



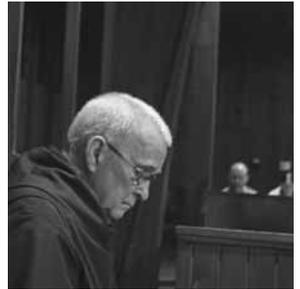
Abbey Letter
Christmas 2007
no. 232



Abbot Andrew



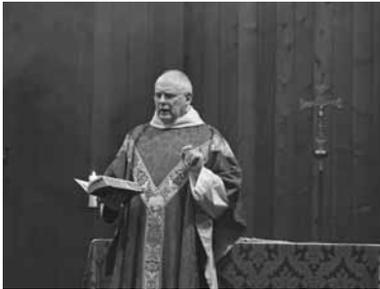
Prior Aelred



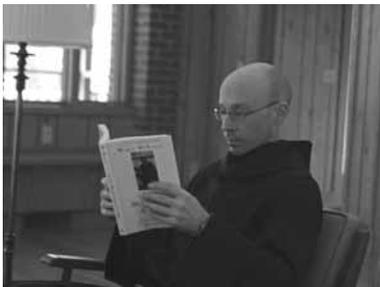
Fr. Jude

*The monks of St. Gregory's Abbey
pray that you and the entire
world may have a joyful
Christmas and a peaceful and
prosperous 2008.*

Fr. William



Br. Martin



Br. Abraham



Br. Cuthbert

Desmond and Leah Tutu with their hosts from the Fetzer Institute get a tour of the abbey.



The retired Anglican Archbishop of Capetown, South Africa, Desmond Tutu, and his wife Leah were our guests for midday prayer and lunch on Friday, August 10th. They were in the midst of a few weeks of rest and retreat at the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo. While in Kalamazoo, the archbishop was involved in talks with the staff of the Fetzer Institute about his and the institute's work on peace-building, and he also spoke to a large crowd at Western Michigan University. During his visit to St. Gregory's, Abbot Andrew asked Bishop Tutu to give his opinion, through hindsight, of his work with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which involved disclosures by both victims and perpetrators of serious human rights violations committed during the apartheid years in South Africa. Bishop Tutu answered: "It was not perfect, but if we had not had it, we would have *had* it."

Bishop Steven Miller of the Diocese of Milwaukee was here with some of his staff members August 19th through 21st for a time of reflection, prayer, and planning.

Bishop Wayne Smith of the Diocese of Missouri was with us on retreat October 10th through 15th. At one time before his election as bishop, he was a priest in our diocese of Western Michigan and is a longtime friend of St. Gregory's.

Prior Aelred attended the annual Benedictine Formation Workshop at Conception Abbey in Missouri November 8th through 12th. This year's presenter was Mother Catarina Boyer of the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, speaking on Community Building and Implanting Values Across Generations. Abbot Christopher Zielinski of Pecos Abbey in New Mexico was originally scheduled to be a co-presenter but was called to Rome during the time of the workshop and was not able to attend.



Bishop Miller, center



Bishop Smith

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Joy to the World?

Christmas is nearly upon us again, and for many, the yearly remembrance of our Lord's birth brings with it a sense of renewal and hope for the future. In most parts of the northern hemisphere, the earth lies dormant; not barren and lifeless but rather in a purifying slumber that tells us it will once again burst forth in life. The liturgical year began anew on December 2nd and hopefully for all of us the season of Advent has afforded us the chance to reflect on the past year while looking forward to the new one.

But something just doesn't feel right. Our leaders speak of a never-ending war as we say, "Peace on earth, goodwill towards men." We decry the commercialism of Christmas but then turn and lament when cashiers won't say, "Merry Christmas." While many may dream of chestnuts roasting on an open fire, still there are many who are faced with the reality of being unable to afford heating costs, or health care, or a decent meal. Something is not right. It has been said, many times many ways, that it is easy to get so caught up in the details of preparing for Christmas that we can lose sight of what Christmas is about. Christmas is about the Gospel. But quite apart from the normal distractions of the holiday season, if any of the above contradictions ring true—and I believe they do—then a fair question to ask is, "What *is* the Gospel?"

Certainly we know the story. There's a hay-filled manger with all kinds of animals nearby. There's the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus and St. Joseph. There's the star and three wise men bringing gold, frankincense, and myrrh. There's an angel and some shepherds. It all makes for a pretty scene adorning a mantle piece—or for those who really splash out, a front yard—and it does remind us of the narrative. I do not wish to discount the value of knowing the Nativity story, but the question still remains: What is the good news? What is the meaning behind the Christmas story that makes having all those trinkets worthwhile?

If here you are hoping for a simple "Jesus saves" kind of answer, dear reader, I am afraid you will be disappointed. The fact is that in merely having to ask, "What is the Gospel?" an even more unsettling question arises: *Is* there a Gospel? Is there any good news at all? In a world that is dominated by rampant materialism, a notion that all things can be explained by quantitative formulae, and a relativism that denies even the possibility of abiding truth, there is precious little room for a newborn baby who, some claim, is the savior of the world.

It is no wonder so many people detest the Christmas season. All this talk of peace, love, hope, and joy does not mesh with the prevailing worldview that measures peace in terms of how much or how little violence is going on, that equates hope with a decent retirement package, and that discounts love and joy as nothing more than chemical reactions that can be manipulated. If all this leaves one thinking that life has no meaning, it is not hard to see why. The mentality of pointlessness, however, does not seem to lead always to despair. Instead, the coping mechanism of cynicism steps in, allowing many people to laugh at the perceived absurdity of the world: "There is no need for good news because nothing is wrong and nothing is right. It is what it is and there is nothing meaningful to say." So much for the Gospel, right?

The problem with this postmodern worldview, though, is that it can paralyze the human spirit. The cynical answer here is, "There is no such thing as the human spirit,"



but that just makes the paralysis easier to ignore. The point is clear enough: if there is nothing to the notion of a shared humanity, then the ideas of justice, responsibility, equality, and human rights have no claim on us. Indeed, if we flat out reject the concept of a human nature that is more than just biological similarity, then the result is a complete isolation of the individual in which actions only have “meaning” for the person who performs them, and any impact on other people’s lives cannot be viewed objectively as either good or bad. Some see this as true freedom. Others, including myself, see it as the epitome of slavery.

Another way of coping with a worldview devoid of meaning is to adopt a rigid fundamentalism. This involves a firm declaration of belief that there is real meaning in life, but it also requires the total rejection of any fact or idea, however valid, that does not fit with one’s picture of reality. At first, such a stance may be comforting to those seeking something concrete on which to pin their hopes, but it invariably leads to a mentality of exclusion that is just as poisonous to the human spirit as any postmodern way of thinking—and perhaps even more so. “If,” runs the fundamentalist mind-set, “you do not believe exactly what I believe and act exactly as I say you should, you do not deserve my respect.” Subconsciously or not, this attitude can lead to a gradation of humanity; those of the “in crowd” being human, and everyone else somewhat less so. Grading humanity in this way makes it easier to label others as enemies who either need to change completely or be eliminated. In a system like this, the only good news is belonging to the “in crowd.” It’s bad news for everyone else.

These two ways of dealing with life’s contradictions—shrugging one’s shoulders and saying, “It’s all meaningless anyway,” or claiming that everything will be ok when our enemies are converted or destroyed—are equally unsatisfying because both views degrade the relationship that human beings have to one another and their surroundings. To the fundamentalist, it’s a hard-line “us and them,” so life’s contradictions are not seen as contradictions because somebody has to be the bad guy. To the postmodernist, it’s neither us nor them but an unconnected collection of “me’s,” and there need not be any sense of contradiction at all because there is no objective standard according to which actions have meaning.

It’s hard to reconcile the meaning of Christmas with such worldviews. That is because the message behind the story is about relationship: God embraces humanity. The love that created and holds all things in being—not an impersonal force or



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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.

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