

Abbey Letter no. 249



Easter
2012



Our celebration of Jesus' Resurrection begins with lighting a fire from which the paschal candle is lit near midnight in a darkened hall. The celebrant prays that this new flame will scatter the "darkness of heart and mind." For the fifty days of the Easter season following, the paschal candle is lit at major services, when the altar candles are lit. This re-lighting of the paschal candle celebrates the continuing presence of the Risen Christ on earth to remind us that the Risen Christ is a living presence to us today at all times.

— Abbot Andrew

Speaking in Tongues

Something was wrong. The postulant, who was usually quite reliable in accomplishing his assignments, hadn't shelved the magazines and newspapers and newsletters and such that were building up on their table in the common room. This was odd. The job description on the bulletin board plainly said that cleaning the chapter wing included gazebo duty. Was it possible the poor lad didn't know what "gazebo duty" meant?

Of course it was possible. Joining the monastery, like entering any specialized sub-culture, means learning a new vocabulary. And the Workmaster (myself) had forgotten to tell the new guy about that particular term. In the common room, there's a hexagonal table on spindly legs. In our previous common room, the cats would ensconce themselves under that table and reign in majesty. And on top of that table we would lay the day's incoming mail that wasn't already diverted to various departments. So it held the newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and some correspondence addressed to the community at large. Since the monks always called the table the gazebo, and with the cats underneath, that's what it looked like, new arrivals would pick up on the nickname pretty quickly.

With the passage of years, things have changed. The cats don't come into the new common room, and the magazines and such are deposited on a different table in that room these days. And yet the job of putting them away is still called by the old name. So an explanation is in order. And when that's done, there's one more bit of our quaint monastic tongue the postulant has mastered.

"Gazebo" in that sense is something limited to our own community, of course. But the new boy will be learning some vocabulary that pretty much all Benedictines have in common. Very early on, he'll recognize the liturgical assignment of hebdom, or in some monasteries, just "heb." Both are short for hebdomadary, which comes from the Latin word for "the guy for the week." The hebdomadary is assigned to lead the offices for a week at a time. Here at St. Gregory's we have two each week: Hebdom I leads the early, spoken offices; Hebdom II leads the later, sung offices. That lets the monks who aren't up for leading the singing have the opportunity of leading some of the services anyway.

Another thing the postulant will pick up from daily conversation is that we Benedictines tend to refer to each other's houses by place names, more frequently than by dedication. There are three abbeys in the USA named in honor of St. Gregory. So we just refer to Portsmouth, Shawnee, and Three Rivers. Using place names won't clarify everything, though. There are two Benedictine monasteries located in Oxford, Michigan, one Lutheran and one Roman Catholic. In our house we tend to call them St. Augustine's House and the Sylvestrines, respectively. But if the context makes the matter clear, either one of them might be referred to as "Oxford." And there are Benedictine monasteries named Belmont Abbey both in the United States and England. This is another time we go by context. If someone refers to the Belmont Abbey in North Carolina as Maryhelp, he's just showing off.

Some of the monastic tongue will be learned in the classes on the Rule and monastic life that the postulants and novices attend twice a week. For instance, that's where they learn the historical details about priors. Our postulant joined the

community knowing that here, and in abbeys generally, the prior is the second in command. He may be surprised to learn as he studies the Rule that St. Benedict didn't like priors at all, and didn't want his monasteries to have them. But the monks living in Benedictine communities found that a number two man was a useful thing to have, and we've kept priors as a part of our way of doing things. Further, the newbie will find out that in some monasteries the prior is the superior of the community, the number one man. The technical names for these different kinds of priors are claustral priors and conventual priors. This is simpler to remember than it may seem. "Claustral" has two syllables, and is the name for the sort of prior who is the number two guy.

Then there's the word *Suscipe*. That means verse 116 of Psalm 119: "If you uphold me by your promise I shall live; let my hopes not be in vain." *Suscipe* (pronounced "soó-shee-pay") is the first word of the verse in Latin. We pray those words as an important part of our profession rite. If you've seen a picture of a Benedictine profession showing the monk or nun standing in front of the altar, arms upraised, it's the *Suscipe* that's being said. When I arrived at the monastery, we all bowed when we chanted that verse at Sext on Monday. One of the monks still does so to this day. But since we're not officially doing that bow anymore, he simply chooses that time to lean forward to adjust his office books.

It won't be long before our postulant is counseled, "Pray as you can, not as you can't." That's advice from the writings of Dom John Chapman, OSB, a master of the spiritual life, who is apparently studied by all novices living under the Rule of St. Benedict. I once started to quote that line during a workshop I was participating in, and every Benedictine and Cistercian in the room joined in completing it with me.

Another saying all of them would have known is, "They comes and they goes, but mostly they goes." This remark is attributed to the portress of an English abbey of Benedictine nuns. It was her comment on the turnover of applicants coming to try their vocations in the monastery.

Naturally, to understand the origin of "They comes and they goes," the postulant needs to know what a portress (or porter, in a men's monastery) might be. He ought to pick that up in the classes on the Rule. The title "portress" really assumes there's one main entrance to the monastery, normally a gate which opens into the walled monastery complex. The portress is the guardian of the gate, like that guy at the peephole in the door in *The Wizard of Oz*. You don't get in, unless the portress lets you in. We don't have a porter here in our monastery, or a wall or gate for that matter. But the novices need to understand the chapter in the Rule about the porter, just the same. It casts significant light on the monks' relationship to the outside world, and on how work should be assigned in the monastery. And it shows us St. Benedict's view of the gifts of the new and old members of the community. He tells us the porter should be an older monk, not prone to wander, but with a younger, more physically fit assistant.

Of course that sort of thing is covered in books on the Rule and on monastic life. Our own home-grown vocabulary is something the older monks will have to explain to the younger ones personally as the appropriate occasions arise. For instance when a monk or one of our cats dies, the novices may be startled to hear the burial referred to as the "whanging in." This goes back to the daughters of one

of our early farm managers. Their cat died, and so they had a pet funeral, as children do. After the grave was filled in, one of the girls grabbed her shovel by the end of the handle with both hands, swung it over her head, and bashed the grave flat with the back of the blade. She explained to her shocked sister that “You have to whang em in.” The expression was too vivid to die, and has remained with us ever since. The particular gesture it refers to is not, however, a part of our rather more staid burial rites.

Less shocking, and perhaps less intelligible to the novices will be the seniors’ mutterings about buxilinder bugs, the smelly and easily offended insects that like to move into people’s houses as the weather turns cool. Years and years ago we had a neighbor across the street whose English was rather heavily accented. His pronunciation of “Box Elder” has become second nature to many of us who never knew him in the flesh, and we hardly ever use the standard name of the wee pests. It’s a pleasure to report that buxilinder bugs are less of a problem in our new, more tightly constructed buildings. Thank you, kind donors!

These sorts of expressions won’t last forever. When a monk had overslept and missed the first service of the day at four o’clock, we used to say he was “rejoicing with the saints.” That’s a reference to the fifth verse of Psalm 149. Our brethren at Nashdom Abbey would say he was “at the office of Prone.” I haven’t heard either expression for years. So any postulant reading this article can cross those off his list of things to learn. On the other hand, he may want to bring them back, and teach them to the postulants who arrive after him.

Such bits of vocabulary and lore are the tiny things of our family life. The big things are our redemption by the blood and the victory of Jesus, and our sanctification by the Holy Ghost. But as we live out those mysteries, we offer our entire lives to God, including our family history and traditions, our sense of fun, and our respect for our elders. May the God who has given us great gifts bless and perfect the lives we seek to live as our thank-offering. And may he bring us all together into his kingdom of glory!

—Fr. William



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Monastic Sights & Sounds
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website
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NOTES

Sister Heather of the Community of the Sisters of the Church was with us November 10th - 21st.

Fr. William continues his ministry to the Formation Group of the Diocese of Northern Indiana. This group of people preparing locally for ordination meets every few months for mutual exchange, discussion, and presentations concerning practical issues pertaining to ordained ministry. Fr. William is in charge of the spiritual life part of the program.

Br. Abraham has had two new chamber works published. *The Kiss* for string quartet and baritone voice and *Tuesday Afternoon* for chorus and wind octet are available at webbermusic.com.

Br. Joshua has withdrawn from the novitiate.

Abbot Andrew will attend this year's meeting of CAROA (Conference of Anglican Religious Orders in the Americas) in Cincinnati, hosted by the Community of the Transfiguration April 24th - 28th.

A new set of slideshows featuring scenes from the monastery and original music is now available on our website. Our website also has many other features, including other slideshows, sermon archives, articles from back issues of the *Abbey Letter*, information about monastic life, the Summer Vocation Program and monastic vocations, and contact links for the abbot, novice master, guest department, and publications office. Prayer requests and donations can also be made online, as well as calendar and book purchases.

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Books read in the refectory during lunch and supper 2011

God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution

by Thomas S. Kidd

The Mind's Eye

by Oliver Sacks

Christ and Culture

edited by Martyn Percy, Mark Chapman, Ian Markham, and Barry Hawkins

Beef: The Untold Story of How Milk,

Meat, and Muscle Shaped the World

by Andrew Rimas and Evan D. G. Fraser

Conflict and the Practice of Christian Faith

by Bruce N. Kaye

Mr. America: How Muscular Millionaire

Bernarr McFadden Transformed the

Nation Through Sex, Salad, and the

Ultimate Starvation Diet

by Mark Adams

Mirrors of Grace: The Spirit and Spiritualities of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers

by Joseph R. Veneroso MM

The Devil in the White City

by Erik Larson

Anglican Religious Life: A Well Kept Secret?

Edited by Nicholas Stebbing CR

The Master Switch

by Tim Wu

Jesuit on the Roof of the World: Ippolito Desideri's Mission to Tibet

by Trent Pomplun

"Famous Names" article from the October 3, 2011 *New Yorker*

by John Colapinto

Theodore Seuss Geisel

by Donald E. Pease

As Good As God, As Clever As the Devil:

The Impossible Life of Mary Benson

by Rodney Bolt

The Beautiful and the Damned: A Portrait of the New India

by Siddhartha Deb

Be a July Monk

Spend two weeks (or more) with the monks of St. Gregory's Abbey, a Benedictine monastery of the Episcopal Church at Three Rivers, Michigan.

Worship & Pray Work & Learn

For males 18 to 50 who can stay for at least two weeks during July. The only cost is \$25 for registration.



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For details and an application form write:
July Program Director
St. Gregory's Abbey
56500 Abbey Road
Three Rivers, MI 49093-9595
novicemaster@saintgregorysthreerivers.org



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