

Abbey Letter
no. 240
Christmas 2009





Abbot Andrew



Prior Aelred



Fr. Jude

The monks of St. Gregory's Abbey thank you for your prayers and gifts, and we pray that you and the entire world may have a joyful Christmas and a peaceful and prosperous 2010.



Fr. William



Br. Martin



Br. Abraham



Br. Cuthbert

NOTES

One of Br. Abraham's choral symphonies has been published online by composer/publisher John Webber. A pdf of the score and mp3 of synthesized audio reproductions of each movement can be found at Mr. Webber's website at webbermusic.com. Many of John Webber's compositions can be found on his website as well. There is also a link from our website to the files.

Our website has many other features, including articles from back issues of the *Abbey Letter*, information about monastic life, the Summer Vocation Program, and monastic vocations, and contact links for the abbot, novice master, guest department, and publications office. Prayer requests and donations can also be made online, as well as calendar and book purchases.

saintgregorysthreerivers.org

An unusually large hornet's nest has been slowly growing underneath an electrical transformer located on a pole near our equipment barn. So far, no one has been hurt by the inhabitants.



St. Gregory's Abbey July Vocation Program

Spend two weeks (or more) in July with the monks of St. Gregory's Abbey, a Benedictine monastery of the Episcopal Church at Three Rivers, Michigan.

Worship & Pray Work & Learn

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

For more information, 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, MI 49093

novicemaster@saintgregorysthreerivers.org

Applications will be accepted after January 1, 2010.

saintgregorysthreerivers.org

From Discernment to Obedience

In the final chapter of the *Rule* of our Holy Father Benedict, the monks are admonished to read the *Conferences* of the Fathers, their *Institutes* and their *Lives*. Although there has been some doubt expressed as to whether the *Conferences* and *Institutes* referred to are the works by those names written in the 5th century by John Cassian, current scholarly consensus is that Cassian's works are meant. The assumption is that John Cassian's condemnation at the Council of Orange (for being insufficiently Augustinian in his understanding of grace) led to St. Benedict avoiding the use of his name, while recognizing that the practical worth of his writings on the monastic life was too great to be lost. Similarly, the condemnation of Evagrius Ponticus for Origenism did not lead to the suppression of his writings, but to their continuing to circulate under the pseudonym of St. Nilus.

Whatever the accuracy of current scholarly opinion, there seems little doubt that generations of monks assumed that it was Cassian's works referred to, for, according to Owen Chadwick, it was the Benedictine monasteries that were primarily responsible for preserving the writings of Cassian.

Cassian was a monk in Palestine who traveled to Egypt to receive firsthand the stories of the early monks. Late in life, after he had settled in southern Gaul, he was asked to write something for the benefit of the monastic communities then being formed in the West and produced the *Conferences* and *Institutes*. Of course the *Conferences*, written by an old monk a quarter of a century after the time when he had first as a youth heard the stories of the Egyptian monks, cannot be considered transcripts of what was originally said. Discussions about the authenticity of speeches in historical writings is endless. Suffice it to say that Cassian's works themselves were venerated and his stories accepted as being valuable guides in the monastic pilgrimage.

The first conferences are from Abba Moses, the Ethiopian. Moses had been a brigand and killer before his conversion. Overcoming racial prejudice, he eventually came to be regarded as a wise guide in the monastic life and was even ordained to the priesthood (something extremely uncommon among the early monks).

In his second conference, Moses tells a story of Anthony the Great. Some of the elders came to see St. Anthony and spoke all night on the topic of perfection. They wanted to discover how best to attain purity of heart and union with God. Some thought that the chief means were fasting and keeping vigils. Others thought detachment the answer. Some thought solitude and seclusion the only way to avoid distractions, while they were answered by those who held that the essential virtues of hospitality and charity would be excluded by such a course. The blessed Anthony was the last to speak. His discourse in the *Conferences* is essentially an expansion of an aphorism attributed to him in the *Apothegmata Patrum*: "Some have afflicted their bodies by asceticism, but they lack discernment and are far from God."

For many people the Desert Fathers have conjured up notions of extreme and bizarre practices—contests of who could go without sleep or food for the longest period—and there are, to be sure, such stories in the collections. What one should note, however, is that the point of such stories is usually to indicate the inappropriateness of such extremities. The question of the accuracy of Cassian's account of Moses's story about St.



Anthony, or even the saying ascribed to him in the *Apothegmata*, is not essential. The fact that such an attitude was attributed to Anthony, universally revered as the first and wisest of the monks, indicates the importance the monks attached to the virtue of discernment.

When we turn to the *Rule*, we see that a major change of emphasis has occurred. First, St. Benedict prefers the related word “discretion” to “discernment.” Second, discretion is almost always to be exercised not by the individual monk, but by the Abbot (the single exception being that if one of the older monks loses his temper with one of the boys “*sine discretione*”). The only time Benedict uses the word “discernment” is in chapter II, Qualities of the Abbot: “*Non ab eo persona in monasterio discernatur*” (“The abbot should avoid all favoritism in the monastery”)—thus using the word in a meaning that approximates not our understanding of “discernment,” but “discrimination.”

It seems that the major reason for the shift in emphasis is the change from a monastic life that is basically eremitical (solitary) to one that is cenobitic (communal). Obviously the hermit, alone in his cell wrestling the demons, needed discernment in abundance, but the natural gathering of hermits into loose-knit communities around a noted elder (in the tradition of St. Anthony) and the formation of more strictly cenobitic communities in Upper Egypt (under the leadership of St. Pachomius) led to emphasis on a different monastic virtue—obedience. If discernment is regarded as the primary virtue and the young monk “discerns” that he need not do what he is told, community breaks down.

Even the Abbot must be careful, it seems, and the primary monastic virtue comes to be that of doing things in accordance with the practice of the elders—meaning not just the experienced members of a monastic community, but that of earlier generations of monks. The later Desert Father stories have numerous anecdotes about how much better the monks used to be. Monks did not originate the concepts of “the good old days” nor “we’ve always done it this way,” but they have traditionally been among the most enthusiastic practitioners of these attitudes.

The 12th century Cistercians, with their stress on the importance of exact observance, were frequently accused of being Pharisees. Certainly this is a danger. There can be an empty formalism, devoid of any moral or religious content. On the other hand, one must remember the words of C. S. Lewis, “One must be careful what one pretends to be, for what one pretends to be is what one tends to become.” Monks see their life not as anything special but as the following of the Gospel, a serious attempt to live the Christian life.

As Simon Tugwell says in *Ways of Imperfection*: “... we must not forget that the monastic routine was regarded as embodying, precisely, the Christian life, and there is nothing obviously wrong in supposing that in *behaving* like Christians we gradually *become* new creatures in Christ. We rejoin here the eminently sane Augustinian principle that human minds and wills are far too erratic to provide a dependable basis for the Christian life; it is on the objective fact of the Church that we must build, leaving it to God to perfect man’s inner conversion.”

Terrence Kardong, author of the most recent scholarly commentary on the *Rule*, has said that one of the emphases of Cassian with which modern monks are frequently uncomfortable is the notion that the cenobite is “free from care.” The necessities of life are taken care of and one’s time is regulated by a predictable schedule not to make the monk complacent, but to free him of the burdens of “normal” life so that he may concentrate on God and His will and seek inner peace and tranquillity. Thus St. Bernard can argue that there is nothing to prevent the monk from “tasting and seeing that the Lord is good.” Monastic discipline, willingly embraced, is ultimately freeing.

According to Simon Tugwell, the monks of the West inherited an Augustinian tradition, where, “... freedom is not something we have by right from the outset, it is something which grows in us gradually as we are freed from the tyranny of the old Adam, until, in heaven, we reach the ‘blessed constraint’ of not being able to sin, which is perfect freedom. And the discipline of monastic observance is a radical way of denying power to our fallen instincts. The pessimistic view of monastic life as largely a way of keeping people out of mischief can be subsumed into a much more positive view of monastic life as providing space within which the new creature in Christ can come to maturity. If the cell is a tomb, it is also a womb.”

Many people have been critical of outward observances as being simply “going through the motions,” but the unity of the monastic community comes from common observance, so that the monks are not forced to be inwardly uniform. By agreeing to an outward minimum, the monastic life allows the monks to develop inwardly in their own time and way. As the Prologue to the *Rule* states, “For as we advance in the religious life and in faith, our hearts expand and we run the way of God’s commandments with unspeakable sweetness of love.”

Again, Tugwell puts this very well, “The common observances provide an external point of reference, which allows monks to relax with themselves and with each other; the monastic life as a whole, undisturbed by individual quirks, becomes both a unique ‘school of charity’ and a continual drama of charity. The love of God and the love of neighbor are inextricably entwined in the life of inner unity of heart and outward uniformity of observance, so that the monastery can be described as ‘not an earthly paradise, but a heavenly one.’ ”

— Prior Aelred

Books from St. Gregory's Abbey

Singing God's Praises (1998)

history of the community, select Abbey letter articles, photographs

\$20.00 Please send ____ copies. \$ _____

Born in the Darkest Time of Year (2004)

15 Christmas stories by Abbot Andrew

\$16.00 Please send ____ copies. \$ _____

Tools For Peace (2007)

Abbot Andrew's reflections on St. Benedict and René Girard

\$24.00 Please send ____ copies. \$ _____

Enclosed is \$_____ in full payment. Please allow 4-6 weeks for delivery.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Any payment in excess of the book price will be gratefully accepted as a gift to the abbey.
St. Gregory's Abbey, 56500 Abbey Road, Three Rivers, MI 49093-9595



2010 St. Gregory's Abbey Calendar

13 months, 15 photos, with the Abbey's liturgical calendar

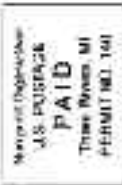
\$10.00 Please send ____ copies. Please allow 4-6 weeks for delivery.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Any payment in excess of the calendar price will be gratefully accepted as a gift to the abbey.
St. Gregory's Abbey, 56500 Abbey Road, Three Rivers, MI 49093-9595



ST. GREGORY'S ABBEY
30500 Abbey Road • Three Rivers, MI 49082-6595

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED



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

Donations may be mailed to:
Saint Gregory's Abbey
56500 Abbey Road
Three Rivers, MI 49093-9595