



*Fall 2023*

*Dear friends of St. Anselm's,*

*As you will read on the next page in "The Chronicler's Column," our community retreat this year was led by Sister Lynn McKenzie, OSB. In one of her talks, she referred to an article in the Australian monastic journal Tjurunga on the topic of breakage. Although at first hearing that might sound like a depressing subject for a retreat conference, in fact it says something very important for all of us. The article began by referring to the traditional Japanese art of kintsugi, which literally means "golden joinery" and refers to the practice of mending broken pottery by lacquer mixed with powdered gold. The blemish of repair is not hidden; instead, the vessel acquires a new beauty as the fracture lines now gleam with gold lines.*

*In a similar way, the Rule of St. Benedict recognizes that in any community there will be "breakages" as we sometimes give way to the frustrations and anger that arise when things don't go just the way we would prefer. Recognizing this, St. Benedict urges us throughout the Rule to be ready to practice the patience, forgiveness, and love that can not only mend the cracks but even allow them to shine with the golden lines of forgiveness and reconciliation. May such teaching guide the lives of all of us as we journey toward the Kingdom in our various walks of life.*

*The Monks of St. Anselm's Abbey*

## *The Chronicler's Column*

Recent newsletters have mentioned our solar-panel project, one of the largest in the District of Columbia. It has now been completed. The work was extensive, for panels cover not only our school's academic building and the lower building (which houses our gymnasium, theatre, and commons) but also the school's parking lot, where solar panels are fastened to an array of canopies supported by steel posts. The canopies also keep cars parked below them out of the rain, snow, or sun. This was a very complicated project—its engineering schedule included 125 different components. We want to express special thanks to our director of facilities, José Morales, who worked very hard to see that the crew did this challenging work in a safe and timely way. The school and monastery expect to benefit from significant savings now that the panels have been connected to the electric grid.

Another way in which St. Anselm's is trying to be environmentally sensitive is through our partnership with a civil engineering firm, Urban Greening, to provide storm-water management on our property and thereby avoid pollutant run-off into the Potomac River and Chesapeake Bay. This project is just now in its beginning stages. Work will include the installation of "rain gardens" at various locations and will be done throughout the

coming months to bring this project, too, to a successful conclusion.

On the more spiritual side of our life, we had Sister Lynn McKenzie, O.S.B. give seven talks during our annual community retreat in mid-August. Sister Lynn is the president of the St. Scholastica Congregation of Benedictine sisters and also the moderator of the worldwide *Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum*, which was founded in 2001 to bring together, in a sisterly bond, the nuns (*moniales*) and sisters (*sorores*) consociated with the Benedictine Confederation. We were all very appreciative of Sister Lynn's conferences and of her willingness to meet individually with any of our monks.

The following month, on the last Saturday of September, the fiftieth annual Thomas Verner Moore Lecture was given by the Honorable Colbert King, whose weekly column in the *Washington Post* is widely read. He was a member of the editorial board of that newspaper until his retirement in 2007. Before then he worked for the State Department and subsequently for the World Bank and other financial institutions. His columns have covered many topics of national and international significance, but of special importance are his timely and trenchant reflections about challenges facing all of us who live in the District of Columbia.

As usual, we include in this column some brief remarks about the activities of members of our monastic community. Our prior, **Fr. Philip Simo**, tends to some of our scheduling, purchases various supplies, and prepares the meals for cookouts on federal holidays during the spring and summer.

As he prepares to celebrate his 99th birthday on November 22, **Fr. Joseph Jensen** finds various ways to stay busy. Now that the pandemic has receded, he has resumed his bi-monthly classes on the Bible for our oblates and other persons interested in learning more about Scripture. In addition, he has continued being the monk in charge of finding a speaker and making other arrangements for the annual lecture named after our community's de facto founder, Fr. Thomas Verner Moore. The first lecture in the series was given by Bishop Christopher Butler in 1974, so this year's, as noted two paragraphs above, will be the fiftieth.

**Fr. Michael Hall**, an alumnus of our school (class of 1956) who taught courses in history, government, and religion before retiring from the classroom, is a headmaster emeritus. Health problems have kept him from being as active in ministry as he was in past years, but his familiarity with the history of our community made him the obvious choice to prepare a work that will be published as we look ahead to our centennial year that begins in September, 2024.

**Fr. Paul McKane**, having retired as pastor of St. Mark's parish in Belt, Montana

several years ago, continues living in retirement in Great Falls, Montana. He spends much of his time in personal study, especially of philosophy, along with visiting some former parishioners and tending to the maintenance of his house and garden.

Our other headmaster emeritus, **Fr. Peter Weigand**, continues his practice of visiting alumni in many parts of our country. During the past summer he met many of them in various cities out west, often accompanied by Fr. Anthony Giampietro, who succeeded him as school president two years ago. Fr. Peter continues teaching earth science to our Form I students and electives in anthropology or Native American studies to juniors and seniors. On weekends he may often be seen tending to plants in our monastery courtyard, such work being one of his favorite tasks.

Our bursar and choir master, **Fr. Gabriel Myers**, writes: "I enjoy, for the most part, my ordinary life in the monastery, which is already varied by ministries, to individuals and groups from the outside. But this year was also varied by special visits. One from a long-lost college friend, with her new husband. Another from a far-away friend, with whom there was a perfect May Day at Inner Harbor, Baltimore, eating seafood lunch on the deck, then lolling on the grass. It was my first time there. How often do we need a guest to propel us to a site in our backyard which we have never bothered to seek out? But the best visit was a March weekend with my brother, John, newly retired.

A brilliant tragedy about the Tulsa massacre at Arena Stage on Friday night; a Washington Bach Consort dress-rehearsal for Handel's Messiah on Saturday; then the actual Sunday-afternoon performance. Dare I say that the dress-rehearsal, in a small enclosed space, with musicians having time for friendly conversation and welcoming my brother—was best of all? Perfect days, like life, pass so quickly. But they are remembered forever.”

As noted in his article published later in this issue of our newsletter, this summer **Br. Dunstan Robidoux** had an opportunity to visit both Israel and Jordan with several friends. He has been instrumental in helping some Afghans leave that country in order to have safer living conditions for themselves and their families. Br. Dunstan has also been active in seeing to improvements at the stone house in Capon Springs, West Virginia, that was given to us more than seventy years ago. Our hope is that these improvements will make that property more inviting for visits by members of our community.

After being a principal editor of this newsletter for many years, **Br. Matthew Nylund** has retired from that position for reasons of health but continues to give suggestions about various aspects of its publication. He remains keenly interested in reading good books and keeping up with news about our world.

**Fr. Ignacio González** was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Evelio Menjivar-Ayala in the crypt church of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception on May 6, with his

parents and other relatives from Texas among those attending the Mass. He celebrated his first Mass in the abbey church the following day; the homily given by Fr. Gabriel on that occasion is one of the pieces in this issue of our newsletter. Like Br. Dunstan, he was able to visit Israel and Jordan for a few weeks this summer. Having finished his studies at Catholic University, Fr. Ignacio is working full-time in our abbey school as a teacher of religion to Form A and a tutor in Spanish for a transfer student. He is also serving as campus minister in the school, director of our abbey oblates, and doing some pastoral ministry, especially at the National Shrine.

Joining Fr. Ignacio with ministry to our students is our school chaplain, **Fr. Samuel Springuel**, who is also kept busy teaching courses in computer science and robotics and serving in the monastery as novice master, house master, and master of ceremonies. He has also been instrumental in helping his parents and younger brother move from Glen Echo, Maryland to Philadelphia.

Even though he finished his canonical year of novitiate in early February, **Br. Cyprian Morales** remains under the supervision of his novice master, Fr. Samuel, as what in our English Benedictine Congregation is called “a second-year novice.” In addition to regular classes on the Rule of St. Benedict, monastic history, liturgy, and similar topics, Br. Cyprian has been working on keeping our liturgical books in good condition and repairing the chairs in our refectory.



The author of this column, **Abbot James Wiseman**, led the retreat for the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration at their motherhouse in Clyde, Missouri in mid-July. Shortly after returning from there he traveled to the Priorato San José in the mountains of western Guatemala that had been founded by Marmion Abbey in Illinois in 1965. Among the many things that he experienced during his two and a half weeks there was the opportunity to

visit the room where the recently beatified Fr. Stanley Rother had been assassinated in 1981 in the city of Santiago Atitlán. That room is now a chapel. Back in Washington, Abbot James continues to teach elective courses in religion to our Form VI students.

JAMES WISEMAN, OSB

## *Escaping from Afghanistan*

I cannot give my real name for obvious security reasons, although I can say that I am a young Afghan husband and father with a wife and two young children. I was born in one of the provinces of Afghanistan. For some time during the years of the American presence in my country, I worked with the American forces as an advisor in one of our eastern Afghan provinces. I managed to live a normal life with my family, although I also loved my work with the Americans despite the dangers. Working with them, I tried to do a good, honest job. However, when our contract came to an end, I was left unemployed for a while, although I continued to remain in touch with a number of American friends and colleagues through the medium of cyberspace and, at times, through email messages. During the time when I was unemployed, I could not find a suitable job

because I did not have the required educational qualifications. In trying to support my family I had to try to keep looking for work and so did not have the opportunity to continue with my education. I can only hope that one day I will be able to continue with my education and so find a better place in the world.

In the midst of my disappointments and when things were most difficult, through one of my friends and a former colleague who is himself an American citizen and who had worked with us in Afghanistan for a while - Richard Anderson - I came to know Br. Dunstan Robidoux, one of the monks of St. Anselm's Abbey in Washington. This led to some major changes in my own life and in the life of my family. Besides having a wife and two children, I also have a mother and sister whom I must support. Through the monks of St. Anselm's

Abbey, I owe the better life that we now have, so I wish that God give them a long and healthy life. From the abbey I have received financial aid, and this help gives me hope that some day soon we will be able to live in the United States, a country where we will not know fear, destitution, and the worry of chronic unemployment. Previously I was not at peace, troubled about why I should receive so much help as a consequence of the sacrifices that others were undertaking on my behalf so that I could provide for myself and my family. I wanted to find a way that would not cause additional hardships to those who were helping us.

After the fall of Kabul to the Taliban on August 15, 2021, as friends and helpers to the Americans we soon found ourselves to be in a

desperate, perilous situation. Along with close friends who had also worked with the American forces, we tried to flee the country by going to Kabul's international airport. There I saw people dying outside the airport's fences. When I tried to approach the soldiers to talk with them, they would raise their rifles at me and I would have to back away. I feared for my family's safety. At that time, we had a little daughter whom I would carry on my shoulders. Every time we failed to escape, we would return and hide in our family apartment before going once more to the airport to see if we could possibly escape. Nothing worked. With the departure of the last American forces, it became too dangerous for me to go out and appear in public, so I left our family apartment very rarely. If I did go out, it

would usually be late at night, after the sun had set. I would wrap my head in a cloth to hide my appearance and simply walk around in order to get some exercise.

One day, however, there were hard knocks at my door. I opened and Taliban rushed in. They ransacked the apartment, fortunately finding nothing incriminating. I had taken advice from a friend and had destroyed anything that linked me to the U.S. and to having any American friends. They broke our washing machine and took me away with my hands



*An Afghan border crossing*

bound. I do not know where they took me, for I was blindfolded, with my hands tied for two days. I was taken into a room and questioned. I told them that I was a journalism student. I was accused of helping the Americans, but I made no admissions. They began to beat me until I finally lost consciousness and fell to the floor. Then someone kicked me in the head, with the result that the hearing in my right ear has not been good ever since. Regaining consciousness, I was then taken to another room. I thought that I would die, for I could not walk and had to be dragged down a staircase. Then, unexpectedly, in the middle of all this my mother came and brought with her some older men from our apartment building. These men testified to the goodness of my character, so I was released, although only after being photographed and fingerprinted. I had been spared until perhaps another time. My mother and the men with her had saved me, for in my country the advice of elderly men is honored and respected.

I returned home but only very rarely went out. I would leave the apartment only when, once every two weeks, I would receive a gift of money from St. Anselm's Abbey. I would go to a bank that I had found which was connected to Western Union and tell them that the money was coming to me from a cousin overseas. It was not good to receive large amounts at any one time. This allowed us to pay the rent and to buy food to sustain us. My mother would do the food purchasing. There was a bakery downstairs at street level.

She would buy bread there but, when coming out with bread for us, she would always give some of the bread to little children who were outside begging for food. After the fall of Kabul, our landlord had fortunately reduced our rent from \$300 a month to \$200 a month. Hardly anyone could now pay high rent. Many people had nothing and were homeless and starving. The city was flooded with refugees.

Because I knew that our lives were in danger and that I could not go out and get a job of any kind, it was clear that we no longer had a future in Afghanistan, so we decided that we had to leave. The plan was to go first to a neighboring country and then hopefully, from there, on to the United States. I had been interviewed for an SIV visa a few months prior to the fall of Kabul in 2021 and had been waiting for my visa to come in the mail. Now, with St. Anselm's help, we were able to pay the fees and whatever extra payments were needed in order to obtain or update our passports and to get the visas that were needed if we were to go to a neighboring country. In Afghanistan, the government is not able to pay their employees any salaries, so at times one is forced to be somewhat generous to whoever is able to help us process and receive passports and visas. It was easy to get documents for the women in my family but, for me, the price kept climbing. It seemed that someone or other always needed to be paid, whether an Afghan official or an embassy official belonging to another government. At a certain point, I went



to the travel agency office and simply told them that they could take my visa and do what they wanted with it. I was no longer interested. Only then did I get my visa without further argument or negotiation.

The abbey covered all the expenses of our travel to leave the country. I was encouraged to travel by air but, in the end, decided to go overland, by road. It was less expensive this way. I knew a man who came to our apartment very early in the morning with his car and, after we paid him a fee, he drove us to the border, arriving at an early hour in the morning when the gates were just beginning to open. We opted to travel in two cars since we had decided to take whatever belongings we could carry with us. We packed everything in big bags.

A few days after obtaining the necessary visas, we started our journey. On our way to the border, we came to checkpoints manned by the Taliban and we were subjected to vigorous and frightening interrogations. At times, we were unfairly and illegally asked for money, and because of our precarious circumstances, we had to give what was being asked of us. I was always afraid that something would happen if we said the wrong thing or made the wrong move, but with the help of God and the savvy of the driver who was accompanying us, we were able to overcome the obstacles that we were encountering. We arrived at the border in the early morning and handed over our passports for exit stamps at one of the booths that was run by Taliban officials. This was another challenge

for us, for we wondered if we would be stopped at the border.

We crossed the border successfully but then encountered further trials of the same sort. It was as if we had never left Afghanistan, for the new border police subjected us to degrading, ugly treatment even though all of us had the documents needed for crossing the border. Once again we were unfairly and illegally asked for money, just as later on the highway police asked us for money on more than one occasion. We had one particularly frightening moment. We had engaged two taxis to take us en route, but I overheard the driver speak with another man over his phone about their plans to waylay and rob us. They did not know that I understood their language. I quickly jumped out of the taxi and took my family from the vehicle. There were times when the women in my family pleaded with me to go back and return to Kabul, but I was able to reassure them and so, late in the evening, we finally reached the hotel of our destination. We were safe, and the very next day my wife gave birth to our son. I think that she had somehow found a way to delay the birth of my son until we were safely outside of Afghanistan. When my newborn son was having difficulty eating and digesting his food, I was helped by a cousin who worked in government social services. Together we found a way to bring him back to health. He is fine now.

We are currently living all together in a two-room apartment in a city suburb. One room serves as both a kitchen and a dining

room; the other, a bedroom. We have a full bathroom with hot and cold running water and even enjoy a balcony. Again, the monks of St. Anselm's and some friends of the abbey have made this possible for us. One of those friends is a retired officer in the U.S. Navy; the other is a woman who is an especially close friend of the abbey. I do not know their names, but I was encouraged to move from a hotel into an apartment when I was told that the naval officer seriously recommended this. I decided that it would be prudent to accept his advice and so made the move.

I am now waiting to be able to begin our travels to the United States. I have had a second interview with a government official at the local American embassy with respect to my SIV visa application, and a second official whom I met there asked if I would be interested in living in Ohio. However, I am hoping to be able to settle in Utica, New York, for I know someone there

and that city is not too far from Washington. I am now making plans for the care of my mother and sister, who were not immediately able to come with me to the United States. I hope to find a way to fly them to another country where I have family who could take them in and care for them until they are able to get their own apartment.

In closing, I would like to say that my purpose in writing this article was not only to tell you about my problems and difficulties but, more importantly, to show that amid all the problems in today's world, human goodness still exists. Among us there are persons who feel the pain and suffering of others and who are moved to extend a loving and helping hand. To all of you now, as I look forward to the future, I owe my life and my love. I thank all of you and pray that God may bless you all.

EHSAN

## *The Rule—and Rules: What Ukrainian Nuns Can Teach Us*

Some months ago, shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, I posted on our monastery's bulletin board a photograph of a small community of Benedictine nuns in their Abbey of Mary Immaculate in the city of Zhytomyr, located in the eastern part of Ukraine. Because of the shelling all around them, the photo showed about six of the nuns huddled together with their Abbess Klara in the monastery's basement, where in very poor light they were praying the Liturgy of the Hours. I later heard that they had decided to leave

Zhytomyr and move to what was considered the safer city of Lviv in the western part of the country. From time to time I subsequently wondered how they were doing in that new setting. This past summer I had my question answered by a published reflection by one of the nuns, who did not give her name. The English translation, excerpted from a longer piece titled "A Nun of a Benedictine Abbey in Ukraine," appeared in the June 2023 issue of the *American Monastic Newsletter*. What that nun wrote is itself inspiring, but it also says



*Refugees having meal in Ukrainian nuns' convent*

something important about monastic life—and Christian life in general. What follows is drawn mostly from that article, as well as from a similar piece that appeared in the journal *Cross*.

Although it had become clear that it was no longer possible to remain in their convent in Zhytomyr, the nuns unanimously decided to remain in Ukraine. Their journey west revealed how their fellow Ukrainians spontaneously helped one another. There were huge traffic jams with so many people fleeing the Russian bombing in the east, but as the nuns and so many others waited in their cars, residents along the way would bring them ready-made food. The nun wrote: “Everyone began to give themselves and everything they had for others. It was an incredible experience, how the evil that had come upon us extracted the best virtues from ourselves.”

Arriving at the monastic building in Lviv to which they had planned to move one day anyway, they soon found that their contemplative life could not continue in the normal way. Hundreds of refugees came to their door seeking help, mostly women and children whose husbands would help them begin to get settled before returning to fight in the war. Many of the refugees had decided not to seek safety in one or another neighboring country, and with their homes destroyed by the bombing they had to rely on the hospitality of the nuns until some alternative might become possible. The following two examples illustrate

how the nuns met the needs of refugees.

One such family consisted of a father and mother and their two young children, one of them just an infant. Originally from the city of Kharkiv, their home there was hit by a Russian rocket early in the war, forcing them to leave. They went first to a friend’s house elsewhere in the city, but as the bombings continued they decided to travel west to Lviv, only to find that city so overcrowded that they could find no place to stay. Exasperated, they sat down on a bench near the train station, wondering where to go next and where to find warmer clothes for the baby. Suddenly and unexpectedly, one of the Benedictine nuns came up, identified herself as Sister Hieronima, and offered them shelter at the monastery. The nun later told them that she had not even planned to go to the train station that day but then felt “a kind of tug” telling her to go and see if anyone needed help. Once the family was at the monastery, the mother said, “We will remember that moment and be grateful for the rest of our lives. It was divine providence—a sign from God.”

Another day, when all the rooms at the monastery were full and no mattresses left, there was a knock at the door once the sun had set. Some women and children had been searching for a place to stay, happened to see the monastery, and asked for help. The nuns took them in and found some cardboard and sleeping bags that allowed them to sleep on the floor.

As the nun wrote, “We agreed to accept them in order not to kill their last hope, to assure them that God had not abandoned them, and to give them a sense of being embraced and cared for. They didn’t ask for good conditions. They were just looking for answers in their despair, looking for acceptance.”

In these and other refugees, the nuns saw in them a reflection of the horrors of war. One of the nuns said: “Their eyes had seen atrocities, shelling, and enemy armored personnel carriers in front of them. Some of them escaped through evacuation corridors, some had gone through the hell of Mariupol. Many of them we could touch as relics of the cross: living icons, living icons of the Crucified.”

What their life is like today is not at all what the nuns had expected when they made their monastic profession many years before. They continue their regular schedule of common prayer and have actually increased the hours for adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, but with all the refugees living among them, their monastery has become noisy and their life hectic. Refugees still knock on the door at all hours, and one of the nuns’ rooms has been turned into a playroom for twenty children. During the feast of the Annunciation they all celebrated the wedding of an elderly couple from Zhytomyr, while a young couple from Kharkiv was preparing for the sacraments of reconciliation and matrimony. When asked how all this fits in with a contemplative way of life, with its traditional emphasis on silence and

a degree of withdrawal from the rest of society, Abbess Klara gave a ready response: “This is how our community reads the signs of the times, and this is how we envision our service now.”

Not surprisingly, the nuns understand what they are doing as part of the centuries-long tradition of Benedictine hospitality. One nun wrote: “In St. Benedict’s vision, the monastery is the House of God—a place of acceptance, where everyone can find everything they need, find hope in a good God.” But even though the nuns may not go farther than that in explaining how they now live, it seems clear to me that their main guide is not the Rule of St. Benedict but rather the Gospel. After all, St. Benedict’s Rule expressly states that the monks are not to get too involved with guests; instead, on meeting one the monk should “ask for a blessing and continue on his way, explaining that he is not allowed to speak with a guest” (RB 53.24). That injunction may not be literally followed in many, even most, monasteries today, but in almost all Benedictine houses there remains a degree of separation much greater than what the nuns in Lviv are experiencing. If one were to ask how those nuns understand the rightness of their current way of life, the answer would best be found in the Gospels, especially the passage where Jesus says that in feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, and welcoming the stranger one is simultaneously serving him: “Whatever you did for one of these least brethren of mine, that you did for me” (Matt. 25:35-40).



In this connection, it is important to note that the earliest monastic legislators—St. Pachomius in Egypt, St. Basil in Asia Minor, and St. Augustine in North Africa—*never* called their legislation “a rule.” For them there was *only one rule*, the Scriptures. The legislation they wrote was understood to be ways of applying that one rule to particular circumstances. It is understandable that later legislators, including

St. Benedict of course, did refer to their works as “rules” (*regulae*), but even they knew that their compositions could never be placed on a par with Scripture, above all the Gospels. The Benedictine nuns in Lviv forcefully remind us of this hierarchy.

JAMES WISEMAN, OSB

## *Thoughts for a New Priest—and for You*

*Though this homily was composed as a gift for Father Ignacio at his first mass on May 7, 2023, I wanted an audience which was not just “listening in.” I wanted to say something worthwhile as a tribute to the dignity of each person present. Great moments, rites of passage, are not exclusively experienced by the person “up front.”*

Well, well, here we are. Father Ignacio is thinking, “At last: they held me back so long.” What shall *I* say? The generic and congratulatory? Or specific wishes for this specific priest? I won’t speak like yesterday’s bishop, but brother to brother. Unlike adoring supporters who do not live with you, a brother will tell it like it is. He won’t sugar-coat; he will say things you may not want anyone to hear. Having once had an explosive encounter with you, surviving it (barely), and never wanting to experience it again, I had to back off, accepting that, as brothers, we are stuck with each other. I hope to speak also as a *sister* might. Sadly, the women in your life are not given voices in these

official events. So, informally, and in their name, I hope to channel Our Lady, Seat of Wisdom, and Mary Magdalene, apostle to the apostles. Think about those subversive titles!

Globally, this is a royal weekend. King Charles and Queen Camilla were crowned yesterday, and, loving English church music, I did not miss a minute. But, for us, yesterday at the basilica was more important than the service at Westminster Abbey. Americans historically oppose monarchy; we are a republic. Yet today’s reading, a paschal-themed reading for Easter season, announces that you are “a royal priesthood, propelled from darkness into marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). **You** are a royal

priesthood. My wishes, therefore, are not reserved for the newest member of an ecclesial elite, but for the people of God, the people, all people of good will, especially those listening now, in this place. I hope they are, by extension, wishes for the people of God throughout the world. In a strange way I intend them for every human on earth. Every human is precious to the heart of God. Preach inclusively and lovingly, Father Ignacio, not harshly or rejectingly. Build bridges to the excluded.

In addition to the people at your ordination, there were those who could not come. And there were the invisible. Princess Diana, who might have been queen (though I read the sad story of the king's first marriage as being without villains), was an invisible and benignant spirit in London yesterday. So too, invisibly present in this room are Aidan, Christopher, and Boniface. They modeled monastic faithfulness for you. Invisibly present are also bright-faced Gingi Enzel and ebullient Michelle Arene, fellow-faculty at the Abbey School. From in the house, how could we forget receptionist Jeanette Carter, always edgy but uniquely authentic. Let these and other women-mentors make you gentle.

Yesterday's congregation was as big as Texas! There was concern in some corners of the school staff that it would be bigger. There was enough barbecue to feed Texas, and enough chairs for everyone to sit down (in shifts). The meal was as lavish as the miracle of

loaves and fishes. **But**, here I will caution you about your love of bigness, the big sound, the grand gesture. Perhaps quantity has its place. But you are a priest for everyone, whether they all sit up and notice you—or not.

We spoke for “everyone” yesterday when the congregation said, “He is worthy; he is worthy.” That was a gamble, a big risk. We stuck our necks out for you, Ignacio. We did so not for ourselves, as if your priesthood means to ease the clergy shortage or enlarge the abbey's homily roster. Your priesthood is for the poor, and the meek who seem not to inherit the earth; your priesthood is for the uninterested, the broken, and the bitter.

Your priesthood is for every single group mentioned in the great Bidding Prayer of Good Friday. It intercedes for, and is present to, those outside our clubhouse, the Jewish people, those faithful to Islam, Hindus and Buddhists, those of other faiths which we do not understand too well, those who do not, cannot, believe in God. They do not need converting; they deserve respect and your willingness to listen. They have something **you** need, Father Ignacio. They will enlarge **your** soul. Becoming a priest is not getting to the top of the pyramid, nor being the ultimate receiver in the food chain. To connect earth with heaven, as priests should do, you must be able to touch the smelly feet at the bottom of the pyramid. As Jesus did, in real life, and not as a liturgical gesture.



*Fr. Ignacio being ordained a priest*

Your desires are big as Texas. This ideal brought you to the monastery, and God is lavish. That is true, but not a complete statement. A priest must have brains too! Listen carefully. I do not mean high IQ or academic degrees. Yes, St Anselm's was founded to be elite and academic, a theological think-tank. We can respect that heritage without imitating

it. Institutions shift, transmute, morph, as ours has. We are no longer an intellectual hothouse. But we need to use our brains, or impulse will run us amok. Father Peter has been heard to say, "Have some sense. Use your head. How many times have I *told* you?" Students hear these words. But perhaps you have heard them in the abbey, Ignacio? Our obtuseness sometimes requires shock-treatment, Father Peter's plain-speaking.

Saint Benedict's seven steps of humility are shock treatments too. They sound masochistic and psychologically unsound. "Regard yourself as inferior to and less worthy than everyone else." How distasteful and psychologically unsound. I would transmute the words to say, "Use your head to become competent and feel your worth. But do so honestly, not inflatedly." A more pertinent step of humility from Benedict might be, "Do not seek to be called holy before you are holy." Even when you are holy, does the praise belong to you? Or might it inspire you to "rise, shine, and give **God** the glory?" (I can hear this chorus from your guitar.) Have some sense, Ignacio. Use your head. Be quiet for once. Allow space for humility. If you are quiet, you become humble! Don't talk too much. Speak little, says Benedict.

Honor your non-priestly brothers, all your sisters, and the ordinary people. Listen to them before you hold forth. Listen to your brother from Hawaii, our newest member, and best beloved. The fellow in big glasses and

Groucho mustache will make you laugh. Cruel, vulgar laughter is forbidden by Saint Benedict, but not Brother Cyprian's laughter, bringing joy to the sterile. Listen to the lady from Guyana in her marimba heels and colorful headdress. (On Good Friday the headdress was bright purple and hit the ceiling.) In Sunday best, Rowena can change a geri-diaper without getting smudged. Watch Rowena and Brother Cyprian, how modestly they serve, not calling attention to themselves, putting us at ease. They neither lecture nor show off. Priesthood is presence. Being present (in stillness), not telling people what to do. Being there, being with, in the moment, is the best present of all. It is sacramental presence, like the silence of Christ in the sacrament.

Father Ignacio, today is a new beginning. Father Peter is also known to say, "Every day: a new beginning." Do not use that as an excuse to gloss over yesterday's outrages. Do not blow up your bridges. A good bridge takes time. Build slowly and intentionally. Think about endings, but do not "make them happen." Benedict is wise to say, "Keep death daily before your eyes." That does not need a skull on your desk, but an awareness of life's preciousness.

One of my favorite things is a list called *Five Regrets of the Dying*. The statements show me what to wish for, pray for, work toward. The regrets were recorded by a palliative care-giver, a helper for the elderly, like Cyprian or Rowena. Bronnie Ware is from Australia, which is **almost** as big as Texas. She is your age, Ignacio, your soul-sister, your Queen Camilla. Here is what

the dying say. Listen to what they wish they had done differently.

- Regret one. I wish I'd been true to myself, and not done what others expected of me.
- Regret two. I wish I'd shown my feelings, taking time to know what they really were.
- Regret three. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.
- Regret four. I wish I had let myself be happier.
- Regret five. I wish I hadn't worked so hard.

Where do I find myself on the list? For many years I had Regret Four. I wish I had let myself be happier. This was true for me from age 15 to almost 50, thirty-five years. I was not miserable **all** the time. But things were not right inside. Entering the monastery was a step in the right direction, but not a solution. Eventually I became a priest, and then, about ten years later (it does not happen instantly, Ignacio; you have to wait for it), I began to feel like the person I wanted to be. It happened, unawares, by being with people as their priest. Listening, learning, letting their goodness make me humble. With them, I did not feel inferior or worthless: I felt happy, by being exactly where I was meant to be.

I may have gotten it all wrong, Father Ignacio. But I wonder if you try to do too much, too fast, in too many places, and all at the same time? Will you have regret five, "I wish I hadn't worked so hard?" The earth will keep turning on its axis when you do not accept every priestly invitation that comes your way.

Your enthusiasm inspires us. But from you we want *quality*, not your quantity. Remember your devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. From that precious box Jesus goes *nowhere*, and (in words) says *nothing*. Perhaps he has something to teach you? If I am wrong, you will certainly tell me so. But, to use Father Peter's words, I am asking you: "Use your head; have some sense."

Perhaps I am saying what you already know? That being present, being tuned-in and

connected, is the highest goal for any authentic human life. A royal life, an ordinary life, a priestly life: we wish you to have all three. God bless you, Ignacio, on the precious journey you here begin. God bless all the priestly people, near and far, visible and invisible, who support you.

GABRIEL MYERS, OSB

## *Visiting the Holy Land: Reflections*

At the request of Fr. Abbot, I am writing a few reflections about a recent visit I made to the Holy Land. From June 19 to July 5, I spent six days each in both Jordan and Israel: first some days in Jordan, then six days in Israel, and finally back to Jordan. A close friend, Richard Anderson, made this possible both financially and otherwise. Rick is posted at the US Embassy in Amman as the US military advisor to the Jordanian forces, a job comparable to the mandate once given to T. E. Lawrence in his day. A large apartment with three bedrooms and four bathrooms hosted a gathering of various friends: Roland Krismer from Austria and Charles Ferris and Timothy Vikery from Canada. From Bismarck, North Dakota,

David and Christine Fleischacker joined us in Jerusalem for seven nights at the German hospice in that city, administered by the Sisters of St. Charles. Delightful time with the Sisters. Mass every morning in German. For most of us, it was our first pilgrimage to the sacred places in the Holy Land, although Charles Ferris had visited Jerusalem years ago to attend a human rights conference and Tim Vickery had been there for advanced theological studies.

Between Israel and Jordan differences abound, even though they had once formed one region and one people. All, Semites. In Jerusalem and environs, we walked where Our Lord had once walked. More than that, we entered into the historicalness of our religion





*Br. Dunstan and friends at St. Mary's Syrian Orthodox church in Bethlehem*

by encountering old Israel and the call of a Chosen People whose mission was to be a beacon of light for all nations and peoples, to reveal realities that order our souls toward a transcendence that surpasses all known things, terminating in a God who is not a tribal God but rather “the God of all gods” (to employ a terminology which is hopefully not too misleading or puzzling). As we speak about God whom Moses had experienced, God is simply the source of being, the one whose name in English translates as “I am”: “Tell them that ‘I am’ has sent you”! Subsequently a more

radical form of companionship was given in Christ who, as God incarnate, enters our world of space and time to make his abode among us. Behold the humility of Christ’s humanity, the awesomeness of this humanity, the divinity of this same humanity which is unexpectedly revealed to us and points to a different concept and notion of God: God not only as ruler, king, and governor but also God as our companion, host, and suffering servant. Solidarity. The transcendence exists within an immanent order of things, even as this same immanence points to a participative form of transcendence. Each adds to and valorizes the other.

In other words, to use a technical definition: primary causality (the primary causality of God) in its greatness and sway more fully presents itself through the goodness and the nobility of a created form of causality that exists as secondary causality. Conversely, this secondary causality lives and breathes through the primary causality of God. A better understanding of one necessarily points to the other and vice versa. The primary causality should not and cannot be understood as taking away from the effectiveness of the secondary causality, while conversely the secondary causality cannot be understood as detracting from the potency of the primary causality. In words that come to us from St. Paul, “It is when I am weak that I am strong.” From failure comes success. Those who fail, succeed. From death comes life; from defeat, victory; from privation, being. If the created order of things

has come to be from nothing, then from a kindred kind of nothingness we have salvation and redemption.

In the Holy Land, on both sides of the river Jordan, concrete examples point to instances of compactness and density that belong to the religious history of both the old and new Israel. To cite only one example, if we walk up to Mount Zion by Dormition Abbey (an adjoining Benedictine foundation), another building presents itself. A lower chamber room or building in stone is topped or “transcended” by an upper chamber room. At the ground level, the tomb of King David is visited and venerated by pious, faithful Jews. Above it, however, an Upper Room is frequented by Christians (and others), for it is there that Christ’s disciples are said to have met. The Last Supper was celebrated there. After his resurrection, Christ met there with his apostles and Our Lady. There, too, all received the gift of the Holy Spirit and, in the same chamber a few years later, Our Lady fell asleep as she passed into the timelessness of eternity. As she, like her Son, was without sin, she could not experience the finality of death in all of its blows, reach, and dimensions. Death could not have any kind of lasting effect or hold on her. Hence, in the compactness and density of that one place, so much is brought together. So much occurred there, tempting us to move into a greater silence and, in its wake, to an obedience that exists as a happy acceptance and acquiescence. All is gift or, in other words, the gift exists as a fundament or grounding reality

since, simply by its reception, our own activities and operations can begin to enjoy a fruitfulness and a resonance that they would otherwise not have.

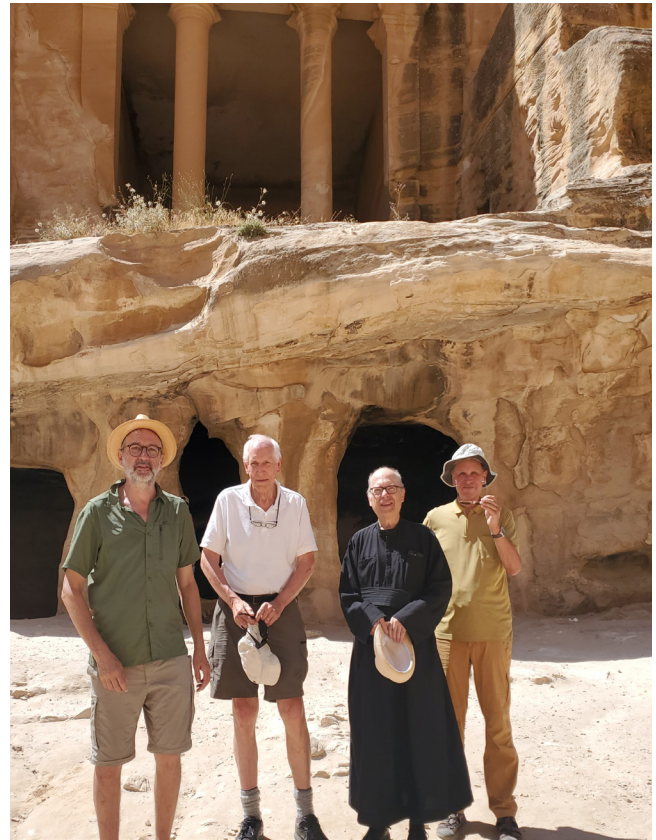
An accompanying order of insights arises from the particulars of a given religious tradition, revealing how religion and belief casts a kind of light (or shadow) on our understanding of many different things: influencing, constituting, and reordering the order of our human world. An apt or right religion makes all the difference as we try to distinguish between different peoples and cultures and try to trace the lines of a trajectory that raises a crucial question: Is our human reason ultimately a function of our faith and of the kind of faith which we could possibly have or possibly move towards? If certain things are to be understood in a way that can begin to make sense, is some kind of faith needed or, more controversially, is the solution an enlarged or different kind of faith? It can be argued that, somewhere, in each of us, a certain kind or type of faith exists that we might not too well understand or be able entirely to rationalize. Hence, our need at times for the kind of radical change which belongs to conversion or to a number of conversions that can occur along the way, conversions that we cannot very well imagine or put into words.

In the Holy Land, spirit and flesh exist together in different combinations that jar and shift with each other. If eternal realities exist within determinations of space and time, so much depends on the adoption of a given religious perspective. In terms of ends, for Christians the ultimate goal is a heavenly Jerusalem, but for Jews the goal is a Jerusalem that does not appear to be lacking in

material determinations. However, in the context of our day and as an unending source of tension, Jerusalem's core or center, the Temple Mount, is out of reach for the Jews because of the practice and belief that belong to the world and religion of Islam. The beliefs—whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim—exist as a kind of cause; the religions exist as a kind of effect, although many persons reject this distinction because they do not want to accept the truth that is claimed by the affirmation of this type of distinction.

In Jordan, Islam is dominant. Driving in from the airport, many mosques come into view. When out in public, walking or sitting somewhere, loudspeakers sound the calls for prayer. As we drove south to visit Petra and later the deserts of Wadi Rum, our Jordanian driver spoke to me about the importance of prayer at different times of the day, for without a sense of God's abiding presence our days would lack sense and meaning, would be empty. I asked about a kind of rosary that he was usually wearing around his left hand. While driving us, he would always have this rosary about his hand at the wheel. I asked him if set prayers existed but received an answer that I was not able to understand. Later, I happened to come down from my room at the Cleopatra Hotel in Wadi Musa, and in a corner our driver and the young hotel clerk were beginning to kneel to say their prayers, facing a wall. During an evening meal at a restaurant, prayers were sounding from a nearby minaret. Around us, no one seemed to flinch. We found ourselves within a world where, more than in our own world, religion and the obligations that belong to religious practice boldly

presented themselves to us and, relatively speaking, are taken more seriously. Complementary insights come to us from the last chapter of Hilaire Belloc's *History of the Crusades*, where he wrote that in the West we have a religion that few practice and for which even fewer would be willing to die. But in the Middle East or in Islamic countries elsewhere, a different attitude prevails, so important and necessary



*Br. Dunstan and three friends before ancient ruins at Petra, Jordan*

f is the daily regime of religious observance. Within Islam, the liturgical practice of daily prayers acts as a kind of first principle, giving form to a certain type of society. The contrast encourages us to think about the situation of our own faith and religion and how we are—or are not—observing it. What is the first principle that can properly be said to belong to it? For us Catholics, is it not the primacy of the Mass and the kind of drama that is the Mass?

Very much to the point is a line of reflection that first emerged around the eighth century and that, among Catholic theologians, endured into the nineteenth: the claim that Islam lacks a proper supernatural origin. However, one might very well say that it enjoys supernatural support and assistance, for there exists no better scourge for Christians for their failing to live up to the demands and the requirements of their own faith, a faith that they claim to believe and to profess.

Totally different from the situation in Jordan is what finds in Israel, where it is Judaism that dominates a scene that jars with and challenges both Christian and Islamic claims. Walk about Jerusalem. Enter the Old City. Such and such a quarter belongs to this or that group. Armed military personnel constantly patrol or watch from protected vantage points. Passing into the square opposite the Western Wall (also called the “Wailing Wall”) requires security checks that resemble the checks common at airports. Walking down a staircase in my first and only visit, shouting and scuffling were erupting behind me. A younger man was shouting and pushing an armed guard

who was himself also young. The two keep shoving each other. Instinctively, I backed away, down the steps, trying to retreat, taking distance. Mercifully, calm returned. No further escalation. The man who had been shoving the attendant security guard did not appear to be a Palestinian, did not look too dangerous.

A tension prevails in Jerusalem which seems not to exist in Tel Aviv (or so I was told). Before arriving in Israel and while there, I had been told many troubling stories. I had been warned that I could be spit on for wearing my black Benedictine habit. Coming from some of the orthodox Jews, this type of behavior does unfortunately exist. To be on the safe side, I had accordingly brought three changes of habit with me. Scout’s motto: Be prepared! Fortunately nothing happened, and throughout my days in Israel I experienced only kindness and courtesy. To my discredit, however, whenever I did see any orthodox Jews, I tried to shy away from them. Better to be out of range. Be prepared! This experience of fear and apprehension accordingly raised questions: What are the likely causes? What are the possible solutions? What is the best solution? If theological positions and beliefs exist within the order of Zionist premises, can we, as Catholics, also operate from our own religious perspective? Do we not have our own premises? What should be our response if, by “Christian” and “Catholic,” we are referring to a faith that we claim to hold and believe? How does our faith offer an adequately proper response? Conversely, if one’s faith is Orthodox or Protestant, would some other kind of



response be more adequate? The tensions that exist are obviously rooted in differences of belief and creed. Not to be omitted is the way differences in theological understanding play their own supplementary role. Each relies or feeds off the other. Where, then, to find a solution? What is the right approach? Is there a solution that can transcend religious differences and bring healing, reconcile opinions, and find new insights? Where to go, however if, within the order of religion and belief no other higher order of meaning and being exists? In order to look for a higher viewpoint or move toward it, one would have to work from within a dialectic that somehow exists within the faith and practice of religion. We would want to move toward a more comprehensive, larger viewpoint and grow in our love and in our care for others.

Somewhat inadequately and abruptly, I would like to end with a little story. A few weeks ago, on a Sunday morning here at the abbey, I met a young Palestinian man who had been raised a Muslim. He happened to have an uncle who had emigrated to Brazil some years ago and, in the course of his adjustment there, became a Catholic. The uncle was later visiting his family back in the Israeli-occupied West

Bank and, in the presence of his nephew, made some disparaging remarks about the Prophet Mohammed.

This naturally maddened his younger nephew who, in order to understand the weaknesses, fallacies, and stupidities of the Christian position, began to read about Christian things. He encountered bits and pieces that came to him from various Gospel narratives, including a passage that said that we should “love our enemies.” Wow! Why would anybody want to do this? He was so struck by this that he proceeded to read the entire Gospel in order to understand the surrounding context. In the end, he found that he was changing from within, undergoing a conversion, a radical change. He wanted to become a Christian and so went to a nearby Catholic church. On asking to be received into the Church, he was driven out by the priest in charge. Too risky to receive a Muslim. Danger. Failing to be received into the Catholic Church, he chanced to meet one or more Protestants and they willingly accepted him. He became a Protestant Christian.

DUNSTAN ROBIDOUX, OSB



## *Eucharistic Revival*

“Catholics are making a really ridiculous mistake.” So writes Peter Kreeft in *Catholics and Protestants: What Can We Learn from Each Other?* But a mistake about what, exactly? About the Eucharist. Kreeft elaborates further: “If Protestants are right, then Catholics are making a really ridiculous mistake. Catholics are bowing to bread and worshipping wine, thinking it is literally Jesus Christ. That is not only idolatry—that is insanity.” Many Christians think Catholics are making such a ridiculous mistake. As the Catholic Church in America finds itself in a Eucharistic Revival culminating in a National Eucharistic Congress to be held in Indianapolis in July, 2024, it is beneficial to examine some of the biblical roots for the Church’s understanding that Jesus Christ is truly present—body, blood, soul and divinity—in the Eucharist.

The first foundational biblical text for the Eucharist is in Genesis 14, when Abram (who later became Abraham) met the King of Salem: “*And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) And he blessed him and said, ‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!’ And Abram gave him a tenth of everything*” (Genesis 14:18-19). Here, eighteen centuries before the birth of Christ, a priestly king used bread and

wine as an offering to God. At the Last Supper, Jesus will make a similar offering and transform bread and wine into His body and blood.

The next biblical foundation for the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is in the Book of Exodus, where we read: “*Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it*” (Exodus 12:7-8). Here, we see God’s prescription for the Israelites to protect themselves from the tenth plague. It was not enough that the slaughtered lamb’s blood would be on the doorposts; they had to eat the flesh of the lamb in obedience to God’s command and to remain in covenant fellowship. Here, reference to eating is clear—it is physical, not spiritual. Like the bread and wine offered by Melchizedek in Genesis 14, the paschal lamb from Exodus 12 also prefigures Jesus.

At Our Lord’s baptism we see a direct reference when John the Baptist cries out: “*Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.*” In the original Greek, we see a present active participle: *taking away*, which implies an ongoing action by the Lamb of God more than the present active verb “takes” that the ESV translators use. Consequently, a literal translation of “God’s clear Word” is “*Behold the lamb of God, the one taking away the sin of*

*the world*” (John 1:29). It is not a stretch to imagine that the faithful and observant Jews who wanted John to prepare them for the coming Messiah would have understood the concept of the “lamb of God,” but it might have struck them as odd to hear this term referring to a man. This is all in preparation for what happens the night before Jesus’ Passion and the following day when he goes to the Cross.

The most direct reference by Jesus that *the Eucharist is his real flesh and blood* is in the Bread of Life discourse of John 6. The chapter begins when *the Passover feast was at hand* (John 6:4) and Jesus feeds five thousand people. The next day, the crowds want more from Jesus, who says to them, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal*” (John 6:26-27). When the crowd asks Jesus what works of God they must do *for the food that endures to eternal life*, Jesus responds, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (John 6:29).

Jesus goes on to say that *he is the Bread of Life*, and all who come to him shall never hunger and all who believe him will never thirst (John 6:35). Right before them is the Incarnate Son of God who miraculously feeds them, and they still would not yet believe (John 6:36). Jesus pushes the crowd to faith when he says that he is the living bread come down from heaven. Jesus continues: *If anyone eats of this*

*bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh* (John 6:51) which we must eat. However, not all were convinced:

*The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat? So, Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat [phagein] the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds [trogon] on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds [trogon] on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds [trogon] on me, he also will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds [trogon] on this bread will live forever. (John 6:52-58)*

Notice the verb change from “eat” to “feeds,” which the ESV Bible translators made because they wanted to have “an ‘essentially literal’ translation that seeks as far as possible to reproduce the precise wording of the original text. Its emphasis is on ‘word-for-word’ correspondence.” A literal translation of John 6:54 is the following: “Amen I say to you, if you shall not have eaten the flesh of the Son of Man nor drunk his blood, you do not have life

in you.” John here uses an aorist subjunctive verb preceded by a negating adverb, meaning: “*If you shall not have eaten.*” The aorist subjunctive is “an action without history or continuation. A ‘pure form.’ A definite outcome that will happen as a result of another stated action.” In this case, because of the negating adverb, Jesus is saying that we will not have eternal life if we have not been eating his flesh and drinking his blood.

Additionally, John uses two different Greek verbs, *phagein* and *trogon*, the latter of which is a specific verb that only has six occurrences in the entire New Testament. The Liddell and Scott Greek lexicon defines the verb *trogon* as: “*to gnaw, chew; of men, to eat raw vegetables, fruit, etc.; opposed to eating dressed food.*” The BDAG English-Greek Lexicon is even more specific: “*gnaw, nibble, munch, eat (audibly).*” as in making a sound when biting into an apple or a raw carrot. This verb is intentionally selected by John to emphasize the physicality of the eating described by Jesus.

For John Calvin and his Protestant intellectual descendants, Jesus is only speaking spiritually, but the Gospel writer uses a different verb and a different tense to emphasize the physical sense—switching from a negated aorist subjunctive verb (“shall not have eaten”) to a present active participle (“gnawing, munching, crunching”). Here, the original Greek describes an *ongoing* action that Jesus says must happen, which is why the Church encourages daily communion. Calvin’s spiritual interpretation says that *to read the Word of God*

*is to metaphorically feed on Jesus’ flesh*, and that would be true—God’s written Word does feed our intellects, but not our souls. To feed our souls, Jesus is saying that we must do more—we must be gnawing, munching, chewing on his flesh to be in communion with Him.

“*This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?*” (John 6:60) is how many of Christ’s disciples respond. Rather than softening his position or indicating that he was only speaking symbolically, Jesus replies, “*Do you take offense at this?*” (John 6:65). The following verse reads, “*After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.*” Jesus did not call them back. If what Calvin says is true, Jesus should have said, “Wait, wait, hold on—I am only speaking symbolically here! Don’t you know a metaphor when you hear one?” No, Jesus let them walk away. Jesus then asks if Peter, too, would leave, to which the first pope answered, “*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life*” (John 6:68).

Peter’s response remains a provocation for us. Do we cling to Our Lord and to His Word? In this case, do we cultivate a truly biblical understanding of Christ’s Real Presence in the Eucharist? Do we respond with gratitude and inspire others to recognize the reality of Christ’s presence, not just a historical event that we are preparing to mark at Christmas but a present reality in every tabernacle throughout the world? Catholics have chosen to remain with Our Lord, to stay faithful to *the words of eternal life*, the authentic and consistent understanding of the Eucharist presented in the Bible. Some of

our brothers and sisters, like some of the disciples, have sadly walked away over this teaching, separating themselves from the greatest gift of union with Christ in the Most Blessed Sacrament. Peter Kreeft writes of the ramifications of the Protestant denial of Jesus' Real Presence: "If Catholics are right, then Protestants are missing out on the most real, total, perfect union with Christ that is possible in this life, a gift He Himself left to us as His most precious gift of all: Himself, in person, really and fully and truly and completely present, Body and Blood, soul and divinity, hiding beneath the appearances of the Eucharistic bread and wine."

At the conclusion of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus promised that he would always be with us, and he is in so many ways: in the poor, in the Scriptures, in the breaking of the bread, in the prayers, in those who are hungry, thirsty and in

prison, and in those needing our help, but most precisely and sacramentally in the Eucharist. On this side of heaven, the Eucharist is how we are to remain in covenantal fellowship with Christ—in a literal and not only spiritual communion with Him. Recognizing the clear biblical foundation for Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist, prefigured in the Old Testament and explicitly announced by Christ Himself, we are able to proclaim that Christ was, is now, and will be forever Emmanuel, "God with us." He offers us at every Mass His very Body and Blood so that we have hope of heaven. Now, more than ever, we must pray as Jesus does so that the world might believe in Him whom God has sent for our salvation.

IGNACIO GONZALEZ, OSB

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