

Abbey Letter
no. 306
Summer 2026



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*Listen with the ear
of your heart.*

**Find out what it's like to be a Benedictine
monk at St. Gregory's Abbey,
a Benedictine monastery
in the Episcopal Church
at Three Rivers, Michigan.**

...if you are male, age 18 to 50, and if you can spend at least two weeks at the abbey during July. The only cost is \$25 for registration.

For more information and an application form, write:

Summer Program Director

St. Gregory's Abbey

56500 Abbey Road

Three Rivers, Michigan 49093-9595

novicemaster@saintgregorysthreerivers.org

The Summer Program is highly recommended, but if you are interested in possibly becoming a monk but can't come in July, contact the novicemaster for other options.

saintgregorysthreerivers.org



NOTES

Br. Julian has withdrawn from the novitiate. We wish him well.

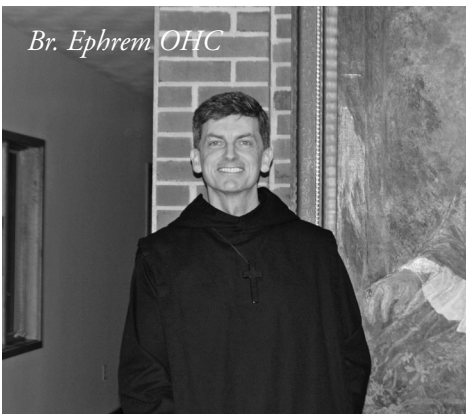
Members of the Episcopal Service Corps stationed at Plainsong Farm were with us January 13th-17th.

Some members of the Order of Lutheran Franciscans were with us January 23rd - 25th.

Br. Ephrem Arcement OHC from Holy Cross Monastery in West Park, New York was with us March 6th-9th.

St. Gregory's Abbey has an e-mail list for those wishing to receive the AB-

BEY LETTER electronically (PDF). To enroll in the e-mail list, send your full name and e-mail address to abbeyletter@saintgregorysthreerivers.org. Enrolling in our e-mail list does not remove you from our hard copy list. If you do want to stop receiving the hard copy once you are on the e-mail list, send an e-mail to office@saintgregorysthreerivers.org telling us you are on the e-mail list and want to be removed from the hard copy list. (If you are in the Confraternity, please mention that so that we make sure you receive the confraternity letter via e-mail.)



On Being God

One of the boldest and most startling statements ringing through the ages of Christian history is: "God became human so that humans could become God." Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons in the second century, seems to have been the first person to state this conviction, but Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria in the fourth century, was the first to develop the notion at some length. This principle has been called by some theologians "The Great Exchange." Many of these theologians, especially in the Christian East, call it deification. The antiphon for the Feast of the Holy Name states this principle: "O marvelous exchange! [Our] Creator has become [human], born of the Virgin. We have been made sharers in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity." This is surely the most lopsided transaction in the history of the universe: the exchange of God's divinity for our humanity, and a fallen humanity at that. One would think that anybody would leap at the chance to take this offer. Just imagine having the power to throw thunderbolts at people who offend me and sit on a heavenly throne while others wait upon me and bow down before me. The question is: why would God offer such a deal? What kind of God would do such a thing? Maybe that should give us pause. Although he was not directly writing about deification, St. Paul articulated the transaction as: although Jesus was rich, he made himself poor so that by his poverty we might become rich. (2 Cor. 8: 9) So what happens if I become God? Am I still rich, or do I find myself making myself poor in order that all those inferior beings can become rich? Do I want to do *that*? To quote Fagin's song from *Oliver*: "I think I'd better think it out again."

These fantasies about ruling the universe on our own terms and being adored for it are human fantasies. Such human fantasies don't really tell us anything about God. There is a human tendency to want to make it to the top, to be the top dog. With that mindset, being God would be really making it to the top. It is precisely such human fantasies that cause many Christians to be wary of the doctrine of deification. It seems presumptuous for humans to aspire to be God, and in these terms, it is. But is reaching the top so as to lord it over everybody what God is all about? The same theologians who write about the Great Exchange and deification say that God is the ultimate Mystery. This makes God's offer a blank check; we don't know what it is worth or what it is all about. If it means giving up all the riches we just got, then maybe we'd better think it out yet again.

If we turn to scripture, we see quite a bit of the thunderbolt-type of god. God certainly throws God's weight around when it comes to getting the Israelites out of Egypt, for example. But already we have reason to pause. Why did God have to act so strenuously to deliver the Israelites from Egypt? Couldn't God have made the world in such a way that one people couldn't enslave another people in the first place? This question takes us to the basics of God as the creator. There is a profound mystery to the human powers of creation. In her bracing theological book *The Mind of the Maker*, Dorothy Sayers draws analogies between human creation and God's creative activity. J.R.R. Tolkien writes that human authors are subcreators. When we project human grandiosity on God, we think creation is about setting up the show we want and running it the way we want it. But the magical thing about creation is that our creations evolve on their own. Fictional characters go their own way in ways that surprise their creators. Madeleine L'Engle wrote that she had to "listen" to the stories she was creating. In a far more profound sense than humans writing novels, God gives the gift of freedom to humans, as Genesis makes quite clear. Humans have the freedom to disobey God, or even to aspire to be gods, as the serpent urged. Pharaoh is a prime example of humans being gods on human terms. Being God, or being like God, entails respect for the freedom of others. As we shall see, God bears the brunt of the results of human freedom and so do the humans who are most like God.

God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt is followed by a long history of apostasy

and rejection. There are many prophetic warnings of divine wrath, but behind it all is a sense of helpless pathos. God can't *force* Israel to turn to God if Israel refuses. There are many laments on the part of God reported by the prophets. "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?...My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender." (Hos. 11: 8) Grieving over the rejection of those God has created is a mystery at the heart of God who philosophers say cannot be moved. Maybe being God isn't what it's all cracked up to be.

In St. Paul's version of the Great Exchange, reference is made specifically to Jesus rather than to "God." This is because Paul had become convinced that Jesus *is* God Incarnate, a conviction handed down to Christians ever since. In fact, all theology of deification presupposes the Incarnation as the vehicle through which the Great Exchange happens. No Incarnation, no deification. It follows, then, that looking at the life of Jesus should give us some insight as to what God is like and what is entailed in accepting the Great Exchange. Where are the thunderbolts, that marching orders, the demands that others bow down in worship? There are healings and there is walking on water, but that's about it. The healings, of course, are about helping the helpless. More important, the healings, especially those done on the Sabbath, bring hostility on Jesus, hostility that culminates in the Cross. Then there are the teachings of Jesus, especially those in the Sermon on the Mount, teachings steeped in forbearance and forgiveness. No thunderbolts there. When Jesus came to Jerusalem, he lamented the deaths of the prophets and the rejection of his tender love that would have embraced the city like a motherly hen. (Mt. 23: 37) As if all that wasn't enough, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper, a job expected of a servant, but not of a lord, and certainly not expected of God. Far from expecting his creatures to serve God, God serves God's creatures. Apparently forbearance and forgiveness and service are what God is all about. What would humanity look like if those teachings were followed rather than people fighting to make it to the top? Something like a new humanity, I should think.

At the heart of the three synoptic Gospels is the mysterious story of the Transfiguration. This is the closest we get to a thunderbolt, but it is a matter of Peter, James, and John seeing the face and clothes of Jesus bright and shining while they were at the top of the mountain. In reference to hearing the voice on the Holy Mountain, the author of Second Peter proclaims our "escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust" so that we "may become participants in the divine nature." (2 Pet. 1: 4) The 14th century Greek theologian St. Gregory Palamas taught that the light of Tabor embodied the "divine energies" overflowing from God's mysterious essence that flowed into humans with deifying power. The fourth century theologian Hilary of Poitiers suggested that, even if the Transfiguration could be considered a theophany, it was even more an anthropany. That is, the Transfiguration offers us a glimpse of what humans can be, perhaps better said, what humans were always intended to be from the dawn of creation. These considerations suggest that even if humankind had not fallen into sin, God would have become incarnate so as to share the divine nature as one human to another. Although I like the perspective offered by this teaching, it is counter-factual. The world has been full of pharaohs since before Moses grew up in Egypt and, for that reason, the glory of the Transfiguration was going to shine most brightly in the love that led Jesus to the Cross.

Wait a minute! God actually gets tortured and killed? Is that what being God is all about? Sounds like deification takes us to the bottom of the heap instead of to the top. This isn't what I signed up for when I signed the dotted line of the Great Exchange. The deeper truth is that the Author of Life doesn't stay dead. One could even say that in the Great Exchange, God gives us the death Jesus suffered in exchange for our being dead in our sins, which is why Jesus died on the Cross. In the end, God gives us God's *Life* on the Cross so that we can rise from the death of our sins. But the death Jesus died was no joke. In order for the Great Exchange to work,

the human nature of Jesus had to be total being human in every way which includes full physical vulnerability and mortality. Only then could God give us in exchange God's immortality in the Risen Life of Jesus. All of this means that deification entails participating in the same love that mourned the rejection of God and suffered the consequences of that love. Although God is a Mystery because God is a Being on a totally different basis than humans and squirrels and rosebushes are beings, this love on God's part to die in order to give life is a much greater Mystery yet.

The down-to-earth Rule of St. Benedict does not seem to be the place to look for insights into what deification is all about, but writing as a Benedictine, I am inclined to look in that direction to see what we can find. We get some help from the Benedictine scholar Luke Dysinger who contributed an article to the collection *Deification in the Latin Patristic Tradition*. This volume explores the contributions of Western patristic writers on the theme of deification to show that it isn't just an Eastern concept. It happens that Benedict uses the word *deifacare*, the Latin term for deification, early in the Prologue. Dysinger admits that the meaning of the term here is not certain. We can translate Benedict's admonition as to "open our eyes to the deifying light," but it is also possible that the phrase means "divine light," which would stress the source of the light rather than its effect on us. In accord with classic commentators of the Rule, Dysinger notes that the "deifying light" is connected with the effect of reading and studying Scripture. Although the Rule enjoins individual study of Scripture, the most extensive encounters are in the Divine Office. Dysinger also notes the divinizing potential of perceiving the presence of Christ in the other monks, the guests, and in the Abbot. As Dysinger explains: "It is within the community, serving one another, that the monks learn the contemplative art of perceiving Christ in one another and rendering fit honor to one another as Christ-bearers." The result of these humble practices is for the heart to widen to "inexpressible sweet love." These considerations suggest that Benedict is indeed bringing deification down to earth right where we can live it. They also remind us that deification is not an individual matter; deification is a gift from God to all of us together.

Time and again, deification has proven to involve downward mobility; quite the opposite of typical human fantasies as to what being God is all about. The strange thing is that God is humble and on that account deification requires humility. Pride can only be an obstacle. The stress on humility in the Rule of St. Benedict, then, is the way to deification. At the beginning of his chapter on humility, St. Benedict uses the image of a ladder, but it is a strange sort of ladder. Going up only takes one down while the way to go up is to go down. The ladder of humility is Christological as the middle steps take one through a deep participation in the Passion of Christ, where one suffers injustice on the model of Christ. At the bottom, which is the real top of the ladder, there is the love of Christ that has cast out the fear with which we began the climb.

At the climax of his biography of St. Benedict, St. Gregory writes of a powerful vision experienced by the saintly abbot where he reported that "the whole world, gathered together, as it were, under one beam of the sun, was presented before his eyes." This vision recalls the light of the Transfiguration revealed to the apostles on Mount Tabor, suggesting the light of deification. Gregory goes on to explain to his dialogue partner Peter: "The soul of one who sees in this manner, is also above itself; for being rapt up in the light of God, it is inwardly in itself enlarged above itself." Gregory says that in this vision St. Benedict sees "how little all creation is." But, small as creation is within the beam of light, creation is as profoundly transfigured as St. Benedict himself. Deification, then, ends in participating in the transfiguring love God has for all creation, including every sinful person among us. Deification means that God gives us everything God has got, which means that we also must give all that we have received.

—Abbot Andrew

DAILY SCHEDULE AT ST. GREGORY'S ABBEY

Weekdays

4:00 a.m. MATINS
6:00 a.m. LAUDS
8:15 a.m. TERCE & EUCHARIST
11:30 a.m. SEXT
2:00 p.m. NONE
5:00 p.m. VESPERS
followed by meditation
7:45 p.m. COMPLINE
(on Tuesdays and Thursdays, COMPLINE is
prayed privately)

Sundays and Major Holidays

5:30 a.m. MATINS & LAUDS
8:30 a.m. TERCE & EUCHARIST
noon SEXT & NONE
5:00 p.m. VESPERS
followed by meditation
7:45 p.m. COMPLINE



CONTACTING THE ABBEY

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