

# Abbey Letter



no.251  
Fall 2012



## Scenes from this Year's July Vocation Program

Participants in our annual Vocation Program commit to staying at least two weeks at St. Gregory's. While here, they are given a glimpse of monastic life as they pray, work, study, and have social contact with the monks.



*community recreation*



*at class*



*proofreading*



*lunch in the refectory*



*beanbag game at Sunday buffet supper*



*homemade ice cream*



*coffee and cookies before vespers*



*weeding the garden*



*working in the refectory*

## NOTES

Br. Cassian Russell OCSO from the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia was with us May 13th – 17th.

Our Br. Cassian attended the 27th annual Monastic Institute at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota June 24th – 28th. The main topic for this year's Institute was "Prayer and Community."

On May 31st, Br. Abraham met with Swami Bodhananda Saraswati for an interreligious dialogue at The Sambodh Center for Human Excellence in Kalamazoo, Michigan. The Swami is the director of The Sambodh Society, a network of ashrams in India and the United States.

Prior Aelred and Br. Martin traveled to Indianapolis for the General Convention of the Episcopal Church July 5th – 12th.

Abbot Andrew is scheduled to speak at Grace Church in Holland, Michigan on September 12th. His presentation on "Engaging a Rule of Life" is part of a series on practices of community the parish is holding over the next year.

Our website has been redesigned to be more accessible for mobile devices. All of the features of our old website were retained in the redesign:

slideshows, sermon archives, 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](http://saintgregorysthreerivers.org)



*Br. Cassian Russell OCSO and Br. Martin in the refectory*

## Resting in God's Desire

Although contemplative prayer or meditation has only a couple of brief references in the Rule of Benedict, this practice has been an important element in the Benedictine life over the centuries. In our time, many writers, among them Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington, have popularized contemplative prayer under the term “centering prayer.” At St. Gregory’s, we set aside a half hour for meditation after Vespers each day.

In many religious and philosophical traditions such as Vedanta and Buddhism, one primary motivation for this discipline is to withdraw from the entanglement of desire, especially the matrix of desires among people. Buddha likened this matrix to a burning house from which we must escape through the renunciation of all desire.

The death and resurrection of Jesus in the Gospels reveals that the matrix of desire that the Vedanta sages and Buddha found so problematic is the organic process of persecution that culminated in the cross. Here, groups of people who normally hated each other: the Romans, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, united for a brief moment and agreed to put Jesus to death. St. Paul called this organic process of persecuting victims “the rulers of this age” or the “principalities and powers.” These powers failed to understand God’s wisdom revealed in the crucifixion, otherwise they would “not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:8).

When human desire is embroiled in conflict that is resolved only through accusation of others and persecution, then human desire is, indeed, a huge problem. René Girard has demonstrated many times over how the desires of each one of us are entangled with the desires of others. That is, we imitate not only the actions of others, but the desires of other people. Girard calls this imitation mimetic desire. Imitating the desires of other people works constructively if it is a matter of encouraging somebody to desire a good book or a fine piece of music. Mimetic desire becomes a problem when we fall into rivalry through our shared desire. In as individualistic a culture such as ours, accepting this reality does not come easily. We often take pride in ownership of our desires, but this very pride is a result of our rivalry with others for ownership of these desires. (“I am the one who wants this toy or this lover, not you!”) Fighting over objects leads to fighting over power and influence, as when Jesus’ disciples fought over who was the greatest.

When we attempt contemplative prayer for any length of time, focusing our attention with images of Gospel stories or a brief repetitive prayer such as the Jesus Prayer, the desires of other people intrude with overwhelming power. Although some of these desires are positive, it is usually the negative, rivalrous desires that have the strongest effect on us. Some of the desires are those of people important to us at the present time, others of people from our past who still haunt us, while other desires come from our culture as a whole, especially the media-driven culture of marketing. We become preoccupied with these desires of others and tend to work

out in our minds how we are going to get the better of our rivals as soon as prayer time is over. But when we become preoccupied with another person or a social group in a rivalrous way, we fall into idolatry, making little gods of our rivals. The desires of the other person have eclipsed the Desire of God.

This is the burning house Buddha warns us about. Daniel gives us a different image: a burning fiery furnace, fueled by the idolatry of the currently reigning empire from which there is no escape. And yet, in the midst of contemplation, we are unharmed by the fire, protected by a fourth person who looks like “a son of man.” The Son of Man, Jesus, steps into the burning matrix of mimetic desire that is ruled by the “principalities and powers.” The Son of Man protects us in the middle of the furnace through infusing God’s desire into us. Rather than pull us out of a burning house, God enters the fiery furnace to transform that furnace by transforming our rivalrous desires. Desire itself is not the problem; we will always have desires and they will imitate the desires of others. The problem is imitating the desires of others in a rivalrous way rather than imitating God’s Desire.

What is God’s Desire? Is God’s Desire so different from human desire that the same word cannot work for both? As with all language about God, the answer is yes and no. God is far beyond the entanglements of human mimetic desire, but even so, God’s Desire is mimetic. The mimetic Desire in God is the love between the three Persons of the Trinity. In this matrix of Desire there is no rivalry but rather a desire focused on the good of the other. This divine Desire overflows into a dynamic, ongoing love for everything in creation. This means that Christian contemplation, far from being a solitary act, is profoundly social as it brings us deeply into God’s Desire, a Desire to give all of God’s self to all, even though we have rejected God to the extent of putting Jesus on the cross. Contemplative prayer is a practice that allows us to let go of our entangled desires and allow God’s Desire to move into us.

Many monastic writers have used the term “resting” for contemplative prayer. This account of contemplative prayer doesn’t make the practice seem very restful and oftentimes it isn’t because our entangled desires tend to become all the more active when we try to draw our focus to a space, a still point, outside of this matrix. But if we let go of these desires and fall back on God, then we will experience, at least intermittently, a restfulness that comes from God that allows us to rest in God’s Desire. So rested in contemplation, we are strengthened to meet all people with the focused self-giving Desire God has for all of us.

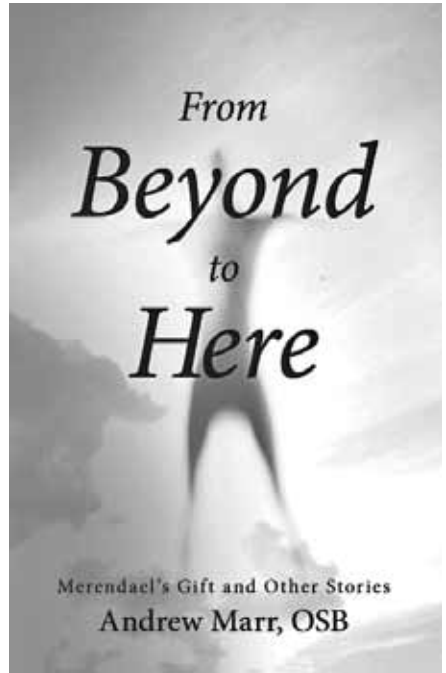
— Abbot Andrew

*For more of Abbot Andrew’s thoughts on contemplative prayer, **The Indwelling God** booklet can be ordered from our website or by using the order form for his new fiction book in this issue of the **Abbey Letter**.*

# Now Available

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*Soft cover, 313 pages*



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