In his search for a meaning that relates to his own personal experience, Paul has embroiled himself in a sea of conflicting currents.

From childhood he had wanted to be a saint, and of course such a notion brings with it a lot of assumptions and baggage from historical periods of the past. Among these assumptions is that the monastic *calling* is higher than the *state* of marriage. Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin had directly challenged this notion; they both married. The biblical Jews – and their Semitic kin, the Arabs – are, with some exceptions, famously nonmonastic in their spirituality. He tries out the monastic life at St. Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, MA. but the turbulence within somehow doesn’t let this work for him.
He marries Tracy, but even then lives near St. Joseph’s Abbey at first, and then not far from Mepkin Abbey when he moves to Wilmington, NC.

At this point it would be useful to reflect on his aspirations – keeping our own in mind. The aspiration to be saint is common in certain cultural situations. Paul says he wanted this from childhood, but that raises immediate questions, like “What kind of idea of sainthood would a child have?” A childish idea, in all likelihood, one for instance that doesn’t deal much with the reality of sexuality as we understand that today. Another question has to do with the actuality of the lives of the saints. That is, what were their hopes, fears, motivations, failures? Usually “lives of the saint” leave out a lot of the realities of the actual historical lives, and this has led to the term “hagiography” having a negative connotation of an idealistic account of someone’s life. Paul’s account of his life leaves a lot out, of course, but it is not “hagiographical”: there’s plenty of unpleasantness reported.

SLIDE 3 – IMAGE OF DANTE IN HELL

Image: Dante in Hell
Which raises the question, Do you have a hagiographical account of your own life? That is, is it an idealistic narrative, with you being a kind of hero who is wronged and long-suffering? There is a certain tendency for us to overlook the negative things and focus on the positive. There is a certain commonsense practicality to this, since we have to get along in a difficult world and a little motivation is useful. However, there is a penalty for self-idealization, and it can be very large indeed. Robert McNamara, whom we discussed in Module 7, did have an idealized narrative about his own understanding of Vietnam and the US’s and his relation to Vietnam, as he came to see later. In fact, McNamara is being a little like Dante, going through the “Hell” and “Purgatory” of facing one’s own failings and psychic impediments to self-understanding.

I hope you’ve noticed that part of the intent of the course is for you to confront such things about yourself. You are reading other authors, of course, but they are examples of the kind of self-examination that you can be doing also. And no one else can do this for you. Others might, of course, see problem areas – and the readings should be suggesting these to you – but if you actually don’t see this yourself, then it is not your insight and it makes no difference in your own life.

SLIDE 4 – IMAGE OF ORIGINAL SIN

Image: Original Sin

This is not a small matter. In Christianity, of course, there is “original sin”; in Buddhism there are the “three roots” of evil – greed, hatred, and delusion. But there is agreement that, to use Christian terms, the pristine image of God is not routinely shining forth in people as they go about their lives. Negativity is actually covering up our core reality or “true self,” as Thomas Merton preferred to call it.

SLIDE 5 – IMAGE OF FEELING OF EMPTINESS

Image: feeling of emptiness
Perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, after Paul has devoted months to monastic living and is having some success – and he’s working very hard at this – he once again feels an emptiness. It may be tempting to be quite hard on Paul at this point: “Boy! You are never satisfied! Why don’t you just live happily with your true self, gardening?” But from a western viewpoint, the self is an evolving and culturally relative reality. That is, it is always someone who is trying for a little more spiritual growth, and that “someone” will live at a certain historical/cultural period which will be different from other such periods. If you are a woman today, you will simply not have the same expectations that you would if you were living around 1200. If you are a black person today, you will have different expectations from those you would have as recently as the Fifties. Part of what is sometimes called the “culture wars” is related to this, because from the Sixties on, the civil rights movement and the women’s movement not only changed some social attitudes about women and blacks but also changed the law about them. These changes are very deeply resented by some people today: they don’t like “uppity” women or “uppity” blacks. All this makes it very difficult for someone – on either side – to relate wisely and compassionately to even the most casual everyday relations.

SLIDE 6 – IMAGE OF BERNARD CARDINAL LAW

Image: Bernard Cardinal Law

While setting up a new married life near St. Joseph’s, the local parish priest for the church where they attend Sunday mass is accused of child pornography. This is nearly a decade ahead of the Boston Globe’s devastating disclosures of widespread and systemic corruption in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Authorities, such as Bernard Cardinal
Law, had knowingly moved pedophiles into unsuspecting parishes. As of 2006 the scandals had cost Boston archdiocese $150.8 million; in 2007 the LA archdiocese agreed to pay out $660 million. Law himself resigned but was given by the Vatican an important position in Rome.

SLIDE 7 – IMAGE OF PRIESTHOOD

Image: priesthood

Luther and Calvin and Cardinal Law are all connected here: how do you evaluate sexuality and marriage, and how do you distribute power in the church? Since Paul and we live in a democratic culture which is suspicious of authoritarian, top-down government, something like the abuse scandals raises serious and persistent questions about the relevance for our day of the medieval paradigm for the governance of the Catholic Church. It is not hard to find, for example, Catholics who are disgusted with the turn of events and are surprised at its happening. But on the other hand, the whole thrust of the tradition here has been to draw a distinction between a celibate priesthood with its authority and lay people who are supposed to obey priests.

SLIDE 8 – IMAGE OF WEDDING

Image: wedding

For instance, when this writer was in college, women – even nuns -- typically were not admitted to theology courses in some places since, being women, they would have no use for such knowledge. And priests quite regularly kept their conversations about theology aloof from lay participation. After Vatican II, this situation has changed somewhat, but old traditions sometimes die hard.

Paul isn’t moved to leave the church on account of this scandal. The effect was different on William Lobdell who in Losing My Religion (2009) tells how he, a religion reporter for the LA Times, was in the middle of his Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults when he began covering the abuse scandal. It not only sickened him; it caused him to doubt the existence of a loving God at all. He discontinued the process of his conversion. Lobdell’s wife, a Catholic, agreed with his assessment.
Being able to face one’s own negativities – including those of the organizations with which one is affiliated – is necessary for living a truthful and realistic life. Otherwise we end up living in and supporting -- either actively or passively by being silent about what we see -- a fantasy world, while the real world is bringing devastation to people’s lives.

SLIDE 9 – IMAGE OF MOSTAR, BOSNIA

Image: Mostar, Bosnia

Traveling to Mostar, Bosnia, Paul finds another aspect of this problem of authority and old attitudes as he finds Franciscans prejudiced against Muslims, and Catholic soldiers, unrequested, happily offering a Nazi salute.

SLIDE 10 – SLIDE OF JON SOBRINO

Image: Jon Sobrino

In El Salvador he talks with Jon Sobrino, SJ, comrade of the slain Jesuits. Since then, in March 2007 Sobrino has been silenced by Rome. On the one hand, the hierarchy supports a “option for the poor” which Pedro Arrupe, SJ had advocated, and on the other the hierarchy opposes liberation theology which is aimed directly at improving the situation of the poor. The issue of authoritarian church structure won’t go away.

It’s a wonder that Paul knows which side is up.
He finds himself giving a series of talks at the Church of the Presentation in New Jersey, and there he discovers a Spirit-led community with an active and involved laity. This shows him what the Catholic Church in the US might be.

He has been trying to move beyond the “false self” that Thomas Merton talked about and that everyone has. It is probably well to note some words that Merton said in his last talk in Bangkok, just before he died. He begins a message from a Tibetan Buddhist abbot to Chogyam Trungpa. This was after the Chinese invasion of Tibet, causing many Buddhist leaders to flee the country.

“‘From now on, Brother, everybody stands on his own feet.’ This … is what Buddhism is about, what Christianity is about, what monasticism is about – if you understand it in terms of grace. You cannot rely on structures. The time for relying on structures has disappeared. They are good and they should help us, and we should do the best we can with them. But they may be taken away, and if everything is taken away, what do you do next?” (The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton 338).

And this is precisely where Paul Wilkes is. The structures are good and can help, but nevertheless, the meaning that we construct is up to us personally. If we wait for someone else to do what only we can do, we will have a very long wait indeed.