

# Assumption

## ABBNEY NEWSLETTER

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## Monastic Discipleship

By Alban Petesch, OSB

*The following conference was given on March 30, 2017.*

Long ago, a young man came to the monastery to seek God. He burned with enthusiasm and fervor for the things of God, and the monastery seemed the absolutely right place for him. He did all that was asked of him in those early days, even things that, to his mind, seemed pointless, if not downright silly. Still his desire burned strong and life was very agreeable. He was so fortunate to have found these holy men with whom to live so that they could lead him on the way to God and teach him the ways of love.

After a short while, however, he noticed that some of the "holy" brothers were not quite what he thought. One brother was inclined to squirrel away food. "Aha, that explains his lethargy and ample figure," thought the newcomer. Another monk would loiter at the gate of the monastery, visiting with all who passed by. "Hm," thought the young man, "his interest lies outside rather than inside." Yet another brother would dis-



The darkened Abbey church during the Easter Vigil when the faithful hold their candles and the Easter Proclamation, or the *Exsultet*, is sung before the paschal candle.

appear into the library for hours at a time and miss the communal events at which the novice had to be present. "He is escaping and not living our common life," condemned the aspirant. And finally, the young man began to scrutinize the abbot, yes, even the abbot: "What about that little dog and the gold finch he keeps in his room?" It seemed that everywhere the young man turned he ran headlong into infractions of the rules of monastic life and the gross humanity of his brother monks. The bliss and excitement of his first encounter with the life ended in scrutiny and judgment of others, and no one

escaped his examination, and, alas, no one was found who measured up to his standards.

The young novice, however, was not deterred from his desire to remain. The prayer and the daily round of routines were pleasing to him. There were, in fact, more good days than bad. And despite their faults and less-than-holy behavior, the newcomer found many brothers he did like, so he was able, more or less, to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to most of their shortcomings. So he professed simple vows.

After his profession, the young monk began to study

with great discipline and attention the monastic tradition and monastic texts. He was encouraged in this by his confreres and superiors. But now he no longer just cast an eye of distaste at his brothers, he began to look at all of monastic life with skepticism. Everything he read and everything he studied indicated to him that the monks of the present day were so much less than the monks of the past, even the recent past. The liturgy was watered down, monastic customs and practices were lost or discarded, the Rule no longer carried much weight in the daily round of things. His brothers' idea of asceticism was farcical in comparison to what their predecessors had practiced. In short, he asked himself what the point was in knowing all of this, if no one was going to live it.

Life wasn't completely miserable. He was given new responsibilities and new opportunities. He was accepted more as one of the community and these shortcomings became habit. The new questions were difficult, but they were tolerable. Besides, he found new ways to amuse himself and alleviate the struggles of life. Among the old texts in the library he discovered a trove of fables and tales which transported him well beyond the walls of the cloister. When things were too hard or seemed unendurable, he just transported himself away to a make-believe world. In fact, at times, the world from these tales was more important to him than the present reality. He began to live



with them, these fictional beings, and not with his brothers in community.

The time arose when he was ready for solemn profession and the abbot and the capitulars presented him with the question: "Do you wish to live here for the rest of your life as one of our members?" They had little reason to doubt the young monk's sincerity and fervor. After all, he spent long hours studying, he was responsible, he worked hard. When the question was posed to him, he had little doubt in his own mind that he was ready for this step. Despite the difficulties, he still was certain that this is what *he* wanted.

In order to prepare for this profession the abbot called him to his office. After the dog stopped barking and the bird perched itself on the abbot's shoulder, they began to talk. The abbot told the young monk that he was quite pleased with everything about him and that they had happily accepted him into the community. The abbot asked the young man if he had

any questions or concerns. Even though he had a multitude of thoughts running through his head, the young monk could only respond in the negative. The abbot then surprised him by telling him he was starting a new policy. Every candidate for solemn profession would now be required to make a retreat, and for his retreat master the abbot had chosen an old priest who lived in the parish a short distance from the monastery. Having blessed him, the abbot sent him away for these spiritual exercises.

On the walk to the parish house, the young monk was seething inside. "What could a parish priest, and an old one at that, possibly have to tell me about monastic life? What was the abbot thinking? This only proves he's a fool and an incompetent!" Arriving at the rectory, the young monk knocked and was greeted by a little gourd-like creature who had to be the priest, because he was dressed like one. After exchanging greetings, the old man showed his guest his room and the church, inviting him to avail himself of this opportunity and also informing him that he would be most happy to converse with him at any time. Secretly, the young man was appalled at the utter simplicity and apparent imbecility of the little old priest. But orders were orders, so he gritted his teeth and began his retreat. For two days he was always in his room or in the church. He ate with the priest and served his mass, but they exchanged few words.

On the third day he began to tire of his confines, this new-

found free time, and he itched a bit for the routine of the monastery. He went outside and began to tidy up the little garden of the parish house. The priest came out and watched the young monk, without saying a word. The little black eyes staring at him disturbed the young monk, so he asked in a rather snappish tone: "Why did my abbot send me here? You're not even a monk. What do you know of monastic life?" The priest hesitated before responding and finally said: "Your abbot sent you to me because I said I would make you welcome. As for monastic life, I am familiar with your Rule, having read it and lived in the vicinity of the monastery most of my life, but I would not claim to know it as one who has lived it. As to the exact reason he sent you here, I could not say. Do you have any other questions?" Taken aback by his honesty and gentleness, the monk rested from his labors and told him what was bothering him. How there was no monasticism left in monastic life, how his brothers, though mostly likeable, were all too human and oh so weak. "And as for the abbot, well, the less said the better." Finally, he blurted out his deepest, darkest thought, what was at the heart of it all, "Father, where is God in all of this?" With that he collapsed on the ground and rested his head in his hands. The old man hobbled over near the young man and stood before him, "My son, God is right where he has always been. Right with you, every step of the way." "But, Father," the monk replied, "then, why is it

all so difficult? What is it all about?"

"Ah, I don't know much about monastic life, child, but I do know what it's all about." And while the young monk looked up at him with eager eyes, he continued, "It's all about love. Nothing more, nothing less. When your brothers display themselves to you as ever so human, that is God teaching you a little lesson about acceptance and tolerance, about patience and compassion. It is a lesson in love. And when you read all that stuff about monastic life and you see how badly they live it in the monastery that is another lesson in love. This time God is telling you: 'What's more important: the rules or the people?' Do you want perfection in ritual and in order, in discipline and in custom, or do you want sincerity and authenticity? You might not find them hand in hand very often in this life. Which do you love the more? The external or the internal? And, child, why are you being so hard on your brothers when you've got a few things of your own to work on? Why do you complain of laxity when you carry that big book of fables all the way out here on retreat?"

The young man hung his head in shame. The blood rushed to his cheeks and tears filled his eyes. "Oh, don't be ashamed," the old man consoled, "We all have our little escapes and methods of running away. But that's another lesson in love. You have to love yourself despite your weaknesses, because God loves you,

and your brothers love you, otherwise they wouldn't accept you. But it should teach you not to be too hard on others, if you're not going to be too hard on yourself. When life or the community gives you a hard lesson, it's really God trying to tell you something. And when life is beautiful and the graces are showered down on you, again that's God teaching you another lesson. Don't miss the lessons when they come, and they come all the time." With that the old man turned to go back into the house. Halfway up the walk, he turned and said: "Oh! One more thing: God loves a cheerful giver." □

## OCTOBER CHRONICLES

October 11: Kind folks have given us their own farm eggs, which are unbeatable for their rich yolks and wonderful flavor. One of our cooks was cracking each in turn into a large bowl for scrambling when she said, "Oh my!" and looked again into the bowl as if she couldn't believe her eyes. You have heard of double yolkers. Well, how about this: one completely formed egg inside another! Yes, that's right: like Russian nesting dolls, she found one completely formed egg inside another. ❖

October 12: The carpet cleaners from Dickinson are here and spent the entire day cleaning the extensive carpets throughout the house. All of them are clean and smell clean. One hopes that the monks will keep it that way for a while. The

biggest culprit is soda pop. Some believe that the abbot should either ban soda pop altogether, or allow the monks only sippy cups. ❖

October 13: Some nice person donates a big box of wooden hangers, disgusted with the wire hangers in our guest rooms. Wooden hangers are more durable and have a longer life span than plastic. Over time, inexpensive hangers sag, and the fabric of the clothes hanging on it stretch out of shape. Not to mention the look of elegance with a closet full of lovely wooden hangers. ❖

October 16: At the Abbey we are celebrating the feast of Saint Gall, a Swiss monk, and a disciple of Saint Columban. We might be the only Benedictine abbey within the American-Cassinense congregation that celebrates this saint. That's because he had something to do with our being here. Gall was an Irish monk who followed Columban into territory that is now known as Switzerland. He converted the Swiss to Catholicism and is the patron of Switzerland. Our abbey is of Swiss origin. If there had been no Gall, there would have been no Assumption Abbey. ❖

October 20: A mouse is seen scurrying through the choir stalls in church, looking for a warmer place to live now that the cold weather has set in. But he will have to find accommodations elsewhere! ❖

October 28: Brother Jacob Deiss appears on KFYR TV with Abbot Daniel Maloney in a short news item entitled "War



and Peace." Being somewhat close to Veterans Day, Br. Jacob was featured as a navy vet of Operation Desert Storm in the Persian Gulf. Of the interview, Jacob said, "I was very nervous" although to us he appeared cool as a cucumber. ❖

October 26-27: The Troops of St. George and their fathers are with us again this year for prayer, meals, and work. They kindly raked leaves from the lawn for us. At a question and answer session, one of them asked, "Do you wear black pajamas?" Another asked, "Are your hoods real or fake?" (Perhaps he meant useable or un-useable?) The answer to the first is: not necessarily. To the second: definitely real. ❖

October 31: One of the monks is sent to the Bismarck airport to fetch the Abbot and Prior upon their return from Bogotá, Colombia. They arrive and wait for the monk-chauffer to show up. After an hour of waiting they phone the abbey. "He should be there!" they are told. And he is: up in the gallery, but not on the lookout at all. It could have been another two or three hours of stand-off: apparently it's the Abbot and Prior's duty to find the chauffeur, not the other way around. ❖

## NOVEMBER CHRONICLE

November 1: It's All Saints Day and our friend and oblate from Switzerland, Elizabeth Dryer, plays the baroque oboe during our liturgy. Good thing we have an electronic piano that can be automatically set to Baroque period tuning, 25 Hertz below today's standard pitch, and also that the electronic piano can instantly sound like a harpsicord. Soft Baroque instruments are well-suited to our relatively small church with its resonant plaster ceilings. ❖

November 9: The FedEx delivery woman asks for help in taking three large, heavy boxes from her truck, gifts sent to us from a woman who has never been here but insists that our prayers helped her to recover physically, though she wonders if we will accept anything, "from an old Lutheran lady." Inside the boxes are three flint-gray, microfiber-upholstered couches, and they are very comfortable. "You boys need these," she says. ❖

November 9: Two ladies join us for Noon Prayer and lunch. They explain that they have been friends with each other for 75 years. "How could that be?" one of the monks asks. "You don't look old enough!" They say that their parents introduced them to each other when they were only two years old, and they have always lived in the same area. ❖

November 10: Abbot Daniel loses his ring when it falls off his

finger and down into the car seat, requiring Br. Louie to take the seat apart. The ring is too big for his finger. ❖

November 11: American Legion Posts nationwide ask for bells to be tolled 21 times at 11:00 a.m. today. The big Abbey bell in the east tower is tolled in memory of the ending of World War I, the armistice, and to honor service members. Tolling the bell 21 times represents a 21-gun salute. ❖

November 16: In the midst of a snowstorm, someone rings the bell at the front door. We had forgotten that the bell even worked, our "front door" changing from here to there over the years. The young man who rings is a student from the University of Mary, here for a short retreat. He probably stood waiting for quite some time. ❖

November 19: A man telephones wanting to stop in and visit with a priest. He wants the sacrament of confession. He is very insistent, though he adds, "I'm a Lutheran. I hope that doesn't matter." ❖

## DECEMBER CHRONICLE

December 1: Christmas Open House and the freezing rain and fog have kept many away. We are surprised, nevertheless, with the good number who did come. One nice lady bought an expensive Nativity set, then left it in the Gift Shop to go off and buy Abbey bread. She never returned to collect the set, and because she paid for it with a

## From the Archives:



November, 1965: Groundbreaking for Sacred Heart Monastery, then known as Sacred Heart Convent. L to R: Fr. Odo Muggli, Fr. Leo Gourde, Mother Anita Soukup, Abbot Ignatius Hunkler, Fr. Alcuin Muggli and Sacred Heart Benedictine sisters. Abbot Ignatius talked the sisters into moving down to Richardton from their convent in Minot in order to help the monks run a junior college. The Abbey enticed the sisters with fifty acres of land. They built a new home, a "little house on the prairie," but the junior college closed in 1971 at the end of the school year. As of February 19, 2019, the sisters have informed the public that they will leave Sacred Heart Monastery and move into Dickinson, 22 miles from this site, in July or August. Their "little house on the prairie" is for sale, should you know of any interested purchasers.

credit card we don't have her address. ❖

December 6: We are visited again this year by a generous St. Nick who leaves sweets at each bedroom door during the night, only this time no shoes were required, as they had been in the past. Jolly Saint Nicholas now leaves sweets in Ziploc bags, one guesses, at the North Pole Super Walmart. ❖

December 8: Rehearsal is taking place in the Abbey church for a performance of Handel's "Messiah" and drums can be heard through the wall. Hopefully, the rehearsing musicians will not hear any return fire, since the monks are

watching their Saturday night movie. ❖

December 9: A production of Handel's "Messiah" by Dickinson State University takes place in the Abbey church: a very moving performance. ❖

December 17: The prior gives the green light to Christmas lights outside. Among other shiny illuminations, Brother Llewellyn plugs in a lavender icicle LEDS that someone gave him: a cascading show of linked lights in front of the pottery that instantly hypnotizes the viewer. No one would be surprised by frozen observers facing this display. □

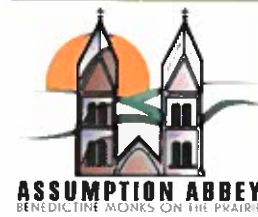
## † Requiescat in pace



Photos by Jacy

Father Victor (Gerald) Feser, monk of Assumption Abbey, died peacefully in the Richardton Health Center, Richardton, ND, on February 11, attended by his brothers in religion. He was eighty years old.

Father Victor was born in Mandan, ND, on October 12, 1938, the son of Louis J. and Elizabeth (Weiss) Feser. He grew up on a farm east of Glen Ullin and attended rural school nearby. He graduated from Assumption Abbey High School in 1955. After attending Assumption Abbey College for two years he entered the novitiate in 1957. Victor completed his undergraduate studies at St. John's University. When it came to priestly training he was a pure product of the Assumption Abbey seminary, having done all his Theology there while teaching Latin and Mathematics in the Abbey schools. He was also



We wish to express our heart-felt gratitude for your generosity on Giving Hearts Day which took place on Thursday, February 14, 2019, the 24-hour fundraising event benefiting charities throughout North Dakota. All funds raised for Assumption Abbey will go, as promised, to the library needs of *San Benito de Tibatí* in Bogotá, Colombia, for books and updated shelving. The school is a Catholic high school under the auspices of the Benedictine monks of *Tibatí*, Benedictines who are full members of Assumption Abbey here in Richardton. *San Benito* was founded in 1978 in the slums outside of Bogotá because there were no Catholic

*Socius* of novices, and attended St. Louis University during the summer months, working towards an M.A. in Mathematics. After being ordained to the priesthood on May 23, 1964, Father Victor was sent to Minot to teach the Benedictine sisters philosophy at their mother-house, Sacred Heart Convent. This assignment lasted only through the summer. In the fall of 1964 he was sent off to Munich to study dogmatic Theology with Michael Schmaus, Karl Rahner and others. He was only a thesis away from a doctorate in Theology in 1967 but changed lanes and ultimately earned a Ph.D. in Mathematics from St. Louis University in 1975. He

## Development Office

Br. Michael Taffe, O.S.B.

schools in the region. *San Benito* has a very small library and very great needs.

Lent has been a *via crucis*, a Way of the Cross traveled anew this liturgical year. You will be receiving an Easter appeal about our paving needs here at the Abbey. The time has come for us to resurface some old paving. Large areas of asphalt have become broken and pose a potential hazard to visitors, guests, our employees and the monks. We thank you in advance for your generosity with this important project, and for your prayerful support. Without your help and concern, we would be at a loss with such daunting necessities. □

was appointed chaplain to the Benedictine sisters at Anunciation Monastery that same year and held the position until 1982. He also taught at what would later become the University of Mary. Becoming a full-time professor of Mathematics in 1982, Father Victor was instrumental in the formation of Mary's mathematics major which began in 1988. He eventually became a veteran and senior member of the teaching faculty, the first person to carry the university's ceremonial mace at its 2009 commencement. He taught until he retired to the Abbey in 2014. His work was mainly teaching but he assisted in various ways at parishes in Bismarck and

elsewhere. For over twenty-five years he offered Mass at United Tribes Technical College in Bismarck throughout the school year. During the summer months he often helped out in parishes in Wyoming.

Father Victor was known for his passion for recycling. He brought the Earth Day celebration to the Mary College campus during the 1989-90 school year. Assembling a crew from the college, they cleaned the ditches along the highway at a time when recycling had not been "invented" yet. Father Victor will be remembered for his abstemiousness. For years he collected aluminum beer and soda cans, cashing them in for cigarette money. And he wasn't exactly a man of high fashion: he continued to wear old clothes until they were threadbare.

In June of 2017 Father Victor entered the Richardton Health Care Center as a resident, occupying the same room that Abbot Brian had as a resident. Father Victor was an avid reader of the Sue Grafton alphabet novels.

Father Victor was preceded in death by his parents, and two brothers: Wallace and Victor. He is survived by a brother, Tom.

A Vigil Service was held at 7:00 p.m. on February 14<sup>th</sup>. On Friday, February 15<sup>th</sup> the Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated at Assumption Abbey followed by burial in the Abbey cemetery.



## From the Library

By Br. Michael Taffe



Books are wonderful things and can tell us all kinds of information, even beyond the words of the printed page. For those of you who are book lovers, a book I would like to recommend is: *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts: Twelve Journeys Into the Medieval World* by Christopher de Hamel. He is one of the world's leading paleographers – those people who specialize in the study of ancient manuscripts. The author takes the reader on a tour of twelve different manuscripts. Each manuscript has a story of how it was developed and why it is so important for our intellectual and spiritual lives. Many of these manuscripts are Bibles or prayer books, but not all.

The author gives us a description of the libraries which currently house these manuscripts. He also tells us his first impressions of the books: how they are bound, what the book looks like, how it is expected that he should treat them, etc. For example, when he goes to view the Book of Kells in Ireland, the librarians asked him not to describe in too much detail how the manuscript is stored because it is so central to the identity of the country and they would not want it to be stolen!

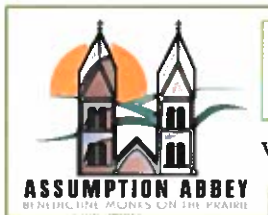
He begins with the Gospel of St. Augustine which was

reported to have been sent with St. Augustine by Pope St. Gregory the Great to Christianize England in the sixth century. (I will let you read the chapter to see the author's conclusions about whether it really is the authentic manuscript or not). An interesting aspect of the chapters is how each manuscript arrived at its current location. One of my favorite chapters is on the *Codex Amiatinus*. This book is a Bible that was copied in the north of England around the year 700. The Bible from which it was copied came from Rome and three copies were made. This codex was taken back to Italy and stored away. Currently it is used as a major source for determining what St. Jerome wrote in the Vulgate edition of the Bible. There are some notes made (as the monks were trying to determine a correct reading of scripture) and the author speculates that some of these notes might have been made by St. Bede as he was one of the great intellectuals of the time!

De Hamel suggests that one use a magnifying glass on his book to be able to really see the pictures and calligraphy, which I did. Enjoy this wonderful book about manuscripts. □



Photos by Jacy



# Newsletter

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## Benedictine Saints

April 6<sup>th</sup> is the feast of Blessed Notker the Stammerer, so called because his biographer, Ekkehard IV, who was one of Notker's Latin and Greek students, said he was "delicate of body but not of mind, stuttering of tongue but not of intellect." Both Notker and Ekkehard were monks of the Abbey of St. Gall. Notker was born around 840. He was given as a child to the abbey, which was a common custom in those days, ensuring that the child would be brought up out of harm's way and educated. He was taught by Iso of St. Gall, became a monk, and was mentioned as early as 890 as being the librarian and master

of guests. But he was also a teacher in St. Gall's famous schools. He was a great lover of art, poetry and music, and introduced the sequence into area churches. Notker wrote the *Gesta Karoli*, or "The Deeds of Charlemagne." According to the *Colledgeville Benedictine Martyrology* (1922), Notker was humble, despite his learning and popularity, and "did not disdain to perform the lowliest services in the house." He died in 912 and was beatified in 1512. In 1798 Napoleon invaded the Old Swiss Confederation and destroyed the *Ancien Régime*. The Abbey of St. Gall was suppressed in 1803. Today it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

May 27<sup>th</sup> is the feast of Saint Bede the Venerable, Benedictine and Doctor of the Church. He was born in 673 within the old Kingdom of Northumbria of the Angles and given to the Abbey of Monkwearmouth at the age of seven. He later joined Abbot Ceolfrith at the Abbey of Jarrow. Both of them survived the plague of 686 that killed the majority of the population there. He spent his days at Jarrow and became famous as a teacher and writer. His most famous work is *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* which gained for him the title "The Father of English History." His writings covered a wide range of subjects: commentaries on Holy Scripture, philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, as well as history. His brothers elected him abbot but in his humility he declined. Bede was sixty-two when he began to ail before Easter in 735. He distributed some little keepsakes to his brothers, including peppercorns, and spoke cheerfully of his approaching death. He was never canonized because a cult of the saint was never established in England, due to the fact that he died on the feast of St. Augustine of Canterbury. In lieu of "Saint" he was called Bede the Venerable. In 1899, Pope Leo declared him a Doctor of the Church. □

