Interview with Abbot Daniel Maloney, OSB

On July 27, 2017, Father Daniel Maloney was elected the ninth abbot of Assumption Abbey. The following is an interview with the new abbot.

How did someone of Irish extraction end up being abbot of a German-Russian/German-Hungarian abbey on the prairie?

I am not pure Irish. One of my grandmothers was Scottish. She was a convert. That said, I was recruited by an Irish abbot of Assumption Abbey: Robert West, who was serving in my hometown of Devils Lake as pastor of St. Joseph’s. Actually, my real parish was a country church near Webster, ND: Sts. Peter and Paul, founded by a Swiss abbot named Vincent Wehrle who also founded this abbey. That parish had an Irish pastor for years. My sisters attended St. Mary’s Academy in Devils Lake, and they introduced me to Robert West.

What is the role of an abbot in a Benedictine community? Does the Rule of St. Benedict describe how an abbot should lead a monastic community?

Chapter two of the Rule talks about qualities that the abbot should have. He is a spiritual leader, and he assigns tasks to monks. He ought to lead by example. He must deal with the spiritual and material needs of each individual in the monastery, and so the abbot must be aware of the differences of each monk and take that into account.

You were chaplain to the Benedictine sisters in Bismarck for more than thirty years. What do you bring with you from that experience that will be helpful in your role as abbot?

I had to preach every day. And I was responsible to many different personalities. I had to take into account the preferences of the community, how they wanted to carry out ceremonies, etc. I had the opportunity to work with many different superiors, so I had to be flexible. The sisters stressed the importance of liturgy.

What will be the biggest differences between the two roles?

A chaplain has no authority over the inner life of a convent. But an abbot is in charge of an abbey. The monks and the sisters pronounce a vow of obedience. The sisters are responsible to their superior, not the chaplain. I had no role in administration there. But I do have that role here, as abbot.

Do you recall seeing the abbot as distinct from other monks, back when you attended Assumption Abbey High School?

The role of the abbot back then was distinctive due to the customs of the times. For instance, one kissed the abbot’s ring, and the abbot regularly
The new abbot of Assumption Abbey, Daniel Maloney, is blessed by the Most Reverend David Dennis Kagan, Bishop of Bismarck, with Brothers Michael Taffe and Alban Petesch assisting.

Consulting with the monks is very important. We must maintain a sound financial approach. There is a need for ongoing maintenance and improvement. In this day and age we need more help from the outside in the form of financial and spiritual support. We used to pride ourselves at being entirely self-sufficient, but this is not possible anymore.

Your formal education includes degrees in philosophy. How does that discipline inform the way you look at leading the monastic community?

Philosophy gives a wide look at life that is useful. Logic, critical thinking, ethical standards: these involve fresh perspectives on things. One has to be aware of differing viewpoints. Philosophy demands abstract thinking, and this is important. Philosophy involves principles and the application of principles to areas of life. Philosophy is also a good preparation for theology.

What would you ask from others to support you in your new role, in addition to prayer?

Cooperation, and taking responsibility. We need to acknowledge the changing nature of our community: we have grown older, and many of us have health care needs.

When you were elected, what went through your head?

I was surprised. I am not young; I am 75. And I have been away from the abbey for thirty-four years.

What was the earliest thing you learned at the abbey that still influences you today?

I learned at a young age that I needed the help and encouragement of others. Abbots were a positive force in my life because of their encouragement.

What would surprise young men today about abbey life, if they were to learn of it?

Probably the common life would be a surprise to them, about the interaction of monks with one another. Also the variety of work that takes place in an abbey. They might also...
be surprised about the amount of classes and study in the formation program.

Which is most important for leadership of the monastic community: patience, discipline, decisiveness, transparency, creativity, clear communication, a sense of humor, resilience?

All of them are important. Certainly patience and a sense of humor are vital. I’d say it’s determination.

Requiescat in pace

Fr. Raymond’s first assignment after ordination was to manage the Abbey print shop. In 1955 he became assistant Procurator and Instructor to the lay brothers. The following year, he needed heart surgery. He was only 27 years old. On December 10, 1956, he underwent open-heart surgery at the University of Minnesota Heart Hospital in Minneapolis. He suffered a stroke during the operation due to an air block, and he remained in a coma for ten days. After many months of rehabilitation he recovered, although he always had some impairment in movement.

Fr. Raymond was appointed pastor of St. Clement’s Parish, Haymarsh, ND, in December of 1963. Then, in 1967, he was appointed to Sacred Heart Parish in Solen, ND, with its mission of Odense. In 1971, he became chaplain at Mercy Hospital, Devils Lake, ND, where he ministered until 1979. He returned that year to the Abbey to work in the Abbey Press and in the woodcraft shop. He also served in the Visitors Center answering the telephone, served as stipendarius, and took his regular turn as chaplain to the Benedictine Sisters at Sacred Heart Monastery. Initially, he did regular weekend work—especially at St. Patrick’s Church in Dickinson, ND—but as the years went by Fr. Raymond was forced to discontinue pastoral work. His long and generous service in the Abbey Visitors Center also decreased and was finally given to others.

Despite the effects of his condition, Fr. Raymond never complained. He was everfaithful to the daily round of monastic prayer and liturgy. Polite and soft-spoken, he was a kind-hearted confessor to many, and a good example in his unshakable hope in improvement, especially in his daily workout sessions in the exercise room which kept him limber and his bones strong. Despite his many falls, he never suffered a fracture.

A Vigil Service was held at the Abbey on Monday, October 30, at 7:00 p.m., and the Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated in the Abbey church on Tuesday, October 31, at 10:30 a.m. Interment was in the Abbey cemetery.

Father Raymond Dietlein, OSB

Father Raymond (Francis) Dietlein, OSB, died late Wednesday afternoon, October 25, 2017, at St. Benedict’s Health Center in Dickinson, ND, after three years of residence in that care facility.

Francis Dietlein was born on September 26, 1929, in Braddock, ND, to Peter and Regina (Heembrock) Dietlein. After completing his elementary education in a rural school near Braddock, he came to Assumption Abbey where he finished high school and junior college. He entered the abbey novitiate in 1948 and was given the name Raymond. He made his profession of vows in 1949. After graduating from Saint Martin’s College in Lacey, WA, in 1951, he studied Theology at Assumption Abbey and was ordained a priest by Bishop Lambert Hoch in 1954.

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I was born Michael McDaniels to African American parents in Los Angeles, CA, who wed in a “Primitive Baptist” church in 1963. Unfortunately, however, they separated when I was a child. My father moved to Las Vegas, NV, while my mother—a businesswoman—stayed in Los Angeles raising my two older brothers and me. Religion wasn’t a priority to her, but she allowed me to go to church with a childhood friend while I was still in pre-school. It was during this time when my conversations with God began, that I began to follow my heart, and joined a local Christian church and was baptized—my first conversion. After I graduated from high school I took a course on the Bible as literature from a junior college in Santa Monica, CA. As an adult, I found both church history and Sacred Scripture fascinating. After explaining my feelings to my college professor, he suggested I look into studying at Wheaton College. So I got information from Wheaton and realized that my grades needed to improve. So I continued to take college courses and within a couple of years I applied and was accepted into Wheaton.

At Wheaton I majored in Biblical Studies, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1988. One of my more memorable courses was a class on Christian history. In addition, I made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land which included tours of Rome and Greece. These helped me to understand the universal church—Christendom—in a whole new light. Then at the age of twenty-five, I joined the Catholic Church because it contained more of what I envisioned as universal—my second conversion.

Again, I was faced with a number of choices. For a while I pursued a master’s degree at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. While studying there, I taught religion for a year at St. Bernard Catholic High School. At one point, I managed our family restaurant—Benny’s Bar-B-Que—but I didn’t feel this was the direction God wanted my life to go. I also grappled with marriage versus religious life. Discernment was not easy; and at the invitation of a friend, discernment led me to Fargo, ND. The decision to move was both for religious and economic reasons. I was fortunate to purchase my first home in Fargo which added stability to my life. I lived and worked in the Fargo-Moorhead area for a decade. While still active in church, I made several private retreats at St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville, MN, which is how I became acquainted with the Benedictines.

There was another group of Benedictines located south of Fargo, beyond the North Dakota boarder, in Marvin, SD—Blue Cloud Abbey. I spent a summer at Blue Cloud in a volunteer/discernment program and then I entered the novitiate in the spring of 2011. However, in less than a year, while I was still a novice, the monks at Blue Cloud decided to close. After
On Saturday, September 23, 2017, I took the final step in becoming a full-fledged monk: solemn profession. One might have presumed I was already a monk in final vows given my responsibilities as the coordinator of groups for the Abbey, but I was still a monk in formation. Now my formal training is over, but the life-long pursuit of perfection, only beginning.

Newly-elected Abbot Daniel Maloney presided over the ceremony which took place in Assumption Abbey Church. Among the guests were the Oblates of St. Benedict affiliated with Assumption Abbey who, for the first time, witnessed a solemn profession; the timing was no accident, for it was intentionally planned to occur during their bi-annual retreat. Several monks from St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville, MN, made the long drive to Richardton. My older brother flew in from Las Vegas, NV—the first time any of my relatives had been to the state. Some close friends carpooled from the Fargo-Moorhead area, and others, locally, answered my invitation. The occasion was festive and rare, for the last solemn profession took place thirteen years ago.

It wasn’t until high school that I began to follow my heart, and joined a local Christian church and was baptized—my first conversion. After I graduated from high school I took a course on the Bible as literature from a junior college in Santa Monica, CA. As an adult, I found both church history and Sacred Scripture fascinating. After explaining my feelings to my college professor, he suggested I look into studying at Wheaton College. So I got information from Wheaton and realized that my grades needed to improve. So I continued to take college courses and within a couple of years I applied and was accepted into Wheaton.

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August 6: Abbot John Klassen of St. John’s Abbey, MN, and Father James Flint of St. Procopius Abbey, IL, are here for the quinquennial visitation. No need to look up the word: it means “recurring every five years.” And visitation means “an official visit of inspection.” Abbot John and Father James were friendly inspectors, and quite thorough nonetheless. 

August 21: During the solar eclipse, an owl came out to perch on the top of one of the tall spruce on the east side of the abbey, fooled into nighttime activity. Later, during the real night, lightning knocked out the lights
The kitchen is a busy place at Assumption Abbey. On average, 3,100 plates a month are served: breakfast, lunch and dinner every day, 700 of these plates for guests. Imagine doing all those dishes by hand! Already the monks wash the pots and pans by hand, three times each day, every day of the week, so we do not complain about an old dishwasher for plates, saucers, silverware, glasses and cups; washing these by hand would require countless hours. In order to keep our old machine going, Brother John and the monks in the maintenance department spend much time and energy servicing it, trying to get every last ounce of energy out of a dying piece of equipment. The poor thing is at the end of its workable service. We believe that it is time for a new dishwasher. Here is where your help would be so much appreciated. Industrial dishwashers are expensive. And readjusting an old dishwashing room—possibly blocking in windows and moving doorways—is even more expensive. But the improvement to our food service facilities would be invaluable. Your kindness and generosity would make possible a smooth-flowing service and spanking clean dishes!

Giving Hearts Day, called the most generous day of the year, has been online since 2008, providing a gateway for people to connect to causes in doing good work in areas they care about. On February 9, simply log on to impactgiveback.org and go to Assumption Abbey to make a donation. Assumption Abbey is fortunate to be able to work with local groups from the Dickinson area and will be sending out a reminder in the mail in addition to posting updates to Facebook and our website. We appreciate your generosity and support! Thank you for all the kindness you show to our good Abbey.
I believe we need various types of books to help us learn about our faith, about God, about the Church and the world, and about ourselves. For example, we have books that may take a look at very specific events in depth (for example, a biography or the history of a specific parish). Other books help us take a wider view of an historical period. A book that I would recommend in this latter category is *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650* by Carlos Eire.

One of the author’s beliefs is that it is important to know who we are, and to understand this, we need to take a look at the church and religious reformations that occurred in Europe during this time period. The author also addresses the issue of terminology used: what is meant by the term *reformation*? How, for example, did Catholics view changes in churches versus Protestants?

The author uses the term *Reformations* in the plural to describe the fact that there were different and many reformations going on at the same time. Thus, the book is comprised of 4 different parts: 1) what was happening in the late Medieval period in Europe, 2) the emergence of Protestantism, 3) the reform of Catholicism, and 4) the outcome of all of these reformations.

Each of these reformations was formed and informed by the other reformations. Various churches worked to distinguish themselves from other churches, to highlight how each saw an access and insight to God, and what was the role and meaning of church and church leaders (and to make sure that others knew that these other churches tended to be wrong about some little things or many big things).

Again, I found how the author put all of this together to be very, very interesting. This is not a book you would want to carry on a plane – the text is about 750 pages – but a work that instructs and enlivens and well worth the read.
Benedictine Saints

February 10 is the feast of Saint Scholastica, the sister of Saint Benedict. Some say twin sister. She is credited with founding the female branch of the Benedictine order, and for that reason is often depicted holding a crozier and wearing a pectoral cross, as does an abbess. Born in Nursia in 480, she and her brother were brought up together, receiving the same education until he left for further studies in Rome. She, being a woman of her times, probably remained in her father’s house, as most women did until they were given away to their husbands. Scholastica, however, became a nun, and might well have been a nun even before her brother underwent the conversion that led to his own life as a monk. In fact, it could have been that Scholastica was the stronger and more experienced of the two, beginning her religious life at the foot of Monte Cassino as a hermit, then founding a convent after other women gathered around her. Later, Benedict, following in her footsteps, modeled his life on hers, consulting her regularly about all things spiritual. According to St. Gregory in his Dialogues, Benedict, during one of these meetings with his sister, indicated that it was time for him to leave. Scholastica begged him to stay so that they might pass the evening together and continue their discussions.

When he refused, Scholastica put her head down in prayer and a powerful storm blew in with rain and wind. He scolded her saying, “What have you done?” She answered, “I asked you to stay, and because you did not listen, I turned to God who did listen. So now go off, if you can, and leave me.” Because Benedict was unable to return to his abbey, they spent the night in discussion and prayer. Three days later—according to the Dialogues—Benedict saw the soul of his sister ascend to heaven in the form of a white dove. That is why she is often depicted with a dove. Benedict had her body brought to Monte Cassino where it was placed in his own tomb. There have been many brother-sister tombs unearthed at Monte Cassino, a story repeating itself over the ages. If there is any moral in the story that St. Gregory tells, it might be this: Men, don’t cross your sister. God is on her side.

A window in the apse of the Abbey church depicting Saint Scholastica with a white dove hovering in front of her.