

Abbey Letter

Summer 2009

no. 238



saintgregorysthreerivers.org



St. Gregory's Abbey July Vocation Program

Worship & Pray – Work & Learn

with the monks at St. Gregory's Abbey – a monastery within the Episcopal Church at Three Rivers, Michigan

For males, 18 to 45, who can stay for at least two weeks in July.
The only charge is \$25 for registration.

For more information and an application form, use the envelope bound in this issue of the Abbey Letter or write:

July Program Director
St. Gregory's Abbey
56500 Abbey Road
Three Rivers, Michigan 49093-9595
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NOTES

During the week after Easter, Fr. Aelred attended the Benedictine Formation Workshop at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. The speaker was Fr. Joel Rippenger, OSB, of Marmion Abbey in Aurora, Illinois. Fr. Joel's topic was: Methods and Resources for Teaching *The Rule of Benedict* and Monastic Spirituality to Novices and Juniors.

From April 28th to May 1st, Abbot Andrew was in Racine, Wisconsin for a CAROA (Conference of Anglican Religious Orders in the Americas) meeting at the Siena Center. The meeting included discussion on ways to coordinate work on common concerns and discerning ways we can serve the church. This meeting was a follow-up to earlier local meetings, one of which was held at St. Gregory's last November.

Abbot Andrew also traveled to Aliquippa, Pennsylvania to serve as spiritual director to The Community of Celebration May 18th - 20th.

Br. Abraham is scheduled to be one of the monastic presenters at the 2009 Dallas Benedictine Experience June 24th - 28th.

Fr. William continues his ministry to the Formation Group of the Diocese of Northern Indiana. This group of people preparing locally for ordination meets every few months for mutual exchange, discussion, and presentations concerning practical issues pertaining to ordained ministry. Fr. William is in charge of the spiritual life part of the program.

The dedication of our new church entrance and bell tower took place May 9th, too late for photos and details to be printed in this issue of the Abbey Letter. Watch for details in the next issue.

Images of the building project can be seen at our website. Also available are links to purchase calendars and books, request prayers, make donations, and update mailing list information.

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the new church entrance and bell tower

Let Us Pray

An annual phenomenon I've learned about since I've been guestmaster here at St. Gregory's Abbey is the August rush. I wasn't aware of it before I had this job, but I've been assured that the monks who were guestmasters before me all noticed it too. Each year in August there's a big increase in the number of people asking to come to the monastery for a time of retreat.

Now, August isn't actually the most comfortable time to visit the Abbey. The guesthouses here aren't air conditioned. We have our share (and more) of blood-sucking insects at that time of year. That month doesn't offer the soft greens and flowers of spring, or the good walking weather and colored leaves of autumn. But the August rush comes each year, just the same.

What happens is this: as the warm months approach, people decide to make the time to go on retreat "this summer." But those plans never quite become solid enough to act on. Then, all of a sudden, August is upon us, and as Jeremiah says, "Summer is ended and we are not saved." So folks rush to the phone and the e-mail to set something up while there's still a bit of time to act on their good intentions. I don't suppose this should be surprising. Summer rivals New Year's Day as a time of high minded plans, and good intentions: put a deck on the back of the house, read *Don Quixote*, landscape the front yard, stop smoking, re-learn whatever foreign language one studied back in the day.

Here's a summer project I'd like to offer for people's consideration: start praying every day. There are a lot of Christians who just get out of the habit of praying regularly as they grow up. They're not *against* prayer. It's just not something they do on their own, unless there's a crisis or perhaps a really glorious sunset, or piece of music that moves them to address their comments to God. Often what has happened is that they outgrew the prayers they used to say as children, but never found an adult replacement for those devotions.

That's a pity, because daily prayer serves several important functions in the life of a follower of Jesus. Most obviously, it is a way of our staying in touch with God. God is always with us, of course. But for that fact to have meaning in our lives, we need to make an explicit recognition of God's presence, and prayer does that. But this recognition isn't the only thing going on in prayer. We actually say things when we pray, praising the Lord, and bringing our concerns to the One who cares for us.

Daily prayer is also a sign that we are serious in our commitment to our faith. This isn't to say that Christians who don't engage in daily prayer don't believe in God, or that they don't love God. But our practice of prayer is one of the ways that other people, whether followers of other faiths, or people of no faith at all, can recognize that we not only identify with a particular religion, but we do something about and with that religion as a part of our everyday lives. Regular prayer is a part of living out our response to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

People who would like to regain this enriching element of the Christian life need to give it a bit of thought and planning, and then just jump in and do it. That's not too demanding as summer projects go. It doesn't take nearly as much planning as the deck on the back of the house, and when you travel or move, you take your prayer with you. So it's really a pretty good deal. The first bit of planning is simply settling

the question of whether your daily prayers are an individual effort, or a time of family devotions. For the rest of this article, I'll focus on individual prayer.

Next, you have to set aside a time for your daily prayers. The time doesn't have to be expressed in terms of "morning prayers at seven o'clock." Something like "between my shower and breakfast" should work fine, if your shower and breakfast are regular items in your daily routine. And devotions don't have to be the same time every day. If your Wednesday and Thursday schedules are different from the rest of the week, then your prayers would reasonably come at a different time on those days. But scheduling is important. Prayer is like exercise or homework, if it's going to be done, it should have a dedicated time, and be done regularly. Remember those folks who were going to go on retreat "sometime during the summer." And remember what happened to the homework that was going to be done when we got around to it.

For individual prayer, I'd suggest twice a day, morning and evening. There are several reasons for this. Somebody who can't see a way to carve out a ten minute slot for prayer can probably figure out some way to make two five minute times. And someone for whom twenty minutes would be unthinkable may be able to manage two ten minute times. Furthermore, turning to the Lord in prayer at both the start and end of the day has a spiritual healthiness to it. It gives the opportunity to make our prayer balanced and integrated with the rhythms of our life that once a day prayer doesn't.

So once you've decided when to pray, you choose how to pray. This is much a matter of personal preference. Some people may want to offer entire church services on their own every day. (Br. Martin had an article about this in the last Abbey Letter.) But most folks who have drifted away from daily prayer and are trying to get back into the habit of it probably want something simpler, more personal, and briefer. So here are a few suggestions with those folks in mind.

To start off, take time for deliberately entering into the presence of God. Most of the time that means mentally stepping back from worldly concerns and recalling that you are addressing yourself to your Lord. Seeking out some quiet and closing your eyes will probably be a help. This is the mental equivalent to entering some private sacred chapel for our time of devotion. If you're praying in front of a favorite sacred symbol, or at some particularly moving place (remember that sunset?), take time to move through the symbol to the God it's meant to bring you nearer to.

Morning is a good time for prayers of praise, thanks and dedication. After all, the Lord has brought you through the night alive and the sun has risen one more time, so praise the Lord for all the blessings showered on us. And ask God's blessing and guidance and protection through the day ahead. The evening is a traditional time for self-examination and confession, since we hope we're through with most of our sinning for the day. And we thank God for particular favors during the day just past.

What many people think of when they hear the word "prayer" is petition and intercession. These are the prayers that ask God's assistance and blessing and favors for ourselves and others. We can do this at either or both of our prayer times. But I expect you'll find that either morning or evening offers a longer period for you to spend in prayer, and you'll discover your petitions and intercessions tend to settle into the longer session.

It may be a good thing to mix prayer in your own words with prayers from other sources. For some people this means using a daily devotional guide. Others will like to use favorite set forms for things like confession and general thanksgiving or praise. But

if speaking your mind in your own way suits you best, you can stick with that. Since the Lord's Prayer is a gift to us from Jesus himself, including that is a blessing on its own. So you may want to include that even if you don't use other set forms. And if you're in a setting where you wouldn't be disturbing other people, don't be afraid to sing if you want to. A favorite hymn or chant isn't at all out of place in personal prayer.

Some people will want to include some Bible reading with their daily prayers. This is a good thing, of course. But if you are just starting out and only have a little time for your daily prayer, then it may be a better idea to separate prayer time and Bible time. Praying regularly, even for a little while, is very important in developing the habit of prayer. That's not the important thing in reading the Bible. In reading the Holy Scriptures, the important thing is to understand what we are reading, and to allow the Word to work on us. To do that we need to have time to hear an integral piece of the text and to understand what it's saying. And if we have reference materials to help us, that's even better. Trying to fit that into part of a brief prayer time won't work. Reading with understanding in heart and mind are what we should be working for. So rather than trying to squeeze that into an already brief prayer time, look for a time or two during the week when you can really sit down and read a whole story or psalm or prophecy, and understand what it's saying.

Of course, you don't have to stick with those little baby-step bits of time for your morning and evening prayer. As you settle into the habit of daily prayer, you'll probably find that time available for your conversations with the Lord becomes more ample. And maybe you'll decide to use that extra time to see what God has to say to you through the Scriptures, or you may want to spend more time in quiet wordless communion with Jesus, the lover of your soul, or maybe you'll find you're the chatty type, who simply has more to say than you did at the beginning. In any case, don't be afraid to grow in your adventure of daily prayer.

– Fr. William





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Information about becoming a monk or participating in the July Program -

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Books and calendars may be ordered, prayers requested, and donations made at our website -

www.saintgregorysthreerivers.org

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