

Abbey Letter

Summer 2008

no. 234

The Final Piece

Back in 1988, when we were starting the building campaign to raise money for a new set of monastery buildings before the structures we were living in crumbled away, I read about how many abbeys in earlier times took twenty, thirty, maybe forty years to build. My reaction to that was: “I hope it doesn’t take *us* that long to build the new monastery!” and my question was: “How could the monks and nuns cope with such a long, slow process?” Twenty years later, I can say that it *has* taken this long, and monks can cope with the slow process when they have to. There is such a thing as patience. It is a gift the Holy Spirit will give to one who is willing to receive it.

When we built the new library and guest reception area in 2001, we were down to one piece to go. The urgency of building a new guest house, St. Benedict’s, delayed this final phase, however. But now the time has come for us to fill in the last piece and be done with it. Much of what is left of the old monastery is the oldest part of it: the farm house that was bought by Dom Paul Severance and Dom Francis Bacon back in 1946. This house was sturdy enough to outlast our former dormitory that was put up a few years later, but it is no longer strong enough to hold up without extensive and costly repair and maintenance, and its multi-level floor plan is difficult for some people to negotiate. All this time, we have been patiently accumulating the funds to put us in range where one final appeal will put us over the top for completion of our building program.



the old farmhouse with church on the left

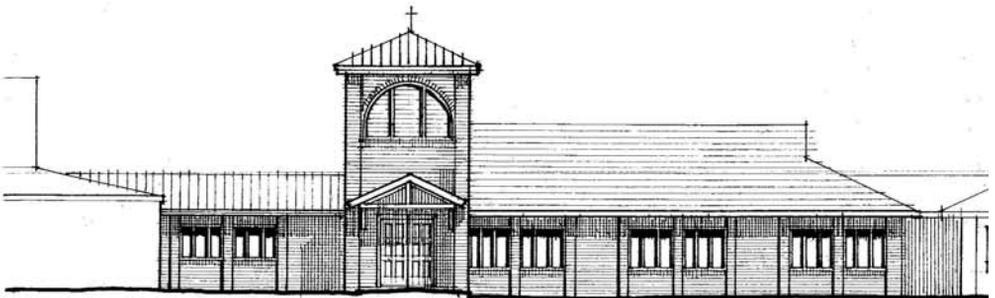
The focus of this final phase, the focus of the whole building project, will be a bell tower. This bell tower will be an entrance to the monastery near the church, and will open into a wide passageway that connects with the church to the left through a narthex and to the rest of the monastery to the right. As with all of our new buildings, it will be barrier free. As promised at the beginning of our campaign, the names of all building fund donors, or the persons in whose memory or honor the gifts are made, will be kept in a book housed in the new passageway, and those whose total gifts are \$2,500 or more will be inscribed on the east wall. It will be a large enough area for tour groups to gather, and it will also be a good place to start the Palm Sunday and Easter Vigil liturgies before processing into the church. South of the passageway there will be two offices and a work room for the monks.

Our architects have completed the basic plans, and we are negotiating with a contractor to build this final phase. We do not have precise beginning and completion dates at this time, but as of now, we expect to break ground sometime in June.

-Abbot Andrew

To be assured of having your name inscribed on the wall, please have building fund donations or fully paid pledges to us by August 15, 2008. Any donations sent to us intended for the building fund should be clearly marked on the check or accompanying letter as designated for that intention. Donations can also be made at the Abbey's website on the sales and donations page, where there is a special button for the building fund. We thank all of you for your generosity and prayers over the years.

<http://saintgregorysthreerivers.org>



architect's drawing of the new building with church on the left and entrance to library/refectory on the right

NOTES

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.

Br. Cuthbert spent the weekend of April 11th - 13th at the Bishop Gravatt Center, a camp sponsored by the Episcopal Diocese of South Carolina, in Aiken, South Carolina. He was attending *Vocare*,

a spiritual renewal weekend for young adults aimed at considering the different ways one can be called to live out one's baptismal vows. He gave a talk on singlehood, with a particular focus on the monastic life.

Abbot Andrew attended the leadership meeting of the Conference of Anglican Religious Orders in the Americas April 8th - 12th at Holy Cross Monastery in West Park, New York. The meeting featured a facilitated workshop discussing issues involving aging and infirm community members.



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St. Gregory's Abbey *July Vocation Program*

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Worship & Pray Work & Learn

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

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St. Gregory's Abbey
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Three Rivers, MI 49093*

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On Being Spiritual and Religious

“I’m spiritual, but not religious,” is a refrain we hear often these days. As with most popular expressions, its meaning is vague, but it’s quite clear that the expression makes a distinction between being spiritual and being religious with the implication that they are alternatives. A brief reflection on what the distinction seems to mean should give us some insight into a prevalent attitude floating in the air.

I take the expression “spiritual but not religious” to indicate an interest in supernatural reality of some sort lived out with consciousness-raising practices such as meditation, but separate from any particular religious institution. There might be respect for some teachings in some religions, but these teachings are brought together in a personal eclectic mix. This approach to being “spiritual” isn’t new. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau did much to sell Americans and people world-wide on a spirituality of “self-reliance.”

It is telling that I can’t recall ever hearing anybody turn the expression around by claiming to be religious, but not spiritual. This suggests that “religious” people don’t see anything wrong with being “spiritual,” and are not likely to see the two as alternatives. Apparently, “spiritual” people see religion as an obstacle to “spirituality,” but religious people don’t see spirituality as an obstacle to religion.

The Latin root word for religion, *religare*, means “to bind.” Religious practices live up to this meaning by making connections that bind people with each other and with God. Practices of spirituality are also capable of making these connections, but if spirituality is separated from religion, then whatever good they do for an individual’s well-being, any connections they make with other human beings or God are tenuous at best. Basically, a person who is “spiritual but not religious” follows the spiritual quest alone. The extreme of this would be to live by Plotinus’ famous phrase: “The alone to the Alone.”

A condescending attitude comes across to me in the claim to be spiritual but not religious. It seems to suggest that religion is beneath one who is really spiritual. I’m sure that is not always the case with everybody who says this, but when I look back on my years of adolescence and early adulthood, I have to admit frankly that this sort of snobbishness was a large ingredient in my own outlook that fit the phrase “spiritual but not religious” forty years before it became common currency. Maybe my perception at the time that religious people usually weren’t all that spiritual was true. I do see a lot more vital interest in spirituality in churches today than I remember seeing then, but there is also a real possibility that my snobbish attitude made it harder for me to see the spirituality that really was present in religious people.

In all fairness to people who are inclined to be spiritual but not religious, it must be admitted that, in religion, we do not always connect to the right things in the right way. The French thinker René Girard has done much to draw our attention to how, traditionally, societies have pulled themselves together by perpetuating collective violence via a scapegoating mechanism. Some religions have bound their people together in precisely this way. It’s understandable that sensitive people would shy away from any religious group that binds itself together by defining common enemies and outcasts. It can easily seem preferable to forge one’s own path, however lonely it is, than to connect with a group that disconnects from other people in violent ways.



A decisive factor that led to my becoming religious as well as spiritual was a dissatisfaction with the eclectic approach. I reached a point where I realized that, in order for my spirituality to be centered, it had to be rooted in a particular religious tradition. My settling on Christianity, however, was not made with the sense that one choice was as good as another. At the time of decision, Christ, who very definitely willed certain things, such as fellowship with me, became very real to me. God's grace and my choice to give myself to the particular Personhood of Christ were so inextricably entwined that there is no way I can separate one from the other. "Particular" is the key word here. The missing ingredient in spirituality without religion is particularity. Before this conversion, it seemed that believing in an impersonal "god", whose manifestation on earth was not limited to one holy person, preserved my individuality. The irony is, that it is the making of particular choices in terms of friends, a community, and God that has enhanced my own particular individuality.

One of the particularities of Christianity is that the Holy Spirit makes spirituality religious by binding people and God together. The Holy Spirit is more than "the bond of love" between the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit is a Person who actively brings the Father and the Son together and also actively brings each one of us, in our own particularity, to the Father and the Son and to each other in that same bond of Love. That Holy Spirit inspires us to love everybody, not in general, but in particular. This does not mean that the Holy Spirit gives us the impossible task of relating personally with billions of people. Rather, the Holy Spirit inspires us to follow Jesus' commandment to love our neighbors. Our neighbors are the particular people who happen to be present in our lives.

With the Holy Spirit binding us together with God in this way, there is no room for binding together by way of collective violence. This is how the Holy Spirit makes religion spiritual.

Living spiritually and religiously requires that we face the challenge of living with our own particularity and the particularity of others. We cannot meet this challenge without commitment: commitment to God and commitment to our neighbors. It is easy to be tempted to shrink from this challenge. I had something of a relapse into being more spiritual than religious when I first considered a monastic vocation. I thought I could relate to God and grow spiritually with little reference to the other members of the community if they weren't enough to my liking. But I learned very quickly that only by committing myself to the particular monks in this place could I grow spiritually. This is why Benedict puts so much emphasis on commitment in his Rule. Benedict has only disapproval for wandering monastics who hop from place to place without ever settling down. Such people are committed neither to God nor to other people. The Benedictine vow of stability of place is precisely a vow of commitment to God *and* to the particular people in a particular place, and the land and the trees, to say nothing of the cats. This kind of commitment may not sound as spiritual as attaining "cosmic consciousness," but it is by living with particular people who give us daily opportunities to make little sacrifices that we receive clear indications of when we are living in the Bond of Love of the Holy Spirit and when we are not.

Far from being a restrictive "god" who imposes a tyrannical rule on us, the God who calls us to commitment models total commitment to us, a commitment that took Jesus to the cross. The Persons of the Holy Trinity are totally committed to each other as much as they are totally committed to each one of us. We might be too busy to attend to a family member, a friend, or a community member, but the Holy Spirit has all the time in the world, plus Eternity, to be the Bond of Love between each of us and the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit fills the whole world by virtue of this full-time commitment. What that means to us is that the Holy Spirit is intimately involved in the smallest details of our commitments to our neighbors and God. As the flame who formed tongues of fire above the disciples, the Holy Spirit breathes life into our smallest acts of service to each other and in the prayers we offer together to God. Serving others at table and vacuuming hallways may not be the sorts of things that make newspaper headlines, but, in the Holy Spirit, they are of cosmic importance.

It is true that I made a caricature of people who are spiritual but not religious at the beginning of this article. I know that many such people honestly struggle to participate in connections that the Holy Spirit is forging. Likewise, the notion that religious people are not spiritual is a caricature that blinds one to many of the ways the Holy Spirit breathes life into corporate activities. Both caricatures are harmful when they are used to denigrate other people. These caricatures are of some use, however, if they are turned toward ourselves and used as monitors for religious and spiritual growth. Is there real binding in our spirituality? Does the fire of the Holy Spirit breathe through our prayer and our acts of service to others? When the answer to both question is Yes, our hearts are inflamed as we walk with Jesus as did the disciples on the Road to Emmaus.

- Abbot Andrew



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Saint Gregory's Abbey is the home of a community of men living under the Rule of Saint Benedict within the Episcopal Church. The center of the monastery's life is the Abbey Church, where God is worshiped in the daily round of Eucharist, Divine Office, and private prayer. Also offered to God are the monks' daily manual work, study and correspondence, ministry to guests, and occasional outside engagements.

The continuing existence of Saint Gregory's is made possible by the support of those who believe that the contemplative vocation within the Church finds valid expression there.

The monks ask your prayers and will be grateful for your offerings.

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