

Assumption

ABBHEY NEWSLETTER

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Self-Esteem and Discipleship

In chapter four of the Rule of Saint Benedict, entitled “The Instruments of Good Works,” we find written that a monk must “attribute to God, and not to himself, whatever good he sees, but recognize always that any evil is his own doing, and impute it to himself.” The Rule was written almost 1,500 years ago, and to modern ears, Benedict’s words are like a recipe for low self-esteem. If the monk is not the author of the good things that come from him but responsible for every bad thing that might arise from who he is, he will soon feel ashamed. He will come to see himself as defective. He will dislike himself and harbor guilt for supposed wrong-doing. Guilt can lead to low self-esteem, even self-loathing. Hatred of self is a main ingredient to many mental disorders.

If we think about it, low self-esteem is not innate. Who has ever known an infant who didn’t like him or herself? Rather, low self-esteem is learned over the course of a lifetime. Kayla Matthews in an article published by the Huffington Post entitled “How to Tell If You’re Self-Loathing and What to Do About It” (10/27/2014) suggests that it’s quite common for people to

develop self-loathing thoughts, “if for no other reason than as coping mechanisms.” To clear up our problem with St. Benedict’s Rule, Matthews might rewrite to drop out any evil imputed to self: “If you remember only the times when you were wrong,” she says, “this is because your idea of yourself presupposes that you are *always wrong*, times when you succeed being exceptions to the norm.” This is, as she points out, a characteristic of self-loathing. If you think this way, you have a *distorted* view of yourself. You are wrong about who you think you are. A healthy understanding of what it means to be right and wrong makes one realize that you can’t be right all the time, that you will fail from time to time, but you will also succeed. You are no better than others, and you are no worse either.

Kristin Neff, who describes herself as an evangelist for self-compassion, says, in her TED talk, that we are often our own worst enemies, saying things to ourselves that we wouldn’t say even to our worst enemies. “We are the same as others,” she says. “To be human means to be imperfect: the shared human experience. But we judge that something has gone wrong, an

abnormality in ourselves, isolated from others by imperfection when that is what *joins* us to others.” She wants people to understand that we can be unaware of how much pain we cause ourselves because we are so harsh in our self-criticism.

Kristin Neff is of the same opinion as Kayla Matthews in why we might be so critical toward ourselves. First, it is—supposedly—to motivate. The thinking goes like this: If I am too kind to myself, I am really being self-indulgent and lazy. “For example,” Kayla Matthews explains, “you might tell yourself things like ‘You’re being a baby—get over it,’ or



Br. Louie Bachand and Br. Jacob Deiss leading a procession from the church.

being self-indulgent and lazy. “For example,” Kayla Matthews explains, “you might tell yourself things like ‘You’re being a baby—get over it,’ or ‘You’re never going to get anywhere if you don’t learn this.’” These statements are actually quite negative. What is more, they don’t really push individuals to try harder.

Kristin Neff points out how studies show that when we criticize ourselves we are actually *undermining* self-motivation. Our bodies tap into a primitive threat-defense system that prepares us for the fight-or-flight response. This primitive response—developed to protect our lives against predators—within modern-day circumstances afflicts our self-concept. When we feel threatened and tell ourselves to grow up, in effect we are on the attack. And who are we attacking? Ourselves. We become both the attacker *and* the attacked. With enough self-criticism, cortisol is released into the system. With persistent high levels of stress, the body—in order to protect itself—begins to shut down in a state of depression. This is not good. “As we know,” Neff says, “depression is not exactly the best motivational mind state.”

In other words, it’s almost impossible to hate ourselves into doing anything good. If I look into the mirror and loath myself for being overweight, I will not shed a single pound for all this cortisol release. Repeating to myself, “I’m an idiot!” tends to be self-fulfilling rather than motivational, helping me to try harder.

Mammals, because their young require so much care



over a length of time, have developed chemicals in the brain that promote attachment and nurturing. When youngsters are coddled and cared for, oxytocin and endogenous opioids are released that relax the body and produce a sense of well-being. Both the mother and the youngsters produce these chemicals. When babies are touched and groomed they find satisfaction in remaining near their mother and so do not venture far from protection and into danger. The state these chemicals induce is characterized by calm, security, social comfort and emotional well-being. Our bodies are programmed to respond to warmth, gentle touch and reassuring vocal sounds.

“When we give ourselves compassion,” Kristen Neff says, “the research shows that we actually reduce our cortisol levels and release oxytocin and opiates which are the feel-good hormones.” And in feeling safe and well, we are in the optimal state to do our best.

Yes, everyone likes to feel safe and well, but what of Jesus’s challenge to his disciples, “If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me, for whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10: 38 and 16: 24-25, Lk 9:23, Mk 8:34)? Is feeling safe and well a bit too cozy and comfortable for Chris-

tian discipleship? Is self-compassion really, at bottom, just plain old selfishness? If we allow ourselves a bit of compassion, have we set out on the road to the sort of objective selfishness that Ayn Rand proposes as a realistic alternative to Christianity?

There is no doubt that self-loathing can sometimes be mistaken for a Christian virtue. When Jesus says “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me,” one might easily interpret his words to mean that Jesus requires of his disciples to hate themselves. But self-hatred is not the same as Christian self-denial. The “self” Jesus is talking about is the rebellious, sin-prone humanness that causes so much trouble and has very little to commend itself before God. It is definitely not the self—the unique creation that each of us is—that God brought into being through love. Jesus—a man like us in every way except sin—did not despise himself. If there had been mirrors in Palestine during his day, Jesus would not have looked into one loathing what he saw. The propensity to loath what I see in the mirror has to do with comparing me to all the beauty and glamour our secular world offers for its commercial value.

There exists a plethora of advice online about loving oneself. Some of it urges you to visit the gym until you’re satisfied with the way your body looks. Websites urge you to buy certain cosmetic products or makeup for a “new you.” There is information to suggest that the right clothing is the ticket to self-esteem. YouTube videos recommend that you

satisfied with the way your body looks. Websites urge you to buy certain cosmetic products for a “new you.” There is information to suggest that the right clothing is the ticket to self-esteem. YouTube videos recommend that you stand in front of a mirror every day and say over and over again, “I love me” until the me who is saying it begins to believe it. Several YouTube videos are actually about *marrying* yourself!

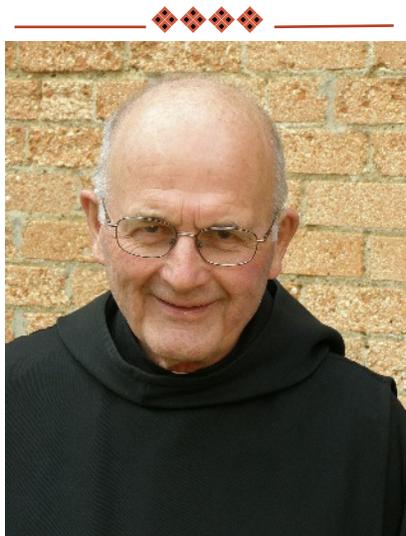
Jesus would not have stared into a mirror thinking, “This is all about ME!” And he most certainly would not have had his disciples staring into a mirror thinking, “I am no good.” His message was not about marrying oneself and it was certainly not about “I am no good.” Rather, it was about “I am broken.”

Taking up the cross means acknowledging that I am, indeed, the source of evil within me. This is a soulful and adult recognition of reality, something that cannot be taken on when one is still spiritually or emotionally immature. Taking up the cross means acknowledging that I am sinful.

Turning to God in prayer is about recognizing God’s love for me and the dignity that I have as a creature of God. Confession is about the remission of sin, a reminder to us of our inherent dignity and how we can tarnish it.

A disciple of Jesus is imperfect and has the courage to admit it. But a disciple of Jesus learns to be kind to him or herself. You can’t be kind to others until you learn to be kind to yourself. A disciple of Jesus

is connected to God in prayer, and this connection results in authenticity: a disciple of Jesus is ready to let go of who he or she “should be” in order to be transformed into what God wants him or her to be. □



Father Stephen Kranz
1926-2016

Fr. Stephen Kranz died at the Richardton Health Center on February 4, 2016, just two days after being transferred there from the abbey. He was three months short of 90 years old. He began life on April 19, 1926, born to Charles and Appolonia (Gergen) Kranz in Hastings, MN, and baptized Peter. His father passed away when Peter was still young and the extended family helped Appolonia raise her large family. Peter joined the Army Air Corp during WWII and trained as a tail gunner, but the war ended before he was deployed. He used the G.I. Bill to go to school and earned a BA at the Benedictine college in Atchison, KS, in 1950. That same year he hitch-hiked from Hastings to Richardton, ND, in order to enter the novitiate at

Assumption Abbey. He was given the name Stephen, and made his monastic profession of vows in August, 1951. After completing seminary studies at the abbey, he was ordained to the priesthood on May 19, 1955. Fr. Steve was first assigned to Sts. Peter and Paul in Strasburg, ND, then Sacred Heart Church, Solen, ND, and then St. Mary’s in Richardton, ND. But his signature work began in August of 1971 when he was sent to the Fort Berthold Reservation. For 41 years he served the Three Affiliated Tribes there, and anyone else who sought help at St. Anthony’s Mission in Mandaree, Sacred Heart Church in White Shield, St. Joseph’s Church in Twin Buttes, and St. Anthony’s Church in New Town. Fr. Steve was adopted by Mary (Young Bird) Lone Fight and Cora (Young Bird) Baker into the Low Cap Clan. His Hidatsa name was Good Bear, a name given him by Art Smith. In Mandaree, Fr. Steve kept up a summer youth camp that continues to this day. And during summers he celebrated Mass at McKenzie Bay for people in resort houses and trailers by Lake Sakakawea. Steve knew a wide range of people. He was well liked, enjoyed having fun, helped people in their work, and was an example to all in his devotion to prayer and his love of community. In 2012 he retired to the abbey but never let age slow him down. He continued to attend funerals on the reservation, played golf, and relished visits from family and friends. May he rest in peace. □

DECEMBER CHRONICLE

December 5: The Christmas Open House draws a good crowd, doubtless because of the sunshine and fair weather. All the fruitcake is sold within 40 minutes. A local radio station reports that we are selling pickled peppers. Who gave them that idea? Brother Peter Piper? (A pickled peck of peppers peddles poorly past pumpkin picking period.)

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December 6: Because it is Sunday we do not celebrate the feast of St. Nick. Nevertheless we are each advised to leave a shoe out anyway, which, by morning, is filled with candy. How to thank this elusive saint?

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December 9: Br. Jacob Deiss prepares for the season by carefully stringing lights on the pine tree near the garage and trees by the library. While some tree lights seem tossed on with the help of the wind, Br. Jacob's show design and symmetry. They won't be turned on, however, until Christmas Eve.

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December 11: We hold a communal penance service led by Fr. Terrence Kardong. A gospel passage is read and preached upon, and priests are available at various stations for individual confessions. It is a chance for all of us to get our souls scrubbed and clean for the big celebration of Christmas.

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December 13: The 3rd Sunday of Advent is celebrated in the abbey church with a performance of Camille Saint-Saëns' *Oratorio de Noël* by the Dickinson State University chorus and vocal soloists, all of whom are excellent, particularly Kelsey Rogers, a local soprano with a graduate degree in vocal performance from the University of Arizona. One might venture to say that it is the first time Saint-Saëns' *Oratorio* is heard in the abbey church, although old programs from yesteryear often yield surprises, such as when, at a silver jubilee in 1938 for Frs. Bede Witzig and Albert Hannan, an assembled orchestra of Richardton townfolk and abbey students performed a full program that included the Overture *Ein Morgen* by Franz von Suppé and extracts from Antonín Dvořák's *New World Symphony*.

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Many people have been coming down from Fort Berthold Reservation to visit Father Stephen Kranz and say their goodbyes, among them Amy Mossett, a member of the Mandan-Hidatsa tribes who served as Chairperson of the National Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Council's Circle of Tribal Advisors and was a very convincing and beautiful Sacagawea portrayer during the Voyage of Discovery bicentennial from 2004-2006.

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Fr. Stephen Folorunso from Nigeria, pastor at Holy Trinity in Hettinger, ND, is here with

two Nigerian friends. Asked if he likes snow, Fr. Folorunso says, "I love it! Snow means no flies, no mosquitoes!"

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December 22: the men in formation become Christmas elves and help Br. Alban make Christmas treats, dipping chocolate and such wise. It looks like a lot of messy fun.

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December 24: at Christmas midnight Mass the thurible was accidentally dropped with a huge bang and the hot coal rolled across the floor. Before it had a chance to burn the floor, the master of ceremonies, Br. Alban, swept it up into his surplus. Quick thinking! The surplus is burned, and Br. Alban suffered a blister. But the floor is fine.

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December 30: The nearby Benedictine sisters are invited over to the abbey for lunch, visiting and games. A group of us decide to play Trivial Pursuit and it turns out to be very educational. For instance, how many hearts does an octopus have? If you answered three, you are correct.

JANUARY CHRONICLE

January 3: Over half of us receive a notice in our mailboxes from our health insurance provider that we are now covered for mastectomy-related services. These include all stages of reconstruction and surgery to achieve symmetry between

between breasts. This is important information to have. Men can get breast cancer, too. And it's good to know that our provider is concerned about symmetry.

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January 9: A local man with weapons cached in his vehicle told US secret service agents that he was Jesus Christ when they arrested him in Washington, DC. His intention was to kidnap Bo, the President's Portuguese water dog, because he felt the dog was being neglected.

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January 17: The temperature is below zero and the outside air is frigid. The indigenous Mandan people of this area referred to January as "the moon of the Seven Cold Days." There must have been a reason for this name, although some would see it as cold more than seven days in January. Better than February: the Arikara refer to February as "the moon which Kills and Carries Off Men," obviously referring to the extreme cold.

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January 20: Father Benedict

January 20: Father Benedict Fischer is home from studies in Belgium. He shares with us a favorite Belgian Christmas snack: jars of *Speculoos* spread. *Speculoos* is a type of gingerbread cookie popular there, and one step better is smashing them up into a peanut butter-like paste. Judging from how long it took for a jar to empty, monks probably prefer good ol' American peanut butter.

From the Archives:



The photo above is an end-of-the-school-year picnic outing on June 7, 1923 at the Heart River. From left to right: Ben Worth, Brother Placid Ritzenthaler (sitting on the truck), Bernard Hammeling (holding his cap), Father Herman Mandry, Frank Kilzer, George Kilzer (sitting on the roof), and Christian Brinster. (The student leaning over the running board is unidentified.) The barrels are for barrel-racing fun later in the day. The pickup is a Model-T Ford but without the windshield or the two front doors. The nice big flag was already an antique in 1923 because it displays only 43 stars. This means it was from 1889 when North Dakota, South Dakota, Washington and Montana were admitted to the Union. In 1923 there were 48 states and 48 stars. These abbey students are wearing military uniforms with puttees, de rigueur from 1921 to 1925 when every abbey student wore surplus World War I uniforms.



This is what they caught on their picnic: a big snapping turtle. Although the animal looks to be smiling, he is more likely not pleased with the attention, nor with being held aloft by the tail. Holding a turtle by the tail can injure its spine. The proper way to hold a snapper is to grasp its back feet and avoid its head. They are aggressive and can bite off a finger if provoked. Therefore they do not make especially good house pets, and are not good with children. Back in 1923, on that sunny June day, if the Abbey students had let the turtle go (and we don't know if they did or did not) this turtle might very well still be alive somewhere since biologists tell us that they can live to be over one hundred years and more.

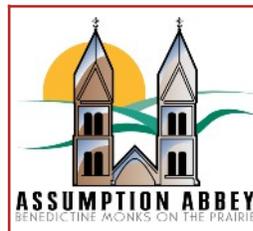
January 23: Our Fr. Benedict accompanies a group of University of Mary students to a Life Rally in Washington, DC. Even though they left the rally early to beat a predicted storm, they were caught on Pennsylvania Interstate 76 in the massive “Snowmagedon” and it left them stranded for 22 hours. Moral of the story: never travel without a big fat novel or the New York Times *Keep Calm and Crossword*.

FEBRUARY CHRONICLE

February 2: On the feast of the Presentation we bless the beeswax candles that will be used on the altar for the year in St. Joseph Chapel and process with lighted tapers to the church. Servers collect the tapers at the statue of Our Lady of Einsiedeln and they are left burning there in a large pot filled with sand. Outside, heavy hoarfrost covers every tree branch and vine because fog has held for days. We are living in the clouds!



February 3: the feast of Saint Blaise and the blessing of throats. The monks wouldn’t dream of doing away with this ritual, dating back at least to 1625, if not earlier. As the legend goes, St. Blaise miraculously cured a boy who was choking on fishbone (in days before the Heimlich maneuver was invented) and ever since a pair of candles is used to bless each throat: “May God deliver you from every disease of the throat and from every other illness!”



Development Office

Br. Michael Taffe, O.S.B.

mission: to bear effective witness to the world.

Pope Francis explained: “The jubilee is a favorable time for all of us, so that in contemplating divine mercy, which surpasses every human limitation and shines in the darkness of sin, we may become more convinced and effective witnesses.”

Given current turbulent events the world over, our pope is preparing us for effective witness. For each Christian, it is important to recognize one’s sins and ask for forgiveness, which God gives in unlimited mercy. We, in turn, are expected to forgive others in witness to Christ’s mission in order to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28: 19).

Doors have been opened. In the diocese of Bismarck, holy doors have been opened on December 13 at the Cathedral of

Doors have been opened. In the diocese of Bismarck, holy doors have been opened on December 13 at the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit in Bismarck, St. Joseph’s Church in Williston, St. Leo’s Church in Minot, and St. Mary’s Abbey Church in Richardton. A plenary indulgence can be obtained by using these doors by anyone who fulfills the conditions. Ask your local priest about these. Let us not walk away from this extraordinary opportunity. □

Throughout our lives, doors open and doors close. These openings and closings are mostly beyond our control. Nevertheless, we oftentimes take advantage of such events and turn what is unfortunate into some good or what is auspicious into something even better. The extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy is an opportunity where doors have opened wide to the saving mercy of Christ. In celebration of the 50th anniversary of the closing of Vatican II, a Year of Mercy is being celebrated from December 8, 2015 to the Solemnity of Christ the King on November 20, 2016. During this special period, Pope Francis is calling upon all Catholics to be witnesses of mercy and to “find joy rediscovering and rendering fruitful God’s mercy, with which we are all called to give comfort to every man and every woman of our time.”

Throughout the Church’s history there have been only three other extraordinary Jubilees. As things are, every twenty-five years the Holy Door of St. Peter’s basilica in Rome is opened for an ordinary jubilee. The next such event isn’t due until 2025. But Pope Francis has called for an extraordinary jubilee: an unscheduled jubilee. Why? What could be the reason for this exceptional business—this door opening—at this time in our history? The reason is to prepare the Church for what has always been its great

February 10: the feast of Saint Scholastica was pre-empted this year by Ash Wednesday. Nevertheless, we are invited by the Benedictine sisters to celebrate Scholastica, on February 13th with Vespers, dinner and recreation. The sisters are very good hosts.

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February 12: a tribute to our cooks comes by way of a guest, a member of a group using the abbey facilities, who asked, "What package brand was that lasagna?" One of the cooks answered, "It's called home-made."

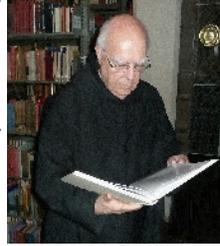
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February 29: Leap Year Day, and Father Claude Seeberger returns home from mission. At is ninety-one years old he had been serving the Presentation Sisters in Valley City, ND, and still has plenty of vim & vigor in him to entertain us at the abbey. He might reach 100! □



The interior of the abbey church during the Easter season.

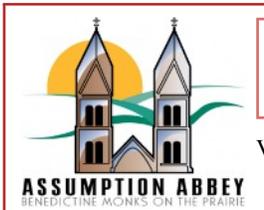
From the Library



Why I Am A Catholic by Garry Wills. This book is dated—having been published in 2002 during the pontificate of Benedict XVI—but significant enough to read again, if the reader can indulge the author in his lengthy personal history at the outset, setting a context, to be sure, but somewhat tedious. This book is not for the timid Catholic: 98% of it deals with the checkered and often appalling history of the Roman Catholic Church. One begins to wonder why Wills did not title it *Why I'm Not A Catholic* with all the sullied history of simony, ineffective councils, failed reform, bad popes one after another with their bumbling and bombast that led to the Protestant reformation. There have been periods in the Church's historical record that were shameful, and some of them not so ancient, such as the *Syllabus* of Pius IX in 1858 which condemned any criticism whatsoever of the Church, and the canonization of Pedro d'Arbus, a 15th century inquisitor who presided over the forced baptisms of thousands of Jews in Spain, or Leo XIII's invention of a heresy called "Americanism," along with his anti-Semitic behavior during the Dreyfus Affair in 1894. The list goes on.

For anyone not in the mood for criticism, skip to chapter 23, and thereafter, where Wills delivers a beautiful exposé of the Creed and the "Our Father" which are both enlightening and moving. Wills gives a concise and most useful description of

Vatican II. He also clearly explains the role of the pope and why the man who is elected to that exalted office has become a synecdoche of the universal Church. Wills has remained a Catholic because he acknowledges his need for the Church. "The heretic has many virtues (almost too many)," he says, "but he or she is almost always a snob." The Cathars were the "pure," the Manichaeans the "elect," the Calvinists the "predestined" and the Jansenists more worthy than other Christians "who receive the sacraments as pigs take slop." Reformers live by reform and have a narrower perfection, and they ultimately become too pure even for themselves. "They are fissiparous," Wills explains. Whereas the Church that Catholics know and love is unified, made up of sinners who acknowledge their sin and welcome all into their midst, including the town drunkard and the prostitute, because "Who are we to condemn?" If any human institution is carefully and thoroughly examined, no matter how worthy and noble its cause, that history is checkered because it is human. Peter of the gospels was a man of wrong action, inept and often ridiculous. He was unaware of his own instability. He was a coward and impulsive, and we identify with him because he was human. He was just like us. And through him Jesus worked. "I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." (Matthew 16:18) □



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Benedictine Saints

For anyone living outside Scotland, an odd name for a saint might be Fillan of Pittenweem. He was a Benedictine monk from a priory on the Isle of May in the Firth of Forth, which—believe it or not—is a real name, too: an estuary of Scotland’s river Forth where it runs into the North Sea. May Priory was founded by Reading Abbey under the patronage of King David I of Scotland in 1153. Fillan left the priory to convert the heathens of Pittenweem, and once that was accomplished, he retired to a cave where he wrote sermons by the light of his luminous left arm. Or so it was said. No one knew where the cave was until it was rediscovered in 1900 after

a horse fell down a hole. The hole turned out to be Fillan’s Cave. Inside was an altar and a small spring said to issue holy water. In 1935 the cave was rededicated as a place of worship and is open to the public, in case you find yourself in Pittenweem. Saint Fillan’s feast is June 20th.

June 14th is the feast of Brother Meinrad Eugster of the Abbey of Einsiedeln in Switzerland. He was born in 1848, entered the abbey in 1873 and professed vows in 1875. His entire life at Einsiedeln was spent as a humble brother in the tailor shop. He died in 1925 and his grave became so popular a pilgrimage site that it was

moved into the abbey church in 1960. That same year, the process for his beatification was begun by Pope John XXIII. Tailoring, it seems, is a very specific penance that can bring sanctification, to some.

On June 12, 2014, Pope Francis recognized as “blessed” the Benedictine oblate Itala Mela who died on April 29, 1957. Her life has been recognized as one lived in heroic virtue and a miracle has been attributed to her intercession. A date is yet to be announced for her beatification.

She was a Benedictine Oblate of the Abbey of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, in Rome. Itala was born in 1904 to non-believers. Her maternal grandparents prepared her for first communion and confirmation which she received in 1915. After the death of her brother, she slipped into atheism. However, she had a reawakening of the faith on the feast of the Immaculate Conception in 1922, and her motto became, "Lord, I shall follow You unto the darkness, unto death." She became a member of FUCI (Italian Catholic Federation of University Students) where she met Giovanni Battista Montini (the future Pope Paul VI) and the Benedictine monk Alfredo Ildefonso Cardinal Schuster. She was a brilliant student and earned a Bachelor of Letters and a Bachelor in Classical Studies. □

