WHERE GOD HAPPENS

Discovering Christ in One Another

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I.

Life, Death, and Neighbors

I

One thing that comes out very clearly from any reading of the great desert monastic writers of the fourth and fifth centuries is the impossibility of thinking about contemplation or meditation or "spiritual life" in abstraction from the actual business of living in the body of Christ, living in concrete community. The life of intimacy with God in contemplation is both the fruit and the course of a renewed style of living together. These reflections on the legacy of the fathers and mothers of the desert consider how they saw the whole of this life together, where they thought contemplation came from and where it led to. They point to the wellsprings of renewal in our community as Christians seeking God in prayer and common life. We are always faced with the danger of trying to think about this odd thing called spiritual life as if it were a matter we could deal with in isolation, and it is often very attractive to attempt this, simply because the facts of human life together are normally so messy, so unpromising and

unedifying. Other people in their actual material reality do make things a lot more difficult when what we *think* we want is spirituality, the cultivation of a sensitive and rewarding relationship with eternal truth and love. And this is where the desert monastics have an uncompromising message for us: relation with eternal truth and love simply doesn't happen without mending our relations with Tom, Dick, and Harriet. The actual substance of our relation with eternal truth and love is bound up with how we manage the proximity of these human neighbors.

At first sight, this monastic movement seems to have been all about avoiding the compromises that the presence of other human beings entailed. We encounter the very common language of "fleeing" from other people in the writings of the desert, and the impulse of monasticism had a lot to do with the worry felt by increasing numbers of Christians that the church of their day was becoming corrupt and secularized. The early monks and nuns moved off into the communities of the desert because they weren't convinced that the church in its "ordinary" manifestations showed with any clarity what the church was supposed to be about; they wanted to find out what the church really was—which is another way of saying that they wanted to find out what humanity really was when it was in touch with God through Jesus Christ. In the literature associated with the early generations of desert ascetics, they report back from the "laboratory of

the Spirit" not only about how prayer is to be experienced but also about how humanity is to be understood—about life, death, and neighbors.

The phrase derives from a saying of Anthony the Great, the earliest and most influential of the Christian desert monastic teachers:

> Our life and our death is with our neighbor. If we win our brother, we win God. If we cause our brother to stumble, we have sinned against Christ.[1]

We can compare this with some material from a generation later that comes to us under the name of Moses the Black (whom we will meet again), one of the most vivid personalities of the early monastic world, a rather larger-than-life character whose teaching and sometimes slightly anarchic example appear in many stories. He was a converted Ethiopian highwayman (large physically and generally larger than life) whose burial place is still shown to visitors near the monastery of Baramous in the desert west of Cairo—one small sign of the extraordinary continuity to be experienced at such sites. Moses is credited with a series of summary proverb-like sayings about the monastic life written for another great teacher, Abba Poemen, one of which seems to pick up the language of Anthony yet give it a twist that is at

first sight very puzzling. "The monk," says Moses, "must die to his neighbor and never judge him at all in any way whatever."[2] If our life and our death are with the neighbor, this spells out something of what our "death" with the neighbor might mean: it is to renounce the power of judgment over someone else—a task hard enough indeed to merit being described as death. And the basis of this is elaborated in another of the Moses sayings: in reply to a brother who wants to now what it means to "think in your heart that you are a sinner," which is defined as another of the essentials of the monastic life, Moses says, "If you are occupied with your own faults, you have no time to see those of your neighbor."[3]

We begin to see here the cluster of ideas generated by the apparently simple words of Anthony. Living Christianly with the neighbor, living in such a way that the neighbor is "won"—converted, brought into saving relation with Jesus Christ—involves my "death." I must die to myself, a self understood as the solid possessor of virtues and gifts, entitled to pronounce on the neighbor's spiritual condition. My own awareness of my failure and weakness is indispensable to my communicating the gospel to my neighbor. I put the neighbor in touch with God by a particular kind of detachment from him or her. And, the desert writers insist, this is absolutely basic for our growth in the life of grace. Here is a saying under the name of John the Dwarf:

> "You don't build a house by starting with the roof and working down. You start with the foundation."
>
> They said 'What does that mean?"
>
> He said, 'The foundation is our neighbor whom we must win. The neighbor is where we start. Every commandment of Christ depends on this."[4]

Everything begins with this vision and hope: to put the neighbor in touch with God in Christ. On this the rest of our Christian life depends, and it entails facing the death of a particular kind of picture of myself. If I fail to put someone in touch with God, I face another sort of death, the death of my relation with Christ, because failing to "win" the neighbor is to stand in the way of Christ, to block Christ's urgent will to communicate with all.

The desert monastics are keenly interested in diagnosing what sort of things get in the way and block someone else's relation with Christ. They seem very well aware that one of the great temptations of religious living is the urge to intrude between God and other people. We love to think that we know more of God than others; we find it comfortable and comforting to try to control the access of others to God. Jesus himself speaks bluntly about this when he describes the religious enthusiasts of his day shutting the door of the Kingdom in the face of others:

"You do not enter yourselves, and when others try to enter, you stop them" (Matt. 23:13). And he goes on to describe how such people exert themselves to gain even one convert, but because they are only trying to make others in their own image, they make them twice as worthy of condemnation as themselves (15). The desert teachers are well aware that by fleeing to the isolation of prayerful communities, they do not automatically leave behind this deep-rooted longing to manage the access of other people to God, and this is why they insist upon an ever-greater honesty about the self; this is why the "manifesting of thoughts" to a senior brother or sister becomes so crucial—because we are all drawn almost irresistibly back toward this urge to manage.

One of the most frequent ways in which this becomes visible, they suggest, is *inattention*, the failure to see what is truly there in front of you—because your own vision is clouded by self-obsession or self-satisfaction. There are several variants of a story in which some young monk goes in despair to one of the great "old men" to say that he has consulted an elder about his temptations and been told to do severe and intolerable penance, and the old man tells the younger one to return to his first counselor and tell him that he has not paid proper attention to the need of the novice. If I don't really know how to attend to the reality that is my own inner turmoil, I shall fail in responding to the needs of someone else. And the desert literature

consistently suggests that excessive harshness, a readiness to judge and prescribe, normally has its roots in that kind of inattention to oneself. Abba Joseph responds to the invitation to join in condemning someone by saying, "Who am I?" And the phrase might suggest not just "Who am I to be judging?" but also "How can I pass judgment when I don't know the full truth about myself?"[5]

Among the longest collections of sayings attributed to particular desert fathers are those around the names of Macarius the Great and Poemen (granted that Poemen, "the shepherd," may be a name concealing several different figures) and these collections have in common an exceptional number of sayings on the subject of the dangers of harshness and self-satisfaction. Of Macarius, we read, in an unforgettable image, that "he became like a God on earth" because when he saw the sins of the brothers, he would "cover" them, just as God casts his protection over the world.[6] Informed of a self-confident old monk whose counsel has depressed others, Macarius pays a visit:

> When he was alone with him, the old man [Macarius] asked, "How are things going with you?" Theopemptus replied, "Thanks to your prayers, all is well." The old man asked, "Do you not have to battle with your fantasies?" He answered, "No, up to now all is well." He was afraid to admit anything. But the old man said to him, "I have lived for many years as an ascetic and everyone sings my praises, but, despite my age, I still have trouble with sexual fantasies." Theopemptus said, "Well, it is the same with me, to tell the truth." And the old man went on admitting, one by one, all the other fantasies that caused him to struggle, until he had brought Theopemptus to admit all of them himself. Then he said, "What do you do about fasting?" "Nothing till the ninth hour," he replied. "Fast till evening and take some exercise," said Macarius. "Go over the words of the gospel and the rest of Scripture. And if an alien thought arises within you, don't look down but up: the Lord will come to your help."[7]

Self-satisfaction is dealt with not by confrontation or condemnation but by the quiet personal exposure of failure in such a way as to prompt the same truthfulness in someone else: the neighbor is won, converted, by Macarius's death to any hint of superiority in his vision of himself. He has nothing to defend, and he preaches the gospel by simple identification with the condition of another, a condition others cannot themselves face honestly. How easy to go in and say, "I *know* you suffer these temptations"; Macarius refuses this easy way and goes instead by

the way of "death to the neighbor," refusing to judge and exposing himself to judgment.

But we can find something like the opposite extreme in the stories as well. What about those who judge themselves too harshly? Abba Poemen is confronted with a brother who admits to having committed a great sin and wants to do three years' penance.

> The old man said, "That's a lot." The brother said, "What about one year?" The old man said, "That's still quite a lot." Some other people suggested forty days; Poemen said, "That's a lot too." And he said, "What I think is that if someone repents with all one's heart and intends never to commit the sin again, perhaps God will be satisfied with only three days."[8]

The point of leading someone to confront his or her weakness and need is not to enforce discipline or cement patterns of spiritual superiority and inferiority. Whether it is a matter of persuading others to admit what they have never admitted or of helping them to face mercifully what they *have* admitted, the goal is reconciliation with God by way of this combination of truth and mercy. A harsh judgment of others can lead to despair; several stories turn on this,[9] as we have already seen, when monks resort in fear or self-loathing to one of the great old men

after receiving rough treatment from a less-experienced elder. The fundamental need as far as the counselor is concerned is first of all to put oneself on the level of the one who has sinned, to heal by solidarity, not condemnation. Hence stories like that of Moses:

> There was a brother at Scetis who had committed a fault. So they called a meeting and invited Abba Moses. He refused to go. The priest sent someone to say to him, "They're all waiting for you." So Moses got up and set off; he took a leaky jug and filled it with water and took it with him. The others came out to meet him and said, "What is this, father?" The old man said to them, "My sins run out behind me and I cannot see them, yet here I am coming to sit in judgment on the mistakes of somebody else." When they heard this, they called off the meeting.[10]

An anonymous version of the story portrays one of the old men at the same kind of meeting getting up and leaving when sentence is passed. "Where are you going, father?" they ask. "I have just been condemned," he replies.[11] (How wonderfully recognizable is his response—someone had committed a fault, so they called a meeting.) And Abba Bessarion's version:

> A brother who had sinned was turned out of the church by the priest. Abba Bessarion got up and followed him out; he said, "I too am a sinner."[11]

Macarius was like a god in Scetis: he hid what he saw as if he had not seen it, says the narrative.[13] And,

> A brother questioned Abba Poemen, saying, "If I see my brother sinning, should I hide the fact?" The old man said, "At the moment when we hide a brother's fault, God hides our own. At the moment when we reveal a brother's fault, God reveals our own. [14]

Poemen again

> Some old men came to see Abba Poemen and said to him, "We see some of the brothers falling asleep during divine worship. Should we wake them up?" He said, "As for me, when I see a brother who is falling asleep during the Office, I lay his head on my knees and let him rest."[15]

We can be deceived into thinking that the desert monks and nuns—at least those quoted here—were

somehow indifferent to sin, or that their notion of relation to one another was a matter of bland acceptance. But they are not exponents of some sort of "I'm OK, you're OK" method. They actually believe that sin is immensely serious and that separation from God is a real possibility: if you define the purpose of your life, a costly, boring, difficult life in physically harsh conditions, as "winning your neighbor," you may reasonably be expected to believe that it is a tough and serious business, in which success isn't guaranteed. But they also take for granted that the only way in which you know the seriousness of separation from God is in your own experience of yourself. Moses writes to Poemen, "If you have sin enough in your own life and your own home, you have no need to go searching for it elsewhere." And, more graphically, from Moses again, "If you have a corpse laid out in your own front room, you won't have leisure to go to a neighbor's funeral."[16] This is not about minimizing sin; it is about learning how to recognize it from seeing the cost in yourself. If it can't be addressed by you in terms of your own needs, it can't be addressed anywhere—however seductive it is to say, "I know how to deal with this problem in *your* life—and never mind about mine."

The inattention and harshness that shows we have not grasped this is for so many of the desert fathers and mothers the major way in which we fail in winning the neighbor. Poemen goes so far as to say that it is the one

thing about which we can justly get angry with each other.

> A brother asked Abba Poemen, "What does it mean to be angry with your brother without a cause? [The reference is obviously to Matt. 5:21*ff.*] He said, "If your brother hurts you by his arrogance and you are angry with him because of this, that is getting angry without a cause. If he pulls out your right eye and cuts off your right hand and you get angry with him, that is getting angry without a cause. But if he cuts you off from God—then you have every right to be angry with him.[17]

To assume the right to judge, or to assume that you have arrived at a settled spiritual maturity that entitles you to prescribe confidently at a distance for another's sickness, is in fact to leave others without the therapy they need for their souls; it is to cut them off from God, to leave them in their spiritual slavery—while reinforcing your own slavery. Neither you nor they have access to life—as in the words of Jesus, you have shut up heaven for others and for yourself. But the plain acknowledgment of your solidarity in need and failure opens a door: it shows that it is possible to live in the truth and to go forward in hope. It is in such a moment that God gives himself through

you, and you become by God's gift a means of connecting another with God. You have done the job you were created to do.

Saint Anthony of the Desert says that gaining the brother or sister and winning God are linked. It is not getting them signed up to something or getting them on your side. It is opening doors for them to healing and to wholeness. Insofar as you open such doors for another, you gain God, in the sense that you become a place where God happens for somebody else. *You become a place where God happens.* God comes to life for somebody else in a life-giving way, not because you are good or wonderful, but because that is what God has done. So, if we can shift our preoccupations, anxiety, and selfishness out of the way to put someone in touch with the possibility of God's healing, to that extent we are ourselves in touch with God's healing. So, if you gain your brother or sister, you gain God.

II.

If we ask how this literature contributes to any kind of contemporary understanding of Christian life together, the answer must lie in two of the words at the heart of that saying of Saint Anthony's with which we started—*life* and *win*. To find my own life is a task I cannot undertake without the neighbor; life itself is what I find in solidarity, and not only in a sense of togetherness (talking about solidar-

ity can easily turn into no more than this) but in that willingness to put "on hold" the perspective I want to own and cling to and possess, so that something else may happen through my presence and my words—the something else that is the announcing of the gospel. And *winning* is a word not about succeeding so that other people lose but about succeeding in connecting others with life-giving reality. Together, these words challenge us to think about common life in radical ways

What if the real criteria for a properly functioning common life, for social existence in its fullness, had to do with this business of connecting each other with life-giving reality, with the possibility of reconciliation or wholeness? What if the deepest threat to life together were standing in the way of another person's discovery of wholeness by an insistent clinging to self-justification? Our success (if we still want to use that not very helpful word) would be measurable only in the degree to which those around us were discovering a way to truth and life, and since we are not all that likely to know much about this simply on external grounds, we might never know anything at all about our success. We'd only know the struggle and weakness out of which we attempted to speak to each other; beyond that, who knows? We could be confident only in God's unfailing presence with us for forgiveness and in God's unceasing summons to us to act for the reconciliation of others.

So a properly functioning human group, doing what human groups under God are meant to do, would also be one where we were engaged in learning quite intensively about the pressures that make us run away from this presence. We should need to be developing some very well-tuned antennae for the varieties of competitiveness that take us over and for the ways in which we assume, secretly or openly, that success is always about someone else's loss. This prompts some uncomfortable thoughts about the sorts of disagreement we are so used to in the church. Inevitably, we think in terms of winning and losing: this or that controversy that must be resolved in accordance with God's will so that we prevail in God's name. It isn't that the desert tradition knows nothing of controversy, of course; these documents come to us from an age compared with which many of our squabbles are pretty tea partyish. It is simply that they leave us with the question of whether any particular victory in the constant and supposedly invigorating life of debate leaves some people more deeply alienated from God—and the nastier question of what we are going to do about it if that is so.

The church is a community that exists because something has happened that makes the entire process of self-justification irrelevant. God's truth and mercy have appeared in concrete form in Jesus and, in his death and resurrection, have worked the transformation that only

God can perform, told us what only God can tell us: that he has already dealt with the dreaded consequences of our failure, so that we need not labor anxiously to save ourselves and put ourselves right with God. The church's rationale is to be a community that demonstrates this decisive transformation as really experienceable. And since one of the chief sources of the anxiety from which the gospel delivers us is the need to protect our picture of ourselves as right and good, one of the most obvious characteristics of the church ought to be a willingness to abandon anything like competitive virtue (or competitive suffering or competitive victimage, competitive tolerance or competitive intolerance or whatever). The church points to the all-sufficiency of Christ when it is full of people whose concern is not to separate others from the hope of reconciliation and life by their fears and obsessions. A healthy church is one in which we seek to stay connected with God by seeking to connect others with God, one in which we "win God" by converting one another, and convert one another by our truthful awareness of frailty. And a church that is living in such a way is the only church that will have anything *different* to say to the world; how deeply depressing if all the church offered were new and better ways to succeed at the expense of others, reinstating the scapegoat mechanisms that the cross of Christ should have exploded once and for all.[IX]

III.

The desert monastics have very little to say about theories of the atonement—apparently very little to say even about Jesus for quite a lot of the time. But they are speaking about and living out something that only begins to make sense in the context of the gospel, and we *are* reminded of what they actually read and thought about each day, as in the story of Macarius and Theopemptus. At the center of practically all they have to say is Christ's own command not to be afraid. Death to the neighbor, refusing to judge, the freedom to ask, like Abba Joseph, "Who am I?"—all of this is about freedom from fear.

The desert community tells the church, then and now, that its job is to be a fearless community, and it shows us some of the habits we need to develop in order to become fearless, habits of self-awareness and attention to each other, grounded in the pervasive awareness of God that comes from constant exposure to God in Bible reading and prayer. Put it in this way, we ought to be able to see why it is a total misreading of the desert literature to think that it's all about tolerance and niceness. Not judging anyone sounds at first like a very contemporary thing, the nonjudgmental attitude that so well fits a postmodern reluctance to identify any absolute rights and wrongs, truths and falsehoods. But the desert is about the struggle for truth or it is nothing. "God will forgive; that's his job," said a famous eighteenth-century cynic. The desert

fathers and mothers are no less sure that God will forgive, but they know with equal certainty that for us to *receive* that forgiveness in such a way that our lives will be changed is a lifetime's work requiring the most relentless monitoring of our selfish and lazy habits of thinking and reacting.

We have to be strenuous yet relaxed. We certainly know how to talk about being strenuous, how to portray Christian life as a struggle, a drama, in which we're called to heroic achievement and endurance, and we know how to talk about being relaxed, relying on God's mercy when we fail and not taking things too seriously. But it's far from easy to see how we can hold the two together. We can imagine the tightly strung pitch of effort, the slackness of relaxation: how are both possible at once?

The desert teachers encourage us in many ways to expect the worst of ourselves. From Anthony onward, they tell us that we must expect trials to the very end[19] and even that the apparent ending of trial or fantasy or distraction is a dangerous thing.[20] We need to be aware of our fragility and never to stop weeping for it. Another frequent type of story in the literature is of a younger monk saying to an elder, in effect, "Haven't you earned your passage to heaven by now? Your asceticism is so great, your penance so ardent, your wisdom so obvious." And the older man will reply, "If I had three lifetimes, I still couldn't shed enough tears for my sins."[21] In a well-

known ascetical treatise of Saint John Climacus of Mount Sinai, we read things about the need for penance that can freeze the blood of a liberal modern believer. What is hard for us to grasp is that the desert monks know with utter seriousness the cost to them of their sin and selfishness and vanity, yet know that God will heal and accept. That they know the latter doesn't in any way diminish the intensity with which they know the former, and their knowledge of the former is what gives them their almost shocking tenderness toward other sinners.

They are not, in their tears and penances, trying to make up their debt to God. They know as well as any Christian that this is paid once and for all by the mercy that arrives in advance of all our repentance. They simply want to be sure that this assurance of mercy does not make them deceive themselves about why mercy is needed, by themselves and others. If they continue with this awareness of the sinful and needy self, it is so that they will understand the tears and self-hatred of others and know how to bring them to Christ by their unqualified acceptance and gentleness. So the strenuousness is in the effort to keep before our eyes the truth of our condition; the relaxedness is in the knowledge of a mercy that cannot ever be exhausted. It could be summed up in the formula of a great Anglican monastic reformer of the nineteenth century, R. M. Benson, who believed he should have "a heart of stone towards myself, a heart of

flesh toward others, a heart of flame toward God"; though we should be careful not to take the "heart of stone toward myself" as meaning some kind of passionate self-loathing rather than the merciless honesty that Benson, like the desert teachers, has in mind.

The truth is that we will only understand the balance of severity and confidence, the strenuous and the relaxed, in the context of the common life. Every believer must have an urgent concern for the relation of the neighbor to Christ, a desire and willingness to be the means by which Christ's relation with the neighbor becomes actual and transforming. But that urgent concern arises from the sense in *myself* of the cost and grief involved in separation from life in God, the self-awareness of frailties and failures that I cannot overcome for and by myself. I have, by God's grace, learned as a member of the Christian community what is the nature of God's mercy, which does not leave me to overcome my sin by my own effort, so I have something to say to the fellow-sufferer who does not know where to look for hope. And what I have to say depends utterly on my willingness not to let go of that awareness of myself that reminds me where I start each day—not as a finished saint but as a needy person still struggling to grow.

Sin is healed by solidarity, by identification. Its power is shattered by the act of God in Christ; that act creates the community of Christ's body in which we live, ultimately,

only through each other. This helps, too, to make sense of the varying attitudes of the desert fathers and mothers to physical self-denial. The literature has examples of real extremes of asceticism, and it has instances of very relaxed attitudes to penance and discouragement of excessive zeal. Different people need different disciplines to keep them attentive: the disaster is when one kind of discipline is either practiced as a means of superiority or imposed on others without attention. The whole purpose of any kind of ascesis is to challenge and overcome in ourselves whatever makes us an obstacle to the connection between God and the neighbor. So we should expect variety and should beware of any pressure to uniform severity, but the implication is also that we should beware of any slackening of the underlying watchfulness in regard to the self and its delusions. Not for nothing does the word *nepsis*, watchfulness, become the key concept of later monasticism in the Christian East.[22] If we trivialize the depth of our human need for God, we shall never be instruments to others of reconciliation. If we are unaware in ourselves of this need, because we have no disciplines for recognizing who and what we are, the church becomes ineffective.

Some of the most interesting recent research on desert monasticism has been on the significance and understanding of common life among the first generations of monks.[23] The surface pattern of "running" or "fleeing" from human contact is much more nuanced than it

seems. What is to be learned in the desert is clearly not some individual technique for communing with the divine but the business of becoming a means of reconciliation and healing for the neighbor. You "flee" to the desert not to escape neighbors but to grasp more fully what the neighbor is—the way to life for *you*, to the degree that you put yourself at their disposal in connecting them with God. The unusual community that is the desert monastery of the first generation is not meant to be an alternative to human solidarity but a radical version of it that questions the priorities of community in other contexts. And this remains the most important function of any monastic community today—for the church and the wider world alike

The figures we have begun to meet in the desert are not a set of interchangeable monastic clones but highly distinctive personalities. The ideal of finding your life by putting yourself at the service of another person's reconciliation with God could conceivably be taken as a recommendation simply to stop *having* a self in the ordinary sense. Of course, this is a misreading, but you can see why it might look plausible. Here we have to be reminded of why the desert fathers and mothers valued self-awareness. To be a real agent for God to connect with the neighbor in the way we have been thinking about, each of us needs to know the specific truth about himself or herself. It's no good just saying to yourself "I'm a sinner" in general

terms. The specific facts of your experience may or may not be helpful to another—you should not assume that you always need to share the details, but you need to know them yourself. To be the means of reconciliation for another within the body of Christ, you must be consciously yourself, knowing what has made you who you are. And knowing what your typical problems, your brick walls are, and especially what your gifts are.

This doesn't mean that every Christian has to have the same kind of self-consciousness—that would be to destroy the whole point. People know themselves in very diverse ways and express that self-knowledge very differently. A child may be the means of connecting a person with God, as may an adult with severe learning difficulties; it isn't that holiness is the preserve of literary and educated self-awareness. But for anyone at all, even the child, even the person with a "handicap," the capacity to have some kind of loving and truthful *look* at himself or herself is surely part of the human presence that is there—to be aware at some level of one's distinctiveness, and to be aware of it as being in the hands of God.

The neighbor is our life; to bring connectedness with God to the neighbor is bound up with our own connection with God. The neighbor is our death, communicating to us the death sentence on our attempts to settle who we are in our own terms and to cling to what we reckon as our achievements. "Death is at work in us and life in

you," as Saint Paul says (2 COR. 4:12), anticipating the themes of the desert. He is writing about how the apostle's suffering and struggle make the life of Christ visible in such a way that others are revived in hope. And it is as others discover this life in hope that we receive it too, the gift we could not have expected as we, with such difficulty and reluctance and intermittent resentment, had to learn to let go of our own lives and learn how to attend in love to the neighbor. We love with God when and only when we are the conduit for God's reconciling presence with the person next to us. It is as we connect the other with the source of life that we come to stand in the place of life, the place cleared and occupied for us by Christ.