

Abbey Letter

Fall 2007

no. 231



If You Get There Before I Do

Perhaps you've seen pictures taken at a monastic profession that look like someone is lying on the floor, playing dead in a big way, covered by a funeral pall and surrounded by funeral candlesticks. You're not misinterpreting the picture. That part of the service is exactly what it looks like, and it is meant to be a reminder that the monk or nun must die to the world in order to live to Christ. It is also a vivid memorial of what was actually going on when we were baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus. And monastic profession (as the preacher at that service probably pointed out several times) is a particular way of living out the spiritual reality of our Baptism. For Christians, life and death are intimately intertwined, and Christ leads us through both on our way to God in Him.

Furthermore in the Communion of Saints, living and dead Christians are closely bound together in the body of Christ. We are one church, one family. In the monastery, this closeness between the living and the dead is especially obvious at the time of a monk's death. Like rites of passage everywhere, that's a time when formal religious ceremonies mingle with the personal and family ways of doing things in a way that is comforting and most holy.

Some monasteries are very old fashioned and bury their brethren without embalming. That means (especially if their summers are as hot as ours) that they bury their brethren quite soon after death. Here, we want the members of the departed monk's family to be able to join us for the funeral. So that in turn means he will be embalmed, to help through the wait while his friends and family come to say goodbye.

Once the embalming is taken care of, our brother's mortal remains are dressed in his monastic habit and laid out in a very plain wooden coffin with rope handles, made by the monastery's maintenance man. Then he comes back to the Abbey church for the last time. His coffin waits in the church for the funeral mass, covered by the pall and surrounded by the candlesticks that covered and surrounded him at his life profession.

I feel the closeness between the living and the dead especially during this time. Every time we go to church, we are also visiting our brother, paying our respects to one of our own who has gone before us into the next world. And whenever we want to take time for a personal visit and time by the coffin, the church is just a few minute's walk from wherever we are on the monastery grounds.

Then when the family and friends have arrived, we offer the funeral mass. It's one of those family times—I mean the monastic family here—when our father, the Abbot, is the celebrant and preacher. As the coffin and the congregation leave the church, the tower bell begins tolling, and continues to ring, slowly, solemnly, all through the graveside service.

Cover: Some of the members of the summer vocation program at a Monday night class.



And now the realities of country life kick in. The monastery has its own burial ground. But it's a bit too far and a bit too uphill for folks to walk carrying a coffin in a seemly manner. So the deceased gets to ride. Just what he rides depends on the condition of the dirt road to the cemetery. When conditions are good, then he goes all uptown and gets to ride in a hearse. But if the road is a mess, then he'll ride like the country boy he was, in the back of a truck or maybe in a wagon pulled by a tractor.

When we're all at the cemetery, monks and friends lay the coffin on the two-by-fours that span the open grave for the Committal service. Once those prayers have been offered, some of us tie ropes to the handles, and lift the coffin a few inches, while others remove the two-by-fours so we can lower the monk's remains into their last resting place. And then we pick up our shovels and fill in the grave. This is a great comfort for us: this act of personally, physically, burying our departed members. And the guests usually want to share in that work as well, in spite of being in their dressy funeral clothes. The congregation tends to disperse as folks walk away after they have taken a turn with the shovels. So at the end there are just a final few adding the last shovels of dirt to the mound over

the grave. Those folks will sometimes finish with an impromptu favorite prayer or song of the deceased before heading back downhill to the monastery.

It's not an unusual thing for a rural church in this part of the country to have its own graveyard on the grounds. But we monks have a particular advantage in keeping close to those who have gone before us. After all, we live at church. And so the closeness between the living and the dead isn't just a spiritual reality for us, it's a physical one as well. We can visit the graves of our departed brothers as frequently as we wish. We don't have to drive to church, we just have to go outside and walk up the hill.

We can visit the cemetery anytime, and so we do. But there's a day that's especially appropriate for all the members of the church to take the trouble to visit the graves of those we love who are no longer with us. That is November 2nd, All Souls' Day, an observance begun in the tenth century by the Benedictine monks of Cluny. It's a day set aside to show affection and reverence for our dead. We remember them and what they were to us, we give thanks for the benefits we received from them and pray that they may grow in their knowledge and love of God. And we can give alms in their memory. (It's funny, we think of memorial gifts at the time a friend dies; but so often we forget that we can aid the needy in memory of a departed friend at any time. After all it's an ancient and commendable act of Christian piety to do so.)

But one day a year isn't very much. Even two days a year aren't much—we Benedictines keep a day for All Souls of Our Order later in November. In fact, popular devotion has made the entire month of November a time to keep our beloved dead in mind. So on many November mornings I'll be in our cemetery, saying my prayers and sprinkling holy water on the graves. Doing this helps keep fresh the bonds of affection that tie me to those who lie there, the folks who were significant parts of my life, and the folks I never knew.

Maybe you'll join me. Not here, I mean. But perhaps your church has a graveyard or a columbarium on the property. Allow a bit of time, when you go to church in November, to pay a visit and say a prayer for those there who sleep in Jesus. And if you can't visit the graves of those particularly dear to you, November can still be a time to go through old photographs and souvenirs from days gone by. But this time as you look at your pictures and handle your souvenirs, do it with a prayer on your lips.

And we also bless thy holy Name for all thy servants departed this life in thy faith and fear, beseeching thee to grant them continual growth in thy love and service; and to grant us grace so to follow the good examples of all thy saints, that with them we may be partakers of thy heavenly kingdom.

-Fr. William



new skylights

The skylights in the roof of the abbey church were recently replaced in an effort to stop leaks. One step in removing the old skylights was the concurrent removal of the glare-reducing louvers covering them from the interior, allowing much more light into the church than has been for many decades. As the seasons progress and the angle of sunlight in the church changes, the monks will decide what measures are necessary, if any, to reduce or alter the incoming light, depending on glare on the choir stalls.

Bishop Edward Little of the Diocese of Northern Indiana was with us June 3rd through June 10th. His retreat here was the beginning of a three month sabbatical, during which he hopes to do some writing, as well as spend some time at a friend's house on Maui.

Br. Peregrine Rinderknecht of St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota was with us the evening of July 11. He was

Br. Peregrine



Bishop Little

traveling from a family funeral in Ohio back to St. John's, and stopped at St. Gregory's to spend the night, arriving in time to have supper with us as we celebrated the Feast of St. Benedict.

Our friends from St. Augustine's Church in Gary, Indiana joined us on July 19 for our annual "Gary Day" picnic. St. Augustine's was one of the northern Indiana parishes to which the monks ministered while living in Valparaiso before moving to Three Rivers, and ever since the move, the parishioners in Gary have set aside a day to visit us, bringing a feast along with them.

For your convenience, books and calendars can be ordered and donations made with credit cards using Pay Pal on our website. However, we can not take credit card orders by phone, through the mail, or at the monastery. Prayer requests can also now be sent to the abbey through our website <http://saintgregorysthreerivers.org>

unloading the bus on Gary Day



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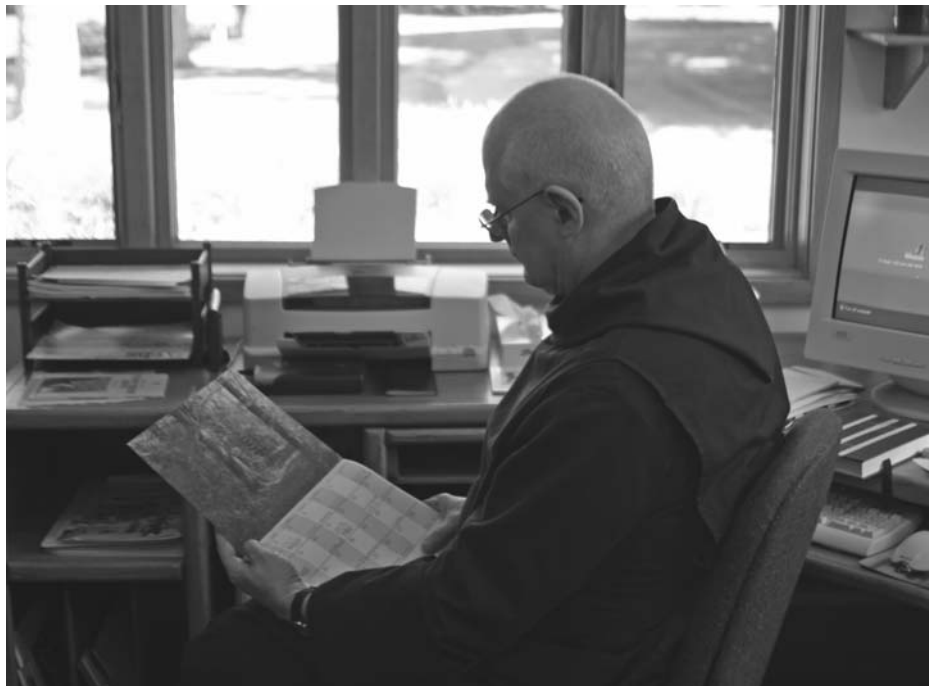
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