

Together Into Life

Brother Philip

*Creator Spirit, mighty wind of God,
You brood over our lives
and speak new life into our chaos. ¹*

If you were to look for a summary of Saint Benedict's vision of faith and life, his spirituality, you would need to look no further than chapter 72 of his *Rule*, "On the Good Zeal." Considered to be a later addition by Benedict to the text of the Rule, it is the well-distilled fruit of his experience of living in gospel community with his brothers. After exhorting us to pursue what is truly important and life-giving in our relationships with one another—preferring nothing to the self-giving love of God revealed in Jesus Christ—Benedict prays, "May Christ bring us all together to life everlasting." *All together.* Here is the heart of our life! We have not come together to be engaged in solitary, parallel journeys. From our first days in community, we have been searching *together* for the God in whom we are immersed, through all the daily details of our living, serving, loving, and forgiving. And lest we miss the point, Benedict crowns his Rule with the reminder that we are, all of us, being drawn into God's overflowing life at this very moment, and that we shall find ourselves sharing that life *together*, or not at all. This humbling awareness of our being loved into fuller life has filled my mind and heart during these weeks.

*Emmanuel—
God with us*

**We find ourselves
—now!—in the midst
of a loving dialogue
with the Holy Mystery,
into whose pure giving
we are being drawn.**

In late spring, after ankle-fusion surgery and a program of rehabilitation, I was ready and eager to move ahead with living, now with greater ease of mobility. The path, however, turned out to be quite different. At summer's end, I began a series of tests to discover, through the process of elimination, the reason for the appearance of additional and worrisome symptoms. This fall I was diagnosed with ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis)—in the US called "Lou Gehrig's Disease"—a progressive neuromuscular degenerative disease for which there is no cure. The weeks since have brought me to feel the harshness of this life-altering

diagnosis, as my understanding moves from my head to my heart. Experiences of increased limitation bring a full share of frustration, but also the challenge to let go into the reality of today.

But amidst it all, I am deeply at peace, in a way I have never experienced before.

From the very moment of learning the diagnosis, we brothers have chosen to journey each day into this uncharted territory *together*, step by step. For my part, I promise to not waste this chapter of my life, but to live our common life as fully and gratefully as is possible. I believe that our trust and our love for one another will only deepen, as we learn to be brother to each other in new ways. And, I pray, so will our compassion, as we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with every person in the face of life's shadows and light.

I am learning, again and again, that love and faithfulness are not the stuff of romantic novels. No, they are fashioned in the crucible of life, as each of us lets go of all that is so unimportant, in order that we might be free for the matters of the heart. For all of us, the price of avoiding the reality of suffering is ceasing to love and relinquishing life's joys. I don't know how to adequately convey the daily, tender generosity of my brothers, stretching their time and energy in care and support. As the late German theologian Dorothee Sölle once said, "Ours are the only hands God has." Each of my brothers is an unearned gift from God, and I am amazed. *Thank-you* is much too small a word to express my love.

Paul Crowley, in his book *Unwanted Wisdom*,² writes that no one is called to silently endure or passively submit to fate. Rather, he says, we are summoned to an *active obedience to reality*. For persons who wish to live in the Spirit of Jesus (and for those who are inspired by the Rule of Benedict), this "active obedience to reality" is a daily practice and the path to true life. As I listen to this summons, I hear it calling me toward accepting and going-through what *is*, that which I cannot change or even understand; the willingness to wrestle with the often unanswerable questions involved in what I am accepting; prayerful listening for the silent Mystery that is deeper and wider; seeing beyond my own situation, in a solidarity with others, in order to bring healing to the brokenness of our world; and finally, a truly personal response in trust, generosity, and gratefulness. These are not a series of steps, but markers on the winding journey of hope. I pray for this kind of free, active obedience.

One morning during our October retreat days, I realized that "all that I'm experiencing is so much bigger than me!" The marvel is that we find ourselves *together*—now!—in the midst of a loving dialogue with the Holy

Mystery, whose promise of love and new creation will never be withdrawn, but into whose pure giving we are being drawn. I pray that, as a dialogue-partner, I may respond with love and generosity.

For the prayer, love, and support of so many of you, our dear friends, and for the extraordinary care of my doctors and therapists, I continue to be deeply thankful. All of us—together—in the specific realities of our lives, are being invited to let go *into* that Self-giving Goodness who refuses to stay at a safe distance from us, and in whom all creation will be made whole.

Through Jesus your Servant, with him, and in him,
drawn together as one by your Spirit of love,
we give you all our praise, O Source of our life,
today and forever!



¹ "Prayer of Blessing I" (excerpt), from the recording *Hear the Song of Your People: Morning and Evening Prayer at Weston Priory*, © 1998 The Benedictine Foundation of the State of Vermont, Inc.

² Paul G. Crowley, SJ, *Unwanted Wisdom: Suffering, the Cross, and Hope* (New York: Continuum, 2005).

