

Ab Austro

Newsletter of Notre Dame Priory

Nov/Dec 2024

No. 75

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Priory update

In early November, Fr Prior travelled to Melbourne to give a retreat to a group of almost 30 men, assisted by Br John. The retreat went well, thanks be to God. Check the back page of this edition for the retreat schedule for 2025.

As has become customary, the brethren enjoyed an annual Thanksgiving lunch, with the presence of our dear friend, Fr Michael Tate. We did however anticipate the festive day a week in advance to profit from the presence of another very special guest, D. Benedict Nivakoff OSB, Abbot of the monastery of San Benedetto in Monte, Norcia, Italy. It has been five years since his last visit, and we were all delighted to share the news from our respective communities. Norcia remains an inspiration to us, as they were founded in similar circumstances, from a single monk; it is wonderful to see their recent elevation to the status of an Abbey.

On Saturday 30 November, Sam Clear from the Archdiocese's Office of Youth Evangelisation brought out a group of young men for a 'come and see' recollection day, as part of the Ember Days series around the state. Fr Bede gave the young men a talk on the monastic life and the spirit of the Rule of St Benedict,



and they then joined the community for the Divine Office and Holy Mass. It was a fitting day, being the feast of St Andrew, an apostle to whom Our Lord addressed the words, "Come, follow Me." The afternoon was spent in some healthy *labora* in the monastery vineyard, before finishing with First Vespers of the First Sunday of Advent, the first office of the new liturgical year.

The community received sad news in early December—Br Stephen Joseph Varga, of the Little Eucharistic Brothers of Divine Will, went to his eternal reward unexpectedly. Fr Bede and Br Isaac travelled to Cygnet on 6 December to represent the community at his funeral, offered by his confrere, Fr John Joseph LEB. Many clergy and faithful were present, praying for the peaceful repose of his soul and for consolation for his family, community and friends.

The brethren take this opportunity to wish one and all a blessed and joyful Christmas 2024, and a safe New Year 2025. May God be glorified in all things!

Brother Chronicler





In the school of St Benedict

To keep one's mouth from evil and depraved talk. Not to love much speaking. Not to speak vain words or such as move to laughter. Not to love much or violent laughter.

The tools St Benedict gives us this month are all related to speech and laughter, which are distinctive human traits. Did not one of the ancients define man as *animal risibilis* (the animal that laughs)? At first sight, limits placed on speech and laughter can seem demeaning, almost as if we were being asked to turn into mute beasts.

This is where we need to pay attention to the details. St Benedict does not condemn speech and laughter as such, though it is a common misunderstanding that he does. It is not rare to encounter persons who think that monks take a vow of perpetual silence, as if once you enter a monastery you can never again utter a single word... Words are the normal medium for human communication. They cannot be absolutely proscribed. In reality, there are three things St Benedict here condemns.

The first is evil or depraved talk. That is to say, we must refrain from using words that of themselves refer to bad things or that could lead someone else to think or do something bad. That's not asking too much, but that doesn't make it any easier. We are all agreed that people should not say bad things, but we all know how hard it can sometimes be to refrain from saying something we know we will regret.



The second thing St Benedict does not like is “much speaking”. In chapter six he will quote the Book of Proverbs: *In much speaking thou shalt not escape sin* (Pr 10:19). He could also have quoted Psalm 139: *A man full of tongue shall not be established in the earth* or St James (3:8): *The tongue no man can tame, an unquiet evil,*

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full of deadly poison. Clearly, the tongue is a marvellous organ God has given us, but it is very easily abused, and few are able to master it. So, says St Benedict basing himself on Holy Scripture, it is safe to limit our talk to what is important and essential.

The third point concerns laughter, and once again, St Benedict is not banning laughter absolutely, for that would not be human. What he doesn't like is “much or violent laughter”, the kind in which you are continually looking for people or things to laugh at, or when you lose control of yourself in laughing, not to mention indecent words that might cause laughter by referring to things that you shouldn't.

While it is true that there is a monastic genre of “*gravitas benedictina*” (Benedictine reserve or seriousness) which is on display in these instruments of good works and which monks strive to practice, everyone can learn from them how to better temper their tongue and have an overall dignified comportment.

The Infant Jesus is there to teach us how. The word “*in-fans*” actually means “one who cannot speak”. Many saints have learned silence by contemplating the Eternal Word totally silent in the crib, or rather, speaking volumes more by His silence than by any use of the tongue.

We happily receive the details of anyone who might be interested in receiving our newsletter
via newsletter@notredamemonastery.org

Br Paphnutius Tours the Summa

Fr Germanus begins today's lesson in theology:

“My dear Brothers, you are not unaware that the very first article of the creed professes our belief in God the Father Almighty. It is noteworthy that the very first adjective our faith attributes to God is that He is almighty. Perhaps it's because there is nothing man is more confronted with during his life than his weakness and incapacity. We all want to do many things, we aspire to make a difference in the world, but we continually crash against the wall of our frailty and mortality. We have to admit and acknowledge that we are so weak that we cannot even guarantee for ourselves another day of life.

“By reason of this, it is a comforting thought that God is almighty, for it means that there is nothing beyond His reach. You may have heard the quote attributed to St Teresa of Avila: ‘God knows all things; He can do all things; and He loves me.’ Wow! What a relief to know that the one who holds all things in His hands actually cares about me; He loves me.”

Without delay, Br Paphnutius raises his hand, and before getting permission to speak blurts out: “But Father, how can you say that to a mother who just lost her child, or to a man whose wife has just been run over by a car?”

“Brother, believing in God means trusting in His loving care and providential concern over our lives. Why, if He is almighty, does He not prevent bad things from happening? Well, that is His secret, and He will reveal it to us at the end of time. St Paul says that *all things work together unto good for those who love God* (Rom 8:28). And yet, there are times when we have to believe in that love, because we don't feel it, as St John tells us (*we have believed in God's love for us*) (1Jn 4:16). The book of Job is there to remind us that sometimes we cannot understand why bad things happen to us, but we know through faith that it will somehow be good for us. Don't we have to 'believe' the dentist is a good guy who is actually trying to be

helpful when he starts drilling in our mouth?!

“In reality, the Christian message as a whole is an answer to those questions, for the Almighty God who controls the universe decided to enter into our history as a little baby. When you look down on that tiny infant in the crib this Christmas, remember that He is the Mighty God whom the prophet Isaiah announced (Is 9:6). God baffles us often, but He never baffled us more than when He decided to become a defenceless baby, so weak that He depended upon a bit of milk from His Mother's breast, so powerless that if He were not dragged off by night into exile He would have been slaughtered by a ruthless king. And that powerlessness will reach its climax on Calvary, when the sky above is dark, and the cry of anguish goes unanswered. Those who reject God for allowing suffering in our world need only contemplate the life of Christ. God knows by experience what suffering is, and no one can say He doesn't. As for why, the answer is coming. Actually, it's almost here now.”



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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 Monks' Retreat Apostolate

Notre Dame Priory's main form of apostolate consists of five day retreats that follow the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. The Exercises are a synthetic and practical presentation of the central truths of the Catholic faith—God, the meaning of life, the eternal destiny of man, the life of Jesus Christ, Saviour of the human race—in the form of meditations, examination of conscience and prayers, to find peace of heart, rid oneself of worldly attachments and discover the will of God for the salvation of the soul. This particular form of retreat was popularised in Spain and France in the early 20th century by Fr Francis de Paul Vallet, whose spiritual heirs have opened up the treasures of the Exercises for untold numbers of faithful for over a century now. Our small foundation in Tasmania offers these retreats considered as an eminent form of Benedictine hospitality in the spirit of chapter 53 of the Rule in which St Benedict prescribes that the abbot should have the “law of God” read to guests for their edification. Given our limited numbers and remote location, we hold these retreats principally in venues at which larger numbers of retreatants can be welcomed. The retreat calendar for 2025 is below.

Retreats in Galong, NSW Australia:

Men —20-25 January
Women —13-18 October

Retreats in Lysterfield, VIC Australia

Women —25-30 August
Men —10-15 November

Retreats in Maria Stein, OH, USA

Men —7-12 July
Women —14-19 July

To find more details and to register for a retreat, visit the following page:

<https://www.notredamemonastery.org/retreats/>

Our small guest house in Colebrook, called Bethany, is also available for personal, unguided retreats, during which it is possible to attend the various hours of the Divine Office and, in some cases, help the monks in their many labours. If you would like to explore that option, please send an email to

bethany@notredamemonastery.org

