

# A Spirituality of Desire

Wisdom School at Saint Mark's

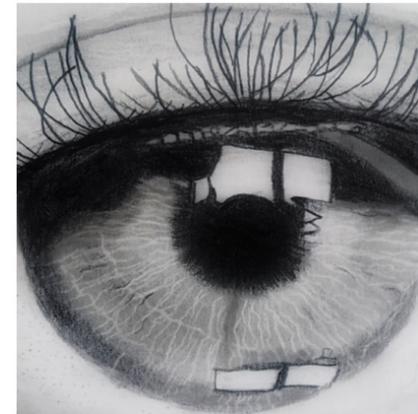
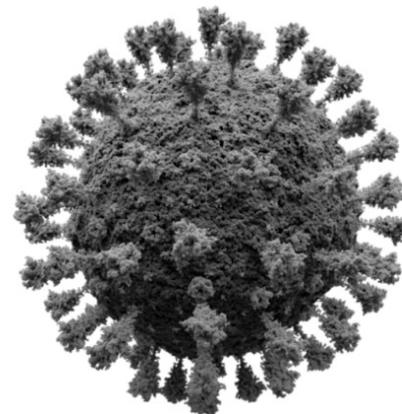
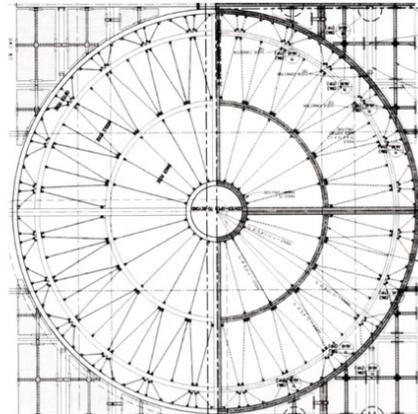
Opening Plenary

October 6, 2021

Steven L. Thomason

# THE WISDOM SCHOOL

AT SAINT MARK'S CATHEDRAL



# What is the Wisdom School?

Our mission is to offer a balanced path for spiritual transformation grounded in prayer and practice, drawing on the Christian contemplative tradition while respecting the diversity of experiences born from contemplative practices of other traditions.”

The space for reasoned discourse, lifelong learning, and spiritual renewal is held sacred for all seekers, whether they worship at the cathedral or not.



# Upcoming Events



## **Following Jesus to a New Counter-Cultural, Post-Pandemic Normal**

*Saturday January 15, 2022, 9am-3pm*

The year 2022 is already being called “the year of all things,” as the world attempts to catch up on two years of pandemic postponements. But Jesus, ever attentive to the present moment, calls us to liberation from the tyranny of being overcommitted and offers us the invitation to rest, heal, and be well. This workshop will explore the resources of our faith tradition for grounded and connected life and ministry for all of God’s people.



# Upcoming Events

## **Creation Spirituality: Delight, Wonder & Reverence**

*Wednesdays, February 16 & 23, 2022, 6:45-8:15pm*

Join Canon Daugherty over the course of two Wednesday evenings to explore the riches of creation-based spirituality in the Celtic tradition. She'll share some of what she learned while on sabbatical in Ireland and Iona, and we'll practice rhythms of embodied prayer and openness to daily encounters with the holy.



# Upcoming Events



## **Spirituality of the Meal**

*Saturday March 19, 2022, 9:30am-12pm*

Food is a profound portal into spiritual growth even as it often carries trappings of stress and shame for many. It doesn't have to. Sharing a meal is a holy experience, if we avail ourselves to the opportunity to practice presence and see the bounty before us as opportunity to practice gratitude. Brief reflections across the day will include history of the meal, reflecting on food as spiritual metaphor, and participants will engage in sensate tasting and will share a meal prepared by all present.

Facilitators: Chef Marc Aubertin and Dean Steve Thomason

# Upcoming Events

## Ravished by Nature's Beauty: Christian Mystics and the Longing for God

*Friday April 22, 2022, 6:30-8:30pm*

*Saturday April 23, 2022, 9:30-3:00pm*

A two-part workshop by Dr. Belden Lane

Christian mysticism can be deeply earthy and sensual in its yearning for union with the Divine. Hildegard of Bingen and Teresa of Avila found a wondrous God in trees and flowing water. Catherine of Siena and Ignatius Loyola were drawn by the brightness of fire and the darkness of the cave. These mystics call us back to a "Great Conversation" with the natural world, reconnecting our spiritual lives with the earth.

Renowned theologian and best-selling author Belden Lane will guide this wholesome exploration through images, storytelling, poetry, and guided meditation.



# Upcoming Events

**Women's Retreat: Desire and Holy Longing**

*May 13-15, 2022, Camp Casey,  
Whidbey Island*

**Men's Retreat: "Our Shelter from the Stormy Blast"—Spiritual Reflections on 9/11, Pandemic and Change**

*June 10-12, 2022, St. Andrew's  
House, Hood Canal*





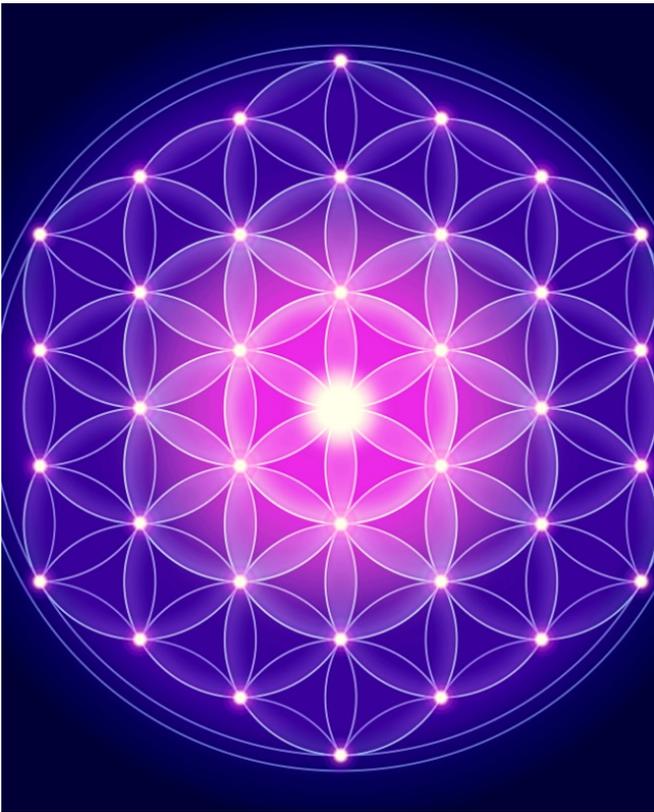
# Capstone Pilgrimage

## Following in Celtic Footsteps: Iona and the Celtic Missions

July 17-31, 2022

Led by Steve Thomason and Jennifer King Daugherty

# Theme for the Year: Spirituality of Desire



- ▶ *Desire is often understood as existing solely in the realm of carnal experience, and is therefore to be denied or rejected.*
- ▶ *But mystics know a deeper truth—that desire is at the core of our spiritual awareness and informs all that we do and are, in response to God's desire for us, or alternatively, as a shadow that hinders that union through false attachments.*
- ▶ *Premise: Desire is a deeply-seated spiritual gift, hardwired into our very existence*



# What is “Spirituality?”

- ▶ A term used widely and for varied purposes—something to be caught or achieved.
- ▶ Suspect in that it is used to cover up loose thinking, individualism, or as escape from engagement with pain, need or injustice
- ▶ Important: all people have spirituality!
  - ▶ It is the ordering of life by what we cherish most, even if unarticulated or unconscious
  - ▶ We steward our time, energy, possessions and relationships around that which we cherish most.

# Brief writing prompt—Spirituality

- ▶ What would rip the fabric of my life?
- ▶ What would rend me?



# Christian Spirituality



- ▶ Characteristic elements include
  - ▶ We want to love and know God
  - ▶ Intensely practical, incarnational, real and relational/communal
  - ▶ Cosmic Christ is life-force and unifying source of Wisdom, Mercy and Love
  - ▶ Stewards in relation to creation (to know thyself is not a self-centered exercise)
  - ▶ Collect (prayer)



What do we mean by “desire?”

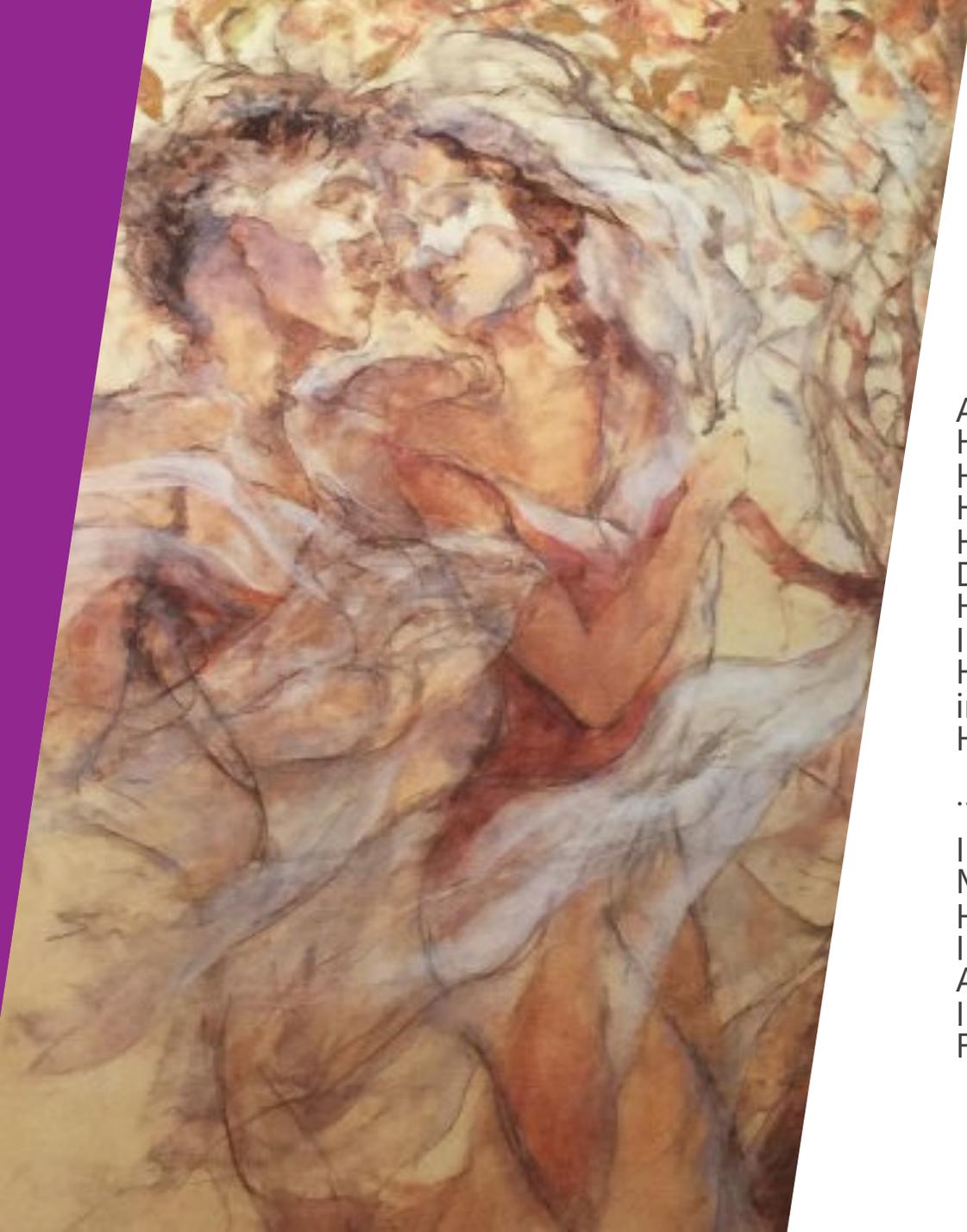












# Desire, by Rumi

A Lover knows only humility,  
He has no choice.  
He steals into your alley at night,  
He has no choice.  
He longs to kiss every lock of your hair,  
Don't fret,  
He has no choice.  
In his frenzied Love for you,  
He longs to break the chains of his  
imprisonment,  
He has no choice.

...

I Desire you more than food or drink.  
My body, my senses, my Mind,  
Hunger for your taste.  
I can sense your presence in my Heart.  
Although you belong to all the world,  
I wait in Silent Passion,  
For one gesture, one glance from You.



# Retrieving “Desire” from “Sex”

- ▶ Gregory of Nyssa (4<sup>th</sup> C.) proposed that desire, properly understood, is intensified as spiritual awakening unfolding into mutual joy that is shared more broadly (justice)
- ▶ To leave it as individualized and physicalized constrains and distorts desire
- ▶ Erotic desire (not bad per se) is interconnected to food, drink, comfort, intimacy, power, pleasure, money, rest, physical sex, etc.—excess in any one area will inexorably cause trouble in other areas
- ▶ Often what we think are sexual desires are really attending to other bodily needs—to relax muscles, raise blood circulation, contact releasing endorphins, excitement to remedy boredom, restore intimacy to banish loneliness.

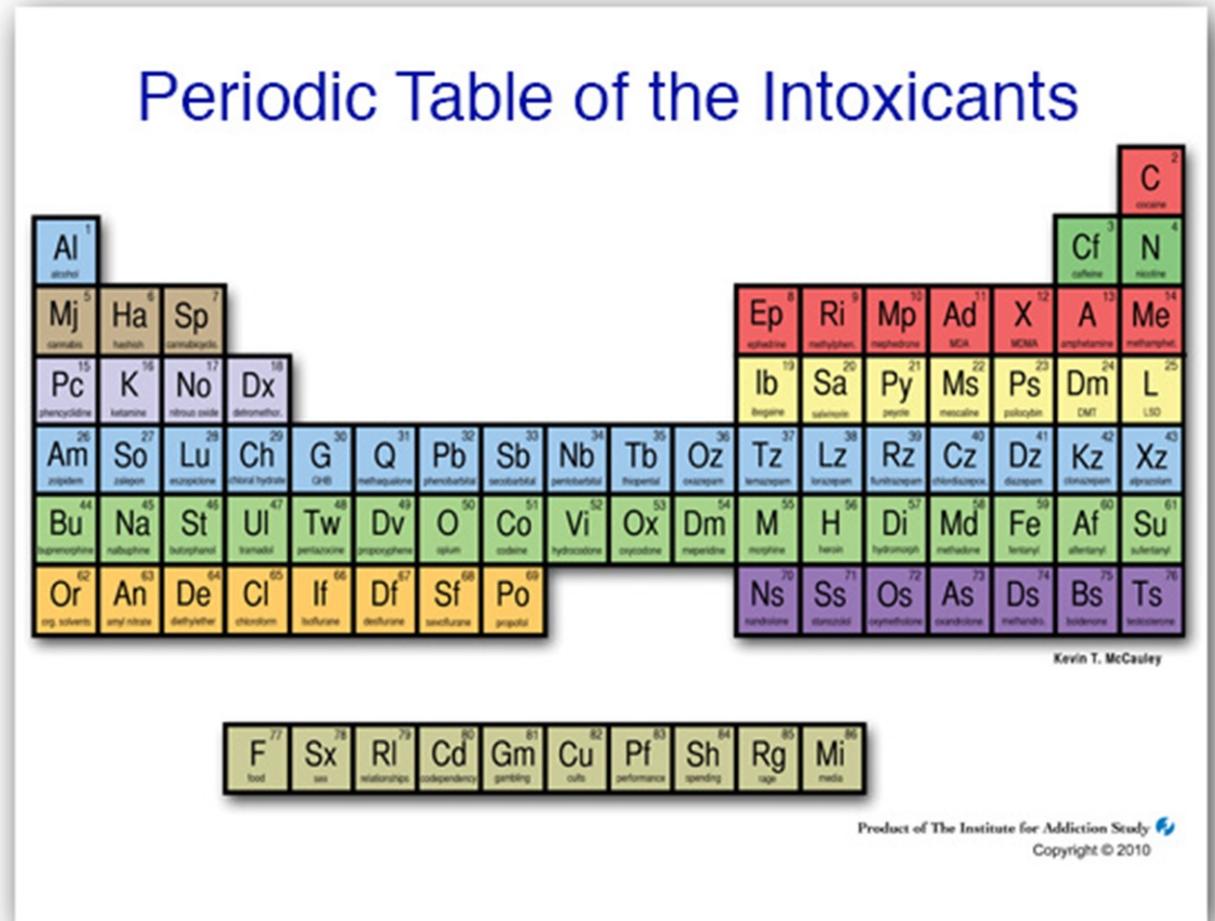
# Retrieving “Desire” from “Sex”

- ▶ Desire animates good instincts and longings—to love and justice, empathy and altruism, concern for the common good
- ▶ Gregory of Nyssa: desire allures us, liberates us, gives us energy and ecstasy of participation in the divine life, makes us “fully alive” (i.e., nothing alienated from the God of love).
- ▶ The challenge: differentiate between toxic (distorted, corrupted) desires and those that are life-giving
- ▶ Ancient wisdom: nothing in excess
- ▶ The path: ascetical practice of formation, self-knowledge, humility, and reliance on God’s grace (in relationship)
- ▶ Goal: Spiritual Union



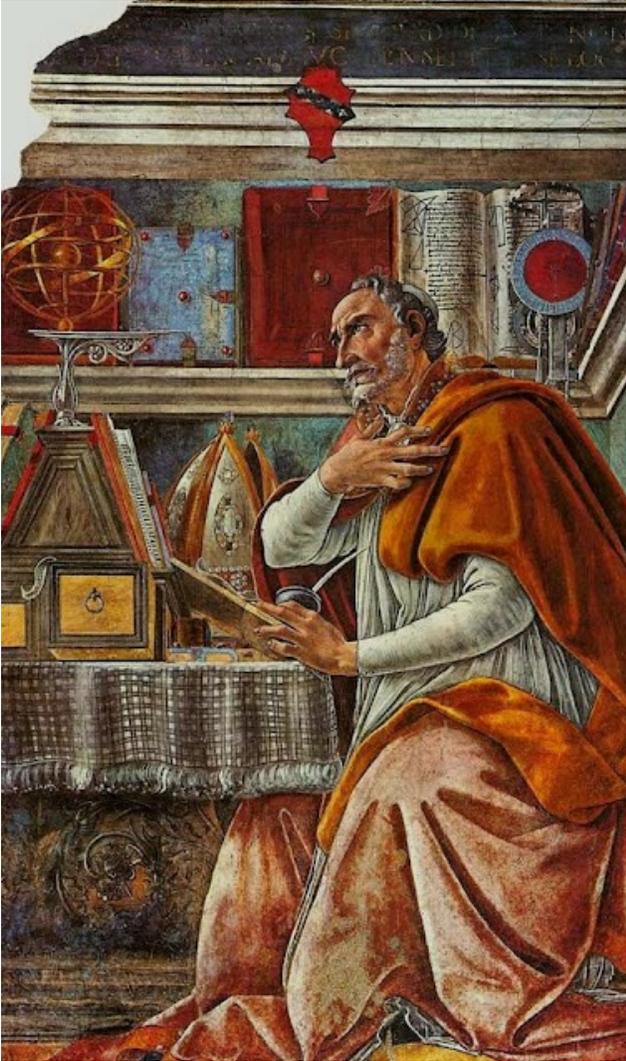
# False Attachments

- When compulsive, they represent something else to us, something beyond what they really are.
- That “something else” is the real desire we have repressed and refuse to recognize
- Test: does the desire imprison the self or set it free?



# Consumptive versus life-giving

- ▶ Many socially constructed longings exert influence on us with little awareness—desire to dominate, subjugate, consume, own or control
  - ▶ Consumer advertising
  - ▶ Pornography
  - ▶ Lust, covet, greed, demand
- ▶ The Church has lacked a sound theology of desire, choosing to be disingenuous in not dealing with its cultural contradictions
  - ▶ Celibacy is somehow intended as antidote to desire
  - ▶ Homosexual desire is understood as inherently sinful and shameful (suppression)
  - ▶ Celibacy and marriage are considered opposites, defined by sexual relations
- ▶ Freud: denying desire often accentuates its effect in our lives



## Ordering Loves— Augustine

- ▶ Encouraged loving all created “goods”, but in their proper order
- ▶ Temporal “goods” can be loved rightly or wrongly
- ▶ The aim is to learning to love and enjoy God through the things God has made (don't terminate your love on the lesser thing)

# Mystics and Desire



- ▶ Speak of “union” in ways that often conjure sexual intercourse more than spiritual fulfillment
- ▶ Bliss, ecstasy, rapture, burning desire, consummation, delight, penetrating, caressing
- ▶ Popular descriptions of human romance: divine, splendor, mystery, delight,

# Purpose/Calling of our Capacity to Desire

- move from isolation to relationship
- culminating in creative goodness
- liberating experience of interconnectedness
- Inherent goodness of body and relationships
- longing to know and be known
- Spiritual union such that nothing is disconnected





# The Root and Source of Desire

- ▶ Sarah Coakley: The God we desire is...a desiring trinitarian God: the Spirit who longs for our response, who searches the hearts, and takes us to the divine source (the 'Father'), transforming us Christically as we are so taken (Living into the Mystery of the Holy Trinity: Trinity, Prayer, and Sexuality)
- ▶ Incarnational, and therefore erotic is not detached from agape
- ▶ Communal (oriented to justice)

# Breakout Groups

- ▶ We all have false attachments (distorted desires) in our lives, and these are often good things. Can you name one or two in your life, and how do you know they are mis-ordered in your life?
- ▶ Do you agree or disagree that union with the desiring God is the root and aim of our desires? What would that look like? How would you understand the experience of such union? What practices (ascetical work) would help you hone that awareness?



O Love ever burning, never  
quenched! O Charity, my  
God, set me on fire with  
your love!

# Resources (not exhaustive)

- ▶ Coakley, Sarah. *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender, and the Quest for God*. Bloomsbury, 2015
- ▶ Gudorf, Christine. *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics*. Pilgrim Press, 1994.
- ▶ Guenther, Margaret. *The Practice of Prayer*. Cowley. 1998
- ▶ May, Gerald. *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology*. HarperOne. 1987.