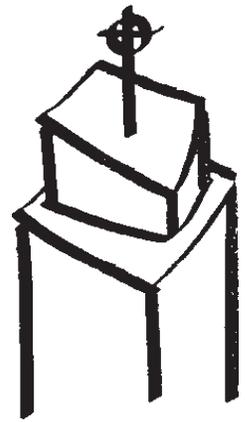


OUR FAMILY



NEWS



For Oblates of St. Bede Abbey, Peru, Illinois

January &
February, 2016

THE “GYPSY” IN US ALL

Dear Oblates,

In the September & October, 2012 issue of Our Family News, we published an essay by Fr. Claude Peifer, O.S.B., on the subject of mindfulness of God. In this issue, we offer you, as something of a meditation for Lent, another essay on the same topic, this one by Fr. James Flint, O.S.B., of St. Procopius Abbey, Lisle, Illinois. Veteran teacher and formerly novice master, junior master, and subprior of his community, Fr. James is currently its vocation director, librarian, archivist, and treasurer. He holds an S.T.B. from the Collegio Sant’ Anselmo, Rome, Italy, and a Ph.D. in Modern European History from the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.

Vicki Gensini
Br. Nathaniel

The Australian Trappist Michael Casey, in considering humility as found in the monastic tradition and especially in the Rule of St. Benedict, offers as a fundamental definition of humility: “living in the truth.” (See his classic *A Guide To Living In The Truth: St. Benedict’s Teaching on Humility*.) Many of us do not much care to live in the truth, for the truth is that many of us, much of the time, can rather closely resemble low-down no-gooders. But – and here, of course, is an essential point, about humility, about St. Benedict’s Rule, and about our whole Christian faith, a point rescuing us from doom and gloom, from cheerlessness and despair – God does not intend that we remain either low-down or no-good. He has something much better in mind for us.

Some lines from Casey’s book, lines upon which I doubt it would be possible to improve, lines that in his view follow from Christ’s words, “Whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” Casey writes: “Humility is the necessary human condition for God’s act of exaltation. It is not, in essence, a particular attitude in social dealings but a fundamental stance before God: a willingness to be saved, an openness to God’s action, an assent to the mysterious processes by which God’s plan is realized in the hearts of human beings. Humility is not an action, nor a sequence of actions, nor a habit formed by a repetition of actions. It is, rather, a receptivity or passivity; a matter of being acted upon by God.” (pp. 55-56) The ladder of humility is not a spiritual Mount Everest that I, hero that I am, am going to climb, perhaps with a little help from my God. No, God it is who does the exalting, the heavy lifting; progress up the ladder, if progress there be, shows primarily that God’s activity is not being impeded, not being blocked.



You might remember the commercial with the melodramatic line, “Please, Mother, I’d rather do it myself!” It must be over forty years old by now, and I no longer have the faintest notion what product was being sold, but the line was endlessly quoted and remains unforgettable for many people, probably because it is so easy to relate to the sentiment. We have probably all heard someone say, “Thank you, Mother” to someone who is

not Mother and to whom not one iota of gratitude is really felt. Being helped can be annoying, needing to be helped can be infuriating, and to be grateful for all that annoying and infuriating assistance requires, well, humility. It is hard to accept, very hard to want to dwell upon, the reality that grows out of the human condition, which is that the low-down no-gooder I encounter in my mirror, that person needs a lot of help. It is hard to “live in the truth.” But without the truth, we are without God, and we end up without the freedom for which we suppose we are striving.

As “Gypsy” found. We learn about “Gypsy” in a story, really a parable, told by a mid-twentieth-century American, Sheldon Van Auken. He and his wife were virtuous pagans of the sort the modern world produces, noble in intent, decent in behavior, vaguely interested in seeking truth when they had some leisure time, but left utterly clueless by their background as to where Truth might be found. The Van Aukens were fortunate in having an opportunity to spend some time at Oxford, where they came to know C.S. Lewis. Long discussions awakened in the Van Aukens an interest in Christianity and led to their eventual conversion. They then tried to think of ways to get across to young friends the Truth they had discovered. So there came about the tale of Gypsy, from which some extracts:

Gypsy, a furry, wheat-colored collie, found herself in possession of several hundred acres of hills and woods, full of good things like rabbit trails and streams, and she delighted in it all. She was given a comfortable bed and good meals. Of obligations there were few, and they not heavy. She was, to be sure, supposed to worship her Master and be right joyous to be with him. She knew she must not chase the chickens. While she must obey certain commands, there were no unreasonable ones, and no tricks.

There came a day when, as Gypsy was prowling on the far hill, two things happened at once: the Master called her, and a rabbit fled across the hill. Gypsy wheeled and raced towards the Master, as she had always done. Then she stopped. It entered her mind she that didn’t have to obey. Perhaps the Master didn’t understand about that rabbit. Anyhow, these were *her* hills. The rabbit was hers, too. Very likely it was all lies — the story of everything, including herself, belonging to the Master. How did she know that the food in her dish came from him? — Probably there was some natural explanation. She was a free dog and that was the end of it. These thoughts went through her mind swiftly while she stood irresolute. Again came the Master’s command; the rabbit crossed the hilltop. Gypsy whirled and chased after the rabbit. She had made a choice. She was free to choose.

Hours later she came home. She saw the Master waiting for her, but she did not rush gladly to him, leaping and frisking, as she had always done. Something new had come into her demeanour: guilt. She crept up to him like a snake on her belly. Undoubtedly she was penitent at the moment. But she had a new knowledge — the knowledge of the possibility of sin — and it was a thrill to her heart and a salt taste in her mouth. Nevertheless she was very obedient the next day and the day after. Eventually, though, there was another rabbit — and she did not even hesitate. Soon it was the mere possibility of a rabbit. And then she dropped the rabbit thing altogether and went her way.

The Master loved her still but trusted her no longer. In time she lived in a pen and went for walks with a rope around her neck. All her real freedom was gone. But the Master gave her, from time to time, new chances to obey of her own free will. Had she chosen to obey she would once again have had perfect freedom to wander her hundreds of acres. But she did not return to the obedience. She always chose, if she were out of reach, to run away. The Master, knowing hunger would bring her back to her pen, let her run. He could have stopped her. But while she lived she might still return to the obedience that was freedom.

One day, during a journey by car, Gypsy and her good little daughter, Flurry, were taken into the edge of a wood. Always Gypsy had limited her disobedience to her own hills. But now, coming back to the car, she suddenly felt the old thrill. She turned and fled. The Master called with a note of sharp urgency. Gypsy, her ears dulled to the meanings of the Master, continued her rush into the dark forest. After hours of search and calling, the Master sadly abandoned the lost one and, with Flurry beside him, went home.

There Flurry continued to live in freedom under the obedience. She was right joyous to be with the Master, especially when she did a thing which pleased him. She knew that in his service was perfect freedom. She obeyed gladly of her own free choice.

But Gypsy, if she still lived, wandered the woods and roads an outcast. She became dirty and matted with burs. No doubt stones were thrown at her and she was often hungry, but she had lost the way home. If she had puppies, they, too, and their children had lost the way home, for Gypsy's perilous and bent will must affect them; and the comforting hand of the Master would be unknown to them, except as a tale. This is the way Gypsy chose on the Day of the Rabbit and continued to choose until, suddenly, there was no more choosing. [Sheldon Van Auken, *A Severe Mercy*]

Sheldon Van Auken's title for this story was "The Fall," and I have often thought that one could construct a course on Original Sin with it as a primary text. It certainly offers a dramatic presentation of pride at work, of all the little lies which step by step can separate any "Gypsy," even a two-legged one, from truth.

"Gypsy" in the story lost her fear of the Master. What we can lose is "the fear of the Lord." St. Benedict's program for having us recover what sin would have us lose begins as follows: "The first step of humility is that a monk always keeps the fear of God before his eyes and flees from all forgetfulness." Flees from all forgetfulness. A more positive way of putting that is mindfulness. Mindfulness of God and of reality.

Michael Casey distinguishes between mindfulness and memory. Memory recovers what is in our minds – that could be good or that could be bad. If our minds are full of fantasies, then memory might serve to isolate us from reality, rather than connect us to it. If our minds are full of past hurts and grievances, memory can lead us down a very bitter road. One of my confreres was convinced that many of his contemporaries were still resentful of the leadership he had provided several decades before when he was in a position of secondary authority. He was convinced that he had been ostracized, and that he was still being criticized and persecuted, all very unfairly. Twenty years of living with all concerned never gave me much reason to believe that his contemporaries even remembered his earlier role in the community, far less despised him for it. But he played that tape over and over in his mind, nursed his real resentment over their imaginary resentment, and became ever more isolated as a result – which of course fed into his persecution complex. Memory did him no favor at all.

The mindfulness which leads to fear of the Lord is something more than mere memory. Mindfulness brings us into touch with reality. Admittedly, reality can be painful – the true memory of what really does lie in my past can be most painful. But pain based upon reality, upon truth, is pain that can lead somewhere. It can lead us to another reality, to what God desires to give us, His mercy.

This discovery of the reality of God's love can take the form of an interior explosion. A conversion experience, in more traditional terminology. St. Paul knocked off his horse on the way to Damascus being the classic case. More often, some number of lesser experiences of God's grace leading to a realization that a moment of decision is at hand.

Not that we always want to decide. St. Augustine tells in his *Confessions* of a time during his protracted process of conversion when he suffered a toothache. Not just any old toothache, but a real monster of a toothache, one that prevented him even from opening his mouth to speak. Using a wax tablet, he begged his friends to pray for him. He joined them as they knelt in prayer together. Instantly the toothache disappeared. That's when Augustine really got scared. That there's really somebody there, listening when we pray, that this someone might really be my Lord, my God, my Judge, is not always as consoling as it ought to be.

But perhaps it's not so very surprising, that we should recoil from anything suggesting immediacy with God! After all, if every moment of our day, if every action we perform, is immediate to God – well, this gets to be serious stuff. The spiritual journey affects us "always" and "at every hour." Casey puts it well: "Spiritual life is not a hobby or a part-time occupation. It is nothing if it does not find expression in everything we do. . . . Taking the spiritual life seriously means that it is not compartmentalized. It is a total obsession. There are no vacations [from it]. . . . Dabbling in spiritual life is futile; the specific advantages of religious practice follow only where there is unqualified commitment." (p. 72)

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Our Family News is published in the special interest of the oblates of St. Bede Abbey. Please send changes of address and comments to The Editor, Our Family News, St. Bede Abbey, 24 W US Highway 6, Peru, IL 61354.

We welcome your submissions to this publication, either instructive or reflective, whether prose or poetry. They should in some way relate to the **Rule of Benedict**, Benedictine spirituality, and/or the oblate program. The editor reserves the rights to choose material for publication and to edit as necessary.

This is language I find hard to bear. But do I feel that way because I don't think it's true, or because I'm afraid it is? There's a part of me that would like to be able to forget the spiritual journey every now and then. I can often identify with a priest in a J.F. Powers novel who found, as he grew older, that a little bit of community can go a long, long way! But that is precisely the attitude that St. Benedict very forthrightly tells me is incompatible with spiritual growth. I can never forget that I am a monk, more fundamentally a Christian, and that this must have consequences for every facet of my existence.

--- Fr. James Flint, O.S.B.



Passage for *Lectio* at the January Meeting

The fear of the Lord is the beginning
of wisdom;
prudent are all who practice it.

Psalm 111:10

Passage for *Lectio* at the February Meeting

Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing.
In all circumstances give thanks, for
this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS

Meetings are held in the abbey church from 1:30
P.M. to 4:30 P.M.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2016

Sunday, March 13, 2016
Sunday, April 10, 2016
Sunday, May 1, 2016

Abbey Prayer Schedule

Visitors are welcome to join the monks for Mass and for the hours of the Divine Office. Conventual Mass is celebrated on the first level of the abbey church, the hours of the Divine Office on the second level. During the school year, the monks' schedule is as follows.

6:00 A.M. Morning Prayer*
12:00 Noon Midday Prayer
5:00 P.M. Conventual Mass**
7:10 P.M. Evening Prayer***

* on Sunday, 7:00 A.M.

** on Sunday, 10:00 A.M. and on Monday, 7:30 A.M.

*** on Sunday, 5:00 P.M.

