

Assumption

ABBHEY NEWSLETTER

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Monasticism and Gratitude

By Fr. Lawrence Wagner

Gratitude is a habit. And habits, be they good or bad, be they virtues or vices, are formed by repeating an action, a word or even a thought over and over again. These repetitions are expressions of why we are happy to have a marvelous space for our worship, why we are happy to belong to this particular community of monks, why we are pleased to recite the psalms over and over, and also why, after it was revealed to us that there are Three Divine Persons in God, we have more favors than ever to be grateful for.

I have been a monk in vows with the Assumption Abbey community for sixty-five years. Life for me has been a journey from dependence to independence to interdependence in the hope of arriving at maturity. Usually I am one of the early birds to come to the Divine Office in the morning. I love to come early and am forever amazed at the space where our main work as monks takes place five times every day, 365 days of the year. First of all, it is all those arches. The upward thrust of each arch reminds me that I come here to offer our prayers of praise, thanksgiving and petition to God. And then in the downward thrust of the arch we

monks listen to the Word of God in the words of psalms, other Scripture readings and a marvelous selection of reflections from ancient writers as well as modern ones collected for us by one of our own monks.

I submit that there is no other church in North Dakota that has as many arches—large ones, smaller ones, even ones over the stained glass windows—as our abbey church has. This, for me, defines that our church is a place of worship worthy for monks and for all people who come to pray with us.

And then there is all that space above us. To me that's not wasted space, space only to be heated during the long hours of winter. To me it speaks of the immensity of God. It helps to remind us to keep our thoughts aloft to heaven, not only to things that go on in the world of men and women below.

I watch the monks marching in, one by one, bowing to the altar upon which later in the day will be repeated the Sacrifice of our Paschal Lamb. Then each monk goes to his

assigned place. I thank God for each monk as he arrives, for together we all do support one another in our common faith in the One True God. What a blessing is our common faith that forms us into one community! How much easier it is to maintain our common faith within a community than trying to defend it alone in a world that for the most part has only temporal concerns.

Yet I need to realize that I am committed to a life with a community of sinners. It is not only that some monks irk me by their faults and shortcomings, but it is also true that in ways, perhaps unknown to me, some things about me irk them. It's



Fr. Lawrence in the abbey church

not my business to try to correct others in community; rather it is for me to accept them as they are, and try to live in harmony with them as they are.

Late in life I am still learning that it is difficult to get rid of an entrenched spirit of self-righteousness, of pride, of selfishness. If it is hard for me after sixty-five years, how hard it must be for a monk who has lived much of his life on his own while assigned to a mission before retiring, or for a novice or a recent arrival in our community. Yet, let us all realize how grateful we need to be for the privilege of a life-long vow of stability which gives time to adjust to a life of give-and-take.

Why are the psalms still used in the worship of God by Christians today? Psalms have formed the largest part of worship for the People of God for three thousand years. Psalm 90 is believed to be the oldest of them; it goes back to the time of Moses. More recent psalms come from the time of King David who organized them for worship in the Temple where the Jews believed God resided. Jesus himself prayed the psalms with people in the synagogue at Nazareth and in the Temple in Jerusalem. For Jesus, the psalms expressed many sentiments for his own experiences as a man, such as Psalm 22, when unjustly condemned he cries out to his Father, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

For us, poor sinners that we are, the psalms express the whole range of human feeling and experience, from dark depression to exuberant joy. They are rooted in particular



circumstances, yet they are timeless, and so they are among the best-loved, most read parts of the Bible for people eager to communicate with God. In our modern age we are stirred by the same emotions. We puzzle over the same fundamental problems of life, cry out in need or worship the same God as did the psalmists of centuries past. We find it easy to identify with them. And we find their sheer dogged faith—the depth of their love for God—not only a tonic for us today but a rebuke as well. "My soul, give thanks and never forget God's blessings" (Ps. 103:2).

The Blessed Trinity gives a broader base for our gratitude. In the books of the Old Testament God is adored as the Lord of all creation, and for all the favors God does in defending His people from enemies. That the world in which we live was created by God is a theme that we monks continue to affirm, but that people at large often forget or reject. We reaffirm that all things that exist, both visible

and invisible, were created by God. The visible creation was given for development to man: mountains and oceans, marvelous living things, such as the tomatoes and lettuce and the large variety of vegetables for our table, beautiful flowers, dogs and horses, even flies with six legs who sit on the four back legs on my choir stall while washing their hands and then sitting on the four front legs to clean their feet. This marvelous variety of visible things are given to humans to enjoy and develop. Above all, each human being is unique, an irreplaceable mystery. There never has been nor ever will be anyone exactly like you or me.

In the New Testament we get a much broader view of the favors that God does for His people. God is there known and called *Our Father in Heaven*. We also learn that God the Father has an only begotten Son. The Father sends the Son in flesh to restore human life to its original integrity. Known in history as Jesus, he came to remove the curse of disobedience that had death as its penalty. He is willing to go through all human cycles from conception to birth, to life as a common working man before becoming a preacher with a large gathering of followers, but then is put to death by crucifixion as a criminal, is buried, rises again, returns to heaven, thereby reopening heaven and giving all humans the possibility of joining Him in heaven when we die. What a motive for us to thank Jesus Christ!

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But there is more. Jesus in turn sends His Holy Spirit as Giver of Life to restore human life to its original status. The Holy Spirit offers to form in me habits of truth and love which would qualify me to share life with God forever.

Often every day we monks pray together, "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit." We thank God the Father for creating us, thank God the Son for redeeming us, and thank God the Holy Spirit for grace to pursue truth and to practice love. The Divine Office helps us to live in communion with the Family of Divine Persons forever. □

DECEMBER CHRONICLE

Br. Placid Gross, who has been curator of the abbey museum for the past fifty years, was stumped by an item in the collection: a highly ornate flag with embroidered German script. Being able to read German script, the one word he could not translate was *Lobas*. But with the help of friends, he discovered that *Lobas* was an ancient village in Saxony-Anhalt that has been swallowed up by the city of Zeitz. He sent a letter about the flag. The residents of the former *Lobas* area replied that the flag was made in 1913, one year before the First World War, at the time their military association was founded. And they sent a photo of one hundred men and women in formal dress at the blessing of the flag, June 16,

1914. As a Christmas present, Br. Placid returned the flag. The village was overjoyed. But how the flag came to the abbey in the first place is still a mystery.



The wine truck always seems to come at the wrong time. Sacramental and table wine with our label on it comes from California (since our season in ND is too short for an abundance of grapes) and Moonlight Transport showed up on December 1st when it was -22 Fahrenheit with 35 mph winds. Nonetheless, Brothers Louie, Jacob, Elias and Placid, and Father Odo, unloaded 20 pallets, or 40,000 lbs, before the whole shipment became wine popsicles.



On December 6th, the feast of St. Nick, each monk found a shoe outside his cell door with wrapped candy inside. This has never happened before in anyone's memory, which means that the monks have never before been good enough to be rewarded. We do hope that the tradition will stick.



The monks were on television, if only for a half

December 6th was also Christmas Open House at the abbey. All 300-some loaves of Br. Alban-made fruitcake were sold within an hour, along with nearly all the homemade bread. The made-from-scratch soap was "cleaned" out of the Gift Shop before 3:00 p.m. Br. Louie even sold some potatoes from the abbey garden!

second. KFYR-TV in Bismarck did a parody of Pharrell William's song "Happy," because North Dakota was voted happiest state in the union. Cliff Naylor—a producer and friend of the abbey—came out to Richardton and filmed us. Judging from the looks of it, we're the happiest monks in the world! You can see us on Youtube if you go to the website and search for North Dakota - Legendary KFYRTV. We're at 0:28.



Brs. Joseph Fisher and Lewis Brazil arrived on December 11th representing the National Religious Retirement Office. The NRRO facilitates retirement planning by offering assessment tools, educational programming, services, and resource materials that help religious institutes evaluate and prepare for long-term needs for elderly religious. There are currently 66,211 Catholic sisters, brothers and religious priests in the USA and 52,000 receive assistance and/or support from the NRRO.



Lately we've seen an unusual number of notes posted on the bulletin board about missing keys. Community life means sharing keys. When they are not returned, things become inconvenient. Last year, Father T placed the keys to the Silver Impala in his summer jacket and did not use the jacket again for five months. Recently, keys for the Display Room went missin

missing for days, until one of the monks entered the room with a key from the Business Office, there to find the missing key beside the offender's wallet, which had also been missing for days. (People set things down and forget them!)



On December 15 Southwest Flooring came to the abbey to refinish the oak floor in the Visitors' Center. All the furniture had been moved out leaving a story behind: the only pristine and still-shiny part of the entire area was a small patch under the display cabinet that had not been moved in 40+ years. The rest looked like weathered planks surviving from the Middle Ages. Who says the abbey doesn't get any visitors?



December 17: we began singing the "O" antiphons which, when mentioned to outsiders, leaves them scratching their heads. "What do you mean? Like Oh no? Oh really? Oh don't do that? Oh darn it?" We mean the Advent antiphons that anticipate Christmas: O Wisdom, O Adonai, O Root of Jesse, O Key of David, O Oriens, O King of Nations, O Emmanuel.

old, and the average human life



December 25: we didn't kill a Christmas goose, but even so, a lovely celebration was had by all. It helps that certain monks like to bake cookies and stir up fudge, and other monks enjoy decorating. The place was bright and full of good cheer.

JANUARY CHRONICLE

The new year brought with it head colds and influenza, the latter being dangerous enough for Sister Michael Emond, the local physician assistant, to prescribe a prophylactic for each one of us. This is not such a bad idea because you can't keep some people in bed, even when they're running temperatures and erupting like Sneezzy, one of the seven dwarfs.



January 4: Epiphany and the three kings miraculously appeared in the crèche at the entrance of the church. Although the crèche's provenance is not known, Br. Victor Frankenhauser informed us, before he died, that it is as old as St. Mary's abbey church. He himself remembered it as a child in the early 1920s, having grown up in Richardton. The crèche has certainly become an essential part of the parish's holiday celebration.



January 9: Brs. Jacob Deiss and Alban Petesch helped our cooks Jane Mayer and Cathy Tormaschy make strudel in the kitchen, a good thing since pulling authentic strudel dough is fast becoming a lost art. They made apple, pumpkin, cottage cheese, and cream of wheat. According to local German Hungarians, anything can go into a strudel, including sauerkraut, spinach or parsnips. But don't tell our Fr. Denis Fournier; he'll want an onion and peanut butter strudel.

January 16: just before Noon Prayer a man and a woman were seen robbing money out of the votive candle stand. They also robbed from the donation box at the entrance to the church, including the note from the abbey business office, put there after the last robbery, shaming any thief who would dare steal from the House of God.



As of January, sixteen men are living the monastic life at our monastery of Tibatí in Bogotá, Colombia. Five entered the novitiate, three are in temporary vows, and eight are in solemn vows. The median age there is 40.9 years old. Without the two old *gringos*, the median age would be brought down to 35.8. At a recent concert there in the school chapel, the musicians asked that people not come dressed in black as the concert was all about life. The monks showed up in their black habits anyway.



Speaking of median age, Abbot Brian Wangler, Prior

Speaking of median age, Abbot Brian Wangler, Prior Michael Taffe, and Father James Kilzer went to San Antonio for an NRRO (National Religious Retirement Office) meeting, January 26-29, regarding the care of elderly religious. A speaker at the event referred to the "young" old in their 70s and 80s, and the "old" old in their 90s and 100s. Actuaries predict that babies that were born in 2000 will have an average life span of 100 years. The average age at death in 1840 was 40 years

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FEBRUARY CHRONICLE

February 2: Feast of the Presentation of the Lord. On this day we bless all the new candles that will be used in our liturgy throughout the year. They are placed in St. Joseph's chapel where the air becomes fragrant with beeswax. After the blessing, the monks—each carrying a lighted candle—process to the church where their candles are placed, still burning, before the statue of Our Lady of Einsiedeln. There they remain burning throughout the holy Mass.



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February 14: Valentine's Day, although here at the abbey we celebrate Saints Cyril and Methodius, monks and mission-

From the Archives:



Sheep were once part of the abbey's strategy to keep the grass down. These natural lawn mowers use no oil or gas, carry a good appetite to work every day, and cooperate with general enthusiasm. This photograph was taken in 1928. The camera is facing north with the Powerhouse to the right. The sheep are where the cafeteria is today.

leaving a story behind: the only pristine and still-shiny part of the entire area was a small patch under the display cabinet that had not been moved in 40+ years. The rest looked like weathered planks surviving from the Middle Ages. Who says the abbey doesn't get any visitors?

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old, and the average human life span in developed countries has been increasing three months per year since that time. Two

poor souls. One disgruntled monk abruptly got up in the middle of the morning conference and stomped out. He came back several minutes later wearing a coat and a stocking cap.

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During the season of Lent, Abbot Brian is making his rounds, visiting each monk in his cell, which means that the broom and vacuum cleaner are in constant use. Some monks do their only yearly cleaning in preparation for this visit! In some Benedictine houses, there was a time when each monk had to submit a list to the abbot of each and every item in his cell. The abbot would then come to check if it really was just four pairs of socks and a handkerchief, or if you had other things hidden under the mattress. (See chapter 55 of the Rule of St. Benedict.)

February 20: A room in the basement, across from the Business Office, has been known for years as the “Bums’ Room” because indigent transients were housed there. Anymore, however, it’s likely to contain coast-to-coast bikers. It’s being renovated: new flooring, furniture, light fixtures, paint and curtains. And the name has to go, for obvious reasons. But what to call it? A saint’s name? Patron saints of travelers include St. Christopher, St. Joseph, St. Anthony of Padua, and the archangel Raphael. The patron of hospitality is St. Martha. Or perhaps it could simply be called “The Welcome Room”? Any suggestions?

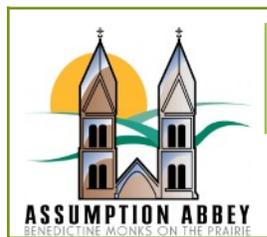
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Brother Placid Gross’ family members are particularly rugged and long-lived. Among them are his Vetter cousins, a family of thirteen siblings, all of whom are still living. The oldest is 92 and the youngest is 70. None of them have had cancer

(Continued on page 7)



Left to right: Fr. Gerald Ruelle, Fr. James Kilzer, Br. Louie Bachand and Fr. Benedict Fischer.



Development Office

Br. Michael Taffe, O.S.B.

The Church considers the holy Mass to be the greatest possible vehicle of prayerful intercession available to the faithful. People, both living and deceased, benefit greatly from intercession at the altar. The focus of the Mass is on thanksgiving to God for his Son’s sacrifice on the cross for our sins. In gratitude for this greatest of gifts, we offer that once for all perfect sacrifice of Jesus in an un-bloody way. We also commemorate the resurrection of Jesus which is essentially part of Jesus’ saving work.

At the beginning of Mass we are reminded that it is the celebration of the *sacred mysteries*. These mysteries are all that Jesus came to do for us so that we might live by faith and obedience according to his plan and eventually come to heaven. The Mass is complete in the sense that it contains all that Jesus did and accomplished. By the power of the Holy Spirit the victory of Jesus over sin and death is present, as are all the graces God has for us. The only lack is our capacity to receive the fullness of grace, and our inability to keep the graces we have received.

All who participate at Mass can offer it for whatever intention they wish. The Mass is a prayer, the greatest prayer there is. It is customary to ask a priest to offer Mass for a specific intention. This means that the priest asks God that the sanctifying, healing, forgiving,

and saving power of the Mass be directed toward the intention given him. This in no way hinders people from receiving the fullness of grace as they participate at the Mass, for the graces of God are infinite.

Assumption Abbey receives all requests for Masses with reverence and gravity. Many people ask that Masses be said for their departed loved ones, for the healing of someone who is ill, for the conversion of sinners, for the spiritual benefit of their family, and for other important things. It is customary to offer the priest a stipend for doing a spiritual service, such as a baptism, wedding or funeral. It is also customary to offer a stipend to a priest when requesting that he say a Mass for a specific intention. While stipends cannot be demanded and a priest must offer Mass for a reasonable intention given him, they ordinarily are offered.

For any Mass intention, the abbey has printed cards with envelopes available upon request. A photo of the monks celebrating the conventual Mass is on the cover; the logo and address of the abbey is on the back. The inside message states, “The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass will be offered for _____ at the request of ___ at Assumption Abbey, Richardton, ND.” □

None of them have had cancer, nor any other major health setback. What is their secret? "Good common sense," Br. Placid explains, "and *very strong* family ties."



February 28: The Catholic Physicians Guild and spouses are here for a weekend retreat with Msgr. Tom Richter of the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, and Fr. Robert Shea of St. Mary's, also in Bismarck. Among Fr. Shea's duties is that of diocesan ethicist for health care. Msgr. Richter established the guild and acts as the chaplain. The purpose of the guild is to uphold the principles of Catholic faith and morality as related to the science and practice of medicine, and also to enable Catholic physicians to know one another better, and to work together with deeper mutual support and understanding. For more information: www.bismarckguild.com.



February 29: Assumption Abbey held an open house to mark the Year of Consecrated Life declared by the pope, to be celebrated throughout 2015. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops collaborated with three religious leadership conferences to create "Days with Religious" as an opportunity for the public to explore religious life. The next event will be on April 25, 2015, at the McDowell Activity Center at the University of Mary in Bismarck: free and open to the public. Register online at the Bismarck diocesan website. □

From the Library

By Br. Michael Taffe

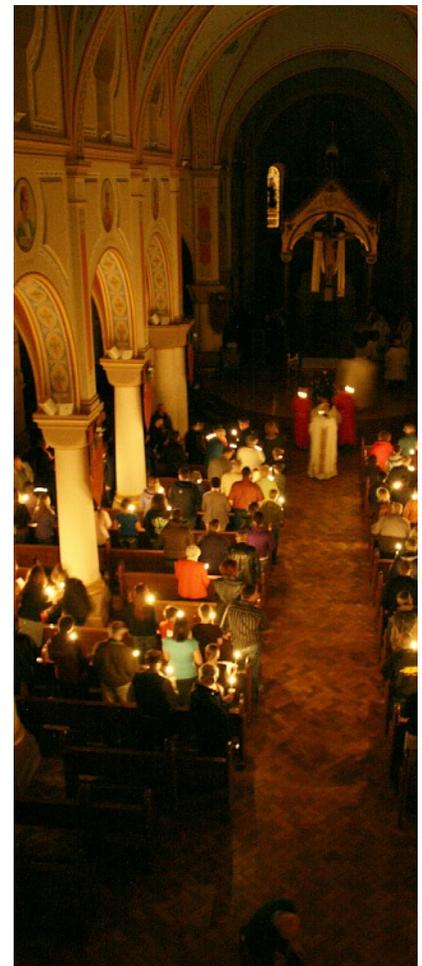


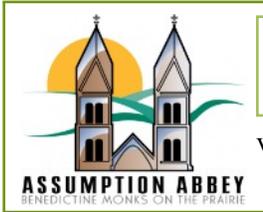
With some book reviews there is a 'spoiler-alert' to let the reader skip that part of the review so as to not learn something critical in the story before getting the chance to actually read the book. However with, *The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold in the 1936 Berlin Olympics* by Daniel James Brown, we essentially learn how the book ends on page 1. Be that as it may, the journey the author takes us on is well worth the spoiler of knowing how it ends.

The book concentrates on one member of the crew, Joe Rantz, and shows us what it was like to grow up in the depression after his mother died and his father remarried. Joe was on his own from about age 10 and learned to rely only on his own intelligence and strength. Joining the rowing crew was one way to get a job while in college and this provided his initial drive to be on the squad. The author deftly supplies information on how a racing crew trains and wins races, how popular crew racing was in the 1920s and 30s, how the depression affected Joe and the rest of his crew, in addition to how the Nazis and the filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl used the 1936 Olympics to give a false front to the world of the Nazi regime.

One aspect of the book that tugged at my monastic heart

was the understanding that Joe and the rest of the crew had to learn over their years of training and racing: crew racing is a group effort and the crew has to work together. Initially, Joe believed that it was up to him to do well and this approach did help him reach a certain level of skill. However, to immerse the self into the whole crew is what makes a shell really fly. The same is true for a monastery: though we are all individuals we do not really fly until we learn how to be community. *The Boys in the Boat* is a truly delightful book and I highly recommend it. □





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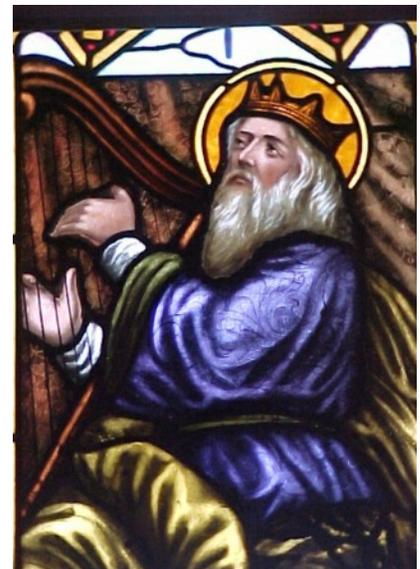
made him a cardinal in 1889. Joseph had so few possessions at the time of his death in 1894 that not even a sheet could be found to cover his body. Pope Saint John-Paul II beatified him in 1988, presenting Joseph Benedict Dusmet as a lustrous example of a monk-bishop.

April 29th is the feast of Saint Hugh of Cluny, born in 1024. He was allowed to join the famous abbey of Cluny when he was only fourteen. At the age of twenty he was ordained, and five years later he was elected abbot in 1049. He remained abbot for sixty years. Under his care the community increased in size from 50 monks to over 300. He rebuilt its church to be the largest in Christendom, which it remained until St. Peter's in Rome was rebuilt in 1626. Under Hugh, dependent houses of Cluny expanded from 70 to over 1,200. He died in 1109 and was canonized shortly thereafter by Pope Calixtus II, himself a monk of Cluny. □

Benedictine Saints

April 3rd is the feast of Blessed Thiento, abbot of Wessobrunn which was once an important monastery near Weilheim, Bavaria. When the dreaded Huns invaded in 955 most of the monks fled to safety. But six of them stayed behind with Abbot Thiento and like him were hacked to pieces. They were buried on the spot and a chapel built over their remains. In 1713 the bodies were disinterred and placed in the abbey church. The abbey of Wessobrunn was dissolved in 1803, during the course of the secularization of Bavaria, and exploited for building material. The martyr bodies, however, still remain there.

April 4th is the feast of Blessed Joseph Benedict Dusmet, born in Palermo in 1818. He made his profession of vows in the local Benedictine abbey of San Martino della Scala and was ordained a priest there in 1842. He became the abbot of San Niccolò at Catania in Sicily in 1854 and, thirteen years later, was appointed archbishop of Catania. Joseph took a leading role in the first Vatican Council, 1869-1870. In his archdiocese he restored over 60 churches, opened 17 new ones, restored the seminary and built schools. The episcopal palace, however, he turned into a monastery and lived monastic life in as much as it was possible for him to do so. Pope Leo XIII



Stained glass portrait of King David in the church choir loft.