

Abbey Letter

no. 245



Easter 2011



*May the grace and joy
of the Risen Lord
strengthen all of us to
have a good Lent filled
with prayer and
longing for God.*

- Abbot Andrew

NOTES

Abbot Gregory Polan, OSB of Conception Abbey in Conception, Missouri led our annual community retreat December 1st - 4th.

Stephen Briggs from Ellenton, Florida has joined us as a postulant. Stephen is a native of Ogden, Utah.

We recently received a large portrait of Martin Collett, OSB, who was abbot of Nashdom Abbey while the American monks who later became St. Gregory's Abbey were being trained there from 1936-1939. The portrait was given to us by the monks of Elmore Abbey (the successors of Nashdom Abbey), who have moved to a new location in the Salisbury Cathedral Close.

Abbot Andrew met with the Order of Julian of Norwich February 3rd-5th to

participate in reflections about community life. On February 18th -22nd, he attended a workshop shared by Benedictine abbots and prioresses at a retreat center in Jacksonville, Florida. Michael Casey, OCSO, a leading writer on monastic spirituality, was the speaker. Abbot Andrew is also scheduled to serve as chaplain at the diocesan convention of Western Michigan held in Traverse City April 7th -8th.

Our website now has four short videos showing events at the monastery through the seasons of the year. These seasonal videos are in addition to our virtual tour of the monastery buildings and our slideshow showcasing monastic life and vocation. Also new on the website are additions to the sermon archive.

saintgregorysthreerivers.org

Abbot Gregory



Stephen Briggs with the portrait of Abbot Martin



Books read in the monastic refectory during lunch and supper 2010

Christmas in America: A History by Penne L. Restad

The Hamburger: A History by Josh Ozersky

The Eighth American Saint: The Life of Saint Mother Theodore Guerin, Foundress of the Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-Of-The-Woods, Indiana by Katherine Burton

Leonardo Da Vinci: Flights of the Mind by Charles Nicholl

Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years by Diarmid MacCulloch

Thrift Store Saints: Meeting Jesus 25¢ at a Time by Jane Knuth

Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India by William Dalrymple

The Ninth: Beethoven and the World in 1824 by Harvey Sachs

Nothing is to Be Preferred to the Work of God

It seems that ever since St. Gregory's Abbey adopted the vernacular for the recitation of the Daily Office in November of 1967, we have been in the process of revision. With the adoption of English there has been the question of what translation to use. Then there has been the question of what liturgical materials are available. Some have questioned the appropriateness of certain psalms and canticles for Christian use. The issue of inclusive language has raised another question.

As I am supposedly overseeing the current process of revision, it seemed that some reflections of the Daily Office, its history, what it has meant to Benedictines and to the monks of St. Gregory's would be apt.

When the early monks referred to the "Work of God" they meant the entire practice of the monastic life with its attendant vigils, fasts and manual labor, but in chapter XLIII of the *Rule of Our Holy Father Benedict* when it states, "nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God," it is the performance of the Daily Office that is meant. A change had occurred in the course of the intervening centuries.

Exactly how such a change came about is a thorny question. Such evidence as exists is sufficient to permit the adoption of different points of view but slight enough to preclude consensus. It seems likely that the change is at least partly a result of the performance of the Daily Office ceasing to be part of the normal life of the average Christian and being seen as the task of the religious professionals. Exactly why this should have occurred is also unclear. In the Latin Church it would be tempting to speculate that the prayer of the church being in "a language not understood of the people" would make the laity less inclined to participate. Unfortunately for this suggestion, a similar change also occurred in the Greek Church (where the language of the prayer of the church and the vernacular remained the same) as well as the fact that it occurred in the west before the development of vernacular languages other than Latin (it is worth keeping in mind that the vernacular of Benedict and his monks was Latin). It also seems true that Cranmer anticipated the adoption of the *Book of Common Prayer* would lead to the laity in the parishes performing Morning and Evening Prayer in the place of the Divine Office previously chanted by the monks and nuns of the suppressed monasteries. Regardless of what explanations there might be of the disappearance of lay participation in the Daily Office, it is indisputable that in all these cases the celebration of the Daily Office was no longer a component of the normal life of the average Christian but became instead part of the duty of the religious professionals (of all the churches influenced by the Reformation it seems that the Church of England was the only one which continued to require the recitation of the Daily Office by the clergy).

One possible solution to this development is that the Daily Office as it came to be performed in cathedrals ceased to meet the religious needs of the laity for other reasons than being in a foreign tongue. This explanation requires some knowledge of the historical background of the Daily Office once again bearing in mind that the evidence is meager and subject to differing interpretations.

From the beginnings of the monastic life, whether eremitical or cenobitic, repetition of passages of Sacred Scripture, especially the psalms, was an essential aspect of the life. The primary purpose, even in cenobitic communities or when the hermits gathered to pray together, was individual and ascetic. The goal was to put on the mind of Christ by immersing oneself in the Word of God. Since it was assumed that God had something important to communicate in every word, it followed that all parts of Scripture (included some works that were not included in the canon eventually established, such as the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Letter of Barnabas*) were used. From early descriptions it seems that the monks took turns offering some passage

from Scripture. This was followed by a period of silence while all pondered its significance. After the silence the leader would say a prayer that “collected” all of the prayers of the individual participants (hence the word, “collect”). At some early time the psalms were recognised as being especially appropriate for this form of common prayer which, combined with the desire to include all of the Word of God, led to some arrangement of the entire psalter being prayed through in some period of time (in the *Holy Rule* it is specified that the entire psalter should be prayed through each week). There is considerable disagreement as to how often the early monks gathered for such prayer, but in cenobitic communities the entire group seems to have assembled at the beginning and close of the day. The emphasis on personal edification and complete use of Scripture has led liturgists to describe forms of the Daily Office of this type as “monastic.”

A different approach to prayer in common developed outside the monasteries and became popular in cathedrals and basilicas. Again the times for assembly were typically at the beginning and close of the day, but the approach was quite different. The emphasis was on corporate praise, celebration and intercession. Rather than all of the psalter being recited on some sort of schedule, only certain psalms appropriate to the time of day or the occasion being celebrated were used. Readings from Scripture were brief or sometimes (apparently) dispensed with entirely. Modern liturgists have coined the term “cathedral office” for this form of the Daily Office.

One might assume that a “monastic office” was prayed here at St. Gregory’s and other monasteries and that a “cathedral office” was prayed in cathedrals and parishes that prayed the Daily Office (using, perhaps, the *Book of Common Prayer*). Alas, the situation is not so simple. It was already most complex and mixed by the time that the so called “Liturgical Code” was composed for the *Holy Rule*.

The *Holy Rule* sets out a scheme of eight times in each day when the monks are to assemble for common prayer. The rationale is set forth in chapter XVI, “The Prophet says: *Seven times a day I have praised you.* We will fulfill this sacred number of seven if we satisfy our obligations of service at Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline, for it was of these hours that he said: *Seven times a day I have praised you.* Concerning Vigils, the same Prophet says: *At midnight I arose to give you praise.* Therefore, we should *praise* our Creator *for his just judgements* at these times: Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline; and *let us arise at night to give him praise.*”

For centuries monks prayed a form of the Divine Office that was unchanged, except for the occasional addition of a new feast, but after the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, everything changed. It is a complicated story and some descriptions and reflections will need another article.

— Prior Aelred



CONTACTING THE ABBEY

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(please do not telephone at other times or on Sundays or holidays)

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

novicemaster@saintgregorysthreerivers.org

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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.

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