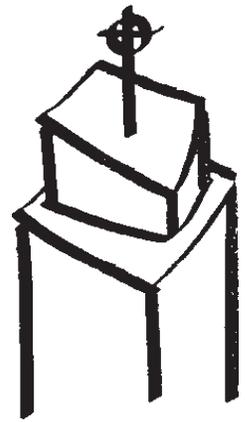


OUR FAMILY



NEWS



For Oblates of St. Bede Abbey, Peru, Illinois

November &
December, 2012

What is Advent? It is a time, at once sober and joyful, given to us by the Church that we might immerse ourselves in the mystery of the comings of Christ. I say “comings” because—and this, I believe, most of you already know—even as the Church proclaims to us during this season a single central mystery of our faith, she presents to us three distinct manifestations of it.

Most prominent in your minds, no doubt, are Christ’s first and last comings: the former that coming in the flesh over two thousand years ago that had been foretold by the prophets, the latter that coming in the flesh at the end of time that has been foretold by Christ himself; the former a past coming, the latter a future one.

The Lord’s other coming, occurring between these two, is a present one. It is, in fact, taking place right now, at this very moment...as it does at every moment. In chapter 3 of the book of Revelation, Christ

tells us, “Here I am! I am standing at the door, knocking. If anyone hears me calling and opens the door, I will come into his house and eat with him, and he with me.”



How wonderful, how consoling, to know that the Lord is so close to us, so eager to enter each one’s dwelling, so anxious to commune with each of us, to be the “company” of each in the root sense of that word!

But knowing all this raises a question. Why, every Advent, is there all the talk, all the fuss, about preparing for the coming of the Lord when he is right here, right now, knocking and calling at our very doors?



Sometimes—indeed, all too often—because we do not even hear his knock and call. Other times—even more often, I fear—because we hear

them but do not recognize them as his, do not believe that it is really he who is at the door. And so we do not respond; we do not let him in. I would like to say something about this frequent failure of ours as Christians to recognize the Guest whom we can quite glibly claim to be awaiting with the deepest of longings and the warmest of welcomes. What is to be made of it, and what can be done about it? Let me backtrack a bit.

I have just stated that, failing to recognize the Lord, “we do not let him in.” But let him in *where*, exactly? What is this house of which Christ speaks, to which he so ardently seeks admittance? It is the heart, the *inner* habitation of a person, that place where one’s most profound thoughts, feelings, and desires, one’s choices, and one’s conscience converge to form who one is. It is the center both of sensibility (the place where one experiences things) and of responsibility (the place where one decides things). It is that core of a person that is so hard to describe in words yet is so commonly used and understood as a symbol of the totality of that person, as when we speak of one pursuing something “with all one’s heart” or, conversely, of “one’s heart just not being in” something. And yet, for all that, it is not entirely a person’s own.

The human heart is a place which God has chosen—more, which he has created—to be *his* dwelling. Thus Christ has not only the desire to enter it; he has the right to do so as well.

But he respects our freedom—Ambrose says in one of his to enter, he does not care to burst us against our will.” If Christ is to be Emmanuel, “God-with-us,”—the doors to them at the sound of



What is it that so frequently and call in the first place? In a ourselves and our own affairs. To must be listening for him. To door, we must be living in him.

our privacy, so to speak. As St. sermons, “Though he has the power in uninvited or to force himself upon come into our hearts—if he is truly to we have, of our own accord, to open his knock and call.

prevents us from *hearing* that knock nutshell, a preoccupation with be able to hear Christ at the door, we always be able to hear Christ at the constant, conscious expectation of him.

And what is it that frequently prevents us from *recognizing* Christ’s knock and call? Again in a nutshell, the paltriness—to be precise, the narrowness—of our faith. To always be able to recognize Christ at the door, we must be living in constant, conscious expectation of the *whole* Christ: of the Christ who draws near to us not just invisibly and silently in personal prayer but also visibly and audibly in the members of his Body; of the Christ who approaches us through our brothers and sisters, our neighbors, through other people, even the least likely of them; of the Christ who at times appears and appeals to us in the most distressing of disguises, who at times utterly appalls us.

Now I daresay that if anyone could be considered an expert, as it were, at recognizing, purely by faith, the divine presence *wherever* it is to be found, that person is Benedict of Nursia. I am talking here, after all, about a monastic legislator who in his rule directs that the cellarer of his monastery “should regard the utensils and goods of the monastery as if they were the sacred vessels of the altar” (*RB* 31:10). Indeed, the recognition by faith of the divine presence—recognition of it in the sense of awareness of it and in the sense of acknowledgment of it alike—can be said to be the very basis of the *Rule of Benedict* and of the life that the *Rule* is meant to generate and sustain. It is the spiritual art of which, perhaps more than of any other, St. Benedict can be said to be the consummate master.

It is not surprising, therefore, that he says a great deal in the *Rule*—sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, but always incisively—specifically about both the recognition of Christ in other people and the role of faith in that recognition.

He speaks about the recognition of Christ in others most obviously—and here a survey will have to suffice—in such chapters as those that treat of the role of fatherhood that is to be exercised by the abbot (2), of the attention that is to be paid to the young in the search for wise counsel (3), of the tools of the spiritual craft that are to be used by his monks (4), of the obedience that is to be rendered to the abbot (5), of the confession that is to be made to the abbot both of evil thoughts and of evils secretly committed (7), of the care that is to be provided for sick brothers (36), of the reception that is to be afforded to guests (53), of the consideration that is to be shown to visiting monks (61), of the obedience that is to be rendered to confreres (71), and of the good zeal that is to be practiced by his monks in all their dealings with one another (72).

He speaks about the role of faith in that recognition nowhere more patently than in the passage, early on in the *Rule*, wherein he says of the abbot that “he is *believed* to represent Christ in the monastery” (2:2). In fact, this is the sole passage in the entire *Rule* in which St. Benedict *explicitly* attributes the recognition of Christ in another person to faith; elsewhere he does so only implicitly. I say “*only* implicitly,” but that such is the case should not be taken as an indication that this role of faith is not all that important to him, still less that he is not all that certain about it. Quite the contrary.

The implicitness should, rather, be understood as a measure of just how integral to his thinking this role of faith actually is. Establishing a link between faith and recognition—without ado or fanfare but with clarity and firmness—almost at the beginning of the *Rule*, he goes on to simply—one would like to say confidently—turn potential statements of faith into statements of fact, replacing “for it is believed that” with a mere “for.” Consider this passage about ailing monks in the community: “The sick are to be cared for before and above all else, *for* it is really Christ who is served in them” (36:1). Consider these passages about wayfaring strangers: “All guests who arrive should be received as Christ, *for* he himself will say, ‘I was a stranger and you took me in’” (53:1) and “The greatest care should be exhibited in the reception of the poor and pilgrims, *for* Christ is more especially received in them” (53:15).

Finally, consider this most remarkable and compelling passage, likewise from chapter 53—the single passage in the *Rule* in which St. Benedict not only presents the presence of Christ in others as fact but also *states outright* that it is—and, furthermore, the unique instance in the *Rule* in which St. Benedict uses the word “adore”:

As soon as a guest is announced, the superior or the brothers should hurry to meet him with every mark of love. First they should pray together and then be united in peace. The kiss of peace should not be given unless prayer has come first, on account of the wiles of the devil. The greeting itself, however, ought to manifest complete humility toward guests who are arriving or departing: by an inclination of the head or by a complete prostration on the ground, one must adore Christ in them, *for he is in fact* the one who is received (53:3-7).

Christ comes to us, and in the flesh, still. Christ comes to us, and in the flesh, ceaselessly. Let us expect him; let us receive him; let us adore him.

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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 St. Benedict**, Benedictine spirituality, and/or the oblate program. The editor reserves the rights to choose material for publication and to edit as necessary.

Dear Oblates,

The preceding essay is a composite piece, an adaptation by me of a conference given to his community by Abbot Matthew Leavy, O.S.B., the recently retired abbot of St. Anselm Abbey, Manchester, New Hampshire, and sent to me in response to my request for a contribution from him to this publication. I am grateful to Abbot Matthew not only for the conference itself but also for the permission he so generously gave, in the note that accompanied it, to "do with it as you wish." For various reasons I found it necessary to omit from his text—a lengthier and richer piece than the one you have just read—some points altogether, to abridge his treatment of other points, and to expand his treatment of still others. I trust that I have not, however, misrepresented his thought or otherwise mangled what is a fine meditation on the meaning of Advent.

Abbot Matthew was born in the Bronx, New York City, New York, in 1950. He entered Woodside Priory in Portola Valley, California, in 1969 and professed his first vows a year later. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1975. In 1976 Woodside, at the time a monastery of the Hungarian Congregation of Benedictines, transferred to the American-Cassinese Congregation, becoming a dependent priory of St. Anselm Abbey, and the then Father Matthew was summoned to the motherhouse. Ten years later, when he was but thirty-five years of age, he was elected its fourth abbot.

Abbot Matthew holds a doctorate in Formative Spirituality from Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Fluent in French, Italian, and Hungarian, he has long been active both here and abroad in the field of Benedictine monastic formation, giving workshops and teaching courses to Benedictine formation directors and their charges alike. He is currently in residence at the Archabbey of Pannonhalma, Pannonhalma, Hungary, assisting in the formation program there.

*In the Lord,
Br. Nathaniel, O.S.B.*

NOVEMBER 11 OBLATES DAY SCHEDULE

NEXT REGULAR MEETINGS

- 10:00 A.M. Conventual Mass, within which oblates will renew their oblations
- 11:00 A.M. Coffee and socializing in the abbey church lounge
- 12:00 noon Midday Prayer with the monks in the abbey church choir chapel
- 12:15 P.M. Lunch with the monks in the monastery refectory
- After lunch Meeting in the abbey church, with presentation by Fr. Ronald Margherio, O.S.B.
- 2:30 P.M. Conclusion of meeting

Sunday, December 2, 2012
Sunday, January 13, 2013
1:30 P.M.—4:30 P.M. in the abbey church

Passage for *Lectio* at the December Meeting

And the king will say to them in reply,
"Amen, I say to you, whatever you did
for one of these least brothers of mine,
you did for me."

Mt 25:40

Copies of this passage will be available at the meeting.

