

Notre Dame Priory

Newsletter

OCTOBER 2017

QUODCUMQUE DIXERIT VOBIS FACITE

ISSUE EIGHT



GIVING THANKS FOR THE GIFT OF LIFE

This month marked a milestone in the life of our Father Prior, one which however he would not like for everyone to know about. But since *nothing is covered that shall not be revealed: nor hid, that shall not be known* (Mt 10:26), he will have to accept the reality: on the 24th of October, he reached his 50th birthday!

The brethren and some close friends were intent on celebrating this event, but the friends in question could not be present on the real day, and so it was decided to anticipate the celebration on the 18th. This allowed us also to join the celebration with that of our dear friend Brian Andrews' birthday which falls on the 21st.

And so, all was prepared — some of it without Father Prior's foreknowledge, as is meet on such an occasion. The Good Lord Himself and His Holy Angels seemed to be cheering us on, as the weather was spectacular and quite hot, for Tasmania that is — the thermometer measured 27°, or rather, as Fr Prior persists in using Fahrenheit measures, 81° (whew!).

The festive meal was lovingly prepared by Judith Andrews and Martine Watkinson. Two cakes were of course required for the two celebrities, and both had to blow out

their own set of candles (for Fr Prior, the last time he did this was probably when he was but a boy.... but he did succeed, an unequivocal sign that there is still a bit of life in him...).

It is a custom in many monasteries that on the feast day (also called "onomastico") or birthday of the Novice Master, the novices show him their filial affection by means of an exceptional recreation. It is also the custom for a community to do the same for its Abbot or Prior. On this occasion, there was a double reason for such festivities. So, as soon as dessert was served, the invitees were all treated to the first Notre Dame Monk Show. Postulant Alec introduced the performers one by one, each playing a little sketch or reciting a piece of poetry, or even singing a song. There were also acts that involved the entire group, each playing their role with all their heart and talent.

We will not burden the reader with the intricate details of the plots and performances which are henceforth consigned to the monastery archives, but we can safely say that Fr Prior was quite pleased with it all, even though he has made it clear that we are no longer counting birthdays (*his* birthdays, that is...).

Passing over to some more profitable considerations, when we celebrate birthdays, we must be mindful of the progenitors. Fr Prior is immensely grateful to his good parents, both deceased, who made room for him in a home that already counted nine children (and in a house that was designed for about two...). In an age which seems to have lost the capacity of wonder at the precious gift of life, the witness of such God-fearing parents is invaluable. As many of you know by experience, the rearing of children is no easy "job: fulfilling and rewarding, especially when done with great love, but very demanding and of utmost importance for the world.

And so our thoughts go out to all those brave parents who at the present moment are battling a dying culture, and standing up for all that is good and true, and affirming by their openness to life that God, the Eternal Life, is always victorious over our petty concerns. The monks, in their dedication to celibacy for the love of Christ and in view of the spiritual paternity of souls, send you their prayers and gratitude. The Apostle says to you and to us: *Be on your guard, stand firm in the faith, be courageous, be strong* (1Co 16:13).



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 in JESUS and MARY,

Earlier this month we celebrated the feast of St Thérèse of the Child Jesus and we heard once again from the mouth of Our Lord those words, both consoling and terrifying: *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). It's not an option, a preference, something that's nice to do: it's rather a condition: *unless... you shall not...* But what does it mean to “become as little children”? It means essentially becoming humble. What is humility? Humility, as the etymology of the word would indicate (*humus* means “soil”), could be thus defined: the virtue by which we realise how small and insignificant we are. So, if we must become like little children to enter the kingdom of Heaven, and if being like little children means being humble and having a lowly opinion of ourselves, then we can say with the strictest accuracy: our eternal salvation depends upon our being humble. If we are truly humble we shall be saved. If we are not humble we shall be lost. It's as simple as that. Every soul that is now in Heaven is there because they were humble. Every soul that is in hell (and there are many souls in hell) is there because they did not have humility, or at least not enough. So what is “enough”? How can we measure this virtue?

Last month I promised to begin considerations on the degrees of humility as found in the Rule of St Benedict. I shall fulfill that promise, but before I do, it may be more helpful to remind those who have made an Ignatian retreat of how St Ignatius of Loyola presents the kinds of humility. In his teaching, this first degree of humility, which is necessary for salvation, “consists in this, that as far as possible I so subject and humble myself as to obey the law of God our Lord in all things, so that not even were I made lord of all creation, or to save my life here on earth, would I consent to violate a commandment, whether divine or human, that binds me under pain of mortal sin” (*Sp. Ex.* 165).

So for Ignatius, the minimum humility required is to avoid mortal sin. This is a very helpful insight. Sin, every sin, involves a degree of pride. It implies, at least implicitly, not accepting God's law, not respecting the nature He has given us, and wanting to make our own rules, which we consider to be sovereign, at least at the moment we give in to sin. Ultimately, every sin is a form of idolatry: it makes the individual the supreme rule and the only source of morality. This is all the more important in an age where there is an increasing tendency to give to the individual conscience the autonomy necessary to decide what is good and evil. Is that not the essence of the very first temptation in the Garden of Eden: “If you eat that fruit, you shall be as gods, knowing what is good and evil” — “knowing”, meaning “deciding for yourself”?

So, to avoid mortal sin, one must subject oneself to obey the law of God — in all things. Question: Do we often look at it that way? Do we consider, when we are in the grip of temptation, that our salvation depends on whether or not we have enough humility to not offend God? If we don't, we should. We all experience moments of temptation, when it would be so easy to give into an impulse without anyone knowing it and possibly without any foreseeable bad consequences. But the real question we must ask ourselves is: am I violating a serious command of God? If I am, I am showing my pride, I am obeying Satan rather than God, and I am doing something that will jeopardise my eternal salvation. It's so very important to keep this in mind: a mortal sin, a serious offense against the Divine Law, is *humanly* irreparable. What that means is that man has no power in himself to make up for it. Just as you cannot lift yourself up by the lobes of your own ears, or by the straps of your own boots, you cannot bring yourself back to the life of grace once it has been lost. Only God can do that. He does so through the sacrament of Penance, but that sacrament is not a given, not something we have at our disposal as a fundamental right that we can demand of God; it remains a free gift on His part, and it requires of us the humility of acknowledging our offense and accepting to do penance and resolving not to sin again. The humility we did not have and the lack of which led us to sin, we must obtain in

order to confess our sin. So the point we must always keep in mind in times of temptation is: do I accept being in an order of things that I did not make, that does not depend on my personal preferences, but is determined by the omnipotent Creator and provident Father of the universe? If I do not, I place myself outside of that order, and I lose all the benefits of it. If I do, then I have the beginnings of humility.

Keeping this limpid teaching in mind, let's have a look at how St Benedict presents the first degree of humility, and we shall see that, not only is it in perfect harmony, but it also helps us live it out. His text is lengthy, and this month we will only have space for part of it. "The first degree of humility," writes our holy Father St Benedict in ch. 7 of the *Rule*, "is that a man keep the fear of God before his eyes, altogether shunning forgetfulness. Let him ever remember all the commandments of God and how hell will burn for their sins those that despise Him; and let him constantly turn over in his heart the eternal life which is prepared for those that fear Him. And guarding himself always from sins and vices, whether of thought, word, hand, foot or self-will, and checking also the desires of the flesh, let him consider that God is always beholding him from heaven, that his actions are everywhere visible to the eye of the Godhead, and are constantly being reported to God by the angels. The prophet shows this to us when he represents God as always present in our thoughts, in the words: *God searcheth the heart and the reins* (Ps 7). And again: *The Lord knoweth the thoughts of men* (Ps 93). And again he saith: *Thou hast understood my thoughts from afar* (Ps 138); and: *The thought of man shall confess to thee* (Ps 75). In order then that he may be careful regarding his wrongful thoughts, let the good brother say constantly in his heart: *Then shall I be spotless before him, if I shall have kept myself from my iniquity*" (Ps 17).

Note in passing how much St Benedict was imbued with the psalms, quoting no less than five of them in just this first part of the first degree of humility (there will be five other psalms and four other scriptural passages quoted in the next section) — just to say how important the psalms are in our lives—; the text is a nearly inexhaustible source of meditation. I think we can safely summarise it this way: Always keep God before your eyes, never forget the four last things: death, judgment, heaven and hell. What a powerful insight and a penetrating maxim! Perhaps the most fundamental words to consign to memory are: *altogether shunning forgetfulness*. Forgetfulness is one of the most dangerous plagues of the spiritual life: we tend to forget eternal realities because we do not see them, and we get ourselves involved with worldly things because we do see them. *Altogether shunning forgetfulness*. Remember who you are, where you came from, where you are going, why you are here. Ask yourself often what God is thinking of you, how He considers this particular action you are engaged in or about to do; how does He like this thought you have on your mind and which you like to dwell upon; how does it fit in with His eternal law, which will never change and by which you must be guided if you do not wish to destroy yourself.

The mention of the angels continually going back and forward between God and us, reporting everything to Him, should put us on our guard — it is destined to keep us in line —, but it is also a great consolation: my Guardian Angel is continually going to God to report on my activities, but He is also bringing God's grace to do good and avoid evil. He is my best friend, and if I listen to his sweet voice, I shall live a good life and be saved. Never forget he is your ally in the battle against the forces of evil and that he is stronger than all the forces of hell put together for the simple reason that he is on God's side; sadden him not by sin, but give him the joy of seeing your progress each day in virtue and in holiness. One day you will see him face to face and thank him for his lifelong fidelity.

All this, my dear Friend, is matter for lengthy meditation and prayer, and will, I hope, nourish yours for many days to come. Remember: *shun forgetfulness!* So many get nowhere because they are spiritually absent-minded. Keep on the ball, every day of your life, by means of your daily meditation.

Yours through Mary Immaculate,

Fr Pius Mary Noonan, O.S.B.

Retreats 2018

Both January retreats are filling up fast, so don't lose anytime in booking!
<https://www.notredamemonastery.org/retreats/>

Update from the Priory

Beloved Friends,

Yes, I am now on the “other side” of the 50-year divide. At first sight, it might seem that I’ve lived more than half my life by now, but who knows? I like to tell people I’m aiming at 120! (I feel for the poor monks who will be looking after me then....) God’s will be done: 1,000 years are like one day for Him, and one day like 1,000 years. The only matter of importance is that we fulfil the tasks entrusted to us by Divine Providence here and now.

My task at the moment is finding a way of moving our community to Rhyndaston. It all seemed quite simple when we purchased the land three months ago. But, as I’ve already mentioned in previous newsletters, it’s quite a complex affair. I think, however, that we have reached a bit more clarity on our mode of procedure. Initially I had thought we could swiftly and inexpensively put up some provisional structures to live in while we built our monastery. This has proven to be neither swift nor inexpensive. And so, at the moment we are aiming at launching the full monastery project, as soon as we have some sufficiently elaborated designs from the architect. My hope is that this will give our dear friends and benefactors a more concrete idea of what we are striving towards and of how they can help us in building something beautiful for God and His Blessed Mother. Of course you’re thinking: that sounds great, but the problem of relocating to Rhyndaston remains, and it can’t wait till the monastery is built. True, but a solution may have been found in renting a nearby property until we can get something built on our own land. It may be somewhat Spartan, for sure, but whoever said monastic life wasn’t meant to be penitential?

In the meantime, some minor improvements of our property are underway: the installation of garden beds and the beginning of a vegetable garden; and the construction of a shed next to the existing house. This shed will be used for storage but we imagine it may some day be remodelled as an extension to the house, providing for the accommodation of families.

On a personal level, I have been invited to the Christus Rex Pilgrimage at the end of the month. Even though this had been on my mind for a while, I had ruled it out for practical reasons at this early stage of the foundation. But a special invitation from the organisers who told me they were down on the number of priests attending led me to think this was Our Lady’s way of telling me to go. It will be a great opportunity to get to know more Australians, and I’m sure will be an excellent additive to my ongoing inculturation — even if my ageing body is not so sure of its performance on the long walks, an essential part of the pilgrimage. But, with the help of the Holy Angels, we’ll get there.



Construction of raised garden bed

The major event, however, of the coming weeks, is the clothing ceremony of our four postulants, which will take place on 21 November in St Patrick’s Church, Colebrook, in the presence of our beloved Archbishop, His Grace Julian Porteous. I will clothe these men with the monastic habit, and they will then begin their canonical novitiate, which lasts at least one year, and, please God, will lead to the profession of their first monastic vows. So please keep them in your prayers, as they prepare themselves for this major step in the monastic way of life. Taking the habit does not bind them yet to the community through vows, but it does give them the outward look of a monk, a sign to the world of the presence of God among us. In this way, it has its demands on the novice, who will then be tested to ascertain the solidity of his purpose in coming to the monastery. In these early stages, the event has special significance, as it will be the first group of men to take the habit, and also, so it would seem, the first ever clothing of Benedictine monks in Tasmania. Next month, we hope to share with you the joy of this event.

With our prayers and gratitude for your ongoing support without which we would not get very far.

Through Mary Immaculate,

Father Prior

To keep up with Notre Dame Priory, visit our website at www.notredamemonastery.org
To contact us, please send an email to: info@notredamemonastery.org

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