

Ab Austro

Newsletter of
Notre Dame Priory

July 2020

No. 37

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- † SAP progress
- † The Rock of Christ
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Priory update

Dear Friends,

Man proposes, but God disposes. This year's community retreat, which had been booked in for almost two years, was supposed to take place leading up to the solemnity of St Benedict on 11 July, under the direction of Dom Cassian Folsom, founder and prior emeritus of Monastero San Benedetto in Monte (Norcia, Italy). You can imagine our disappointment. To make up for not being able to console us with his presence, Dom Folsom graciously accepted to give us two video conferences as a "consolation prize". His long experience of Benedictine life as well as his equally long teaching career made for some most interesting and fulfilling talks. We are most grateful, and pray that one day he will be able to reschedule a trip to the antipodes (It's not that far, Father!).



On the First Friday of July, an unusual delivery arrived at the monastery door: a large painting depicting Our Lady overlooking our community and Jerusalem Estate. The artist, commissioned by a friend, is a Carmelite nun. She clearly wanted to highlight that this foundation is the work of Our Lady who envelops the brothers and the land, enlightening all with the rays of grace emanating from her hands. Even the six jars of Cana are there to remind us of her miraculous

interventions in history, and to give us confidence that she will continue to watch over our needs.

We were blessed to have Brother John Joseph of the community of the Little Eucharistic Brothers of the Divine Will established in Dover, Tasmania, stay with us for a time of retreat preceding his life profession of vows of poverty, chastity and obedience on 16 July. We wish Brother all the best as he pursues his life of consecration to God.

Alongside so many spiritual blessings, we cannot fail to mention some purely material ones. Great news: We have finally locked in the commencement date for construction of the monk cabins: 1 October! The brothers are literally counting the days. In the meantime we have all the materials waiting and ready to go: timber, insulation, windows, sinks etc. have all been delivered and are on site. Another delivery of importance for the future was that of professional folding and envelope inserting equipment which we were able to ressource at amazing prices. This is in provision for the development of our Ab Austro newsletter and Cana Press editions.

On the land development front, we are happy to inform that our application for a Specific Area Plan over the property has been favourably received by the Southern Midlands Council and is now going to the Tasmanian State Planning Commission. The hope is that with this approval we will then be able to initiate the full-scale plans for a complete monastery tucked away in the rolling hills of Jerusalem Estate.

On the lighter side, the community enjoyed a fraternal meal around the traditional winter bonfire which took place this year on the feast of St Mary Magdalene, 22 July. There was a lot to burn, as our various works of clearing had accumulated a mighty pile. It was a magnificent blaze and a truly pleasant evening together. And no, we don't intend to wait till next winter to start over again!

Brother Chronicler

QUODCUMQUE DIXERIT VOBIS FACITE





In the school of St Benedict

(Prologue continued, 28)

He that taketh the evil spirit that tempteth him, and casteth him and his temptation from the sight of his heart, and bringeth him to naught; who graspeth his evil suggestions as they arise and dasheth them to pieces on the rock that is Christ.

Monastic life, like the Christian life itself, is warfare. Holy Job had already said it: *Vita hominis militia super terram: the life of man upon earth is a warfare* (Job 7:1). Whether we like it or not, we are engaged, from the very moment we make our entrance into this world, in a battle of cosmic proportions: Christ, the Sovereign Commander of all good souls, seeks to lead us all to His eternal kingdom, whereas Lucifer, the lord of all those who succumb to sin, seeks to lead all to Hell. There is no truce, there is no sharing of booty. They both want all. It is an all out war to the death.

Each of us is at the centre of that war, for the simple reason that both Christ and Satan want our soul. Christ wants to share with us His grace, His love, His life, His eternal horizon of all that is beautiful and good. Satan wants to lock us up with himself within the narrow confines of our own tiny little ego, and thus make us his slaves in the dark pit of self-love, far from God and others in the throes of despair and oppression. Such is the reality. It is true. It is the message of Holy Scripture from the first page of Genesis to the last page of Apocalypse. The difficulty resides in the fact that our enemy has a number of masks he is good at putting on in order to fool us into drinking his poison. He knows how to put on the right mask for the right person at the right time. The seven capital sins, which we all have in us, give him ample tools to work with in order to lead us astray.

This is why St Benedict give us the precious advice we find in this passage of the prologue. Referring implicitly to Psalm 136, he admonishes us to reject the evil thoughts at the beginning, when they are suggested by the enemy. The reference to the Psalm is quite helpful, even if not always easy to explain. The Psalm addresses Babylon: *“Blessed be he that shall take and dash thy little ones against the rock”* (Ps 136:9). The image is a gory one indeed, that of smashing the babies of our enemies against a rock. This is why it is what we call an allegory. It has spiritual meaning, and that meaning is given to us here by St Benedict.

Babylon means “city of confusion” and the devil

seeks to get us confused about the basics of our relationship with God. The babies of Babylon are the evil thoughts inspired by the devil. As soon as we perceive a thought that is contrary to one of God’s commandments or that could lead us that way, we must smash it to pieces without delay. But how do we do that? St Benedict says to “dash it against the Rock that is Christ”, that is to say: only Christ has the power to dissolve the evil thoughts that come to us. On our own we can easily get confused, we are easily

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swayed, because the enemy has a foot in the stronghold of our soul due to concupiscence with which we are born. To smash bad thoughts against Christ is to react swiftly by turning our gaze to Christ and saying a brief prayer, which can be as simple as pronouncing the Holy Name of Jesus, which terrifies the devil. More often than not, our problem is that we insist on putting ourselves first. Instead of looking at Christ, we look at ourselves, which can only lead to greater confusion still.

The more adroit we become at looking at Christ and turning away from ourselves, the more easily we will win the victory, for whereas it is relatively easy to snuff out a thought that has just come to us, the longer we wait, the harder it is. A small fire is easy to put out. If we allow it to wax, it quickly becomes uncontrollable. If we open the door of our soul and entertain it, we will fall. In chapter 7, St Benedict will tell us that “death is placed at the very entrance of pleasure”, for there are passions so vehement that if we do not oppose them right away, our chances of not falling into spiritual death are slim. A couple months ago we were taught to become proficient at playing tennis with the evil thoughts. Today’s image goes a bit further: don’t just send them away; hurl them to the feet of Christ: He will dash them to pieces.

We happily receive the details of anyone who might be interested in receiving our newsletter
via newsletter@notredamemonastery.org

Br Paphnutius discovers the liturgy

As our novice's love for the Divine Office grows, he also learns that this love must be nourished by spending time in gratuitous, personal prayer. In the Rule, St Benedict insists that the monks spend a good amount of time practicing what is known as *lectio divina*, that is, the prayerful reading of Holy Scripture and all that flows from it and leads back to it, such as the commentaries on it by the saints. Such reading helps the monk understand better what he is singing at the office ("so that our mind may be in harmony with our voice" as St Benedict will say in chapter 19), and it also nourishes his time of personal, contemplative prayer, during which he fixes the gaze of his heart on the object of his love: God Himself become incarnate in Jesus Christ and made present throughout history in the Holy Church and its sacraments.

He thus discovers that there is a profound link between the various kinds of prayer in the monastic tradition : Divine Office, *Lectio Divina*, contemplative prayer. None of them can stand on its own. All three are required to allow for the continual prayer of the soul, which is what we are aiming at, in obedience to the command of Our Lord that *we ought always to pray and not to faint* (Lk 18:1).

At Notre Dame Priory, the time allotted to this exercise is in the morning after both Matins and Lauds. If there is more than one priest at the monastery, this would also be the time during which they would offer their private Mass, which Br Paphnutius might be privileged to serve on certain days. This experience opens up to his prayer an even greater horizon, as he discovers how the Sacrifice of Christ offered in the Mass suffuses the entire monastic day, like the sun which rises in the east and pours out its radiant beams, warming and rejoicing the earth in its course. *For from the rising of the sun even to the going down, my name is great among the Gentiles, and in every place there is sacrifice, and there is offered to my name a clean oblation: for my name is great among the Gentiles, saith the Lord of hosts* (Mal 1:11).



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JESUS MARIA JOSEPH

I am come to cast fire on the earth,
and what will I, but that it be kindled?

Lk 12:49

Before engaging the retreatant in the Exercises of the “First Week”, St Ignatius gives a final and most enlightening, though challenging, consideration: he brings up the subject of general confession. A general confession, in the strict sense of the term, is the confession of all the sins of one’s entire life, in as far as one can, after a serious examination of conscience, remember them. St Ignatius does not stand alone in condoning this practice. Many saints thought it worthwhile to make a general confession at certain times of one’s life. Why? The reasons are set out in *Spiritual Exercises # 44*.

To begin with, we are agreed that if a person confesses his sins with a certain frequency, a general confession is not absolutely required. If one’s spiritual life is relatively in good order, there is certainly no obligation to make a general confession. This leads to a twofold conclusion. First, if someone does not have the habit of regular confession and especially if they have not confessed for years, a general confession may very well be the only way of setting the record straight and getting back on the track of a truly Christian life. Secondly, even though it may not be required for someone who does confess regularly, it has several advantages. What are they? The saint tells us that there will be much greater merit and spiritual profit, “because of the greater sorrow experienced for all the sins and perversities of his whole life”.



number of expectations, but the starting point – just as the starting point of every Mass is to acknowledge one’s unworthiness – is to admit that one has sinned. If this is done with the proper meditations concerning the seriousness of sin, it cannot possibly fail to bear much fruit.

The “greater profit and merit” St Ignatius mentions are in proportion to the deeper knowledge and sorrow for sins. What does that tell us? Two things: If we spend time considering the gravity of sin and asking God to show us what it really is in all its ugliness, if we can come to a deeper realisation of what it means to offend God, that is going to impact immensely the way we live. The second thing is that this consideration of how serious sin is cannot fail to cause greater sorrow in our soul, and greater sorrow is going to mean greater grace of remission and firm resolve to not fall again. The more you love someone and the deeper your understanding of how gravely you have offended them, the greater your sorrow and the higher your chances of actually doing something that will make amends. This is a common trait among the saints. The realisation of the gravity of their past sins spurs them on to feats of heroic virtue. The path that leads to making a good general confession can be an arduous one, but it is one of the most liberating experiences on earth. Is it any surprise that the Exercises have made so many saints?



This is a profound insight, and anyone who has made the Exercises properly knows it. There is no better context in which to hold oneself accountable before God of one’s past failings, at whatever state of progress we might be. A soul may come on retreat with any

