

Ab Austro

Newsletter of Notre Dame Priory

February 2021 No. 42

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Priory update

Dear Friends,

During the octave of Christmas, seven men took part in our first retreat at Jerusalem Estate. It was a positive experience, and we look forward to renewing it. The NSW retreats in January presented another challenge. As the dates approached, Greater Sydney had become a “hot spot” once again. Our usual retreat venue was not in Greater Sydney, but nevertheless we were unable to hold the retreats there. After initially, and very reluctantly, cancelling the retreats, we realised – thanks to the encouragements of a few distressed retreatants – that we simply could not leave it for better days. Amazingly we were able to reschedule both retreats at other venues, the men’s at Benedict XVI Retreat Centre in Grose Vale and the women’s at The Hermitage, Marist Brothers, Mittagong. We are very grateful for both these centres for accommodating us at such short notice. Thanks be to God for His gracious gift!

On the occasion of the retreat travels to NSW, Fr Prior, Br Gregory and Br Francisco were able to pay a visit to the recently founded Carmelite Monastery in Mathoura. Br Gregory had been there before as he had attended the opening Mass a couple of years ago, but for the others it was their first visit. Fr Prior offered Holy Mass in the small chapel, after which a picnic lunch was provided by the nuns before the monks were treated to some parlour time with the community. They were all edified by this young, growing community, and wish them all the best as they put down their roots in Australia.

Another noteworthy event was a Missa Cantata which Fr Prior celebrated in The Rock. The monastery has quite a few friends in the area, and it was good to be able to catch up, as well as meet the new bishop of Wagga Wagga, Bishop Mark Edwards, who, to the delight of all, attended the Mass in choir.

Work on the monk cabins has made giant leaps since the beginning of the year, and we are actually getting close to seeing them made available for use. More on



that hopefully next month. For now, other news from the monks’ back yard may be of interest.

Our new monastery bell, Guadalupe, made her appearance on her name day (12 December), and she is happy with her role of summoning the monks to the Divine Office. Her only complaint is that she would like to have a nice view from a bell tower. We have told her that the monks are in no rush, so she will have to be patient (Fr Prior seems to use that word a lot!).

Last but not least, we have a rabbit, Norbert by name! The area around Hardwick House is a favourite hangout for these long-eared creatures. It’s not rare to go out and find three or four (or ten!) jumping around and playing, hardly frightened by the monks. Well, little Norbert just happened to find himself in Br Joseph’s hand one day as he was digging in the garden. And the rest is history. Norbert is arguably one of the most spoiled rabbits in the world. His only complaint: he would like to go on a field trip with his brother rabbits! Fr Prior has promised one, but it is more likely to be in the direction of the kitchen... Lucky rabbit who can become a monk! What we hope Norbert does realise is that if he remains a quadruped, he can claim the amnesty of the Rule!

Brother Chronicer





In the school of St Benedict

(Prologue continued, 39-44)

Since then, brethren, we have asked of the Lord who is to inhabit His temple, we have heard His commands to those who are to dwell there and if we fulfil those duties, we shall be heirs of the kingdom of heaven. Our hearts, therefore, and our bodies must be made ready to fight under the holy obedience of His commands; and let us ask God to supply by the help of His grace what by nature is not possible to us. And if we would arrive at eternal life, escaping the pains of hell, then - while there is yet time, while we are still in the flesh, and are able to fulfil all these things by the light which is given us - we must hasten to do now what will profit us for all eternity.

The beauty of the monastic life, like that of the Christian life itself, is that it is so simple. God's plan is for us to spend all of eternity with Him. He has made us the heirs of His Kingdom. Eternal life, everlasting bliss will be ours, on certain very clear conditions. St Benedict, with the genius of the saints, condenses it in four Latin words: *si compleamus habitatoris officium* – if we but fulfil the duties of one who is to live there.

Si compleamus – if we fulfil. No beating around the bush. No ambiguity. No need for a clarification. If we fulfil what is prescribed, we will inherit eternal life. One would think that any person who weighs those words carefully, would then want to make every effort to 1) find out what those duties are, and 2) put them into practice. The stakes are simply too high to waste time and energy doing anything else. In his *Pensées*, Blaise Pascal expressed it this way: “The immortality of the soul is a matter of such importance to us; it affects us so deeply that we must have lost our wits completely not to care what it is all about. All our actions and our thoughts must follow such differ-

ent courses depending on whether there are eternal rewards to hope for or not, that it is impossible to take a single step with sense and judgement unless it is determined by our conception of our final end”.

While there is still time – we are asked to do now, by the light of day, what will profit us for all eternity, for night is coming when no one will be able to work for God. There will come a day and an hour when it will no longer be possible to fulfil the duties of an heir to the kingdom. The time to do so is now, and we must make haste while we are in the body and can merit eternal life.

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with Him.**

If only we would fulfil those duties, we could put our minds and hearts at rest and our souls in security. We understand it well when we talk of fire proofing and life insurance. We are attentive to prepare when we have to take an exam that will determine our career. We know certain conditions are to be met if we are to succeed. Would entrance into the Kingdom of God, eternal life in the presence of God, be the only outcome without conditions, the only reward we need not deserve, the only repose we need not earn? Is it then nothing to be with God and see Him? The message of St Benedict, along with that of all the saints, is so clear and so simple that you have to be a child to see it. Odd, isn't it? As Someone once said: *Amen I say to you, unless you be converted, and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven* (Mt 18:3).



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Br Paphnutius discovers the liturgy

The Psalms are the bread and butter of the monastic office, and Br Paphnutius continues learning them in his years as a junior professed monk. But as time goes by, he finds himself more and more intrigued by the Latin hymns which are sung at each office. With the exception of Lauds and Vespers where it comes after the Psalms, the hymn is recited at the beginning of the office, and sets the tone, as it were, by either praising God for the particular aspect of that time of day (position of the sun is the determining factor here) or on the feasts of saints by singing their praises and admiring their virtues.

Lauds, for example, is the hour of the rising sun, but it is also the hour of the Resurrection of Our Lord who rose at the crack of dawn. As would be expected, the hymns of this hour refer to the light that is coming back to the earth. The liturgical season too can add a special touch. For example, the hymn for Lauds during the season of Lent (*Iam Christe Sol Iustitiae*) marvellously ties together the theme of the rising sun with the coming of the eternal light, Christ Our Lord, to heal us of our sins. The first stanza goes like this:

Now Christ, Thou sun of righteousness
Let dawn our darkened spirits bless:
The light of grace to us restore
Whilst day to earth returns once more.

It then goes on to explain how the time that is given us now is meant to be used in order to turn back to the Lord and offer atonement for past sins. It concludes with this equally inspiring stanza:

Soon will that day, Thy day, appear
And all things with its brightness cheer:
We will rejoice in it, as we
Return thereby to grace, and Thee.

In this way the liturgy combines cosmic events and the life of the soul. The young monk learns to follow Our Lord by walking in His light, and avoiding the

darkness of sin. God is light, and there is no darkness in Him. The only real darkness is sin, just as the true light is the light of grace, a life lived in God's friendship. *He who follows me, walketh not in darkness*, says the Lord. With these holy sentiments, Br Paphnutius prepares for another day lived under the loving and lightsome gaze of the Sun of Justice.



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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

Lent is a fitting time to say a few words about St Ignatius' Second Exercise. After having considered the tragedy of sin in general, we are then invited to take a look at ourselves, to acknowledge not only our "sinfulness" but our sins. It will not do to consider ourselves to be, in general terms, sinners. Acknowledging one's sins means acknowledging specific thoughts, words and deeds and how they offend God and neighbour. A good examination of conscience will consider not only the Ten Commandments and the Seven Deadly Sins, but their specific manifestations in us. The Second Exercise is not an examination of conscience, but it is designed to prepare for one by having us give serious thought to the following points.

To sin, that is, to offend God, is no laughing matter. On the contrary, it is very serious. This would be true even if God had not given us the Ten Commandments which are but the expression of who He is. The Catechism, in a concise expression loaded with consequences, puts it this way: The Ten Commandments "belong to God's revelation of Himself and His glory. The gift of the Commandments is the gift of God Himself and His holy will. In making His will known, God reveals Himself to His people" (CCC, 2059). In other words, to sin is to violate not only God's commandments, but God Himself, because the Commandments are nothing other than the road map to become like God. When one disobeys the commandments, one revolts against the very idea of God's essence and love, which expresses itself in the Commandments.

A further consideration is that this offending against God is done by someone who is so small and insignificant. If we compare ourselves with the rest of creation, what are we really? If we see ourselves in the context of the world as we know it, and even



in the light of the entire universe, what can we say for ourselves? Further still, and more challenging: What am I compared to God? God is infinitely good, infinitely holy, infinitely just, infinitely wise, etc. There is no perfection in which He is lacking. If I try to compare, what have I to say for myself? And yet, even though I am so small, I am the one who has dared to offend God. Such a thought should lead us to a sense of deep bewilderment. So insignificant and yet so demanding on God and presuming to change the order He has placed in the universe? The harmony He established in His wisdom I have dared to break through my sins. I have disrupted the divine order and been the cause of His sorrowful Passion.

Once we come to perceive this, it is easy to be troubled, unsettled, fearful. But then we must realise that in spite of so much wrong in our lives, we are still here, and if that is true, it can only mean that God wants to save us and give us peace. And so the meditation ends with great confidence that the grace of God will make it possible for us to change, to turn around, to convert, to make amends for the past and move forward to the Kingdom of God.

