

5th Sunday 2019 – Fr. Gabriel Myers

Three days in a Texas monastery. *It was the best vacation of my life.* What good is that to me, asked Peter Collins, having a hard day? My prayer is that *you* have the best vacation of *your* life, because it's a sacred experience. Different from what you'd expect. God is unpredictable. Texas gave me a third-commandment sabbath. Texas gave me a Lord's day of new, surprising, resurrected life. Texas gave me an opportunity for conversion, which we talk about but we seldom seek out. You can't *make* these happen, but pay attention when they do. Scoff not at vacation.

A good vacation is quirky, unpredictable. I went to a young, earnest community. Before going, I referred to them as traditionalist. "We think of ourselves as *conservative*," I was told. The beautiful architecture and *conservative* liturgy overcame my reservations. The natives were welcoming, not hostile. I never *wanted* to visit the red state of Texas. I had to reconsider my prejudice. This is what conversion requires.

Our Lady of Dallas has no overnight guests but family members and Cistercian dignitaries. An exception was made for *me*. I had to be on my best behavior. A good vacation brings rest, yet requires work of a different sort.

I went to visit my new friend Father Ignatius, who stayed here last summer for studies. If you don't remember, I will describe. He is from the same house as Father Joseph Van House (to my left, seat four), but nothing like him. Not all Cistercians are the *same*, though they wear those clever buttoned scapulars and little white collars. You may distinguish curly-top from premature balding. Father Ignatius is slow and deliberate in movement, private and reserved in temperament. He is soft-spoken, 43, *thin*. Everything I am not. He is Father Peter's ideal monk: keeping silence, no-drama like President Obama. Everything I am not. It is good to have a friend different from you. It unbalances you, challenges you, smoothes rough edges, causes *conversion*. Makes change with minimum pain.

It is humbling to be given so much pleasure in so little time, three short days, all Jesus needed to rise from death. Father Ignatius was a good host. Behind, God is a stupendous host. We looked at paintings in beautiful buildings. Ignatius made me look *slowly*. We had Texas barbecue and sweet-tea outdoors, by a trickle in a ditch that's called a river. We had front-row seats for an exclusive baroque recital in a private home. Mozart and Handel arias, which even you, Father Joseph van House, might recognize—from the large voice of a large diva. Afterward, she shrieked with joy over Ignatius. He was pink and pleased. During intermission we looked at the Matisse on the wall. Nearby sprawled a Matisse female in bronze, nearly the size of our diva.

Did this luxury offend monastic simplicity, compromise evangelical poverty? Or is God as big as Texas, pressing down the measure, spilling out more blessing than we can take in?

Our home-base was the monastery: prayers to start the morning, a restful room after the day's adventures. *All* rooms in a monastery, not just the church, are places to find God. As are all rooms in your house, or inner house. Ignatius showed me his studio. I was eager to see the clutter. Eager to see pictures outside his usual style, unfinished pictures, surprising ones made for middle-school students. The window blinds were tilted down. "Texas sun is so harsh. Some days they stay closed or I can't see what I'm doing." I thought of 1 Corinthians 13. "Now we see through glass darkly. Over there we will see it all. But for now this is good enough."

There is always a *word painting* in progress for Ignatius. *Word paintings* make me *mad*. They make money; they please the abbot. “Peace” or “Courage” in an abstract shape. Mystical passages of scripture, with curlicues encrypting the message. Last summer I spoke my mind. “They are *decoration*, not art. Hung by the refrigerator or over the toilet. Not even *noticed*. Why do you waste your time? Your portraits are *art*, all that personality and mystery. Why do you let the abbot take advantage of you?” The quiet answer: “They are interesting to me. I *like* to do them.”

In the fall, a small vellum envelope arrived. Spiky handwriting I didn’t recognize, sealed tight as Christ’s tomb. Needing the paperknife. Notecard, inside a George Herbert poem I like. The outside, an Ignatius painting well reproduced. *A word painting*. “**You win**,” I shouted. As Isaiah said in the temple: “**You win**.” As Peter said on the seashore: “**You win**.”

On a sky-blue background is the shape of a house. You can see the angle of a roof, cellar pillars at the bottom. In between are little cubes of Mediterranean stucco, shades of orange, pink, yellow. The words are from last Sunday’s reading, so familiar they are dull, until an artist or diva brings them to life. Chimney and attic are in big letters: “Love is kind and patient.” Small letters at bedroom level: “it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” On ground level, the door is open: sunlight, not harsh, flows out between medium letters widely spaced, “L-o-v-e never fails.” I picture Ignatius, arms folded, grinning, watching my reaction. *Not* saying, “I told you so.” To really convert someone, *don’t use force*.

Saint Benedict quotes the psalmist’s humility: “I am small and stupid, like a beast before you.” Eating my words about word paintings, giving in, I didn’t *mind* being small and stupid. Normally we hate surrendering a self-defining idea. We lose face, diminish in identity. Who am I if not superior to Texas with its word-paintings and earnest conservatives? Who am I without my brilliant opinions and watertight theology? How surprising to leave it all behind without regret, learning there is beautiful territory ahead, in a place I have never seen. Giving up is sabbath rest leading to resurrection. Beyond the grave of giving up, true conversion is possible.

I got off easy. But maybe Isaiah also did. The smoke settles, the earthquake stops, the angels disappear. Were his coal-touched lips burnt? Had he taken on such a terrible mission? Or did it taste sweet to remember what God looked like, out of harsh Texas sun? Was it sweet to the inner ear, the Mozartian tones of “who will go for us”?

We make much of Simon Peter, crucified upside-down and how he suffered. In his ordeal did he smile at getting off easy? Did he remember the Texas-size catch of fish? See with the inner eye, the earnest young stranger in the little white collar—politely inviting him to leave home, and learn to be at home anywhere in the world? To live in a house of Mediterranean pastels where love endures, hopes, believes all things.

God sometimes hooks us in painful circumstances. We find him because we need him. But sometimes he lets us find him differently. On a great vacation with young conservatives. Listening to a large diva. Opening an envelope that proves me wrong. Isaiah, Simon Peter, Our Lady of Dallas. Sabbath, resurrection, conversion. Think of what’s possible in Texas. Think of what’s possible for you. —Gabriel Myers, OSB