

Abbey Letter no. 257

Easter
2014



distributing palms for procession into church on Palm Sunday



When we receive a palm branch and say: “Hosanna,” do we remember that the people who strewed palms before Jesus cried out for his crucifixion only a few days later? Are we ready to hold onto our palms and cry “Hosanna” when everybody else turns against Jesus? Are we ready to put our palm at the feet of the Risen Lord?

— Abbot Andrew

on the cover: friends and neighbors gather in the refectory after midnight Easter Vigil

NOTES

The Rt. Rev. William Gregg, assistant bishop of the Diocese of North Carolina, was with us November 11th - 15th.

Br. Abraham spoke to students in the honors college of Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan on January 8th about the Christian monastic understanding of the relationship between science and religion.

Abbot Andrew attended the North American Benedictine abbots' workshop February 21st - 25th at St. Bernard's Abbey in Cullman, Alabama. He is scheduled to lead a quiet day at St. Andrew's Church in Valparaiso, Indiana March 15th, and a mini-workshop on Benedictine spirituality at All Saints Church in Saugatuck, Michigan May 17th.

Our website has been reconfigured to make it easier to use on mobile devices. Simply go to our website and click the mobile link. saintgregorysthreerivers.org

Saint Gregory's Abbey now has an e-mail list for those wishing to receive the ABBEY LETTER electronically. To sign up, simply go to our website saintgregorysthreerivers.org

Books read in the refectory during lunch and supper 2013

From Willow Creek to Sacred Heart: Rekindling My Love for Catholicism

by Chris Haw

Marvel Comics: The Untold Story

by Sean Howe

Rob Bell and a New American Christianity

by James K. Wellman, Jr.

The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?

by Jared Diamond

A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story

by Diana Butler Bass

Hallucinations by Oliver Sacks

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The Life and Pontificate of Pope Pius XII: Between History and Controversy

by Frank J. Coppa

Praying for Sheetrock

by Melissa Fay Greene

Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion (The Spiritual Memoir of a Twenty-first Century Christian) by Sara Miles

The Autistic Brain: Thinking Across the Spectrum

by Temple Grandin and Richard Panek

Evolving in Monkey Town: How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask the Questions

by Rachel Held Evans

Monastic Evangelism

When people tell their families and friends that they are joining a monastery, they are usually met with congratulations and questions about monastic life, and sometimes with criticism (often all wrapped up in the same response). The families and friends of monastic candidates respond this way because they care about the candidate, but are not sufficiently informed about monastic life to know if it will be a good choice for their friend. One of the questions that is often raised goes something like this: “If you really believe that Jesus is the cure for all the world’s problems, why are you planning to shut yourself up in a monastery, rather than going out to spread your belief?” The question is a good one, and the same should be asked of anyone choosing a career: “If you really believe that Jesus is the cure for all the world’s problems, why are you planning to be a computer coder, construction worker, supermodel, astronaut, homemaker, insurance agent, etc, rather than going out to spread your belief?”

The answer to the question lies in how we define spreading our belief about Jesus being the answer to all the world’s problems, otherwise known as evangelism. In current American culture, evangelism is usually thought of in terms of tent revivals, street preaching, passing out printed material at sports events, going house to house to discuss religious beliefs, or preaching on radio and television. None of those things are bad, and although they are usually done in a manner that turns people away rather than engaging them in fruitful conversation and thought, they can be done well. Other common definitions of evangelism involve getting people to join a certain church, or say a certain prayer, or agree to a certain creed. All of these might be commonly thought of as evangelism, but there are also other ways of defining the term, such as spreading the love, peace, joy, and health of Jesus to people around us without any expectation that they respond in any way. One way that this type of evangelism can be practiced is by simply living a good life in order to make the world a better place for the people around us. The people who are consequently blessed by our life can then decide if they want to join themselves to the Jesus that we follow. After all, Jesus told us to make disciples in every nation; he did not say how to do that.

Christian nuns and monks in the past and present have found this type of evangelism to be fruitful. After all, much of northern Europe was evangelized by establishing monasteries in pagan areas, allowing the neighboring inhabitants see the joyful life of the nuns and





monks. Although politics sometimes did play a part in the “Christianization” of these areas, much of the time the people around the monasteries merely decided that they wanted some of what the nuns and monks had, and became Christians themselves.

Today, monasteries try to follow the example of these medieval ancestors. As in the past, contemporary Benedictine communities express our love for the world around us by being committed to a particular place, along with the environment and people in that place. Here at St. Gregory’s, we take care of the gifts God has given us by practicing good stewardship of our land, buildings, appliances, and tools, as St. Benedict prescribes in his Rule (we sometimes keep machinery so long that repairmen are amazed and amused at how old and yet well-maintained our things are). We have received citations from the State of Michigan for good soil and water conservation, and from our county for maintaining a healthy forest. We have even tried using solar power, but the usual cloudiness here in western Michigan does not make that practical. We also try to be good citizens (recycling, voting, paying taxes, and serving on juries) and we follow fair business practices; salesmen comment on the fact that we pay our bills on time (apparently not a universal occurrence in the business world), and we pay our employees well and are generous with granting vacation and leave time. Salesmen, repairmen, and construction workers who have spent time on our property are inquisitive about our life and engage in conversations about religious issues they say they cannot talk about anywhere else (including their own church congregations) for fear of ridicule or dismissal, but feel comfortable discussing with us because of our acceptance of difficult questions. Sometimes these discussions lead to people developing a deeper relationship with Jesus (or establishing any relationship at all with Jesus), sometimes they do not. We also help as many people as we can who need material goods, although because of scam artists in the past, we are wary of handing out money to strangers. We are more likely to help with food, toiletries, gas, bus tickets, etc, but these things rarely occur simply because of our rural location. As with all of our guests, we do not charge any fee for staying at the monastery, although we do make sure that our guesthouses are available for people wanting to share in our monastic life, rather than using us as a free or inexpensive hotel.

This guest ministry (which is based on the monastic ideal of silence — giving the guests time and space alone so that they can be in touch with themselves and the Holy Spirit) is another way we practice monastic evangelism. The disunity of the church is often a reason

that people turn away from or never approach Jesus. We witness to a unity that is deeper than denominational disagreements by welcoming all Christians to our home, and even though we are affiliated with the Episcopal Church and the worldwide Anglican Communion, most of our guests are not. As we gather around the altar, the monks and guests frequently do not know or care about the other guests' denominational affiliations, and when we do learn of them, we are glad to have the opportunity to worship with people from various traditions, knowing that they are all valuable and necessary for the fullness of the church. An increasing number of our guests are involved in the emerging church and new monasticism, and we learn from and gain strength from them, as they do from us traditional church monastics (after all, Christian monasticism could have been called an "emerging church" movement in the third and fourth centuries). We have quite frequent contact with some of these emerging church and new monastic groups, and we have helped them with advice and capital resources, holding them in our prayers as they bring Jesus to their own parts of the world in their own way.

The emerging church and new monastic groups are usually made up of people in their twenties, thirties, and forties, sometime called the "Y" generation or "millennials". We also tend to have many guests in that age range who are not involved with any religious groups, as well as many who are involved in established denominations. In fact, during school terms, it is rare to not have guests from local universities here at the monastery. Much has been said about why people in the millennial generation have either left the church or never joined it in the first place, but for some reason, they tend to respond positively to our life and worship here at St. Gregory's. Maybe it is because most of our services are different from usual parish church services. Maybe it is because in our worship and in our sermons we tend to recognize that life, the universe, and God are mysteries, and rather than trying desperately to explain the mystery, we instead embrace it and try to live deeper into the mystery. Maybe it is because we try to take seriously the implications of the Incarnation: God willingly chooses to live a full human life as Jesus, and so all of human life is holy, and in extension all of the universe is holy. Maybe it is because we are open to and affirming of lifestyles that differ from ours. Whatever the reason, we do seem to appeal to the millennial generation that supposedly wants little to do with the church, as well as to formerly well-established church members who have become estranged from their own congregations because of their questioning of certain policies or their desire to be more embracing of mystery. People who never consider becoming involved in anything related to Christianity are also drawn to our monastery, and we are honored to share the love of Jesus with them, and to receive their love.

None of the things discussed above are meant to be congratulatory on our part, because none of them are heroic, and they are done by millions of others around the world. However, they are what we do; they work for us and they help us spread the love, joy, peace, and health of Jesus to our own small part of the world in our own way (and if people are still critical of us shutting ourselves up in a monastery rather than going out to spread our belief in Jesus, they only need to remember that our quarterly newsletter is mailed to tens of thousands around the world, our website is available to even more, and members of our confraternity as well as oblates of our community bring monastic values to their own families and communities "out in the world"). We are merely following in the footsteps of other evangelists (monastic and otherwise), who are following Jesus.

— Br. Abraham

Come & See

Find out what it's like to be
a Benedictine monk.

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

if you are male, 18 to 50, and can stay for at least two
weeks in July. The only charge is \$25 for registration.



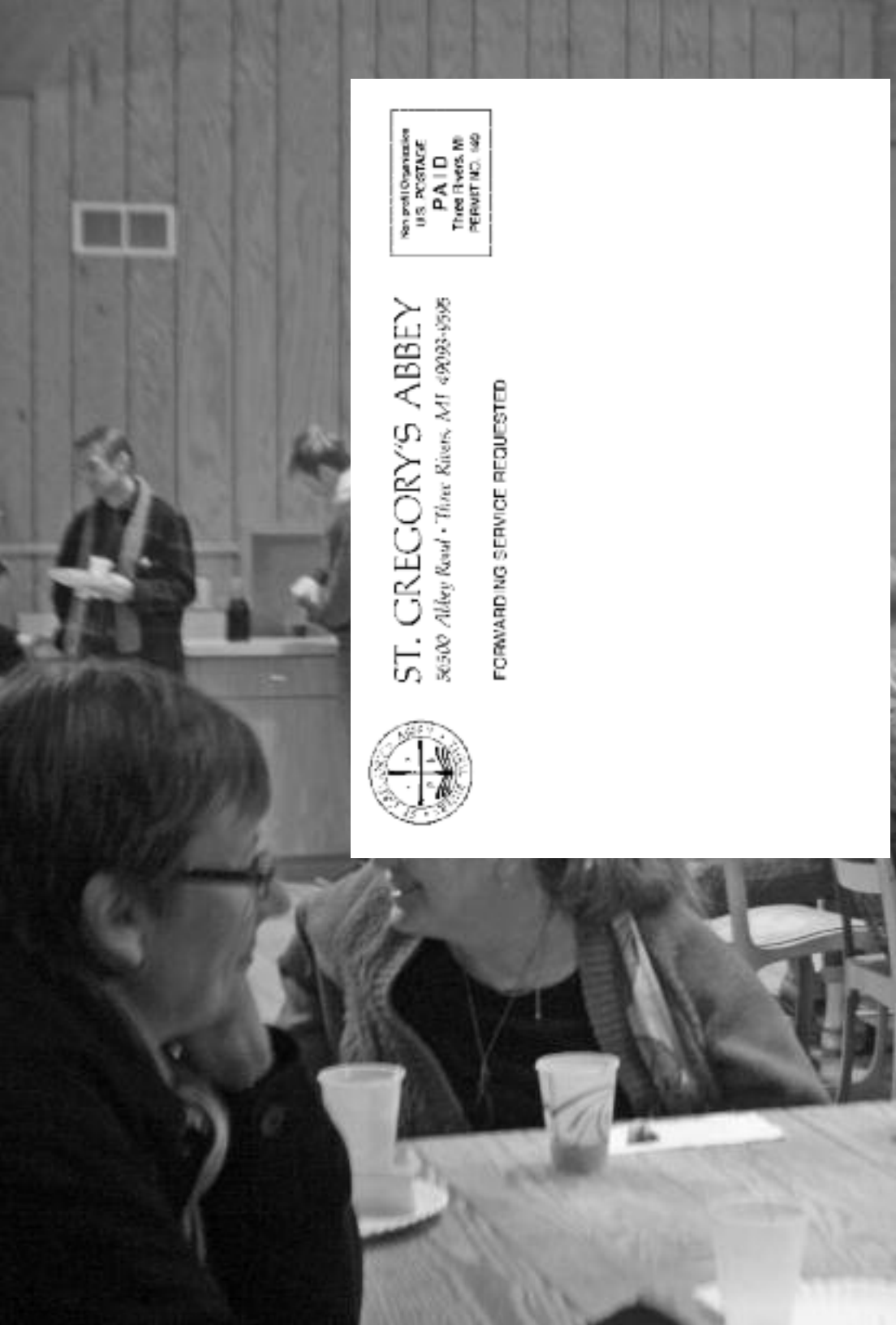
For more information and an application form, write:

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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.

<http://saintgregorysthreerivers.org/donate.html> to donate online

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