

# The "M" PIRE

an interview with  
**FATHER WILLIAM McNAMARA**

by Carter Phipps

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**WIE:** *Father McNamara, you are a Carmelite monk, a contemplative in one of the most respected monastic traditions in the world. What inspired you to renounce worldly life and set your feet to the path of asceticism and solitude?*

**FR WILLIAM McNAMARA:** The original motive, affirmed and reconfirmed more passionately and intensely over the years, was and is a desire for the fullness of life, in order to be prepared for and receptive to that onslaught of life and love that the Creator provides for us in himself and through everything that is connected with him (because God is not a separate God, he is distinct and transcendental but not separate). One has to become pure, one has to become empty, one has to become responsive, one has to become alive and alert to all the possibilities of living. I wanted that fullness of life and I didn't want to become halfhearted. I didn't want to get caught in half-truths. I didn't want to be stymied or seduced by mediocrity, by pseudo-events rather than events. I wanted the whole thing. I wanted utter reality. I wanted the ultimate. So I had to renounce whatever seemed to me to be less than real.

**WIE:** *What did you see as being less than real?*

**WM:** I found most communication an impediment to communion. We com-

municate so much - a veritable Vesuvius of verbiage-that we don't hear the Word itself. The truth escapes us. I think that one of the worst pollutions in the world is verbal pollution.

So I didn't want to be choked by verbal pollution, by a shallow, empty, febrile kind of talk. I wanted a life that was dominated by and permeated by silence. And then, out of that matrix of silence, I hoped that the deeper words would come, the primordial words. But the only words that would be worthwhile would be those which are connected with the original Word, the Word of God, the Word that became flesh.

Another thing would be the way reality escapes us, precisely because we are in such a hurry. We are in a stampede almost constantly. There's no time to think, there's no time to love, there's no time to *be*. We're driven to do, do, do at a rather shallow, superficial level, and that prevents us from *being*, which is most important. As Lao Tzu said, "The most important thing to do is to be." So that would be another aspect of the search for truth, the search for the Ultimate. Again, it's communion rather than communication. If communication sets the stage for communion, that's wonderful communication.

If it doesn't, it's useless. The big thing that every human being is striving for is communion. And if that is not experienced on all levels - communion with God, communion with human beings, communion with animals, vegetables, minerals, the earth then we experience the terrible affliction of loneliness and isolation. That's what is dominating this modern society. Everyone's lonely, everyone's isolated. So we need time to *be*, we need enough silence to be, we need enough solitude to be, we need enough good communion with others to be.

**WIE:** *Could you explain exactly how you define "the world" on the spiritual path?*

**WM:** I find it necessary to distinguish between the world and what I call the "Mpire" - the world of the three M's: mediocrity, mendacity, and manipulation. The world that is the earth, the gift God has given us - I would never renounce that. All I want to do is embrace that and love it and become more and more a part of it - that objective, wonderful world.

But the Mpire is that aspect of the world that has been used and twisted out of shape in order to provide the power, pleasure, and prestige of human beings.

The net result of that, down through the centuries, has been an unreal world. The Mpire is an unreal world. It's made up of a network of mediocrity, manipulation, and mendacity.

The whole sociopolitical world we live in is dominated by mendacity - the big lie. The big lie is coming through television, through magazines (not enlightenment magazines but through many magazines) through propaganda, ideologies. There is some truth in it, but it's the big lie because it doesn't reveal the ultimate. And it doesn't

evaluate contemporary situations in terms of the ultimate. Therefore it goes askew.

Then there's mediocrity. Everything is worked out into a system so that there are no surprises. And God is surprise. God is beyond our conceptions, our images, our big to-dos. If we are not being surprised constantly, it means we are out of touch with the real, and we've worked things out simply to be manageable, to provide us with more power, more convenience, more comfort.

The third aspect is manipulation. I think the biggest problem of society today is that we let too many things happen to us. We've allowed ourselves to become usable items for government, for church, for whatever the big power structures may be. That's manipulation. It happens in respectable, subtle ways. First we allow television into the home. Then we allow computers, and then because there is pornography on the Internet, we get used to pornography in the home. It just becomes absurd, but we've gotten used to it. We are shrinking humanly. We're not being divinized; we're not being transformed. It happens little by little as we let too many dehumanizing things happen to us, so that we can no longer take a stand against it.

The term I like to use to describe that whole phenomenon is "pretty poison." It's not a spectacular kind of evil. Pretty poison is the kind of evil that killed Christ. It was not the bad men of that age, not the state, not the church. It wasn't the notoriously evil men but the pretty poison that seeped into the best institutions and the best people. Pretty poison is that kind of evil that seeps unnoticeably, imperceptibly into our nicest people and our best institutions and just disorients them, derails them.

It's a respectable kind of evil.

**WIE:** *How have the very specific external changes that you made - for example, stepping away from the world completely and becoming a monk - helped you to remove yourself from what you call the "Mpire" and go deeper into the spiritual dimension?*

**WM:** When I entered the Carmelite order at eighteen, I took the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. When I started a new branch of the Carmelite order in 1960, I added another vow, and that is the vow of holy leisure—refusing to be driven into stampedes of work, busyness, and fuss.

Poverty means no fuss. We fuss about so many things that we have no energy left to be focused and concentrated on the one thing necessary: God, union with God, enlightenment, purity of heart. So we take the vow of poverty, and that means that nothing short of ultimate union is worth fussing about. It's not worth it unless it's connected to that. So poverty really means getting rid of all of the excess baggage. We don't need watches, radios, and hi-fi sets - we need God. We need a good earth, we need good relationships, and we need a rich kind of life where there is a variety and balance of human activities that lead to the one thing necessary, the pure act, which is the act of enlightened love.

Chastity means no lust. It means not lusting after anything, not only human beings but anything. It means getting rid of all forms of craving. All of the great religions have said that - get rid of craving and you're free. So we take the vow of chastity to get rid of craving, and then we focus on real intimacy - with God, with human beings, animals, vegetables, minerals. One responds to people as they are, with no designs on them, with no greed, with

no lust. Then one becomes full of awe, wonder, and radical amazement, because as this brand-new kind of beauty emerges before us, we don't want to use it, we want to celebrate it, and offer it to God and thank God for it. So that's chastity. It also means renouncing some good things, like the good aspects of the sexual life with one's beloved. We renounce that, not because it's bad but because we want the quickest, shortest route into the ultimate. Therefore we store up those sexual energies and, by the help of God, subsume them within eros itself. Eros is that deep, profound desire in every human being to be united with everyone and everything. And then obedience means no rust, that is, not allowing, our mind to become rusty. So, no fuss, no lust, and no rust. Obedience comes from the Latin *obedire* and it means "to listen." How many people really listen? To be obedient means that we are so free of self-will, self-interest, and self-importance that we really listen to all those messengers that God sends to tell us the truth. In obedience we renounce a lot of the self-preoccupation and look to the other, listen to the other. It's other-centered rather than self-centered.

**WIE:** *How have you found that your outward renunciation has supported and deepened your inner renunciation? How has the outward asceticism and solitude helped to deepen your inner spiritual life?*

**WM:** That is a good question, because in our modern age there is a tendency to dismiss the need for exterior renunciation, saying, "We're grown up now; we've come of age, so all we need to do is renounce disturbing interior things but not exterior ones." It doesn't work. If there is no renunciation of inappropriate external things, then the whole interior life weakens. You can't separate the exterior from the interior. If

we're not mortifying and renouncing a lot of external things, then we grow soft inside, we grow limp. There is no interior alertness, aliveness, because we're still too inordinately attached to external things: food, clothing, conveniences, comfort, my own schedule, my own agenda. All of that interferes with what God wants and what is absolutely the best for the human being.

If God is not supremely important, he's not important at all. So we have to judge everything, evaluate everything, and ask the question: how directly and immediately does this meeting, this talk, this meal, this movie relate to the ultimate human act, divine union? If we don't ask that question, we lose track.

**WIE:** *What if someone came to you and said, "Father McNamara, I think that I want to become a monk, but is it worth it? From your own experience, tell me why it's worth it to take that step." What would you say to them?*

**WM:** A monk is convinced that God is the all, and that short of union with him, life is a fallacy and we do more harm than good. So I would say that the basic reward of taking that leap and becoming a monk, becoming a god-man, possessed by God, overwhelmed by God, is human freedom. It just obliterates all of those shackles, all of those forms of imprisonment that prevent freedom. We're not only free for delightful, passionate, intimate union with God, but we're free to enjoy all that pertains to him, and belongs to him with no designs on any of it. We're not grabbing, clutching, using. We just see God's gifts and thank him. It's a wonderful, free life. It's sheer joy.

**WIE:** *That's inspiring, because so many people see it as the opposite.*

**WM:** I know. That's the popular opinion. Spooky, sour monks. I think of monks as the fish that jump out of

the water. They're the live ones. That's what monks do. They jump out of the ordinary, everyday environment in order to taste God.

**WIE:** *Jesus said, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Like other great religious figures of history, Jesus inspired a very strong spirit of renunciation in his disciples, many of whom walked away from family, friends, and work forever to follow him into a homeless life of poverty and simplicity. As a contemplative monk in the Christian tradition, what do you think of that kind of radical step, of dropping everything, walking away, and leaving the world completely behind to pursue the spiritual life?*

**WM:** That radical kind of leaving the world behind in order to do the one thing necessary, in order to follow Christ into the abyss, into the ultimate communion with his Father and his Father's world, is the most dramatic kind of gesture. Although everyone can't do that, it's absolutely indispensable that some do it. By doing that, by leaving the whole world behind and going into the desert (let's use the desert as a symbol), they become the best possible witnesses of the living God. What greater testimony could there be that God is alluring, that God is absolute, that God is demanding? And in so many cases it's a very enriched mind that does that; it's a noble person. Any kind of person who does that becomes a living witness, but the more noble the person, the greater the witness. People say, "God alone satisfies that man or that woman. Nothing but God." And that's worth all the preaching and all the writing in the world—just living that way.

I've given retreats to a lot of people who are totally dissatisfied with their way of life, but they don't have the courage to change it. They know it's

killing them. They feel like robots, automaton, but it would mean stepping out of that rat race, taking a stand against that whole current, and that's a lonely, heroic thing to ask of anyone. There have been people like that from the beginning, and there will be until the end. They are the people who keep the world from falling apart. It's not the people who are busy all day and all night in offices, on computers, in the hurly-burly of the world, but the people who have a pure heart and who want only God. The overflow of that - its benefit for the world is tremendous. My favorite example is St. Anthony the Hermit. He was the first hermit, in the fourth century. He heard a sermon in church that quoted that exact same statement of Christ's that you just read, and he went off to the desert and stayed for eighteen years. Then he came back, and he was alive with love and he had a tremendous effect on people. He was sustained by God, and because of that he just radiated God. Look at Jesus himself. The apostles would wake up in the morning, and they wouldn't be able to find him because he was out in the desert communing with his Father. Now if he had to do that - how ridiculous we are to think that we could pull it off under our own steam. In all the traditions, it is the great people who take that kind of radical step away from the world. It's not just an individual thing, a private kind of spiritual matrimony with God. It's also an apocalyptic thing. They are willing to wage war with the enemies of God. And they do it first of all by being committed entirely to God, and then, once they make themselves available to him, they are also willing to be sent by him, if he sees fit, into the worst places in the world. All they know is that they

have to make themselves available, by going into the desert, and then whatever God does is fine with them. But if they don't take that first step, nothing happens.

**WIE:** *Many people today feel that the contemplative life, the life of solitude and renunciation, is fundamentally self-centered, merely an escape from the problems of our modern society. Yet both you and the co-founder of your Spiritual Life Institute, Mother Tessa Bielecki, have claimed the very opposite - that the contemplative life is the crucial and missing answer to many of the most pressing issues of the human predicament, "perhaps the only hope for the future of our endangered planet," as Mother Tessa says. Could you explain why you view the renunciate or mystical life not as a flight from the world's problems but rather as the best way to get at the essence of what ails the human race?*

**WM:** The reason a human being renounces the so-called world in pursuit of the contemplative life is because that person not only accepts responsibility for him or herself, but they are literally in love with the world, and they are convinced that by moving into solitude, they move into the heart of reality. And from that God-centered place, deep down in the universe, in the real - from that prayerful center, they believe that they can touch and uplift everyone in the world to some degree. So what they are seeking is more reality, more communion, more salvific human activities that will help the whole world. They are not primarily trying to perfect themselves or sanctify themselves, because only God can do that, and only the exigencies of life can do that, when one is responsive to them and therefore allows God to break through. There's absolutely no selfishness in the life of a genuine monk, a genuine contemplative. No, they are called by God to make themselves present to him so that he can use them for the benefit of

the world.

**WIE:** *Many people today feel that the whole concept of renunciation and monasticism is outdated in the modern world, based on values that are world-denying, patriarchal, and which imply a false split between the world and God, between the body and the spirit. What would you say to those who feel that we need a new form of spirituality based on a total integration of the worldly life and the spiritual life?*

**WM:** Certainly your whole life is your spiritual life. There is no doubt about that. We do have to integrate every aspect of our lives into the center, into the god-spirit that permeates and sustains us. But it is obvious to me, and should be obvious to everyone, I think, that the monastic life, if properly understood, is the most conducive way to achieve this end. Because the monastic life *does* integrate them. It provides the most balanced possible life, if it's genuine.

For example, our own life in the Carmelite order I started is the only instance I know of where there is a marvelous co-operation and balance between man and woman, between solitude and community, between work and play. That has always been the purpose of monastic life, to provide the most humanizing set of circumstances or conditions so that God is free to sanctify the human being and then to act, through the human being, on the whole world. I think that because people don't understand the real meaning of monastic life, they falsely see a separation. The whole purpose is to unite and to integrate everything, but on a deep level. There are a lot of shallow, superficial efforts in that direction today, but they are kind of juvenile and transient; they're passing fads. Whereas the monastic life is so essential and so substantial that it goes right to the heart of the human

being and the human world, and there unfolds effectively.

**WIE:** *Why do you think it is that there are now so few people interested in the kind of life that you have undertaken?*

**WM:** I think that most people in this modern age are seduced by the workaday world. The average human being is being deceived by hyper-activity, feverish activity. It's dispersed human energy. It is not hitting the target. It is not uplifting the world. It's just a roundelay of repetitive mechanisms, over and over again, with no final end. George Santyana, the great Harvard professor, said, "A fanatic is one who, having forgotten the end, multiplies the means." And that's what we're all doing. Where are we? We don't know. Who are we? We don't know. We're just busy. And that embarrasses us, and so we keep doing more things to cover over the embarrassment, the emptiness, the hollowness of our lives. So given the condition that we're in, we shy away from the contemplative life.

**WIE:** *Do you think that is also partly because the predominant message in the spiritual world right now seems to be that you can do it in the midst of the world, in the midst of your work and your life? Does this message help to blind people to what you were just speaking about?*

**WM:** Yes, and that's so seductive because it's half true. *You can* do it in your present circumstances and conditions, but *not* unless you take radical steps for transformation. And so people say, "Oh yes, we can do it in these circumstances and conditions, if. . ." But they never follow up the "if." They never introduce those measures, those disciplines, those habits of life that will make it possible. So ultimately it's possible, but existentially it's not possible because no one is doing what it takes to make it possible.

**WIE:** *It seems that even those people who do*



have a genuine passion and interest in spiritual life often don't consider the step of monasticism. I wonder if that's also partially because it has been denigrated in our modern society.

**WM:** I've given retreats to a lot of people who are totally dissatisfied with their way of life, but they don't have the gumption, they don't have the bravery, they don't have the heroism to change it. They know it's killing them. They feel like robots, automatons, but they don't have the courage to change. It would mean stepping out of that rat race, taking a stand against that whole current. It's a lonely, heroic thing to ask of anyone, and so people won't do it.

**WIE:** I have one last question. As a spiritual practitioner, I know that it can be quite a shock to come back into the world after a period of time in seclusion, and I'm sure that that is even more true for someone who's spent as much time as you have in solitude. I was curious what your experience is of spending time out in the world. What do you see when you walk out into this modern society?

**WM:** I guess I see two things, progressively. One is that I'm more and more aware of the unreal aspect of what I go back out into, as opposed to the ideal situation in which I live. The noise, the frenzy, the lack of meaning in things. For instance, the expressed, articulated relationship of creature to Creator is not obvious. It's not there, or at least when it's there, it's smothered, it's submerged. I never hear anyone refer to God except by profane language. It's all very remote, and it's all very separate. People have somewhere a spirituality, they have somewhere a religious duty, and it's pretty conventional. They go through it on Sunday. So I feel all of that right away when I enter the world. I feel a sense of, "I'm an alien." And there's a sadness with that.

On the other hand, despite all that, because of some kind of awareness of God that has become habitual, I sense his presence more in the turmoil. But at the same time it's kind of a "negative presence." I don't mean that he's absent, because he's not absent. I sense our absence, not the absence of God. I perceive and appreciate God in an alien world.

### MOTHER TESSA BIELECKI

**Mother Tessa Bielecki**  
co-founded the *Spiritual Life Institute* with Father McNamara, and is the director of its hermitages in Colorado and Ireland. She has been a nun in the Carmelite order since 1967.

**WIE:** One of the most challenging aspects of the path of renunciation is the renunciation of sexuality. In contemporary America, most people are completely intimidated by the idea of celibacy, and many view the prospect of lifelong sexual abstinence as abhorrent convinced that it can only lead to unhealthy ends — to neurosis, physical ailments, or even sexual perversions. You have been a celibate nun for over thirty years. What have you discovered to be the value and importance of celibacy on the spiritual path?

**TESSA BIELECKI:** Celibacy makes no sense at all unless it issues from love. Sex makes no sense at all unless it issues from love. Both sex and celibacy are about love, and I have learned how to be a better lover, a universal lover, as a result of celibacy. I have learned to count on God totally, unequivocally, and unconditionally as a result of celibacy. Whereas if I were not celibate (and even as a celibate) I could be tempted to rely on someone less than God for ultimate fulfillment, I would not trade celibacy for anything. It's really the

heart of my life. I believe that there is a qualitative difference in my relationship with God as a result of being celibate — because I have to count on Him alone. When my spiritual director suggested to me that I might be called to celibacy, I literally screamed and ran away. I was absolutely horrified. It was the last thing in the world I wanted. And now I'd be horrified if somebody said, "You have to get married." I couldn't bear it, because of the joy that I know from living a life of celibacy. This brings me to the question of being in the world but not of it. I live in the world, I see the movies, I see the sexual advertisements. But I'm not of that because it's a big lie. That's part of the mendacity. Sex is overrated, and people don't understand that its overrated. They usually come to that after they have been burned by it. One of the things that I especially appreciate about celibacy is that there is no static. The channels are clear. My boundaries are so clear. In my relationships with men, I know where things can go and where they cannot go, and that's a tremendous freedom. I feel so sorry for young people today because there is always the question, "Am I going to go to bed with this one or am I not? Am I going to have sex this night or am I not?" I don't have to worry about that because it's very clear. I'm not. And all kinds of other things can happen because there is not that kind of static. I feel so sorry for young people these days because that static is starting younger and younger. Kids at twelve and thirteen are dressing and talking and behaving in ways that shouldn't come until later in life. There is so much pressure in sex. Its heavy-duty. It's not carefree. You have to perform well; you have to look good. It's sad. It's a sex-

crazed culture. I think one of the most radical counter-cultural stances that can be taken is celibacy — not to mention the fact that it's a healthy form of population control. I feel like I'm doing my part!

### *The Wisdom of the Desert*

"A brother asked one of the elders: What good thing shall I do, and have life thereby? The old man replied: God alone knows what is good. However, I have heard it said that someone inquired of Father Abbot Nisteros...and that he replied: Not all works are alike. For Scripture says that Abraham was hospitable and God was with him. Elias loved solitary prayer, and God was with him. And David was humble, and God was with him. Therefore, whatever you see your soul to desire according to God, do that thing, and you shall keep your heart safe."