

Abbey Letter  
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## NOTES

Abbot Andrew preached at The Church of the Mediator in Harbert, Michigan January 22nd as part of the Episcopal Church's "Religious Life Sunday" observance. He also led a presentation during the adult education hour.

St. Gregory's Abbey is featured in the "American Religious Sounds Project" which has partnered with the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service to produce the "Sounds of Religion" exhibition which debuted January 27th at the Michigan State University Museum.

Part of the Eastern Province of the Order of Lutheran Franciscans met at St. Gregory's Abbey for their provincial gathering January 27th - 29th. They met with other groups in the province (who gathered in Florida and the District of Columbia) via teleconference.

St. Gregory's Abbey had its regularly scheduled Visitation February 6th-10th. The Rt. Rev. Douglas Sparks, bishop of the Diocese of

Northern Indiana, led the visitation, assisted by Br. David Bryan Hoopes OHC, of Holy Cross Priory in Toronto. The visitation team met with the community as a group and individually, reviewed financial records, participated in worship, meals, and other community events, and met with our employees. They reminded us of our strengths and our weaknesses, and left us with encouragement and suggestions on fostering our monastic life.

James Alison was with us the afternoon of March 7th. He was doing some work with the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo and decide to drop by for a visit. He is the author of several books, including **Raising Abel** and **On Being Liked**.

Br. Abraham spoke to a class about "Civil Discourse" at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan March 27th.



*members of the Eastern Province  
of the Order of Lutheran  
Franciscans*



*Bishop Sparks  
and  
Br. David Bryan*



*James Alison*

# **Follow Your True Path — Don't Put It Off!**

## **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, age 18 to 50, have a serious interest in monastic vocation, and can spend at least two weeks at the abbey. The only cost is \$25 for registration. For more information and an application form, write:

Vocation Program Director  
St. Gregory's Abbey  
56500 Abbey Road  
Three Rivers, Michigan 49093-9595  
[novicemaster@saintgregorysthreerivers.org](mailto:novicemaster@saintgregorysthreerivers.org)

[saintgregorysthreerivers.org](http://saintgregorysthreerivers.org)

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### **OUT WITH THE OLD – IN WITH THE NEW**

We are hoping to replace the mattresses and pillows in St. Anthony's guesthouse and St. Denys' guesthouse soon, and are asking people to consider sponsoring the purchase of these items. We need 50 pillows (\$10.00 each) and 25 mattresses (\$170.00 each). If you would like to help us purchase some of these items, please send us the money and mark it "pillows" or "mattresses". Any money received above the total needed will go into our general operating fund. When we reach the amount needed to replace all the items, we will announce it in our next publication.



**YOU CAN HELP**

# HOW TO BE NOTHING

Back when I was considering a monastic vocation as a young man, I read these words by Thomas Merton from his book *Contemplation in a World of Action*: "To properly understand prayer, we have to see in it this encounter of our freedom emerging from the depths of nothingness and undevelopment, at the call of God. Prayer is freedom and affirmation growing out of nothingness into love." I felt that Merton was pointing at what the monastic vocation was all about and that encountering nothingness was what I was called to do. Merton convinced me that nothingness is a big deal.

Many years down the road, I could say that living with nothingness has been something of a motif for my life as a monk but I don't think about it all the time. A fine book I read recently called *The Difference Nothing Makes: Creation, Christ, Contemplation* by Brian Robinette has given me cause to reflect on Merton's words. I will share some musings that this book has inspired.

Nothingness is usually thought to be a bad thing. Surely it is better to be something rather than nothing. So why would one want to explore the depths of one's nothingness? Of course, if we really were nothing we wouldn't be worrying about it because there would be nothing to do the worrying.

That is to say, it is hard, maybe impossible, to conceptualize nothing. Since we live in a world of things, we expect every word, including "nothing," to refer to something. That makes it hard to think of nothing as really nothing. It seems that it has to be at least a sort of something for the word to have any meaning at all. At the other extreme, we have the same problem conceptualizing God. If we think of God as something, or someone, then what we are thinking about isn't God because God is not a something among other somethings; or a someone among someones, not even a much bigger Something or Someone than all other somethings or someones. But is God nothing? Not a thing? Not even a someone? That's not quite right, either, but it's probably closer to the truth.

Curiously, I remember a snatch from a cartoon I saw when I was a very young child. The cartoon protagonist was being bullied by a villain who chanted: "You're just a great big nothing. You're just a great big nothing." Even as a small child, it was obvious that it was bad to be nothing, and it was even worse to accuse someone of being nothing. I remember nothing else about the cartoon but, given the conventions of such cartoons, I assume the bullied protagonist proved to be enough of a something to give the villain the comeuppance he deserved. In any case, the villain's thinking was confused. Nothing has no quantity, so it can't be "great big." And if the bullied protagonist was really nothing, then the villain would have had nobody — nothing to taunt.

It has been noted many times by many thinkers, Thomas Merton among them, that there is a nothingness within each of us, a nothingness that seems threatening and must be overcome somehow. If the nothingness within is something to overcome, one way to try to do it is to make someone smaller than oneself. Hence the villainous taunt that someone else is a great big nothing. This nothingness within is often thought to be the root cause of inner craving, the vain search for something to fill the nothingness. Hence the need for too many things, too many accomplishments, etc. There is no end to it. When we try to fill nothingness, nothing can fill it. Even the whole world will leave us wanting more.

René Girard, a French thinker who gave us some profound insights into the anthropology of violence, suggested that the (usually) unconscious sense of non-being, of nothingness within each of us causes us to search for "being" by looking to other people who *seem* to have the being we lack. This makes anything the other wants and has desirable because that seems to be what gives the other his or her being. In order to have being for oneself, it is necessary to have what the other desires and has. This trait can be positive and constructive; in fact it

is essential for socialization as a human. From birth, we learn what to desire from others. If other people affirm us, we have more "being" than before. But this trait can easily become destructive when one tries to *take* being from another. In this bottomless pit, not only is it not enough to have more of everything; it is essential to have *more than* the other person. This brings us back to the villain who wanted to be more than the bullied protagonist. Having more and being more than the other seems to be a finite goal, but it isn't, for if one needs to have *more* and *be* more, then more is never enough for fear that it won't continue to be more than the other. In taunting the protagonist for being a great big nothing, the villain was trying to strip his victim of being, to take that being for himself. That is, the villain needed to *become* the other. The other must be reduced to a great big nothing. In reality, the villain was revealing his own lack of being.

These considerations make nothing out to be enough of a something to be a threatening devouring monster which is quite a something after all. But if that is the case, why have Thomas Merton and so many other mystics found nothingness so attractive as to be the basis of one's vocation? For a Christian thinker like Thomas Merton, nothing is what God made the world out of, and therefore each one of us is also made out of nothing. It is God's creation out of nothing that Robinette discusses so thoughtfully in the book mentioned above. If God made the world out of nothing, then nothing isn't so bad after all. Not that nothing is a raw material as suggested by the chaos mentioned in Genesis. God has created us out of nothing whatsoever, not out of a great big nothing, not even out of a smidgen of nothing. That is to say, God made the world out of nothing, nothing, nothing at all. St. John says it more positively by saying that the Logos was in the beginning with God and without the Logos, nothing was made that was made. (Jn. 1: 3) All of this is to say that creation is a free gift. God chose to bring us into existence and chooses to keep us in existence forever. As far as God is concerned, we really are something! And, to top that off, when we dwindled towards nothingness by trying to make other people great big nothings, Jesus allowed himself to be made nothing on the cross so that we could be recreated into something all over again. St. Paul captures this double creation out of double nothingness with these words: "For it is the God who said, 'Light will shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." (2 Cor 4: 6)

Since we are created out of nothing, the nothingness within is not a devouring monster; it is emptiness available for God to fill. This should be as easy as knocking so that the door may be opened. (Mt. 7: 7) But this also shows up our radical contingency, our total dependence on God for our being, not just at the beginning but at all times and forever. If we prefer to be our own boss and try to fill the empty cup ourselves in one or more of the ways mentioned above, these efforts will fail with ever more violent results. Keeping the cup empty for God and knocking so that the door will be open is, of course, the essence of humility. There is no being to fight for or fight over. We have all the being we really need as a free gift. And if God wishes us into being and does the same for everybody else, then we want every other person also to be a great big something.

The nothing we are created from may be nothing, but this nothing is quite a big deal, not only the biggest deal in town, but the biggest deal in the world. To appreciate our nothingness, it helps to stop doing things long enough to spend time doing nothing. At such moments, we might even notice God filling the empty cup. Does this mean that we do nothing all the time? When Jesus said he is the vine and we are the branches, he said that without him we can do nothing. (Jn. 15: 5) We may protest that we are doing a lot of things and getting a lot of things done, but all these things amount to nothing. But then Jesus commands us, as branches connected to the vine, to bear fruit, fruit that will last. (Jn 15: 16) That's quite a lot of something! All we have to do is be nothing. There's nothing to it.

— Abbot Andrew

## 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.

\$ \_\_\_\_\_

### **Come Let Us Adore** (2011)

*select Abbey Letter Articles from 1999 to 2011 (companion book to Singing God's Praises)*

\$12.00 Please send \_\_\_\_\_ copies.

\$ \_\_\_\_\_

### **Tools For Peace** (2007)

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

\$24.00 Please send \_\_\_\_\_ copies.

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### **Born in the Darkest Time of Year** (2004)

*15 Christmas stories by Abbot Andrew*

\$12.00 Please send \_\_\_\_\_ copies.

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### **Creatures We Dream of Knowing** (2011)

*fantasy stories by Abbot Andrew*

\$12.00 Please send \_\_\_\_\_ copies.

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### **From Beyond to Here** (2012)

*more stories by Abbot Andrew*

\$15.00 Please send \_\_\_\_\_ copies.

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### **The Forest of Windellynn** (2015)

*fantasy novel by Abbot Andrew*

\$10.00 Please send \_\_\_\_\_ copies.

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### **Moving and Resting in God's Desire: A Spirituality of Peace** (2016)

*Abbot Andrew's thoughts on cultivating peace using Christian practices and the ideas of René Girard*

\$20.00 Please send \_\_\_\_\_ copies.

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### **Seven Times A Day I Praise You**

*Br. Martin's review of personal daily prayer books*

\$3.00 Please send \_\_\_\_\_ copies.

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### **St. Gregory's Abbey and Benedictine Monasticism**

*A survey of Benedictine monasticism and how it is lived at St. Gregory's*

\$3.00 Please send \_\_\_\_\_ copies.

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All of the above except for **Singing God's Praises**, **Born in the Darkest Time of Year**, **Seven Times A Day I Praise You**, and **St. Gregory's Abbey and Benedictine Monasticism** are available in ebook formats. To download, go to our website: [saintgregorysthreerivers.org](http://saintgregorysthreerivers.org) and look for publications (digital).

All books may be purchased as hard copies from our website or by using this order form.

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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



## Meet a friend of St. Gregory's Abbey: Dean Knuth of Kalamazoo, Michigan —

*"I saw St. Gregory's as a teenager exploring SW Michigan with a new camera. I didn't stop, but it left a distinct visual impression. Years later, the Rev. Cynthia Black mentioned the Abbey while we were on an international mission trip, and that inspired me to visit often for Sunday worship and the Great Vigils, and two brief stays. This grew into respect for the community's vocations, the Benedictine Rule, and a fondness for its members. I appreciated what I was learning and experiencing that was unavailable from my home congregation.*

*By 2019, I had retired and had done a lot of elder care for family members. I felt that the community might benefit from a regular break from the care it was providing for one of its elderly members, so I offered to cook for them one day a week. That would allow me to give something more than the offering during worship. Over time they have filled my Wednesdays with cooking the midday and evening meals, baking the hosts for the Eucharist, brewing and cleaning and mopping the kitchen area. When I plan well enough I'm able to join them for sext, none, vespers, and sometimes I stay for compline. I try not to distract them from their regular duties, or to "play monk". Their acceptance allows me to learn and to serve, two important components of my spiritual growth."*



## CONTACTING THE ABBEY

### **Mailing address –**

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Three Rivers, MI 49093

### **Telephone –**

269-244-5893

9:30am - 11:15am or 2:30pm - 4:15pm Eastern Time Monday through Saturday  
(please do not telephone at other times or on Sundays or holidays)

### **E-mail –**

**Guest reservations and information –**  
[guestmaster@saintgregorysthreerivers.org](mailto:guestmaster@saintgregorysthreerivers.org)

### **Mailing list –**

[office@saintgregorysthreerivers.org](mailto:office@saintgregorysthreerivers.org)

### **Abbot Andrew –**

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**Information about becoming a monk or participating in the Vocation Program –**  
[novicemaster@saintgregorysthreerivers.org](mailto:novicemaster@saintgregorysthreerivers.org)

**Books and calendars may be ordered, prayers requested, and donations made at our website –**

[www.saintgregorysthreerivers.org](http://www.saintgregorysthreerivers.org)



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