brother Benedict's room every now and then. Sister Scholastica remembered a Saturday afternoon when about twenty Associate Members were gathered at the monastery. During their gathering they spent a half hour in meditation. The same sounds came from Brother Benedict's room during the meditation period that day as now—only then he was fit and hearty.

Brother Matthew was flourishing. It was obvious to everyone that the monastic life agreed with him. He remembered the prayerful support of his older brother in monastic life, Brother Benedict. His novitiate was far from ordinary and the trauma of the events that occurred during that period was just about healed. It was Matthew's turn to support Brother Benedict now.

A bell pealed and everyone put aside what he or she was engaged in and gathered in the community room, that part of the great room containing a sofa, some chairs, an enormous peace lily that seemed to have found the fountain of youth, and a wall full of spiritual books.

The Abbot asked Clare to offer a spiritual thought. It was a Salesian custom to ask someone to do so at such gatherings. Clare's rosy blush complemented her short blond hair.

"Be who you are and be that well," she said quietly, as if quoting something from one of their founders, Saint Francis de Sales, was really something only vowed members of the community ought to be doing.

There was barely a hint of Clare's hearing challenge detectable as she spoke. Years of lip reading, and an overwhelming sensitivity to the non-verbals and moods of others, had made Clare almost psychic—certainly highly intuitive. Most of the time the members of the community, and people in general, did not know that Clare was almost totally hearing

challenged. The woman radiated a peaceful determination, probably the fruit of struggling to interact with a largely hearing world.

The retreatant's response triggered a wisp of a memory in the Abbot's mind. He was now in his early sixties but still remembered a research study on the social skills of folks who might now be known as "little people." They have above average social skills. He remembered teaching such a wonderful person when he was a high school instructor. Abbot Francis' experience with the boy bore out the conclusions of that study. He said a brief prayer that the challenges of life might evoke strength in others, not bitterness and anger—an understandable but sad response in some cases.

The monk's own brother had recently died after living his life with Cerebral Palsy for more than seventy years. Perhaps his brother's life in some way had motivated him into his present life of--though not always producing miracles--body, mind, and spirit clinical and pastoral practice.

"Earth to Brother Francis," broadcasted Brother Matthew through his cupped hands. The community had grown used to their Abbot's lapses into thought now and then. The lapses didn't last long and were the result of a mind filled with many things, along with a creativity and curiosity which seemed to grow with the years, rather than diminish.

Brother Francis just smiled along with the community and slowly shook his head as if to say, "Oops, I did it again."

"Thank you Clare," Abbot Francis responded. "It is a joy to see that our spirit is rubbing off on you. Don't pick up any of our bad habits though, just the good ones. We are all delighted that you are spending time with us."

She placed her palm-to-palm hands in front of her heart and bowed, turning her upper body slowly from left to right, so as not to miss anyone in the room, with a gesture of grateful blessing.

It was a good time for the community, with the exception of Brother Benedict's illness. There was an especially peaceful flow and interaction among the members these days. Yes they had their little squabbles, what family didn't, monastic or otherwise? They had been through a lot together and it had bonded them--a kind of renewed "Bond of Perfection" which the Rule encouraged them to create through the quality of their lives.

"As you know, I leave for Hawaii tomorrow," the leader of the small community announced in his soft voice. Most of the time people could hear him well. Once in a while someone had to ask the clinical psychologist *cum* Doctor of Natural Medicine to repeat himself. Clare never had a problem understanding the Abbot. Her keen intuition was finely honed to pick up on Brother Francis' strong *qi* field.

Qi is a concept from Chinese Medicine. The Abbot specialized in this ancient branch of healing. Not all aspects of the five thousand years of clinical application of Chinese medicine was researched, but there were indeed thousands upon thousands of studies to support and document the effectiveness and safety of Chinese healing.

Perhaps because the United States Food and Drug Administration could not patent the ancient formulas used in the herbology aspect of Traditional Chinese Medicine, or TCM as it is often referred to, the FDA has little interest in researching the field. Some say that if they found a way to change a formula or even a molecule, and could then patent a particular treatment, the FDA might have more interest.

Be that as it may, the Abbot had a type of dual mind. One side immediately asked, at least internally, for people to “show me the science” when claims were made about any approach to healing. The other side of his mind didn’t let his Lehigh University and Arkansas College of Natural Health training stop him from going *beyond* the science when clinical experience or intuition encouraged him to do so, as long as the strategy would not endanger his patient.

The bi-modal aspects of the Abbot’s brain in some ways reflected the very physical structure of all human brains—the left side being more linear and analytic and the right side being more intuitive and able to “see between the lines” of a given situation.

A physical structure called the corpus callosum connected the two hemispheres of the human brain with one another. One might picture it as a thick bunch of cables bringing wholeness to the human personality. Some people are more dominant on the logical side of life, while others are more intuitive and live by their gut impressions. Life situations push us to develop the less preferred style of interacting with the world so that by middle age we can do some of both, but still have our logical or intuitive preferences.

“My dear friends Lily and Dominic have invited me to give a workshop at the retreat house they created. I’m also supposed to speak at an ecumenical Martin Luther King celebration later in January. Even though that is a one day event, and the workshop lasts much longer, it’s the MLK event I feel most excited about. Lily and Dominic have also arranged for me to do a few private health consults while in Hawaii too, and have some time to myself for quiet and relaxation.”

“Aren’t there several Hawaiian islands?” asked a weak male voice. Brother Benedict was standing just inside the community room at the end of the hallway connecting to his room and some of the guest rooms.

Everyone was startled to put it mildly. They had wondered only two hours ago if he was alive and now Brother Benedict was up and trying to join in with the community as it met to organize life in the monastery.

“Have a seat Brother, and I’ll tell you what I know about where I am going, even though I don’t really know that much. I’ve been told that the Hawaiian Islands make up the most remote chain of islands in the world, more than two thousand miles from the nearest land mass.

“I believe that there are eight major islands and one hundred twenty-four minor islands, shoals and reefs, which string out across the Pacific ocean. The island called ‘Hawaii’ is also known as the ‘Big Island.’ That leaves us with Kauai, Molokai, Lanai, Kahoolawe, and Niihau.” The Abbot ticked off the list of islands with his fingers. “I think I have that straight.”

“You’ve been studying up,” Brother Benedict responded. “You still have not told us what island you will be on.”

“That’s him,” Sister Jane de Chantal added. “Our Abbot has a tremendous grasp of the subtleties in life but sometimes misses the most obvious.”

“Thank you Sister,” Brother Francis answered with smiling face and bowed head. “Community life certainly keeps us honest. Be careful Clare! This crowd doesn’t let anything slip by.”

Sounding a little like a response on the Jeopardy television show—which none of them had seen in years—the Abbot answered the question. “I’ll be on the island of Kauai.”

“Ah, the Garden Island,” added Sister Scholastica softly.

Brother Matthew gave her a quizzical look. “Have you been there, Sister?”

“In my dreams,” the nun responded somewhat evasively with a far away look in her eyes.

“Molokai, Molokai,” mumbled Clare reflectively. “I think that’s the island where Father Damian worked with the people with leprosy about a century ago.”

“Right you are. He was a member of a religious community devoted to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary and received permission to devote his life to the care of the very sick. Mother Mary Anne Cope, a Franciscan Sister of Syracuse, New York, joined Father Damian in that ministry.”

“Today we call leprosy ‘Hansen’s Disease,’” explained Sister Scholastica.

The nun continued more excitedly. “Leprosy has been known since biblical times and its symptoms include disfiguring skin sores, damage of nerves, and debilitation over time. It is caused by contact with an organism but is not as contagious as we once thought. Due to Hansen’s long incubation period, it is sometimes difficult to determine where and when the disease was first contracted.

“Children are more susceptible to the disease, but because of modern treatments and greater understanding, there is no longer a need for special ‘leper colonies’ for people who contract Hansen’s.”

Sister Scholastica opened her mouth to continue. It was obvious that there was much more information in her brain. She saw the startled looks on the others in the room and shut down with an almost palpable thud.

No one tried to pry into the source of this information from their rather private sister in community. They knew that it would get them nowhere.

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