

# Assumption

## ABBNEY NEWSLETTER

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October, 2015

## Does Prayer Really Work?

Prayer is an integral part of life for Benedictine monks; the monastic schedule, or *horarium*, is built around it. Several times a day the tower bell rings and monks drop what they are doing and go to church, there to stand in a well-worn and familiar choir stall for the hours of the Divine Office, and also for the holy Mass. In addition, monks are expected to pray privately. According to our *Customary* here at Assumption Abbey, we are to spend at least one hour a day in private prayer. With all this emphasis on prayer, some people might be tempted to think of monks as prayer “experts.” Yet even monks wonder at times if all their efforts are of any use, primarily because faith waxes and wanes, if it is real.

The experience of wondering whether or not God hears can be painful. “There is no suffering greater than what is caused by the doubts of those who want to believe,” writes Flannery O’Connor. “I know what torment this is, but I can only see it—in myself anyway—as the process by which faith is deepened. A faith that just accepts is a child’s faith and all right for children, but eventually you have to grow religiously as every other way, though some never do.”

truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for

A good reason why monks have no idea if prayer really works might be because there is no real measure to judge such a thing. Very often, the effects of prayer will never be known to the one praying, though studies have been done to scientifically calculate the results of prayer, particularly prayer for healing. These include first-person studies, such as the effectiveness of praying the rosary for the cure of one’s cardiovascular ailments (or any other ailments for that matter), second-person studies involving whether or not the person praying has an effective connection to the person being prayed for, and third-person studies on what effect—if any—several people joined in prayer may have on physical recovery. Studies have also been carried out concerning the secondary effects of prayer, which indicate that prayer contributes to a sense of well-being in the one who prays, and it also fosters hope, a sense of forgiveness, and an ability to be grateful.

In the Gospel of Matthew (18:19) Jesus says, “Again, truly

them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I with them.” Remember that this information comes from Jesus and not the American Medical Association; it is proclaimed by the same person who said, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Such a graphic image used in the context of forgiveness would probably not be found in *The New England Journal of Medicine*. We cannot call the Gospel of Matthew a scientific book; it does not present a systematic study of the physical and natural world. None of the Gospels do. They present the revelation and teaching of Jesus Christ who extols a charity beyond reason and familiarity with God the Father Who can only be known through faith. **But why** can’t the



Br. Jude Schweitzer on the abbey lawn.

extols charity beyond reason, and familiarity with God the Father Who can only be known through faith.

But why can't the effectiveness of prayer be scientifically proven when so many other things can? Maybe for the same reason that familiarity with God is only available through faith. To understand this, you might ask the same question about the friendships you enjoy. Friendship is shared in confidence and mutual trust. Because of that confidence and trust, actions toward your friend display a fundamental faith; your strong belief in him or her doesn't need proof. People probably know who your friend is by the devotion each of you displays for one another; people see by these actions that the two of you trust each other. Something of the same is at work in our relationship to God, and that is why prayer is, at its core, an act of trust. We bring our concerns to God and leave them there. Authentic prayer is an action proper to trust. We wholeheartedly devote ourselves to something about which we remain unsure when we pray, but we don't need proof because we trust in God.

At the same time, this is why prayer is not always easy. Yes, it can be spontaneous, especially when we fall into trouble and beg for help from heaven, but earnest and regular prayer requires ever-greater degrees of trust: so much trust, in fact, that it constitutes a relinquishing—in stages—of our self-will and our agenda to a higher order. Prayer is a process of surrender. The more sublime the prayer the more complete the surrender.



And this surrender is exactly what critics of prayer target as utterly foolish. To surrender is to give up and to crumble, isn't it? Don't we yield to "divine power"? Don't we surrender, in effect, to a dictator, even if it is a "kind" and "generous" dictator of our imagination? If we yield to a concept such as God, we surrender our responsibility to nothing more than an abstract notion. To critics, faith is an easy way out: it's easier to believe in a beneficent God than to face bleak reality wherein no God exists and where there is no grand scheme of things. It's easier to believe that prayers are carried to heaven by angels than to face the fact that there is no heaven. There is absolutely no one "up there" who cares, not even about a child's earnest prayers for his mother.

Strong faith-filled surrender is also seen as mulishness. Critics complain that if the prayer is answered, then it's taken as proof that prayer works. But if the prayer is *not* answered, the believer explains that God's will is otherwise, or that the prayer was answered but just not in the way that was desired, or that things may have been *much worse* without the prayer, and so forth with many other excuses.

The power of prayer cannot be proved, and much less can it be used as proof for the existence of God. At the risk of establishing a circular argument, perhaps the only proof of prayer's effectiveness is in the one who prays. Does it make him or her a better person? And in the community who prays together, does it make them better people in any way?

What is the witness of people who pray? If it is bitterness, prejudice, stinginess, close-mindedness and fear, then no wonder prayer is not seen as effective. But if it is joy, open-mindedness, happiness even in adversity, kindness and peace, then we have to admit that the results of prayer are nothing short of amazing.

Benedictine prayer is robust. In his Rule for Monks, St. Benedict says, "We must know that God regards our purity of heart and tears of compunction, not our many words." Said differently, a monk's prayer ought to be real. For a seasoned monk, prayer is not only genuine but inveterate because prayer has become and remains the deepest part of his existence. He entered the monastery seeking God, and as the years go by he *keeps seeking God*. He remains a monk, and to that end keeps asking for more faith. "What people don't realize," says Flannery O'Connor, "is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross. It's much harder to believe than not to believe." **In a real** sense, learning how to pray is about learning who God is. It is perhaps inevitable that prayer will carry the monk into deep, dark places requiring more and more of faith, though on the exterior he is anything but a gloomy person because of

think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross. It's much harder to believe than not to believe."

One might say that learning how to pray is about learning who God is, and therefore it is perhaps inevitable that prayer will carry the monk into deep, dark places requiring more and more faith, though on the exterior he becomes anything but a gloomy person because of this. If the prayer is persistent and real, its witness to the world will be in a character full of joy, open-mindedness, happiness, kindness and peace. In other words, the person becomes like Jesus Christ. □

For more of Flannery O'Connor see *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*.



## Father Gerald Ruelle 1924-2015



Even after careful treatment in ICU, Father Gerald Ruelle died of pneumonia on July 28, 2015, at age 91. He was greatly loved, and he lived a full and grace-filled life.

Gerald was born in Westhope, ND. His father, William, was a barber. When he was only four years old his mother, Ada Dougherty-Ruelle

died and his father raised Gerald and his two brothers by himself. "As a cook, Dad wasn't all that bad," Gerry used to say. Gerald came to the abbey to begin college studies and entered the novitiate in 1944. He made monastic profession on July 11, 1945.

Father Gerald did theological studies in Ottawa which pleased him because he had French-Canadian roots. But even on the Dougherty side of the family he had an aunt who was a Gray Nun in Montréal. After his studies, Father Gerald was ordained in June of 1950. He did pastoral work in Strasburg and Devils Lake, ND, before being assigned to Bogotá as one of the founders of the *Monasterio Benedictino de Tibati* and its school. He spent five years there and returned to North Dakota to do chaplaincy work in hospitals. He received training at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, DC.

After fourteen years in hospitals, Jerry became pastor of St. Joseph's Church in Killdeer, ND, with its missions of Fayette and Halliday. Father Jerry loved to play golf. His parishioners would say, in jest, "To your stations! He'll be here any minute to say Mass. He's at the tee on the eighteenth hole!"

Father Gerald retired to the abbey in 2007 but that did not stop him golfing. He continued doing so until Spring of this year when he was ninety-one! He wanted to stay active. He was generous and helpful at the abbey with his housekeeping. He had many friends and a big heart and the many who attended his funeral gave proof to that. We will miss him. □

# JUNE CHRONICLE

Immediately on the heels of our own annual retreat in May each year we host the diocesan priests' retreat, and then the diocesan deacons' retreat. This does not mean that monks give the retreats to those special people, but it does mean that the kitchen is kept very busy with many kettles and dishes for the monks to wash, and monks must don their aprons and gloves to clean the facilities at Schnell Hall. The hall was built in the early 1960s as a school dormitory and continued to function that way until the junior college closed in 1971. From that time on, the hall was put to use as a guest and retreat facility, even though it lacks private bathrooms, which can make staying there an awkward experience of reliving college days for those who were housed in dormitories.



The goatsuckers are back! They are small birds in the *caprimulgidae* family that fly through the air foraging for insects both day and night. In England they are called nightjars. In some areas of the USA they are called nighthawks, though they are not hawks and do not feed on goats' milk by night, which was an old wives' tale based on the fact that the birds hover close to animals because of the insects they draw. Goatsuckers are voracious insect traps. They do not migrate south. Instead, they hibernate. Their body temperature plummets from 102 degrees Fahrenheit to 26.5 Its breathing slows and its digestion ceases until Spring and the

degrees Fahrenheit to 26.5 Breathing slows and digestion ceases until Spring when all the insects return.



June 11: the first of the season's bikers arrive: two men and a woman traveling coast to coast on bicycles. This year we were privileged to host a bicyclist with Parkinson's who wants to raise awareness of the disease (google Steve Quam), a retired minister and his friends, a young librarian from San Diego who would like one day to visit Antarctica, and many others, all with interesting stories "and miles to go before [they] sleep, and miles to go before [they] sleep."



June 14: wild turkeys have been especially active this Spring, toms strutting down on the farm in full view of monks in the cafeteria. Today a hen showed off her little chicks that ran around her legs and pecked at whatever she pecked at.



June 15: a niece of Abbot Cuthbert's arrived for a visit. Abbot Cuthbert Goeb came from St. John's Abbey in Minnesota to revive this abbey after bankruptcy had left it vacant. In 1928, he and a small group of monks began house-cleaning in buildings that were empty for four years: dust, fallen plaster, rodents, broken pipes and windows. Cuthbert was active superior of the community for twenty-six years and left it with seventy-seven members and a thriving school.



June 27: a man who stopped in the abbey Visitors' Center asked, "Is it true that you have only four monks left in this big place?" Br. Benet told him that there are currently fifty-two members in the community, although not all of them reside at the abbey. The man explained that his sister is the wife of a minister in Hebron, ND, and he told her that only four monks were left to wander the halls here. That is what is known as a rumor.

## JULY CHRONICLE

July 4: monks don't have to watch Macey's fireworks on television. Right here in Richardton there's no end of flash, crackle and pop. Monks seated on benches in the parking lot enjoyed all the color and bombast the town could afford without having to purchase a single sparkler. It looked and sounded like a genuine battle. The only real battle, however, was with the clouds of mosquitoes attacking from all sides. Thank the lucky stars for Deep Woods Off!



July 6: we celebrated the anniversary of the dedication of the abbey church with bells, candles, *cucullas* and a good liturgy. Father Benedict Fischer was home and presided at Mass. In his sermon he reminded us to be grateful for what we have, "because a beautiful place is good for morale." The church is responsible, in large part, for our soul energy.



July 11: each year on the anniversary of a monk's vows we mention him at Morning Prayer and pray for him. There usually are only one or two names on a given feast day, except for July 11. In the old days, every monk professed on July 11. And it's still a popular day for profession. This year 36 living monks were mentioned at Morning Prayer, along with Father Benedict Fischer whose name day it is. The list does not bode well for anyone anxious to get to breakfast.



July 15: Brothers Jude, John-Patrick and Jacob are cleaning ash out of the big boiler which, of course, has been turned off, for their sakes. It's been off, in fact, for two weeks. Even so, some residual heat makes the place very warm, and on a hot day all three of them look as though they have been working on the sixth circle of Dante's *Inferno*.

## AUGUST CHRONICLE

August 4: a bad electrical storm has left the in-house telephone system "haunted." For example, the phone rings in the hallway and when someone picks up there's no one on the other end of the line. If one dials the operator, strange noises come back through the receiver. A phone will ring just once somewhere in the house at 1:00 a.m. So a serviceman came out today to spend a good deal of time in an effort to fix the haunted problem (in a contemporary electronic version of exorcism) , and left with a

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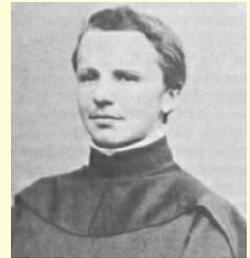
August 5: Three pallets of  
sacramental wine came in on a  
semi truck today. These pallets  
were stacked exceptionally high  
and heavy which caused the  
rear tires of the skid steer to  
elevate slightly off the ground  
when they were lifted. Brother  
Louie performed skid steer  
ballet unloading them! There  
really ought to have been an  
audience to applaud his efforts  
as he turned on two wheels,  
holding each pallet in the air.



August 8: Brother Louie and  
Novice Matthew have been  
picking large quantities of  
garden peas and putting them  
through a homemade sheller  
built back in the early 1950s by  
Fr. Edward Berheide, deceased  
member of the community. The  
peas are first blanched and then  
placed in the hopper. The  
sheller is then plugged in and  
turned on. It creates a terrific  
amount of noise. Pods bounce  
about in the hopper until they  
split. Peas fall out through a  
screen at the bottom and into a  
drawer. Four hours of work  
yields just two gallons of peas,  
including the blanching and the  
cleaning up. But they sure taste  
good! And what is one to call  
this shelling process? Pea-ing?



## From the Archives:



Vincent Wehrle, founder of  
Assumption Abbey



This was once the Roanoke Hotel in Bismarck, sold to Abbot Vincent Wehrle for a song because it was said to be haunted. Wehrle turned it into his residence when he became the first bishop of Bismarck. Br. Peter Wehrlen was his housekeeper and kept chickens in the attic.



Another view of the bishop's house in Bismarck when it was still the old Roanoke Hotel. Next to it is the First Presbyterian Church. This bishop's residence was later purchased for \$8,000 by the Benedictine Sisters in Minot, ND. They turned it into Saint Vincent's Nursing Home. While cleaning up, the sisters found a "blind pig" in the attic: a hidden still that had been pieced together either when the house was the first governor's mansion, or when it was the Roanoke Hotel. The first evening that the good sisters occupied the building, Sister Anita Soukup was cooking supper; she left the kitchen briefly, and when she returned there was a very large rat eating directly out of the frying pan! Whether or not the old building was really haunted, it exists no more. It stood on 2<sup>nd</sup> and East Thayer Avenue where Budget Inn Express is today.

August 14: We hosted a great variety of groups this summer: family reunions, quilters, dissertation workshoppers, the rug hookers (who are very generous to us), an Abbey Prep 1965 class reunion, the *Plein Air* painters, and the Trinity High School Football team. That's right: Trinity High has a pre-season retreat for their football players that includes freshmen through seniors. They played out in the abbey field in the early morning to beat the heat, they ate with the monks, and they also attended prayers and Mass with the monks. They were very well behaved. And goodness could they put the food away! The coach left a note: "Our students are proud to be the first football team to practice at the abbey since 1968 [when Abbey Prep closed]. We all hope this is the start of a great tradition and partnership between Trinity football and the abbey."



## Development Office

Br. Michael Taffe, O.S.B.

Back in 2013, Pope Francis declared that a Year of Consecrated Life (YCL) be celebrated throughout the world. That year began on the First Sunday of Advent, November 30, 2014, and will close on the World Day of Consecrated Life, February 2, 2016. To mark the year, Assumption Abbey held an open house last March. In April there was a convocation at the University of Mary sponsored by Annunciation Monastery, Sacred Heart Monastery, Assumption Abbey and the Diocese of Bismarck. For our fall event at Assumption Abbey, invitations were sent out to "Break Bread with the Monks" on Sunday, August 30<sup>th</sup>. The event was well-

attended. Abbey bread, jams and jellies were served. Twenty-two monks, each in turn, explained aspects of monastic life in "A Day in the Life of a Monk," and all guests were invited to sing Vespers with the monks in the abbey church.

Pope Francis himself is a Jesuit. He said, "Where there are religious, there is joy. We are called to know and show that God is able to fill our hearts to the brim with happiness; that we need not seek our happiness elsewhere; that the authentic fraternity found in our communities increases our joy; and that our total self-giving in service to the Church brings us life-long personal fulfilment." May God continue to bless us in our efforts to be faithful!

**Please include the names of my loved ones in your 2015 November month of Masses for the faithful departed:**

_____	_____
_____	_____

*Please return your names using the enclosed envelope and we will write them into our Book of the Living.*

Your loved ones will be remembered in our prayers throughout the month of November.

**Thank you for your petition and prayers.**

Questions should be directed to Br. Michael Taffe, OSB, by calling

(701) 974-3315 or michael@assumptionabbey.com

August 23: 50 mph winds and rain leave roof tiles on the south lawn and Brother Louie is worried about his sweet corn, especially since he has just begun delivering cobs to the kitchen. He discovered that the cornstalks are still standing but, "it's probably not very good when they're all at a 30 degree angle," he said.



August 27: three visiting monks have reminded us just how international monasticism is. Jean-Pierre Longeat, former abbot of Ligugé (the oldest abbey in Europe, founded in 361), Mark Butlin of Ampleforth Abbey in England, and their driver John-Bede Pauley of St. John's Abbey in MN, represent AIM (Alliance for International Monasticism) an organization composed of 140 communities of men and women in the United States and Canada who follow the Rule of Benedict, and over 450 English-speaking monasteries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. AIM provides spiritual, educational, formation and building assistance to monasteries in developing countries to enable them to be centers of life for others. We learned that there are 1,641 OSB and Cistercian communities throughout the world, with 10 new ones being founded every year. Unfortunately, there are also 10 closures every year, mainly in Europe. These communities share the main elements of monastic life in common (praying and working together, private prayer and *lectio divina*) but monasticism is, of course, somewhat different in each culture. □

## From the Library



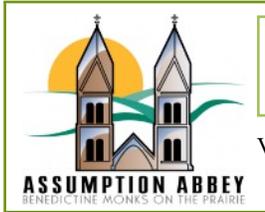
On the first page of his book *Catholic Realism and the Abolition of War* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books) David Carroll Cochran writes, "War's two great lies are its righteousness and its inevitability. It is neither." Thereafter he picks apart the argument of just war advocates: that moral realism requires armed conflict, or that governments have the right and responsibility to protect citizens by engaging in combat, and that to think about a world without war is utopian and blind to the reality of evil. He invokes contemporary Catholic Doctrine which, although not completely anti-war, seems to be heading that way, and carefully delineates the immorality of sending thousands of young people to the grave by comparing it to other forms of institutionalized violence that have become unthinkable anymore in today's world, a long list that includes lynching, dueling, slavery, and the medieval practice of trial by ordeal. Cochran expresses the hope that one day war will be as ludicrous as the old practice of determining God's verdict between disputing parties by making them fight it out under the watchful eye of an emperor; the one killed being the one who is wrong.

Cochran lays out a realistic path to end war forever through democracy and international relations. He knows that society will very likely never reach moral perfection, but people of the world still have the obligation to outlaw war

because war is just plain wrong. War goes against one of the core principles of Catholic doctrine: that it is immoral to intentionally kill the innocent. War involves the killing of soldiers who, taken on their own merits, are innocent of the aggression and crimes of their country. And then there is the issue of "collateral damage," a euphemism for dead civilians killed in crossfire. War has proven again and again throughout history to be ineffective in its objectives.

War drains a country's economy, leading to many other internal problems: lack of food and clean water, disease, contamination, unemployment, poverty. Priceless and irreplaceable cultural artifacts are lost. Warfare stimulates ill-feeling and hatred, never allaying it. The aftermath of war is long-lasting, post-traumatic stress being only one of many disorders making people vulnerable and unable to contribute to society. War is a waste of resources, most especially of the young minds and the talent of men and women who are killed in battle.

One might ask "Where would we be today if we had not taken up arms and defeated the Nazis? Didn't guns and bombs save us in 1945?" A good question and one that is the subject of another book by Pat Buchanan entitled *Churchill, Hitler and the Unnecessary War*, also good reading and perhaps the subject of a future book review here. □



# Newsletter

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Church. During his lifetime Odo composed hymns and antiphons. On the day he died he wrote a hymn in honor of St. Martin. He is said to have written several books about music but none of them survived the turmoil of the ages.

October 3 is the feast day of Blessed Columba Marmion (1858-1923), a humble man who, despite being Irish, became the third abbot of the Belgian abbey of Maredsous. He was an influential writer and his books are considered spiritual classics. One of them, *Christ, the Life of the Soul*, was given first as a retreat to a small group of nuns, then published privately. Even so, it eventually became a publishing success throughout the Catholic world. Abbot Columba died of the flu during an epidemic in 1923. Pope John Paul II beatified him in 2000 and his cause for canonization has remained very active. □

## Benedictine Saints

November 5 is the feast day of St. Bertilla who died in 705. She became a Benedictine at the abbey of Jouarre near Meaux, an abbey that is still active today. Bertilla then became abbess of Chelles and held that office for forty-six years. While she was abbess, two former queens became nuns under her: St. Bathildis, wife of the English King Clovis II, and Hereswitha, widow of Aethelhere, king of East Anglia.

November 18 is the feast of St. Odo of Cluny (c. 880-942) who was brought up in the household of Guillaume le Pieux, duke of Aquitaine, the founder of Cluny. Odo had begun training for a military

career but fell ill and became a cleric instead. He read the Rule of St. Benedict and was so edified that he went to the abbey of Baume-les-Messieurs where the rigorous reform of St. Benedict of Aniane was being observed. He was given the habit there in 909, the very same year that Guillaume d'Aquitaine established Cluny. Odo became the second abbot of Cluny and brought with him one hundred books that formed the basis of what would become a magnificent library. Cluny was, in its heyday, the largest abbey in Europe, and probably still holds the record for having been the largest Benedictine abbey—both in size and in numbers—in the history of the

