

# Assumption

## ABBHEY NEWSLETTER

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## The Power of Belief

Faith moves mountains. Or does it? In Matthew chapter eight, Jesus is entering Capernaum and a centurion approaches him with a request that he heal his servant lying at home, paralyzed and suffering dreadfully. Jesus offers to come right away and heal him, but the centurion—not being Jewish and feeling self-conscious and unworthy to approach Jesus—says, “Just say the word and my servant will be healed.” Jesus is impressed with the centurion’s faith in him and remarks, “Amen, I say to you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.” He reassures the centurion that his servant will recover, and we know the rest of the story: the servant is, in fact, healed.

So often, Jesus extols faith in the gospels. In Matthew, for instance, Jesus speaks of it twenty times, including when he acclaims the centurion. “Take heart, your faith has made you well” (Matt. 9:22); “According to your faith, let it be done for you” (Matt. 9:29); “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish” (Matt. 15:28); “Amen I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not



Brother Placid Gross sitting in front of the cafeteria windows.

only will you do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen” (Matt. 21:21).

Leaving moving mountains aside for a moment, non-Christians might attribute healing and other miracles to the power of faith alone, only a slight variant to the good old American dictum, “If you believe in yourself you can achieve anything.”

Americans want to know that they can do *anything*. There is a secular theory that a “growth mindset” as opposed to a “fixed mindset” can lead to

achievement on almost any level. In other words, if a person renounces “fixed mindset” (i.e. “I’m just not a math person”) in favor of “growth mindset” (i.e. “I can foster and build *any* ability”), belief leads to behavior change, which in turn leads to results. Many words and pages have been devoted to how the key is to motivate yourself to change for the better. None of this literature is bad, but we must remember that it’s not from the gospel, and it’s not anything similar to what Jesus said.

The substance of self-help is self-concern. The substance of the gospel is God-concerned.

Self-help gurus tell you that *you* can be the architect of your own life: if you just do this and that, getting your act together, your life will change and will be amazing. All you have to do is *optimize* your style. If you say the right self-motivating mantra, if you get out there and pitch yourself, you can accomplish big things and have everything you want.

The power of religious (gospel) devotion, on the other hand, is something else entirely; it is God-concerned and something very akin to the initial steps used by Alcoholics Anonymous. First (step 1), we must admit that we are powerless. And then (step 2), we come to believe that a Power greater than ourselves (however that Power might be understood) can restore us to sanity. We make a decision (step 3) to turn our will and our lives over to the care of that Power. And after that, we make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. Although self-improvement will surely result, it's the polar opposite of the believing-in-oneself improvement.

Going it alone, going through life without God: there are all kinds of dangers in self-help. According to Brad Larson, author of *Walking Through Walls: Connecting Faith and Work*, we end up worshipping what we believe will satisfy us. In other words, self-help can become idolatry, a self-glorification, a massive detour away from the joy of serving and relying upon God. Larson lists five ways that can lead us astray. The first is that we stop



Photos by Jacy  
**Father Hugo Blotsky presiding at the main altar in the Abbey church.**

asking for God's help. We are too busy helping ourselves. "At least in my experience," he says, "when I buy into the newest self-help craze, I'm inclined not to stop and ask God for help. My hands are too busy pulling at my bootstraps to fold in prayer." Remember that Jesus extolled the centurion for his faith, not for his self-reliance.

The second way in which self-help can lead us astray is that it rarely accounts for the actual world in which we live. "You can do whatever it is you want to do" is an American myth. The truth is that no matter how meticulously a person plans his life, ultimately he is not in control of it and is not the architect of his destiny.

The third way that self-help can cause trouble is that it is focused almost exclusively on the self. While a certain amount of introspection is necessary for any good life, too much of it is

navel gazing. To paraphrase Jordan Bach of the online site [thebachbook.com](http://thebachbook.com), only when you figure out how you can serve others, given your skill-set, that's when self-consciousness falls away. He also says that prayers are answered once we are determined to use our blessings in service to others.

The fourth way in which self-help can lead us astray is that it assumes that a person has the power and ability to change himself. Organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous know this to be false. Each of us can change habits and make healthy choices, but deep soul-changing takes place only when we become aware of God.

The fifth and last way that self-help can really be unhelpful is that all the onus is on us, and we become the bad shepherds of ourselves. Anne Lamott, in her book *Help Thanks Wow* says that only when we begin to pray do we let ourselves off the hook. Otherwise, all the bad things that turn out become entirely our fault. Or as Brad Larson puts it, "The premise of self-help in Christian circles is that God helps those who help themselves. The gospel of Jesus Christ, though, is that God helps those who cannot help themselves."

So, getting back to moving mountains, Jesus extols men and women of faith for their faith, but can their faith-filled prayers actually move mountains like he said they could?

The mountain might not be just that one mountain you are looking at through the binoc-

ulars. As with so many of the ways of God, mountains moved are far greater than mountains on the horizon. You, and not the snow-capped mountain, are up-ended, turned around, elevated and transformed into a new creature. You get exactly the thing for which you prayed but in a more foundational and earth-moving way than you expected, with more grace and soul-emancipation than you were even capable of imagining or receiving had you been given exactly what you asked for.

In this age of entertainment, while we gleefully watch heroes with superpowers, it's easy to ask Jesus to be the same: a Batman or a Spiderman to rescue us. Move the mountain into the sea! Anything less than cinematic spectacle is not worth our attention. The problem is, we don't know what *real* spectacle is. "I can't imagine," says Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber in her book *Pastrix*, "that the God of the universe is limited to our ideas of God. I can't imagine that God doesn't reveal God's self in countless ways outside of the symbol system of Christianity. In a way, I need a God who is bigger and more nimble and mysterious than what I could understand or contrive. Otherwise it can feel like I am worshipping nothing more than my own ability to understand the divine."

From the concepts of God to nimble aphorisms, much about spiritual life comes down to our own measurements. By what do we measure ourselves: results? achievements? success? getting what I want? fame? dollars?

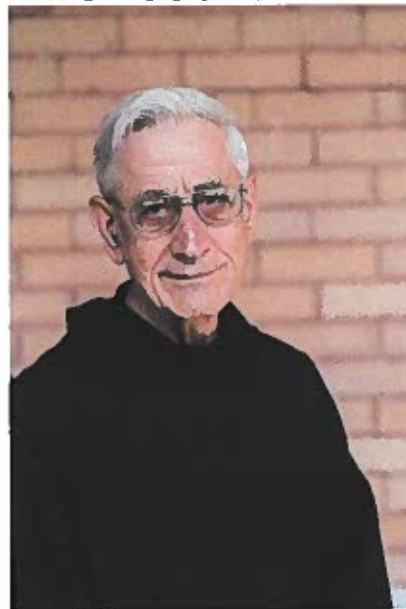
flashy miracles? If the measure which we use to measure is not the Good News of Jesus Christ, we will soon feel hollow and insecure even after consulting self-help gurus.

And let us not neglect to mention that following the path of Jesus is not easy. It certainly is not passive; it is not anything like throwing in the towel and giving up. Following Jesus is a humbling process of redemption, meant to open us to the action of grace, an unusually painful but startling transformation with most of the action on God's side. We provide the proper ground, as with the parable of the seed and sower, and God provides the rest (Matt. 13: 1-23, Mark 4: 1-20, Luke 8: 4-15).

Trying to improve ourselves is a good thing; we ought to do as much as we can to improve ourselves, and in this regard, practical advice is helpful. We can learn such useful things as time management, how to set goals, how to be kind and patient with people, how to eat properly and make use of physical exercise. But this is only soil preparation for the seed. "We must not let self-help become a false gospel or a counterfeit god," Brad Larson warns. "The gospel aims the restless heart on that which actually satisfies. As a by-product of beholding Jesus, we change. The real power to change rests in the nail-pierced hands of Jesus, so if we'll loosen our grip on improving our station in life and cling to him instead, we will find our hearts rejoicing as we become like him."

The power of belief is awesome as we see in the gospels. Wait upon God in faith and see what wonders unfold in your life! □

## Sixty Years of Religious Profession



Brother Placid Gross Photos by Jacy

Brother Placid Gross entered the abbey in 1957 and pronounced first vows on July 11, 1959. He celebrates 60 years in religious life, and is one of two surviving lay brothers, an option once afforded prospective candidates. Lay brothers made simple perpetual vows, not solemn vows as did the choir monks, and among other things, this gave them freedom from the canonical hours that the clerics had to say. They could spend more time in the barns and shops for the support of the Abbey. They fulfilled a role that was more focused upon manual service than that of the clerics who

were bound by the Divine Office. At one time the brothers at Assumption Abbey said the rosary. By the time Br. Placid entered, they were saying a shortened English version of the canonical office in their own chapel.

**Describe your novitiate.**

Father Raymond Dietlein was the Brother Master when I entered. He was in charge of all the brothers, and consequently in charge of the brother novices and their training. Novices met with him for fifteen minutes once a day in his tiny cell on the third floor, just enough room for his desk and chair, a sleeping cot, and three chairs. There was no other instruction. We worked as novices with the professed brothers. As novices we were not allowed to go home, or to go outside the monastery. However, if family came to see us we could visit with them. I had the impression that the brother novitiate was not as strict as the clerical novitiate. After I made vows in 1959 there was no more instruction after that.

**What was your first work assignment?**

I was sent to work in the Abbey Print Shop. Brother Gordon Barnard was in charge and he was very exacting. I was quite good at the linotype machine, and I enjoyed that. But Br. Gordon discovered that I had difficulty handling the big Heidelberg press, so he took me off linotype and I had to work exclusively on the Heidelberg. After a few months of that, carpentry was added to my

duties and I worked with Brother Peter Wagner in the Carpentry Shop. I took first vows in 1959, and was assigned to the farm the next year.

**Describe the life of a brother as it was years ago.**

We got up every morning at 4:40 a.m. and went to the brothers' chapel for prayers at 5:00. We had a breviary. We said Prime and Terce in the morning, Sext and None before lunch, Vespers before supper, and then Compline. We anticipated Matins and Lauds before bedtime. Every day we went to two Masses, and three on Sunday. For a while the brothers attended the parish Mass, but I complained to Father Raymond because the homily was always in German. I understood it, but the others did not. So we stopped attending the parish Mass. The brothers who were employed on the farm went to work at 6:00 a.m. We milked the cows. In those days we were not allowed to watch movies or TV, but I heard the radio, since we played a radio in the milking parlor so that the cows would be used to people talking and to music. Otherwise, if any strange person came into the barn they would have been upset. I heard the news of JFK's assassination when I was washing the milk parlor floor.

The brothers had nothing to do with the high school students in the Abbey Prep. We were told to stay away from them, all except Brother Bernard who was in charge of the gym. He had to keep students in line. And Brother

Paul who was in the library. But in the autumn, the students helped us harvest the potatoes out in the "golf course" field.

The Abbey Prep students watched a movie every week, and if it was a good movie, we were sometimes allowed to see it at a second showing. Father Raymond told us that we could either go to the basketball game or watch the movie. That was just once during the week.

When Father Norbert retired from being Novice Master of the clerical novitiate, then television was allowed in the Novitiate recreation room on the second floor, courtyard side. That became the TV room.

**Describe the farm as it was when you were first assigned there.**

Father Roman was in charge. A priest was always in charge of departments. A brother was never in charge. But Father Roman was also pastor of St. Stephen's south of Richardton, and he lived out there. He also had a room at the Abbey because he was an instructor in the Abbey school. The brothers on the farm had to consult him on everything. Brother Martin Heier had the pigs. Brother Mark Carmer had the chickens. Brother Pius Wenker was the butcher. We did all our own butchering. Brother Benedict Metz and I did the milking, and I took care of the beef cattle as well; we didn't have many beef cattle then, never more than about thirty. When we had dairy cattle the pastures were quite heavily grazed so that we had very little

buckbrush, sage, glovemallow, zinnia or buffalo berry bushes.

**Did most of the monks speak German back then?**

Yes, nearly everyone spoke German or understood it, but there were so many different dialects. Abbot Ignatius spoke German but he was *Reich-Deutsch*, not German-Russian. Some of the monks were from Germany or Switzerland. Some of the monks were German-Hungarian. Father Gregory Borski, who was the parish priest here in Richardton, spoke German, Polish and English.

**Is there a good German-Russian aphorism you might give us?**

*Arbeit macht leben suess.* Work makes life sweet. I think that is a general German saying, not specific to German-Russians. The Hutterites use it, too, because it's true. □

## MAY CHRONICLE

May 9: There have appeared lots of motorized chairs and crutches. Brother James, Br. Elias and Father James, are users and we might have to install traffic signals if there are more. Meanwhile, fifteen member of the Old Red Trail Committee are here for a day of prayer and lunch. Their tour guide, Brother Placid, has trouble with his hearing aids. "What time is lunch?" someone asks, to which Brother Placid says, "How many priests do we have? Fourteen up here. More in Bogota." ❖

## From the Archives:



Father Felix Hummer, OSB, and his housekeeper Eva Scheile, at the first rectory in Karlsruhe, ND. Father Felix was born in 1889 in Schluesselau, Bavaria, and professed vows at Sacred Heart Priory in Innsbruck, Austria, in 1908. He transferred to Assumption Abbey, then known as St. Mary's Abbey, in 1912, was assigned to the college, and then to various ND parishes, including Gladstone and Crary. When St. Mary's Abbey went bankrupt, he incardinated into the diocese of Fargo. Nevertheless, he requested to be buried, and is buried in the Abbey cemetery, along with Eva Scheile, his longtime faithful housekeeper. He died at 94, she at 96.

May 12: Mother's Day. Only about half a dozen of the monks still have living mothers. Anna Jarvis, who had a big hand in establishing Mother's Day as a modern holiday, insisted that the holiday's name should be singular possessive—Mother's Day rather than Mothers' Day—so that each family honor its own mother. ❖

May 14: The yearlings got out of their pasture and trampled Br. Llewellyn's garden, nearly tipping over his large ceramic fountain. Br. Gregory told Fr. James the "calves" were out. But at this time of year, calves stay with cows, so Fr. James concluded that Br. Gregory saw turkeys. The yearlings were into town before they were rounded up. ❖

May 18-19<sup>th</sup> and again on the 24<sup>th</sup>: Snow. A polar bear would feel quite comfortable in this cold, damp "spring" weather. ❖

May 26: Our annual retreat begins with Fr. Roman Paur of St. John's Abbey. It's always nice to have nearly everyone home, and Fr. Roman gives an excellent retreat. ❖

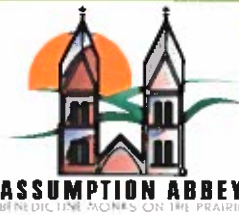
## JUNE CHRONICLE

June 1: Someone asks why the Assumption Abbey Newsletter Chronicles are so far behind the published issue. Here we are, in October, and the Chronicles recount May to July. The answer is simple: every issue needs to be finished

a month and a half before it's mailed. Copy needs to be completed and set before going to proofreaders. Proofreaders need time to pick over it. The printer needs two weeks leeway, and so does the company that does the addressing. Any way you look at it, old news is old news. ❖

June 3: With us for a silent retreat are twenty-seven priests of the Bismarck diocese which means that there are a lot of very quiet men at meals who are, nonetheless, required by their bishop to carry a smart phone, or at least a flip phone, so that they can be reached in an emergency. They are quiet, for sure, many of them quietly studying their smart phones. ❖

June 12: Lawn mowing is well underway. Blossoms and greenery represent a burst of hopefulness for the short North Dakota spring and summer. ❖



## Development Office

Br. Michael Taffe, O.S.B.

Life in a Benedictine monastery is punctuated by the bell calling us to prayer. We drop what we are doing and go to our choir stalls in church to attend what we call the "hours" of the Divine Office, the official prayer of the Church. It is our privilege to do this; monks are grateful that prayer is built into the fabric of our communal life so that each and every day is consecrated to God in thankful praise and attention. We don't spend all day in the church. Instead, we carry away from our choir stalls the attitude of prayer, often with lines of the psalms running through our heads, or perhaps the tune of a hymn playing over and over as we return to our pedestrian

duties: washing floors, doing laundry, kneading bread and other such things.

When we are in choir, we remember the faithful departed: those who have recently died, and anniversaries of our confreres who have passed on. November is when we especially remember all the faithful departed, and we invite you to offer your own personal list of names you would like the monks to remember at prayer. Here at the Abbey we have a *Book of the Living* filled with the names of our deceased loved ones so that we can remember them whenever we enter the church. Names that you submit will be added to this book. Please fill out the form below.



**Please include the names of my loved ones in your 2019 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](mailto:michael@assumptionabbey.com)

June 15: Br. Symeon's solemn profession. There are lots of children in his family who are full of energy, liveliness and family fun. At the same time a class reunion and an unrelated family reunion are scheduled. It's packed here! ❖

June 18: Richardton is in the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of Camp Re-Creation. Young camp counselors arrive every morning for Morning Prayer. To do so, they must rise at 5:15 a.m. and walk several blocks, sometimes through the rain. And then they walk back to the Richardton High School for breakfast, quite a sacrifice. ❖

June 29: One of the light bulbs in the sanctuary of the Abbey church exploded, though it was not turned on at the time. Shards of glass were blown all over. Had it exploded 15 minutes later it would have dusted the congregation with shards! ❖

## JULY CHRONICLES

July 1: A newly installed toilet in guest room 114 is leaking all over the bathroom and into the sitting room, and with a guest in that room! Where do plumbers go to school these days? ❖

July 2: A three-and-a-half-foot bull snake has been making its appearance here and there in the yard, becoming acquainted with us all. Three bikers on their way to the West Coast stop at the Abbey for the night and are introduced. Bull snakes mimic rattlers and do a pretty good job of it. ❖

## From the Library

By Br. Michael Taffe



A book that is amazing and delightfully interesting, which I highly recommend, is: *The Rise and Fall of the Dinosaurs: A New History of a Lost World* by Steve Brusatte. I was never one of those kids who could rattle off the names of every class of dinosaur along with the esoteric information that a true dinosaur kid can. I don't think I have even seen those "Jurassic Park" movies. So, why on earth would I have picked up a book on dinosaurs? Well, one of the joys of being a reader is exposing oneself to new and interesting things.

The author is a paleontology professor at the University of Edinburgh. When he was in elementary school, the standard idea was that dinosaurs were big, lumbering brutes that went extinct because they were so pathetic. From what scientists now know, this was not the case at all. One of the lovely elements of this book is providing the reader with new ways that researchers conceptualize dinosaurs. In fact, we see the descendants of dinosaurs every day (a spoiler: birds).

Brusatte walks the reader through the ages of the various types of dinosaurs: the dinosauromorphs, theropods, sauropods, etc. He also describes how various researchers go about gathering information and

writes about being in the field. An interesting chapter is how some scientists use computer modeling as a way of calculating how various dinosaurs moved around. Words that kept going through my head while reading were, "oh, how fascinating."

The author recalled how, as a kid, he wrote to some famous paleontologists about his interest in dinosaurs – and they wrote back and encouraged him in his interest. Think about what kind of important seeds we plant, given some generous responses, back to kids! For myself, reading this book led me to further reflection and appreciation for God's wonderful and amazing creation. This is a book to engage your curiosity, imagination, thought, and gratitude to God. □



Photos by Jacy

Brothers James, Alban, Symeon and Charles.



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P.O. Box A  
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[www.assumptionabbey.com](http://www.assumptionabbey.com)

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## Benedictine Saints

Saint Ambrose Traversari was born October 20, 1386, and entered the Camaldolese Benedictines in Florence at the tender age of fourteen. A brilliant student, he became a leading theologian and scholar. Famous intellectuals of the day visited his cell to discuss classical and patristic literature. Ambrose translated the Greek Fathers. This scholarship came to an end when he was elected prior general of the Camaldolese at the age of forty-five. In that role, he became an advocate of papal primacy, and Pope Eugene IV sent him to the Council of Basel (Ferrara-Florence, 1439). Ambrose was not edified by life outside the

monastery and described the gathering of delegates at the council as a western "Babylon." Because of his familiarity with Greek, however, he was able to negotiate with the Byzantine representatives for a reunion of Roman and Orthodox churches; it was signed by all but one eastern bishop, but the agreement was broadly rejected by the populace and civil authorities. The union signed at Florence was therefore never accepted. Among his own monks, Ambrose was considered to be a hypocritical and arrogant priest for all his learning, but he was esteemed by the brilliant humanists of his day. The Camaldolese Bene-

Benedictines celebrate his feast day on November 20.

Saint Sylvester Guzzolini was born in 1177. He was sent to Bologna to study law but pursued theology instead, angering his father so much that he did not speak to him for ten years. After becoming a priest, Sylvester dedicated himself to pastoral duties, and then spent long hours in prayer. He castigated his own bishop for neglect of duties. Sylvester's life changed when he assisted at the funeral of a cousin, who had been remarkably handsome and charming. The sight of the decaying body made Sylvester realize that life was short, and he renounced the world for a secluded hermitage. Soon others joined him, and he took up the Rule of St. Benedict, founding the Sylvestrine congregation in 1247. At the time of his death, he had founded eleven monasteries and had guided the congregation for thirty-six years. His feast is November 26.

Saint Wulfhilda of Barking was born in 940. Raised and educated by Benedictine nuns, she became a nun and eventually the abbess of Barking. According to Goscelin of Saint-Bertin, Queen Aelfthryth of the English deposed her because of the attention that the queen's husband was giving the abbess. Abbess Wulfhilda was reinstated some twenty years later. She died in 1000 and was buried at the abbey with two other of its saints: Hildelith and Ethelberga. □

