



Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

Sponsored by North American Benedictine and Cistercian Monasteries of Men and Women

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Events

Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB

from **Gethsemani Encounter I, July 1996**

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The first actual meeting of the Gethsemani Encounter was held during the evening of July 22, 1996. After dinner, there was a tree planting ceremony in the monastery courtyard, where a spruce tree was planted by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Abbot Timothy Kelly. The evening program in the chapter room, which followed the ceremony, included a word of welcome and orientation by James Wiseman, and a talk by Pascaline Coff on the spiritual journey of dialogue leading to the Gethsemani Encounter. These presentations were followed by a "philosophical moment" during which Jeffrey Hopkins and Donald Mitchell presented the philosophical visions behind the traditions of Buddhist and Christian spiritualities. Both speakers presented what they felt persons in the other tradition should understand about their tradition's ideas and ideals as a prelude to dialogue. A closing blessing was then given by Abbot James Conner, OCSO.

For the next five days of the encounter, our mornings began with sitting meditation in the Skakel Chapel at 5:45 a.m. Each sitting was followed by a Buddhist or Christian ritual at 6:15. Breakfast was 7:00, with the first dialogue session starting at 8:00. The morning sessions included talks and dialogue on an essential element of the spiritual life as seen from two of the three Buddhist perspectives represented at the encounter. The sessions were followed by a Christian or Buddhist ritual at 11:00, and lunch at noon. After lunch, there was time for rest, sharing in dyads, or the meeting of the observers with Robert Thurman and Patrick Henry. The afternoon sessions on the Christian perspective concerning the spiritual issue being discussed for that day began at 2:30 p.m. ending with vespers in the church at 5:30. Dinner was at



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6:00, with the evening session starting at 7:00. The evening sessions presented the third Buddhist view concerning the day's spiritual theme. The evenings ended at 8:30, with a closing blessing, or a special ritual for both Buddhists and Christians. On the final day, July 27th 1996, the encounter concluded with the morning session that finished with a final Christian blessing and a Buddhist ritual.

Each of the different aspects of the week—the talks, the dialogues, dyad encounters, rituals, periods of meditation, meals—were parts of an integral whole. They blended voices and silence into a unique and profound encounter experience in the contemplative atmosphere of the monastery. There were no “safe places,” as Fr. Thomas Baima put it, into which one could retreat—we plunged into a deep engagement with each other and remained in that encounter for the full week. This may have been a bit demanding at times, but there was a sense that we were not there just for ourselves; but were in fact living and working together for the benefit of humankind. Hence, as Ewert Cousins remarked, there was a spiritual “treasure chest” that opened up right on the very first evening, and on the final day, it was “still there”

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