

Ab AUSTRo

Newsletter of
Notre Dame Priory

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Priory update

At the beginning of February we were honoured with the visit of yet another distinguished guest in the person of the Most Reverend Gregory Homeming, Bishop of Lismore. His Lordship, who is a Discalced Carmelite and was for many years provincial of his order in Australia, shared with us some of his wisdom and experience of the religious life.

Shortly thereafter, Fr Prior, Br Gregory and Br Isaac made their way to St Clement's in Galong NSW for the summer men's retreat which this year counted 19 retreatants. The retreat, which numbered some very hot days, concluded on the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes who is most fittingly honoured on the retreat grounds with a beautiful grotto.

By the time the monks returned from the retreat, it was nearly time for the season of Lent to begin, preceded with the feast of the Holy Face on Shrove



Tuesday. The recent gift of a reproduction of the veil of Veronica made it very special for us all, an excellent preparation for contemplation of the passion of Our Lord.



Other less significant summer events at Jerusalem Estate included a community campfire dinner, followed by all night camping for the more valiant members of the community (let's say the youngies as opposed to the oldies....).

May the blessings of Lent be with you all.

Brother Chronicler

QUODCUMQUE DIXERIT VOBIS FACITE





In the school of St Benedict

It will come as no surprise that several of the tools for good works are Lenten in character. *To chastise the body. To love fasting. To deny oneself, in order to follow Christ.* St Benedict's formulation is of course only a paraphrase of Our Lord's words: *If any man will not take up his cross and come after me, he cannot be my disciple* (Cf. Mt 10:38). The import of this is that renouncing oneself is not proper to monks. Rather, it is part and parcel of being Christian. There can be no authentic Christian life without self-denial. This is the whole point behind the penitential days of the year. Each Friday the Church reminds the faithful to practice some form of self-denial, which traditionally includes abstinence from flesh meat. In addition, the entire time of Lent is one during which we are called to practice in a more intense way some penance that will help us be configured more closely to our Blessed Lord.

Fasting is one of the three main activities of the Christian life, the other two being prayer and almsgiving. In former times the Church was much more demanding of her children in terms of how much and how long one should fast. Even though the official discipline has been relaxed, the principle remains: the flesh must be kept in check. St Francis used to refer to his body as Brother Ass. An ass needs to be led, sometimes coerced, for asses can be quite stubborn. Our flesh is stubborn too. It never willingly gives up things that it likes, be it in terms of what it eats or the clothes it wears or the amount of time it gives to rest or leisure. And indeed, we must not be overly harsh on Brother Ass, lest he break down and fail. But there is plenty of room for giving up things that flatter us, the lack

of which will not kill us.

Whereas those tools can be found almost textually in the Gospels, another tool gives us their spirit: *Not to seek soft living.* The Latin version of this is *Delicias non amplecti*, which literally means "not to embrace delights". The expression is remarkable. We cannot

We must not embrace without restraint the pleasant things of life.

entirely avoid things that we find delightful. A good meal is delightful when you are hungry after a fast. A soft bed is delightful when you are tired after a long day's work. It is delightful to rest your eyes on a field of flowers, especially if you come from the hustle and bustle of a busy city. A man cannot live without some pleasure. That is why Benedict's expression is so fitting. He does not say to refuse all delights or soft living, but rather "not to embrace them", that is to say, even when we have them we should not embrace them as if they were the best part of life. The delights of the mind are much more intense and satisfying than those of the body, and a man who wants to remain strong for the Lord and have an upright soul must take care not to embrace, that is to say, to give himself over too readily and without restraint to the pleasant things of life. A true Christian is always conscious that we are but pilgrims here below. We are on the move towards eternity, and a pilgrim does not settle in to even the finest of hotels and take up residence there. No, he presses forward, forgetting the things that are behind and moving on to those that are ahead, as St Paul says (cf. Phil 3:13).



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Br Paphnutius Tours the Summa

“Today, dear Brothers,” began Fr Germanus, “we commence theology’s loftiest subject, God.”

A hand shot up. “But, Father Germanus,” cried Br Paphnutius, “what is God?”

“This is a very good question, Brother, yet I am afraid I cannot give you a short answer. You see, St Thomas says that we know more about what God is not than we do about what He is. God is ineffable, meaning we cannot express Him adequately enough. Some call this the apophatic approach to God. This means we must begin by negating any number of things that are not God, in order to arrive at something we can say about Him. So, Brother, if I cannot give you a short answer, I will give you a simple answer.

“God is simple, not composed of parts. There is no here and there in Him. *God is spirit* (Jn 4:24) and not a body, made up of matter and form like us. He cannot be put into a genus that would subdivide Him into species, for in Him essence and existence are the same, and without any extra, any accident like colour, taste or position. God is absolutely and utterly simple, the simplest of all beings, and so far removed from any concept we can have that it is not possible to conceive of Him as being in any way confused with creation, which is what pantheism holds.”

“But, Father,” interjected Br Paphnutius, “if God is so simple, how do we explain that His creation is so complex?”



“Imagine creation to be like a symphony. It is said that the really great composers – say a Mozart or a Beethoven – conceived entire symphonies in an instantaneous mental picture. In a flash, the entire thing was there in their mind, even though it would take them many hours to write it out, and us forever to admire it... It was almost as if it were ‘given’ them. This is what we usually refer to as genius. A real genius gives us the impression that he doesn’t have to work like the rest of us to understand things – though of course this is not entirely true. That is one good way of figuring God to ourselves. Even though the entirety of creation with all its complexity that no one can come anywhere near grasping, came forth from God – for it could come from nowhere else – all things are contained in Him in a perfect act of simplicity.

“While the certitude of the existence of God, simple and self-substantial, was discovered by the ancient Greeks through diligent philosophy, it was revealed to the Hebrews by the very voice of God who said to Moses: *I AM WHO AM* (Ex 3:14). In the New Testament, *I AM* reveals Himself through His one logos, His Word incarnate, Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 8:58).

“‘From one Word are all things, and all things speak to us of Him; and this is the beginning which also speaks to us (cf Jn 8:25). Without this Word, no one understands or judges rightly. He to whom all things are one, and who draws all things to one, and who sees all things in one, may be steady in heart, and peacefully repose in God’ (*Imitation of Christ*, Book 1, ch. 3).”



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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

With this instalment, we begin to go through St Ignatius' rules for discernment of spirits. Even though this is one of the most important aspects of the spiritual life, it is regrettably one of the most ignored. The reasons for this are many. One, especially in modern times, is the failure to acknowledge the existence and influence of angelic spirits, good and bad, in our lives. Another is lack of resources. Indeed, even though St John had already made it clear that we must *test the spirits to see if they are of God* (cf. 1 Jn 4:1), actual principles on how to do this were dispersed among the writings of many of the ancients, and it took either a solid and knowledgeable spiritual guide or a good library to know them. This is why St Ignatius' brief but comprehensive collection is so vital and has had such a profound influence on spirituality ever since.

St Ignatius precludes the first set of rules with these words: "Rules for understanding to some extent the different movements produced in the soul and for recognising those that are good to admit them, and those that are bad, to reject them". Clearly, if we can know which spirit is speaking to us and trying to influence us, this is going to provide crucial insight in determining whether or not to pay attention to what is being proposed, hence saving a lot of time and effort and possible grave mishaps.

The first rule then is: "In the case of those who go from one mortal sin to another, the enemy is ordinarily accustomed to propose apparent pleasures. He fills their

imagination with sensual delights and gratifications, the more readily to keep them in their vices and increase the number of their sins. With such persons the good spirit uses a method which is the reverse of the above. Making use of the light of reason, he will rouse the sting of conscience and fill them with remorse" (S.E. 314).

A person going from one mortal sin to another is a person with little or no concern for the state of their soul. It might be a person with no religious formation at all who has grown up in vice and for whom vice is "normal". But it could also be a person who knows very well what is right and what is wrong, but has developed a vice that has enslaved them to its imperious demands. In either case, the enemy wants to keep that person imprisoned in darkness and the easy way to achieve that desired end is simply to feed them what the beast in them craves.

On the practical level, this means that the enemy will be adept at leading the drunkard to the next bottle, the libertine to the next brothel, the thief to the next valuable object, the gossip to the next scandal, the miser to the next gain, etc. In our day, the enemy has many allies, thanks to the technology which makes it possible to fill people's minds with whatever gratifies their passions. A "technological fast" is an excellent penance not only for Lent, but for all year round. Such a fast alone, however, does not suffice, for enslavement to sin did not begin with the Internet, it just made victory easier for "our father below", as C. S. Lewis's fictional demon Screwtape calls our archenemy, Lucifer.

