The Catholic Church, like all bureaucracies, is suspicious of an empty mind. “There’s a belief — which I do not share — that when the brain is empty, the devil can get in there,” Peter C. Jones, who was raised Catholic and who still occasionally partakes in communion, said Friday morning at the St. Benedict’s Monastery in Old Snowmass. “That can threaten the bureaucracy. And all bureaucracy is in the business of sustaining itself.”

Father Thomas Keating — who served as Superior of St. Benedict’s and continues to live on the magnificent grounds in the Capitol Creek valley — takes sides with the traditional belief about the empty mind. Keating, who is Jones’ uncle, and the subject of Jones’ documentary “Thomas Keating: A Rising Tide of Silence,” sees the cleared, open mind as a gateway to access holiness and peace, or what he might refer to as God. For some 30 years, Keating has been preaching contemplative prayer, a form of meditation that has been a part of the Catholic tradition dating back to the 14th century, but has been in little use in contemporary Catholic practice.

“It allows the brain to calm down,” said Jones, who will be in attendance for a Q&A session when “A Rising Tide of Silence” shows at 2:45 today at Aspen Filmfest. “It shuts down the dialogue going on in everyone’s head for a brief period each day. In practical terms it means fewer instances of violence, fewer arguments, a better quality of life. It’s a way to dump the baggage we all come in with. Going beyond that, if you want to understand the world we live in, it’s a gateway to doing that.”

While contemplative prayer is a focus of the documentary — and of Keating’s life; among
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the best-known of his numerous books is 1978’s “Finding Grace at the Center: The Beginning of Centering Prayer,” which Keating co-wrote — the film is a full and compelling portrait of an uncommon Catholic and an unusual monk. Keating was born to a privileged New York City family that wasn’t fully devoted to the spiritual life. As a boy, Keating secretly attended Mass, and vowed that at the age of 21, he would join the priesthood. After graduating from Yale in the mid-1940s, he became a Trappist monk, helped establish St. Benedict’s in the late ’50s, and in the early ’60s was elected abbot of St. Joseph’s Abbey in Massachusetts. He became the abbot of North and South America, supervising eight monasteries.

Along with being a respected figure, Keating could be a radical one. His embrace of contemplative prayer was not his only break with modern Catholic practices; Keating developed a pronounced habit of reaching out to other religious faiths to allow their wisdom to influence him.

Father Thomas Keating, left, founder of St. Benedict’s Monastery in Old Snowmass, with His Holiness the Dalai Lama at a 2012 event in Boston. Keating is the subject of “Thomas Keating: A Rising Tide of Silence,” showing today at Aspen Filmfest.

“He is first and foremost a Catholic priest,” said the 61-year-old Jones, who had his first meaningful bonding with Keating in the late ’60s, when the two spent a long night together, the uncle explaining to the 19-year-old nephew the Vietnam War and war in general. “But he has a much more ecumenical view of humanity than is espoused by Catholic doctrine. He has absorbed them into his world-view. What was radical was when he began introducing prominent figures of other faiths to the monks at St. Joseph’s. These people came to the monastery, and this went on for quite a few years, and ultimately led to the monastery being divided between those who wanted to move ahead spiritually, broaden their spiritual horizons, and those who wanted to live a simple monastic life.”

In 1981, a straw vote was held, with half of the monks giving Keating a no-confidence vote. Keating left St. Joseph’s and out of a New York garage co-founded the organization Contemplative Outreach as a means of spreading contemplative prayer.

“Everyone was completely surprised that this took off. No one thought there was this spiritual

COURTESY PHOTO

KEATING, A8
hunger in the world. Contemplative Outreach is in 34 countries, with millions of people interested, involved in one way or another. A goal of contemplative prayer is to break with rational thought. Jones — a fine-art photographer who is making his film-directing debut with “A Rising Tide of Silence” — notes that when the age of reason arose, in the 18th century, it represented an enormous intellectual change, a change in humans from survival mode to rational thought. It was considered a miracle.

Jones sees contemplative prayer as a way of moving to the next stage beyond rational thought. Invoking quantum physics, and its notion about the relation of all things in the universe, he said “there is a means of thinking in which two answers to the same question that are in complete disagreement start to merge.”

For evidence of the power of spiritual, rather than rational thought, Jones brings up a recent momentous event — the decision by the Obama administration not to go to war in Syria. “The American people told the president we are not going to war,” he said. “That came from an awareness that there are possibilities to handle things that do not require violence. It may be the first time the American people have gone beyond rational thought. The rational equation is, These people used dangerous weapons; they have to be stopped. That’s a rational equation, but the American people said, ‘Find another equation.’ Fewer people have died.

“Being a monk is different than it was in 1945. It’s not an imposed silence. It’s an honored silence.”

Peter C. Jones
Director, "Thomas Keating: A Rising Tide of Silence"

Maybe. But it certainly has to do with an awareness by the American people that there have to be alternatives.”

In the documentary, Jones creates a portrait of a most alternative sort of monk. Keating is pictured not as a hermit, but a man of the world, conversing with the Dalai Lama and leaders of other faiths, and subjecting himself to interviews. Oftentimes in “A Rising Tide of Silence,” the screen is filled with the notable words that Keating has spoken. “Elocution is a family trait,” Jones said, noting that Keating’s father argued 13 times in front of the Supreme Court, and that his grandfather argued a case related to the crash of the Titanic. “And you have to remember, he became abbot at the same time Vatican II” — the mid-’60s council that significantly altered the way the Catholic Church conducted itself — “came into place. There was no choice but to talk about it.

“Being a monk is different than it was in 1945. It’s not an imposed silence. It’s an honored silence. And Father Keating became a public figure. That’s because people wanted him to talk.”