

Ab Austro

Newsletter of
Notre Dame Priory

September 2019 No. 29

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Priory update

Dear Friends,

The big news here is that on 3 September the Southern Midlands Council of Tasmania granted us planning approval for our building project behind the Old House on Jerusalem Estate. This project – which is distinct from the future plans for a complete monastery – includes the relocation of a weatherboard church from the northern part of Tasmania and the building of 18 self-contained monk cells, as well as a few outbuildings.

This wonderful, long-awaited news opens a new chapter in the life of our community, as it means we will now be able to organise our community life in Colebrook in a way that resembles a bit more that of a full-grown monastery, with proper space for the various activities of the conventual life. We are grateful for the very good contact we have always had with the local Council and local tradesmen needed to get the monastery on its feet. Our immense gratitude goes to all of our benefactors whose indispensable help has gotten us to this point. But it also means that we will need a bit of a financial boost to finish the works, and also volunteers are still most welcome!



Other important news includes the monastic clothing of Xavier Piat, henceforth Br Anthony Mary (his

patron saint is St Anthony of the Desert), two beautiful retreats at Hartzler Park – for these, Fr Prior was accompanied by Brothers Bede, Francisco and Patrick (see page 4) – and a community outing to Mount Rufus near Lake St Clair, which was also our sending off of Fr Bachmann who, sadly for us, returned to Clear Creek on 14 September.



Finally, as a sign of hope for the future, the community planted an olive tree on one of the summits of Jerusalem Estate, in the very location of what we hope will be Our Lady's future monastery.



Brother Chronicer



In the school of St Benedict

Prologue continued, v. 4-7

“And first of all, whatever good work thou undertakest, ask Him with most instant prayer to perfect it, so that He who has deigned to count us among His sons may never be provoked by our evil conduct. For we must always so serve Him with the gifts which He has given us, that He may never as an angry Father disinherit His children, nor yet as a dread Lord be driven by our sins to cast into everlasting punishment the wicked servants who would not follow Him to glory.”

To the young man who is starting his apprenticeship as a monk, St Benedict says that our entire life needs to be under the auspices of prayer. Is this any surprise, when we consider that monastic life as a whole is destined to be one long prayer, a total handing over of one’s life to God?

But what about those who are not called to be monks? Does this hold? The words of our Lord: “You must always pray and never lose heart” (Lk 18:1), seem to indicate that it does. St Paul also frequently encourages his faithful to pray always (cf. among many others 1 Th 5:17). And we could add the writings of many saints who remind us of the primordial place of prayer in our lives.

More fundamental a question is: why? Why are we commanded to pray all the time? Is this not opposed to the autonomy of rational creatures? Is it not belittling to have to turn constantly to someone for help, for in the end, that is what prayer is? It is acknowledging the need we have of Someone greater than ourselves, who holds our lives in His sway, and who can intervene on our behalf at all times.

Clearly, the precept of prayer indicates a real need on the side of the one who prays. This in turn requires a perception of that need. And that is why only a truly humble soul will devote itself to continual prayer, for only humble souls realise the depth of their true needs.

There are, of course, times in everyone’s life when things do not go well, and in which our reflex is to turn to someone for help. Those who have faith in God will turn to Him then. For some, God is like a good book on a shelf. When we need Him, we take Him down and use Him, but when the need is satisfied, we put Him back and forget Him till

the next time. This mentality is rather frequent. It’s a start, but it is not enough. It’s actually – even though this is rarely conscious – an insult to God, who is the very life of our life and who has a right to all our love and service at every moment. A hitchhiking monk was once getting out of the car when he thanked the driver who had taken him and assured him of his prayers, only to hear, somewhat astounded, that he didn’t need prayers, so suggested to offer them for someone else! This mentality of a God who delivers goods when needed is ignorant of a deeper reality than just needing to have the necessities of life and avoid accidents or natural disasters.

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The real matter is that we are engaged in spiritual warfare with powerful enemies, and the stakes of that warfare are our immortal soul. The good news is that we have at our disposal the most powerful weapons imaginable: prayer in its many forms – vocal prayer, mental prayer, examination of conscience, meditation, contemplation, not to mention the liturgy with its sacred chant, the most sublime form of vocal prayer, for as the saying goes, “Qui cantat, bis orat – whoever sings, prays twice”.

This is the fundamental reason for which St Benedict places the necessity of prayer within the context of eternal salvation. If we do not pray, we will not have the grace to serve God and keep the commandments; the world, the flesh and the devil will easily lead us into sin, and God will be “provoked by our evil conduct”, and, as if His hand were forced, He will be “driven by our sins to cast us into eternal punishment”, as we heard St Benedict say in the above-cited text. God loves each of us as His children. He does not want any of us to be lost, but if we do not make use of the means He gives us, first of which is prayer, then we show that we do not really care about Him and His promises. Then disaster ensues, a disaster that can be as irreparable as our soul is immortal.

We need grace in order to serve God and save our soul, and grace is made available to us through

prayer that is humble, trusting, and persevering. It is always possible to pray in one way or another, even if it be only lifting up our mind and heart to God, and this can be done even while working or walking or driving. Prayer is a vital necessity, for how can the Holy Spirit be our life if our heart is far from Him? St John Chrysostom tells us: “Nothing is equal to prayer; for what is impossible it makes possible, what is difficult, easy.... For it is impossible, utterly impossible, for the man who prays eagerly and invokes God ceaselessly ever to sin”. That is why St Alphonsus Liguori was able to formulate this maxim which is at once a great consolation and a stern admonition: “Those who pray are certainly saved; those who do not pray are certainly damned”.



Br Paphnutius discovers the liturgy

We are often asked what is the monks' prayer like? How often do you pray? How do you pray? The brief answer is: we pray with the Church in her sacred liturgy, eight times a day. The ancient prayer of the Church is what constitutes the kernel of our daily life. This month we begin a journey with Brother Paphnutius as he discovers the riches of the prayer life at Notre Dame Priory.

It begins before dawn with the sound of a bell. Brother Bell-Ringer, or Br Excitator as he is also called, makes sure that we all hear loud and clear the divine call to rise and go and sing the praises of God. When Br Paphnutius has reached the chapel and adored Our Lord in the tabernacle, he arrives at his place in choir. Following the admonitions of Fr Novice Master, Brother makes sure he has the right page for the first office, Matins, which is the traditional night office, and is composed of “nocturns” (two or three depending on the days). Like every hour of the divine office, the bulk is composed of psalms, but Matins also gives a lot of importance to the lessons taken from other books of the Bible or the writings of the Fathers of the Church or the Lives (called “legends” from the Latin word “legenda” which means simply “what is to be read”) of the saints.

When the appointed hour has come, Father Prior taps his stall, which is the signal for the start of the office. At Notre Dame Priory, Br Paphnutius learns that each hour of the office begins with a profound bow of all the monks turned “in choir”, that is to say, facing each other. For a few seconds, all remain bowed in this way, in silent adoration of the mystery of God, offering their lives to the One who has called them to such a sublime way of life. On days of penance, instead of bowing, the monks kneel. This simple gesture sets the tone with silent eloquence: the monk is dedicated to the worship of God, before whom he is silent. “Tibi silentium laus” says an ancient translation of psalm 64: “Silence is praise to Thee”, for it is really the only attitude of the creature before the Creator.

That silence will soon be followed by another signal, at which all rise and bow to Fr Prior who presides at the office. This mutual greeting between Prior and monks, which takes place at the beginning of every office, is at once an act of faith in the presence of God among us, and also an act of charity: we come to the office together to sing the praise of God together, and we feel privileged to be part of the community whose task it is to ensure the public worship of God in the name of humanity.

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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

The month of August found four of us monks at Hartzer Park Retreat Centre near Bowral, NSW. Two groups, one of men, the other of women, were guided through the Spiritual Exercises. Since these retreats started in 2007, hundreds have been able to take advantage of the spiritual nourishment they provide. To keep alive in the hearts of retreatants the graces received on retreat, to encourage others to sign up for a future retreat, but also to share with those who are unable to come on retreat, this column starts today as a presentation of that amazing book of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, which “has made its mark as the most wise and the most universal code of laws of salvation and of the perfection of souls, as the untarnishable source of the most elevated and solid piety, as an irresistible goad and alert guide for aiding souls to reform themselves and to attain the summits of the spiritual life” (Pope Pius XI).

St Ignatius composed the Exercises while at Manresa while under the guidance of a Benedictine monk at the abbey of Montserrat, so it is no surprise that there are numerous similarities between the Rule and the Exercises which we will point out in the coming months. They open with an unequivocal answer to the question that lies deep down in the heart of every human being: what am I doing here? Summarising the teaching of Holy Scripture and the Church Fathers, St Ignatius says it all in one very dense phrase: “Man is created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul”.

No beating around the bush here. We are creatures, brought into existence by an all-loving God who wants to share with us His eternal beatitude. The Catechism of the Catholic Church begins in a similar vein: “God, infinitely perfect and blessed in Himself,

in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in His own blessed life.” It is this amazing truth which the retreatant, from the very beginning of the retreat, is asked to take to deep prayer. It’s one thing to know it, it’s another for it to hit home. Immediately, we see things in a new way. I did not have to exist. I could have been among the countless possible creatures who never will exist. But I am here; therefore God loves me. He has loved me into existence. Since this is so, my entire being nestles squarely within God, within His infinite Goodness.

But that is only the beginning. If I am created by God, it is for a specific purpose, namely to spend my eternity with Him. This truth is expressed by St Ignatius by means of the term “to save his soul”. To save one’s soul means to go to Heaven, to be with God for all eternity, to see Him face to face. “We know that when He shall appear we shall be like to Him: because we shall see Him as He is” (1 Jn 3:2). At the same time, the expression “save his soul” also stresses that this is not something automatic, but requires effort; it requires being saved (literally “snatched away”) from eternal damnation, as we pray in the Canon of the Mass. Life is good because it is given to us by a loving God, but it is serious because we are faced with the consequences of our own choices.

St Ignatius also tells us exactly how we are to go about saving our soul. He employs three verbs: “praise, reverence and serve”. If we do these three things, if we give voice to the praise of God, if we show him the respect and adoration due to Him, if we serve Him by means of all that we do, that is, by doing what is in conformity with His holy will, then we will surely save our soul.

