

I am releasing this epistolary account of my Carthusian experience now first as a hopeful inducement for my Christian friends to enter more deeply upon the forthcoming Passion Week and Easter Season, but secondly because the reply I received to this letter informed me that all the monks mentioned in this account have now passed on. So there is no danger of betraying their solitude. Likewise, so many of my friends of the time (1979–1985) were very confused by the apparent inconcinnity of that solitary life and my own gregarious character, and thus could not understand the attraction. The contrast captured in JF's name for me "the Punk Monk" (as he was "the Mad Mathematician") was only last year unraveled for me by J.S. Bolen's characterization of the Hermes personality as "a gregarious loner" who moves effortlessly back and forth between realms heavenly, earthly, and infernal. To this day I consider this, my Carthusian experience, to be the most formative experience of my entire life: God's greatest gift to ME. (I post the letter in its entirety; it is quite long.)--Easter 2012

November 6, 2011

Dear Fr. Prior,

My name is Walter Roberts. Many years ago, long before your appointment (and maybe even long before your ordination), I had the pleasure of being an aspirant of the Charterhouse of the Transfiguration: between the years 1976 and 1984 I visited the monastery about 7 times.

My first visit only lasted a few hours. Fr. Marianus received me (I will never forget his striding, gangly walk, smiling face and the first thought that occurred to me as soon as he opened his mouth: "Here is a man without pretense--I want to be like him.") After a short talk with Fr. Marianus, I met Fr. Diamond, your esteemed predecessor. After a short talk with him, I departed back down the mountain. Having come with the intention of remaining for my entire life, in the end I was not even allowed to stay the night. This, because I had showed up without previous notice (starting out just three days before--with an emphatically histrionic walking-stick in my hand and a resolution, in my heart, to renounce the world forever--I had hitch-hiked to Vermont from Detroit) and was only seventeen. During our

conversation I remember Fr. Diamond shaking his head in dismay as he pronounced that I was "much too young" to stay even for the night.

The next summer, having obtained a letter of recommendation from my spiritual advisor (and other requisites), I returned as an aspirant to the brother's life. Originally the plan had been for me to stay for just one week. But when toward Fr. Marianus observed how well I was taking to the life, I ended up being allowed to stay for another. Thus the pattern was established: every summer I would return to the Charterhouse, and stay for two or three weeks. Though one time I worked with brother Charles (whose temper I inadvertently set off--Fr. Diamond consoled me that his Irish Boston blood simply ran somewhat hot, so he was prone to such outbursts and they really meant nothing), thereafter I worked always as an assistant to brother Michael, collecting wood all over the mountain with his old grey truck. Sometime during what must have been about my fourth visit Fr. Marianus informed me that the cloister was abuzz with the question: "Who's the strongest man on the mountain--Walter or Brother Michael?" At which juncture a little game arose: Ever so often, when confronted with an especially big log (one which in the normal run of things both of us would join in handling) whichever one of us touched it first, when he looked up expecting the other's prompt assistance, would find the other with arms crossed and a smile which said "Let's see if you can do it by yourself?" The challenged party would then fasten onto the log (with those big hooks we used) and with a deep breath and something of the grunt of an Olympic lifter, hurl it into the bed of the truck. After a few such turns back and forth came the wordless decision to let it stand as a draw. Such antics and the many afternoons we spent together grunting, sweating, and silently collecting wood, and the few conversations we did have (his hearing aid and fumbings with it made those quite the exception) Brother Michael and I became close and fast friends.

Ultimately I matriculated at Columbia and graduated (with our esteemed President) in 1983 with a degree in Philosophy and Ancient Greek. During this time (of course) I was reading Merton--another Columbian. And vainglory (of equal course) shone in

my unbalanced mind with the idea that I would become 'the Carthusian Merton'. But oh, how forcefully did old Marianus put a stop to that nonsense.

Me: "Do Carthusians write?"

He: "Yes, of course. They write things on little scraps of paper [insert pregnant pause] and throw them in the fire!"

My heart immediately dropped ten stories--that goofy German accent and mischievous smile of his making it all sound so perfectly logical: How could it be any other way? We belong to God alone and have--nor wish to have--anything else. In another one of our conversations I happened to mention Merton. "Yes, he *wrote* a lot about solitude", was Marianus' terse and smiling reply. The point being that Merton's solitude so clamored with the din of his celebrity that he could hardly have ever possibly LIVED IT--at least not as a good fire worshipping Carthusian might!

The year after graduation I struggled to discern God's will. (The professors and dean at Columbia were appalled that I was considering the Carthusian life; I myself suspected that the active life might better suit me; and even Fr. Marianus himself had resisted by decision to switch to the father's life: "Walter, if you go into cell, one day there will be a great explosion!" punctuating this warning with a quick motion of the hands reflecting a mushroom cloud.) During my process of discernment I visited Benedictines in Montreal (Fr. John Maine) and Washington D.C. (St. Anselm's), and the Dominicans at Catholic University in Providence, Rhode Island. As capstone I spent the six weeks of Advent (1983) at the Charterhouse--my longest ever stay. During that stay at one point I was appointed to serve Mass for one of the other fathers; on visiting my cell a few days later Fr. Diamond reported that to that father I had seemed 'distracted' while at service. And indeed I was: my travels up and down the East coast, my search for the peace I expected to accompany a clear and certain answer to the question of vocation had, in the end, only left me all the more full of question, all the less deficient of peace.

Finally I forced myself to a decision: I would attempt to enter cell. I returned to the Charterhouse for another short visit to discuss final arrangements (with some visible discomfit Fr. Diamond agreed that the order would assume responsibility for the repayment of my \$12, 000 in student loans). That visit ended near or on the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord. With matters settled in Vermont, I returned first to Detroit (to bid final goodbyes to family and friends) and then to New York City (to gather my meager possessions and bid adieu to my college chums).

Somewhere near the beginning of Lent I made my final return to the Charterhouse. I had been preceded, a few days earlier, by the arrival of my library (I remain a fiendish book collector) stripped bare over the previous months by '[desperation] sidewalk sales' of literary and philosophical works and now consisting almost entirely of theological works--and a smattering of Ancient Greek literary texts in the original (for moments of 'relaxation' in cell). Coming into my cell to greet me, and noticing all my books arranged on my cell, Fr. Diamond asked, "Aren't they a distraction?" Without thought or hesitation I replied "No." (Indeed, having arranged my books neatly around my cell signified--at least to me--that my Carthusian cell now constituted 'Home'.)

I lasted 3 days. It's not that I did not want to stay; rather, it's just that I realized that I *would not* stay. Like a heavy stone I could not lift, I realized I would never be able to tame the truly distracting visions of all the "great things" I could be doing or could have done the world, the voices of my professors, of EVERYONE (even my final spiritual director in the world, the late Monsignor Burke of New York City was perplexed by my attraction! --though he was envious of the time I had spent on the mountain, since even he had called once from the bottom with a request to come up and been denied; indeed, even Fr. Diamond himself, whom I must have caught on one of his bad days, had once interjected as I rattled on about the beauties and wonders of the Carthusian life: "You call *this* a life?" A remark easily understandable from the lips of a man whom God had called from the life of a concert pianist to that in the brutal silence of cell.) I knew the Carthusian life would not always feel

beautiful and wonderful. I knew with all these voices chattering, chattering, chattering about the unbounded potential for worldly good of Walterius Maximus (my title with the dean) and even Biblical verses like "no one lights a lamp and places it under a basket" I would never be able to obtain silence in cell. Prostrate before the power of my imagination, these voices--and my own vanity-- ever ready to fueling its fires, no even match, my will collapsed. I departed a few days later.

[Teaching Saint Augustine's *Confessions* a couple of years ago, I noticed, for the first time, the conversion scene statement: "The one necessary condition, which meant not only going, but at once arriving there, was to have the will to go--provided only that the will was strong and unqualified, not the turning and twisting first this way, then that, of a will half-wounded, struggling with one part rising up and the other part falling down." (VIII. viii. 20) Explaining it to my students I came recognized my own twisting and turning condition of 25 years previous, and still again wondered if *I could have done it?*]

During the fury of those few days of attempted postulancy, the rhythm and rules of the life had provided no opportunity to meet or see brother Michael--except as a darkened figure in the rear of chapel. (Father Marianus once remarked how he envied the brother's their privilege of sitting in still darkness during choir. Do you ever have that thought?) Thank God brother Michael took the initiative; otherwise I would have ended up left without speaking to him at all. But grace inspired him otherwise: the night before my departure, coming out of night office he tucked himself into a corner whereby he knew I would pass on my way back to cell. As I walked by he stepped out of the shadows and said--excited and happy: "I'm so glad you're here; I can feel the difference." To which I was forced sadly to respond in desperate, helpless confession: "I'm leaving!" Those were the only words we exchanged. A few quick seconds that became the beginning of many months (I could with more accuracy say YEARS) of heartbreak as I attempted to recover from that shock and consternation known only--one would imagine--to brides left standing at the altar.

That was the last time I saw brother Michael and this is my first contact with the Charterhouse since. Though a day of my life has not passed without thought of the Charterhouse and my old friend Marianus, my initiator into the secrets of our Blessed Mother. ("If you really want something, don't ask Jesus-- he'll make you wait!")

[Though not until last summer did I secure (in Budapest) a suitable icon for my makeshift equivalent of an Ave Maria on the wall beside the door of my apartment. Its use, however, reversed: always when I depart, less often when I enter, do I pause.]

At present I am an assistant professor of Classics, just up the road, at the University of Vermont. I will be, however, leaving my position here quite soon--indeed a little sooner than I expected. Last year I informed the administration that I wished to be removed from consideration for reappointment (my position was tenure-track). My plan at the moment ["Man proposes; God disposes!"] is to return to school for a Master's in Education Administration, raise a couple of million dollars through contacts I have in the world of the obscenely rich [for 4 years I was a gemstone courier for a very exclusive private jewelry house in Manhattan] in order to start a Charter School in Detroit ("Detroit Greek and Latin" it will be called) and ultimately see what I can do to help out the kids of the public school system there--which, in these days of disorder and madness, is some 350 million dollars in debt! We'll see what God will make of my idea. Indeed, it was only with that decision that I finally became reconciled with our Lord for having led me to and then deserted me at the altar; finally and only then, did I imagine I saw what He intended for me all along.

[Maybe one day I will be coming to you for a donation--once I get the non-profit registered and such; but that is not why I am writing today.]

However all that may turn out (my plan to return to Detroit, to establish my charter school, to get elected to the Detroit Board of Education, become Mayor of Detroit, Governor of Michigan (turn the state around) and then Why not President!? Once--a very funny moment--as I talked to Fr. Diamond in cell and ran on and on, I suppose, about what I might do in the world--I must have mentioned something along the lines of serving the Church in the red of a Cardinal--he interjected "Why not White?" Confused for a second but quickly seeing and joining in on his joke, I snapped back "Why not?" and we both enjoyed a hearty laugh at the limitlessness of my imagination and vainglory. Yes, back then I even imagined I might one day have your job! Actually it was Fr. Marianus who first put that thought into my head--he said he could see me as such. Off to the races my imagination went on to paint how the order would so thrive under my leadership (*augurio Domino*--of course) that we need would present itself for another North American foundation--in the Rockies! And in fact, in real life, over the course of my adventures I have come to know a perfect spot for it (though perhaps too remote and even too cold in the winter for you Carthusians--27 below is not uncommon) as over the years I have established a long time connection with the tiny community of Polebridge, Montana (just a stone's throw west of Glacier National Park!) Behold the imagination that would have never allowed me to settle in cell! But enough with all that; I have taken enough of your time.

Today I am writing merely to ask if I may have your permission to pay brother Michael a visit sometime before I depart the state. I have often wanted to drop him a Christmas card or something, but have always resisted the urge, figuring it best just to leave you all in your solitude. (But do feel free, if you think it proper, to share this letter with any of the brothers or fathers who might enjoy tales of their predecessors.)

[A year ago I was in the area and took a nostalgic stroll around lake Madelaine. I ran into one of the lay assistants. He told me that Fr. Diamond had passed. He had no news of Fr. Marianus. I suppose he too has passed. I wonder if Fr. Bruno ever

returned to the Charterhouse from the Le Grande Chartreuse--that is where he was stationed when I last departed. He and I too had become somewhat acquainted over those years. (In characteristic fashion, he once remarked, "A Greek and Philosophy scholar among the brothers . . . what a thought!") Well that is my question, my request. I would like to see (or at least have your permission to write) my old friend one last time, if you think that is appropriate or possible. [I know only family members are officially allowed visitations, but I remember that brother Michael had no active family so to speak and this is what probably added to our kinship, since I was not at that time close to my immediate family either.] Whatever the case, I would welcome any news about the old soldiers I used to know--Dom Raphael, Dom Phillip, Dom Jean Paul-- have they all passed on? I wonder.]

Please send me just a bit of news, if you can. I look forward to hearing from you. You and all the fathers and brothers are and remain ever in my prayers.

In Domino

Walter Roberts

P.S. Please excuse the length of this letter. The joy I have in re-experiencing those memories defied any possibility of a more befitting terseness. Indeed, once I began recalling the sayings of Marianus, I could not stop myself until I found a place for all of them. For he and I too were special buds as well--he even showed me his "secret" bookshelf (hid discretely behind a piece of cloth).

P.P.S. Excuse me Father for extending this letter with a very strange finale. But an answer to a question problem one of the other Fathers posed to me just occurred to

me as I was finishing up Matins. Once I was in the cell of a Father for confession and he shared with me, seeking my advice, a problem that stumped him. There was a young novice who, though otherwise progressing finely, was having problems with masturbation. He asked me what I thought should be done. Totally shocked that he would be asking me (!), I replied, "I have no idea whatsoever." The solution that just occurred to me is as follows. If I were the confessor, after conferring with the novice master, if agreement was reached, I would say to the novice in question:

"Masturbate away! But in your accompanying fantasies imagine yourself making love to the woman of your dreams--but one who would in fact be anything but dreamlike, with whom in fact you would have to run the gauntlet of no fewer challenges than are present in cell in order to have a successful and grace filled marriage--imagine yourself with that woman, making love, aiming for the production of children with every act of that love (as the Church recommends). If the Virgin does not soon rescue you from that fixation and practice, then take it as a sign that you are called to be a father and husband in the world, not a Carthusian." That, in retrospect and with grace, would be my answer to the problem. *Omnia in Eo, omnia per Eum, omnia ad Eum, omnia cum Eo!*