



Love is the Key to Unity

By Bill Conkright



The Conkright Support Group is made up of mostly long term members of Alleluia. These people have been around for some time, and are very discerning when confronted by things of a spiritual nature.

I asked several of them to give us their "take" on Dan Almeter's book, *Unity: On Earth As In Heaven*, and how reading it affected them. Their comments are as follows.

Nancy and Gary Garner said:

"We have both read Dan's book on Unity. His recording of the Pentecostal move of the Holy Spirit is good & historical. Jesus' call for unity in His John 17 prayer is clear, and certainly the goal. Dan makes a good effort to say that.

We have experienced a strong effort at ecumenism and have had pretty good results toward unity in our 31 years in Alleluia [Community]. We believe that level of unity has come primarily because of personal relationships. We want to be united because we love the brothers and sisters in Alleluia and have a lifetime investment with each other.

Trying to sell that unity to fellow church members who are only nominal friends and likely not baptized in the Spirit will probably be a very hard sell.

Unity is the ultimate goal and probably the hardest battle against ourselves but nearly impossible without the Baptism of the Holy Spirit.

We would put the emphasis on developing relationships and getting these people baptized in the Holy Spirit first — then push for developing unity past all barriers, racial, denominational, etc."

Gerald Hebert took the time to write:

One of the things I have come to realize in Dan's book is that love is the key to unity. I can only speak for myself in saying, love's number one partner is sacrifice. It cost Jesus the cross and it's going to cost us something as well. I knew without a doubt, after visiting the Alleluia Community thirty years ago, that this was a group of people striving to be holy and to support one another to reach the same goal through love — not liking one another necessarily, but loving them. So I wanted to be a part of that. I had to make sure Mona and I were in unity (agreement) and most of all would be in unity to give up what we loved (and liked) about Louisiana and our family, because we knew that was what God wanted us to do, not necessarily what I wanted to do. So, for me, love and sacrifice go hand in hand.

"Not my will, but Yours, Lord."

And **Mona Hebert** sent this:

Reading this book felt like reading the history of the Twentieth Century "Wave of the Holy Spirit." It is good to have it written.

Since 1975, when we accepted Jesus as Lord of our lives and were baptized in the Spirit, we knew immediately that if it was not ecumenical, it was not what the Holy Spirit was calling us to do.

Through the decades leading to the new millennium, at interdenominational gatherings, we were involved in many deliverances from pride and judgmentalism, and asked forgiveness and gave forgiveness over and over from "dividing His body" and lack of "unity."

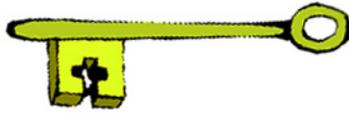
Dan recounted the Holy Spirit "Move" very well. I loved reading about the journey we are on and the hope He speaks of in being a member of the united body of Christ and an eternal ecumenical Cloud of Witnesses. Alleluia!

Mary Joseph submitted the following:

Ecumenism. As I read Dan's book *Unity: On Earth as in Heaven*, I thought this is not an issue that is "in my face" so to speak, but I suppose that has something to do with life experience. I am a child of the '60s who grew up at a time

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of huge social turmoil and change. I am one of those the Holy Spirit saved, part of the Jesus Movement, or "Jesus freaks," as redeemed rebels were named.

Dan is right in saying that many of us did not experience the division in the Body of Christ between Protestants and Catholics. When I came to the Community, I was glad to be out of the turmoil (much of which I created), and grateful to be among people who had a desire to grow in the Lord as I did. I became more sensitized to denominational divisions by listening to stories of pre-Vatican II community members and from the difficulties within the Community. I have not been directly involved with any of the situations in Community, but this reading has caused me to recall the miracle of unity in the Community which occurred, the movement of the Holy Spirit in the charismatic renewal.

I appreciate Dan's work in outlining the history of the Holy Spirit in the United States and the beginning of the Alleluia Community as the fruit of the Renewal Movement. His writing causes me to reflect on the great hope that we have in God and His faithfulness to humanity. He will not abandon us. This is the joy of the charismatic renewal and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Dan also brings out a dimension that I did experience. The Protestants have preserved for us the personal value of the Word of God in each believer's life. I think we all experienced a hunger for Scriptures when we were baptized in the Spirit. It seemed to be a mark of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. It is good to recall these things and to remember that all that we have right now is due to the movement of the Holy Spirit. "For it is you, oh Lord, who have accomplished all that we have done." With great reassurance, I know that He will continue to work in us. And this work often involves sacrifice. When Dan was describing different individuals who were resistant in various situations, I felt that God would not abandon them. Often the Holy Spirit transforms us through suffering. He opens us up, so that what I once

rejected or refused, I begin to understand and accept. I feel that the Body of Christ will continue to suffer and grow, all of us — together. As C.S. Lewis says, "Pain is God's megaphone." Nothing humbles us more. It is suffering that causes us to look in mercy upon the "other" with an open heart and mind, no matter if the other is of a different denomination, religion, socio-economic background, race, or wears an earring in one ear. I am not called to agree with, but to love ... to love even my enemies, and love surely calls us not to offend. It is not easy, but true.

Dan's idea about Protestants and Catholics having the security and confidence to view inside each other's boxes without feeling that we have to change each other is surely a sign of God's great love that has grown in us. I feel it growing more within me. It causes me not to notice the things that bothered me before in relationships or circumstances, but causes me to think and feel and act more in love.

I feel that there are so many issues challenging Christians today: ISIS, homosexuality, violence, secularism ... the list goes on. Ecumenism is something I have not been thinking about lately, but I know that the solution to all these issues is God's love. It is supernatural and able to conquer all things, all fears and anxieties of the human heart, disappointments, weaknesses. It binds all things together and makes them well and whole. All our histories will be welded together by His love into unity.

I feel that the two books we were encouraged to read this September are related. Dan's book and *The Ultimate Treasure Hunt* both tell of the unorthodox moves of the Holy Spirit.

I am glad to have read both. I want to know what the Holy Spirit has done, and is doing. Leave it to the Lord to do the unusual. Not all of us feel led to be sidewalk evangelists, but we all have His grace and power in us. Still, when I read Kevin Dedmon's *The Ultimate Treasure Hunt*, I couldn't help believe that God is on the move and able to do incredible

things, signs and wonders that accompany the Gospel. I believe I am called to pursue Him, and to grow in His grace to such a degree that it is flowing out of me and on to others. I carry His healing power within me. What these books say to me is to be grateful and be open. It won't be bad. It will be great! Invigorating! Renewing! That's how God does things! There may be suffering, but the suffering will be minuscule compared to the peace, joy, and glory. We will be rich. He will help us.

My mother, when she first came into the renewal, had a vision of Christ's body, but His arm was broken. He was pointing out to her his sad condition. She unbelievably said, "This is not how You work." His reply, "You don't know how I work." Now, after reading Dan's book, I realize that this was probably an invitation to ecumenism, to heal the denominational divisions within the church, His Body. This movement toward ecumenism is a major effect of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit years ago, and it must be that God wants it to continue through many avenues.

So Dan's book is an invitation to continue to mend the broken Body of Christ, so that His Body, His most holy church, full of all God's people, may act in unison to bring healing to an unbelieving world.

We don't know how He works, what He will do next, or how He will manifest Himself to us. We do know it will be wonderful, whatever it is, and in this, we have hope.

Bill:

In closing I just want to add one thing: when I was halfway through this book, I knew I wanted to send it to all my family and friends to explain what we are about here in Alleluia.

Bill Conkright is a former head of the Youth Development Team and the Audio/Video Team for the Alleluia Community, continuing to serve as a Support Group Head and a Pastoral Coordinator. He and his wife, Dian, have been Full Covenant members since 1985. They have 11 grandchildren and attend St. Joseph Catholic Church in Augusta, Ga.

A Reflection on Our Covenant Life

By Dan Almeter

Recently, we have experienced the Underway and Full Covenant Retreats. At the Full Covenant Retreat, the Lord emphasized His divine pleasure with each of us. He also invited us to be crushed as grapes, for His sake and for the sake of each other.

The following are excerpts taken from a talk given by Fr. Gerard D'Souza, OCSO, on October 3 of this year. The full comments can be found at the website <http://www.frontporchrepublic.com/2015/10/monastic-stability-in-one-place-with-god-and-others/>. Fr. Gerard is a life-committed member of the Abbey of the Genesee — the same Trappist monastery where Tom, Joe, Dan and Mary's (Almeter/Pidel) brother has lived for 41 years — Brother James.

The comments are quite pertinent to covenant life as we know it. As he speaks of the "vow of stability," you will see he is speaking to our "life-time commitment." It reflects a lot of what we heard and experienced on our full covenant retreat weekend. Enjoy!

"As monks, we actually take a vow of stability, a promise to be in this place and with this community of brothers for the rest of our lives. We belong to the family of Saint Benedict, who wrote his Rule for monks in the Sixth Century. St. Benedict required monks to take a vow of stability. His own monastery possessed a motley crew of characters — Roman patricians, slaves, Goths — the hardworking, the lazy, the sophisticated and the uncouth, the upbeat, the depressed. And this cast of characters was to live with each other for the rest of their lives. And it has been so ever since in Benedictine monasteries. St. Benedict says, "The workshop where we are to toil faithfully at all these tasks [these good works] is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in the community."

He is pointing out something that experience bears out — you just cannot live with a group of people fruitfully if all that matters is yourself. The group

breaks down. You can live fruitfully with the same people for the rest of your life only by working at relationships. There is nothing dramatic about this. It is a workshop where you have to take up the tools each morning and work at it. There is nothing glamorous about it either. It is work, day in and day out, in the same environment and with the same people. But hopefully, like the quiet work of the craftspeople, something good will emerge from this workshop. A community will be formed, and it will be stable because all are more or less committed to making this work. But this would not occur unless we, the monks, had not pledged to remain in the same place with the same group of brothers. This is the foundation for the community's growth. This may seem crazy in our highly mobile society. Staying in one place and being stuck with the same group of people for life — the definitive closing of options — might seem at best odd, and at worst terrifying.

St. Anselm of Canterbury, who also was a monk of the 11th Century, says of stability:

"Just as any young tree, if frequently transplanted or often disturbed by being torn up, after having recently been planted in a particular place, will never be able to take root, will rapidly wither and bring no fruit to perfection; similarly an unhappy monk, if he often moves from place to place at his own whim or, remaining in one place, is frequently agitated by his hatred of it, he never achieves stability with roots of love, grows weary and does not grow rich in the fruitfulness of good works.

... Therefore, anyone taking on the monastic life should strive with total application of his mind to set down roots of love in whatever monastery he made his profession. ... Let him rejoice at having at last found a place where he can stay, not unwillingly but voluntarily, for the rest of his life, and, having put away all anxiety about moving from one place to another ... let him resolve to devote himself assiduously to pursuing the single-

minded exercise of a holy life."

St. Anselm says that stability comes when there are roots of love, love not being a mere sentiment but active self-giving. But love of this sort needs training and discipline, and an environment where our fine sentiments and good intentions are put to the test. They are only proved true when we make a trial of them.

Remaining in one place with this particular group makes us put our money where our mouth is. It is also revelatory of the obstacles to living for others since we are congenitally selfish.

Being "stuck" in place reveals our boundaries. It is easy, without real commitments, to float around with illusions of the possibilities and opportunities open to us. Somewhere over the rainbow there is that illusory pot of gold. So we might nurse, somewhere in our sensibility, the illusion of infinite expansion which is deceptive. But when you are in one place, the false self is exposed and our vulnerabilities and weaknesses rise into the light. That is why the desert ascetics were so particular that we should not introduce distractions into the place we inhabit; otherwise, there is no confrontation with the false self.

A monastic writer has said, "Stability ensures that it is more difficult to avoid the twin struggles ... actively to persevere in doing good and passively to withstand the rigors of progressive purification." Stability makes us aware of the concrete dimensions of our negativity. Aspects of self that could have been successfully concealed in looser associations assert themselves in a close community and cause pain — to others, but more especially to ourselves.

This self-knowledge is important if we are to grow in self-giving. A degree of inner freedom from our self-absorption is necessary to be able to invest yourself in others. Stability happens because we make room for the brothers in our own hearts.

A monk is not looking for a convenient place or the magic monastery. He will never find it. His search for the place that will keep him is really the search to find a place for the brother in his heart.

For the community to flourish in a place, it requires that each of us work at

A Reflection

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mending our fences with those we live with; otherwise, we will never mend our fences with God. One of the key elements to community is forgiveness and acceptance. Forgiveness is essential to living with others. In order to co-exist with our brothers and sisters, we need to find a place for them. But this would be impossible for us if God had not reached out first to make room for us, Himself. Our human community of brothers is underwritten at the most fundamental level by the accommodation of God, Himself. God made space for us in Christ.

When one sets forth the overarching vision, there is always the danger that it might be mistaken for the reality on the ground. Stability, true stability, is something all of us have to work for. It does not happen all at once. It is a long-term process, even a life-long process, of change and conversion and each of us is at various stages of the journey; some at the beginning, some at the middle, and other advanced. It does not look clean and neat as in our brochure; it is as messy as life itself. But the important thing is that we persevere and move forward in faith — faith in God and trusting that the other brothers with us are also making sincere efforts in the same direction.

Finally, I want to add my two cents to speak of an important distinction when it comes to making a commitment, between predicting and promising. Both look at the future, but are very different things. To predict comes from the word — *prae-dicere* — that is, speaking before. I can predict the weather, and I might be wrong. And then I can say that I have made a mistake in predicting, in saying beforehand what would happen. To predict is linked to seeing or imagining the future. I am not the doer, but the seer.

Promising, on the other hand, is different. To promise comes from the Latin — *pro-mittere* — to send before. That is, to throw myself into the future, to send myself into the future before I know what it is. It is not a seeing and imagining of the future so much as an action that plants me firmly in the future in the pres-

Thoughts from the Full Covenant Retreat

By Barbara Harshman



"God bless you!!" "May God bless you to overflowing!" "May the joy of the Lord fill your heart and may you enjoy good health!" These were some of the blessings spoken to each other at the closing of the first evening of the Full Covenant Retreat on October 16 and 17.

Held at the Columbia County Exhibition Center near Grovetown, the retreat site was well-chosen and provided a walking track and lunch opportunities nearby.

While Mark Wilby shared a word about being crushed as in a wine press to be used by the Lord, Dan Almeter gave a reflection on reconciliation and being "crushed," then exhorted everyone to spend the rest of the evening blessing each other.

The next day Kevin Murrell offered a "Vision of Happiness" for our reflection and meditation as it applies to our covenant life. This was followed by Craig and Gary Garner with a wonderful "Vision of our relationship with God" from their personal, generational perspectives. Very dynamic. Having a time of personal prayer completed the morning's agenda.

After a lunch break, we were called back with a time of praise and worship before Steve Swenson and daughter, Rachel Balducci, presented a "Vision of the Christian Life and It's Duties," also from their very personal and generational perspectives. Their insights were honest and real.

ent act of making the promise; to commit myself to the future before I even know what its particularities are about.

The problem comes when I confuse prediction with promising in areas where promises are made. In commitments, we make promises and not predictions. If we treat a promise as we would a prediction, and if things did not work out, we could say I made a mistake and am entitled to get out of it. But then, we were not promising but only predicting when we made our promise.

In the vow of stability, we make a promise. No doubt, we exercise prudence, but in making the promise, we

The final presentation was by Luc Ceyssens and daughter, Miek Johnson, on a "Vision of Community Life" and how they live out our calling... "to be a people."

Following are some of the comments heard about the weekend.

Jim Dooley remarked that "God spoke thankfulness to me... Thankful that we live with people who are so committed, who are more than acquaintances but really are family. Loved the blessings of Friday night and loved the generational sharings on Saturday."

Kurt Eyrich stated that "Friday night was a good time to bless someone you don't often get to talk with. The talks were very uplifting and the teachers did a very good job."

Becky Visintainer shared that "God showed me that I need to learn to relax more when I spend time with Him. I most enjoyed the reconciliation/blessing session on Friday evening."

I was so blessed by the generational sharings. Kevin also gave me a lot to talk with God about what makes me happy... what happiness is to me. Giving and receiving so many blessings from sisters and brothers was incredibly uplifting Friday evening. A great way to start off the retreat! The brief video and Jewish song during the Sabbath meal service was a beautiful addition. And supper was delicious!

are in effect planting ourselves in the future no matter what, and not predicting; which means we take the good or bad as it is dished out to us. And, if it is bad, we do not have to take back our promise, because we did not make a prediction that it would be good. We made a promise that we would take it as it came to us.

It is this throwing oneself into the future that makes for a stable community where we have committed to be there for each other.

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