

# Ab AUSTRo

Newsletter of  
Notre Dame Priory

November 2018 No. 21

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## A New Emblem

With this month's newsletter, we are happy to introduce a new format which we hope will make reading it a more pleasant experience. It's also our joy to present the new monastery emblem, commissioned by Fr Prior and designed by postulant Fr Henry Whisenant.

Here is its legend:

The **six jars** recall the miracle of Cana.

The **Cross** represents the fulfilment of that "hour" of which Jesus spoke to His Mother at Cana. The wedding at Cana looks forward to the Divine Wedding of Christ to His Church, when He gives us the "best wine", His Precious Blood. Christ's crucifixion is also the best example of that obedience to which Mary calls the servants at Cana: "Do whatever he tells you".

The **lily** represents the purity and perpetual virginity of Our Lady, which we honour in the white colour of our habits. It also stands for the chaste virginity of St Joseph, St Mary of the Cross and St Regina, our co-patrons.

The Gospel **book** stands for St John the Evangelist who stood by the Cross, for it is in his Gospel that we have the account of the Wedding at Cana (hence

the first words of that Gospel story can be made out: *Nuptiae factae sunt in Cana Galilaeae*). The open book also represents our *lectio divina* and meditation as monks, enlightened by divine grace, symbolised by the star.

The **star** also recalls the mystery of the Epiphany, so closely connected liturgically to the miracle of Cana.

The **sky** is dark and the land is barren, to show the monk's voluntary separation from the normal consolations of the world in order to be united with Christ in the Desert.

The **monk** is the steward taking the wine, the fruit of his contemplative life, to those in the world who are without it ("They have no wine!"), thus symbolising our retreat apostolate. There are two chalices, to suggest the double precept of love of God and neighbour, and also the nuptials of God and every soul, which the retreats are meant to foster.

The monk **runs** in accordance with our Holy Patriarch's frequent injunctions: "Unless we run thither [to Heaven] by good works...!"

Brother Chronicler





## JESUS MARIA JOSEPH

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

Lk 12:49

Dearly Beloved Friends,

“The tenth degree of humility is that the monk be not ready and prompt to laughter, for it is written: *The fool lifteth up his voice in laughter* (Sir 21:23).”

Reading this tenth step of humility, some readers might be tempted to think that St Benedict is going a bit too far. Is not laughter one of the distinctive traits of humans, so much so that some have defined man as the “animal risibile”, or the “animal that laughs”? To laugh is indeed proper to rational animals, for laughter requires the rational capacity to perceive what is amusing in a given situation; it demands being able to step back from the very earthly needs of creatures or their mistakes and find them somewhat comical, even when they are embarrassing. It is a wonderful thing to be able to laugh, even at oneself, and take lightly events that may appear tragic.

So why does St Benedict consider that it is a mark of a very lofty sanctity to not be given over to laughter? And why, in the chapter on the “instruments of good works” (or tools of the spiritual life), does he tell us that we should not “speak vain words or such as move to laughter, nor should we love much or violent laughter” (Rule, ch. 4). What is it about laughter that clearly does not find favour with the patriarch of monks?

I would suggest several considerations. St Benedict does not proscribe laughter absolutely. He says that the monk should not be prone to laughter, and that he should not give himself over to violent laughter. Most people have direct experience of fits of laughter that are hard to control. This is healthy when kept within certain limits. It is more common among the young, and there are both psychological and physiological reasons for it. There is a certain spirit of levity that one tends to lose as one grows older.

But then there are some people who simply have no depth of soul, and who laugh at everything, as if everything were a laughing matter. This is out of place. It is not rational. Such an attitude denotes a superficial soul, one that has no profundity, no maturity, little capacity to see the seriousness of life or to feel compassion for the sufferings of others. This may be culpable were it to indicate a lack of effort in considering the real goal of life. In any case, it is not becoming of the monk who, by his profession

and his very being, is a sign of the seriousness of life and the closeness of eternity. A monk should, by his very demeanour, inspire others to think of death,

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judgment, eternal retribution. This would not be the case if the monk were continually laughing about the oddities of life.

Another point concerns the spirit of compunction. The monk should be one whose sorrow for past sins moves him rather to be sad, not with a sadness of despair, but with a holy sadness, like the one mentioned by St Paul to the Corinthians: *Now I am glad: not because you were made sorrowful, but because you were made sorrowful unto penance. For you were made sorrowful according to God* (2 Cor 7:9). The monk takes to heart the gravity of sin and evil in the world, and as his love for God should be great, and his desire for his neighbour’s salvation intense, he considers attentively what St Benedict says concerning weeping for one’s sins every day of his life, fearing judgment and hellfire, and preparing for death.

But how sad a life, some will say! There is the paradox: the monk is conscious of these realities, he looks them in the face, they move him to be rather pensive and prayerful, but at the same time, he never despairs of God’s mercy for himself and for all repentant sinners for whom he prays, and this gives him a tranquillity of mind and heart that makes superficial mirth and laughter unnecessary and even unbecoming.

This is perhaps the place to mention Our Lord’s words in the Beatitudes condoning the sadness of which we have spoken: *Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh!* (Lk 6:21). *Woe to you that now laugh: for you shall mourn and weep* (Lk 6:25). St James for his part is quite stern in his address to sinners whom he admonishes to sober up and stop living as if life were a continual party: *Draw nigh to God: and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners, and purify your hearts, ye double minded. Be afflicted and mourn and weep: let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into sorrow* (James 4:8-9).

This is reminiscent of the praise that Holy Scripture has for the woman who fears the Lord: *Strength and beauty are her clothing, and she shall laugh in the latter day* (Pr 31:25). And the text goes on to specify: *Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: the woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised* (Pr 31:30). Can we not see here a kind of confirmation of the spiritual value of gravity and soberness? Whereas ephemeral beauty is often found together with a gusto for superficial joys and mirth-filled nights which lead to desolate mornings, we are told by the inspired author that such are not the values we should be pursuing. On the contrary, it is not appearances that should attract our attention, but realities.

Besides, does not the excessive need for entertainment in our world denote a deep sadness of the heart? Why do people have to pay someone to make them laugh? There is of course nothing wrong with watching a comedy every now and then — assuming it's morally decent —, but when one starts to rely on it as a drug, there is something seriously wrong, a spiritual cancer of sorts that will not allow one to be at peace, and prevents the repose of the mind and heart. Just as some seek to drown their sorrow — or their bad conscience — in drugs, alcohol, the pleasures of the flesh or excessive use of media, so do some with an unhealthy and excessive recourse to entertainment. *It is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting, For that is the end of every man, and the living should take it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, because when the face is sad the heart grows wiser. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth* (Ecc 7:2-4). Better to enjoy the pure, calm, fulfilling joys of reading good, solid books, and spending more time in prayer, than the ephemeral thrills which distract the soul and leave it barren and fitful.

One last consideration. St Thomas, after Aristotle, tells us that there is virtue called *eutrapelia*, which can be defined as “pleasantness in conversation”. It is the golden mean between boorishness and buffoonery. It is a virtue which makes social life pleasant. However, as with every virtue, it is easy to exceed on one side or the other. St Benedict's condemnation of boisterous laughter would fall under the vice of buffoonery. So what are we to say of the habit of poking inoffensive jokes at others, which — so we think — are as funny for them as for

ourselves? Caution: a person is still the butt of such jokes and can be wounded by them; besides, does not the joke-teller subconsciously consider himself better than the victim of his joke? This is precisely one of the reasons for which we are at a lofty degree of humility here: the humble soul rarely pokes fun, and only when certain that the other is himself humble enough for it to do him some good.

So once again, we can see that humility is a virtue which resolves many problems. With it, one stands on solid ground and knows how to adapt oneself to every situation. Humble souls know that



everything does not depend on them; humble souls are not egocentric; humble souls rest in peace with the sure knowledge that, come what may, we are in the hands of God — and that gives a peaceful reassurance that makes worldly distractions unnecessary and undesirable.

Instead of being out of touch with reality, St Benedict is revealed as actually being a master who has a lot to teach, and not only to monks. Everyone can learn from his wisdom.

*Fr Pius Mary Noonan, O.S.B*

There are still available spaces for the men's retreat at Hartzler Park 21-26 January. Also lots of spaces available at the Victorian retreats 27 May-1 June and 3-6 June.  
[www.notredamemonastery.org/retreats](http://www.notredamemonastery.org/retreats)

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## Update from the Priory

Beloved Friends,

For the past few weeks we have been blessed with the presence of Dom Jean Marie Pommarès from St Joseph Abbey in Flavigny, France. Dom Jean is one of the elder monks of the community there. He is fluent in English (as in a few other languages as well...). He is actually the monk who looked after me



when I entered the monastery back in 1984. He was sent to us by the Abbot of Flavigny, Dom Antoine, to teach classes to our novices until the week before Christmas. This session — for we hope there will be other sessions in the future — he is teaching courses on monastic history and the psalms, along with an informative presentation once a week on one of the Roman basilicas. Having been for a number of years in Rome where he worked for the Holy See, Dom Jean was also a guide and therefore knows a lot about these beautiful monuments of the Eternal City. But outside of class, Father has not been idle: he has also been helping the community with other things, such as the monthly newsletter mailing, and of course taking part in our walks and recreations...



His presence of course means more studies for the monks. But this doesn't keep our manual tasks from going forward. We have been working hard



at Jerusalem Estate to prepare for our arrival, hopefully in the next few weeks, but there is still a lot to do, and a lot that we need to keep going. The most significant achievement of the last few weeks has been piping water to the property. This was needed because most of the old pipes were unusable or insufficient for our needs. Four new large water tanks have been installed, and so, thanks to our water allowance from the nearby Craighourne Dam, we should no longer be lacking water as can sometimes happen here in Rhyndaston. The two other major issues to be resolved are also progressing: electricity should hopefully be finished in a couple weeks, and the semi-commercial waste treatment plant is the object of careful study by the experts.



We are making sure everything follows guidelines of the local Southern Midlands Council, with whom we have an excellent working relationship.

We soon hope to launch an endeavour called "Building Jerusalem", along with a broader fundraising package which we will communicate to you in due time. For the moment, we are just trying to keep up with Divine Providence. With our first professions just around the corner, on 8 December, our hearts rise in a hymn of praise and thanksgiving to Our Lady for having brought us this far, thanks to the kindness and generosity of so many good people like yourselves. We entrust you and all those dear to you to her maternal intercession.

Father Prior

