

Living in a “Monastery Beyond Walls”

Among the many groups worldwide that have come to appreciate the Benedictine way of life are six that meet either weekly or bimonthly in the vicinity of Washington, DC and Annapolis, Maryland. They are known by such names as “Benedictine Community,” “Benedictine Group,” and “Life in Balance.” In addition to those regular meetings, often held in local Episcopal or Lutheran churches, they come to St Anselm’s for their annual retreat. We are pleased to offer them hospitality for those retreats as well as for a seminar on the sayings of the Desert Fathers that a smaller group attends more frequently. A longtime member of one of these groups is Lynn Thonnard, who has written the following article about what this kind of community means to all of them.

For centuries, monastery bells around the world have signaled the rhythms of spiritual life and practical living that order monastic life. And beyond the walls of every monastery, neighboring farmers, busy villagers, weary travelers, and grateful pilgrims have heard a clarion call to these reconciling rhythms.

So it is with our Benedictine community, an ecumenical network of individuals who gather regularly among six groups in Washington, DC, Northern Virginia and Maryland. In this “monastery beyond walls” we seek to discover the balance and harmony of cloistered community right in our own environments: family, the workplace, and daily life in a complex world. We learn to employ the ancient wisdom and practices of Benedictine spirituality, slowly displacing a fragmented existence with one that is more centered and whole.

We attempt to integrate the rhythms of prayer, study, renewal, work, and hospitality throughout our lives in ways that equip us to serve the world. We pray and listen for the divine in our midst and share and explore spiritual wisdom. We rest our bodies and spirit, we thoughtfully engage our work in the world, and joyfully welcome and encourage those along our journey. We try to participate in the sacred in every moment: doing the dishes, shuttling the kids to school, working on a PowerPoint for an office presentation, serving at the homeless shelter, entertaining friends and family, sitting in traffic, shopping for groceries, putting the kids to bed.

In our regular gatherings we study the Rule, engage in silent prayer or lectio divina, and welcome the presence of the Spirit. We also practice hospitality and intentional listening. Ultimately, we are engaged in a process of rinsing ourselves with Benedictine rhythms until—God willing—we are transformed by them.

What this community provides, and its meaning, differs from participant to participant. However, each of us is slowly and deliberately being changed through

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*New linden tree in the cloister garth decorated in a late snowfall
(brick wall of the north wing in the background)*

an intentional focus on St Benedict. The support among one another for a way of thinking and life that directly contradicts our Hollywood and media-based culture is

critical. Most participants find it difficult (even impossible) to sustain this kind of focus on their own, without the help of others on a similar journey. The result is that a rather lonely trajectory can be replaced with companionship that holds us fast to the Benedictine values we attempt to espouse. Here are some of our participants speaking in their own words about what this community means to them:

"I've read about St. Benedict's Rule and am becoming aware of how crazily I juggle various aspects of my day, often feeling like I haven't accomplished enough. I'm slowly noticing changes that have positively affected my attitudes and actions. Benedict's thoughts on hospitality are encouraging me to lovingly give more of myself to household chores, volunteer activities, etc. This shift in attitude transforms previously selfish or resentful feelings."

"Knowledge comes so easily in our day and age, but wisdom? A community that guides, supports and nurtures the body, mind and soul in this type of lifestyle is invaluable."

"This is very timely as our lives today are out of balance. The Benedictine way offers community while exploring that balance. There is such a need for healing and peace, both individually and within our families and communities. I was just talking with my son, who has young children and a busy career. He was expressing the need for balance and the need to take the time to find God and not lose himself in the extremely busy life he has."

"To my great joy, this has opened the door for me to loving relationships across multiple generations in a faith context."

"I just returned from a week in Guatemala with our church's youth ministry. One of the most interesting insights of the young folks was that life in the Mayan community we visited has a radically different focus than our lives here: the pace is much slower; the focus is more frequently on people, on community, and on the evidence of God's action in people's lives; and the active care for others, translated into solid actions, is palpable. The Community, grounded in a structure based on Benedictine spirituality, appears to be expanding my own sense of those different priorities and ways to align myself with them. We so clearly are in need of this deeply humane approach that mitigates against the real damages our stress-plagued lives inflict on us, body and soul. The evidence of our collective need is pretty compelling."

"I am drawn to the Community because the Rule and the way of Benedict are so beautiful. As I learn more, I realize how good it is to journey with others who are drawn towards a life rooted in Scripture and the life of Christ. I love the fact that Jesus models for us the way of listening to God, and of being attentive to God and to others in the world. It is a call that says "open wide your heart." It is a call to a loving, gentle, peaceful way of living. In community we encourage each other as we respond to our loving, holy God's invitation to a deeper way of living."

We feel so blessed by the monks of St Anselm's Abbey! We appreciate how their prayers regularly sustain our world, and we are enormously grateful to have held our annual retreats at the abbey over the past several years. Being present on the abbey grounds, and especially participating in the hours with the brothers, is such a special and meaningful experience for all. It is with gratitude we say: THANK YOU!

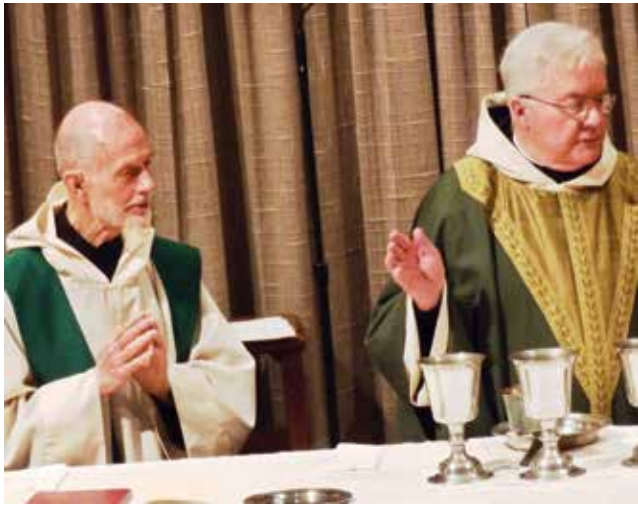
LYNN THONNARD

Golden Anniversaries of Ordination

On the evening of Saturday, February 14 we celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the priestly ordinations of our former superior, Abbot Aidan Shea, of our claustral prior, Fr Michael Hall, and of our vocation director and housemaster, Fr Christopher Wyvill. The latter two were ordained on February 14, 1965 at the Shrine of the Sacred Heart here in Washington along with Fr Mark Sheridan, who has since transferred his stability to Dormition Abbey in Israel, while Abbot Aidan had been ordained four days earlier in Boston so that his elderly mother would be able to attend the ceremony.

At our anniversary celebration, Fr Michael was principal celebrant and homilist at an evening mass that included the psalmody for vespers. In his homily, he reflected first on the gospel of the day, next on the changing





Fathers Christopher and Michael at the altar



Abbots Aidan and James

understandings of monastic priesthood from the time of St Benedict up to the era initiated by the Second Vatican Council, and lastly on his own vocation, which was nurtured by his experiences as a student in our school in the mid-1950s. He noted that whereas St Benedict himself was cautious about having monks ordained lest they arrogantly place themselves above the other members of the community, by the late medieval period the pendulum had swung so far in the other direction that it came to be assumed that all choir monks would either be priests or be studying for ordination. Vatican II's call for religious communities to return to the spirit of their founders has helped restore a more balanced perspective on monastic priesthood.

After communion, there were three brief talks. Abbot James recalled the various ways in which the three jubilarians have exercised their priestly ministry, not only through thoughtful homilies at our conventual masses but also in ministries outside the monastery itself, such as the many retreats Abbot Aidan has conducted for communities across the country, the regular weekend assistance that Fr Michael has provided in local parishes

and, more recently, his service as chaplain in our school, and Fr Christopher's work in the charismatic renewal movement and his ministry as a confessor at the nearby National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Abbot Aidan then spoke of the way in which his years at the abbey have been marked by the quest for truth and by the ways his confreres have helped him to know himself, and Fr Christopher humbly thanked the community for putting up with and forgiving some of his foibles.

Following mass the monks and about fifty guests enjoyed a delicious meal in our calefactory that was prepared by one of our regular cooks, Ronnie Scott, and three couples whose sons had once attended our school and who wished to show their appreciation by generously helping in the kitchen: Helen and Ed Haislmaier, Michelle and Michael Lemmon, and Susan and Chris Girardot. Just as it had snowed during the ordinations at the Shrine of the Sacred Heart in 1965, it started snowing during the anniversary celebration as well, an appropriate way of tying together services that had taken place exactly fifty years apart.

JAMES WISEMAN, OSB

Rome and Evolution

When I was in military service many years ago, I was often engaged in discussions on religion and, of course, always defended the Catholic point of view. Once one of my buddies, a fallen-away Catholic, said, "Don't talk to me about the Church; I know too much about evolution." I felt a sort of pang of worry: was there some conflict between Catholic teaching and the theory of evolution? I had always gone to public grammar school and

high school and had absorbed convictions about evolution. My knowledge of Church doctrine was mainly from the catechism. I visited the post library, which, providentially (miraculously?) had a set of *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. The article on evolution contained a scholarly discussion on Neanderthal Man and other predecessors of Homo Sapiens, on cranial capacities, etc. I came away with the assurance that there was no conflict

between Catholic teaching and evolution.

As a matter of interest, the *Baltimore Catechism No. 3*—THE de facto standard Catholic high-school text from 1941 to the late 1960s—takes a dim view of the theory of evolution. It teaches that while the human soul could never be formed from an inferior animal, the human body could be so formed if God so willed it; but Catholics should not hold this theory because there is no proof for it. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), surprisingly, has nothing in the index for “evolution” or “Darwin.” It does have the following tantalizing statement in its discussion of creation: “The question about the origins of the world and of man has been the object of many scientific studies which have splendidly enriched our knowledge of the cosmos, the development of life-forms, and the appearance of man. These discoveries invite us to even greater admiration for the greatness of the Creator, prompting us to give him thanks for all his works and for the understanding and wisdom he gives to scholars and researchers” (CCC, p. 74). That statement would fit evolution admirably, but the connection is not made.

As for the Baltimore Catechism’s assertion that there is no proof for the theory of evolution, the Church has now modified that position. Pope John Paul II refers to Pope Pius XII’s encyclical *Humani Generis*, which, he says, considered evolutionism “a serious hypothesis,” but he adds that “today...new knowledge leads us to recognize in the theory of evolution more than a hypothesis. ...The convergence...of results of work done independently one from the other constitutes in itself a significant argument in favor of this theory” (Oct. 23, 1996). Any scientific hypothesis is subject to verification; the pope here declares that evolution has been verified by the convergence of evidence from various sources. As to scripture, the pope calls for a “rigorous hermeneutics” which sets forth “the limits of the meaning proper to scripture, rejecting undue interpretations which make it say what it does not have the intention of saying.” Pope Francis recently said, “Evolution in nature is not opposed to the notion of Creation, because evolution presupposes the creation of beings that evolve.” It is true that when Darwinism first emerged, it seemed to be at odds with biblical religion. The early chapters of Genesis speak of the creation of the first humans with no hint that they might have evolved from lower forms of life. A literalistic interpretation would reject evolution, but literalism is not characteristic of Catholic biblical exegesis. Catholic scripture scholars do not read the first chapter of Genesis as asserting that the world was created in six days, but as asserting that everything that exists was created by God and was created in an orderly fashion.

Yet a recent Gallup poll found that only 39% of Americans believe in evolution, and we can suppose there are many Catholics among the 61% who are doubters. Evolution is often characterized as “godless” or “atheistic,” and indeed, it is so in the presentations of materialists or atheists, but of itself it is neither.

Creationists argue that any apparent flaw in the evolutionist position (for example, the incompleteness of the fossil record) is a proof of creationism, but obviously that is false. As for the fossil record, there is a lot more waiting to be dug up. As recently as 2004, fossils of *Tiktaalik roseae*, a transitional species from 375 million years ago (long before the dinosaurs), have come to light. The first samples were incomplete, but later specimens show four limbs adapted to life in shallow waters and possibly short trips on land. This can be considered one of the missing links for sea-to-land creatures.

Evidence of the Church’s attitude toward Darwinism can be seen in the papal-backed conference held at the Pontifical Gregorian University in 2009 to mark the 150th anniversary of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*—an implicit vote for Darwin. Furthermore, the Vatican sources have gone beyond that, even criticizing positions that attempt to refute evolution. In 2006 *L’Osservatore Romano* published an article that labeled as “correct” a recent decision rendered by “a judge in Pennsylvania” that “intelligent design” should not be taught as a scientific alternative to evolution. The “judge in Pennsylvania” is almost certainly John E. Jones III. He rendered the decision (December, 2005) in a case in Dover, Pennsylvania, in which eleven parents brought suit against the Dover school board for promoting the teaching of intelligent design in a biology course. The position taken in *L’Osservatore Romano* corresponds to Judge Jones’s ruling. The organizers of the conference declined to invite intelligent design speakers because they felt the theory lacked scientific merit.

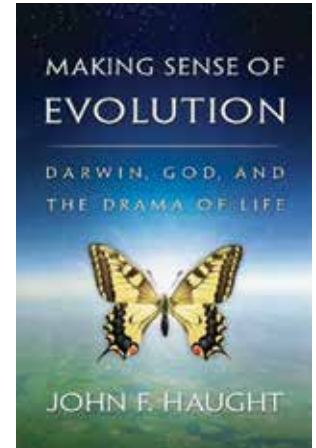
To understand what is meant by “intelligent design,” it is necessary to go back one step to “creationism,” the position of some who reject evolution. Basically these are fundamentalists who claim to follow the biblical account of creation. They come in various flavors. “Young Earth Creationists” hold that the earth was created in six twenty-four hour days. Some, though not all, follow Bishop Ussher’s chronology, which dates the creation to 4004 BC, while others will go as high as 10,000 years since creation. This, of course, is at odds with the scientific consensus that the universe came into existence 13.8 billion years ago, the earth 4.5 billion years ago, and the first life on earth perhaps 2.5 billion years ago. To bolster their position, these creationists have established “creation museums” at a cost of millions of dollars (the one in Petersburg, Kentucky cost, for example, \$27 million) which show humans and dinosaurs existing together. Those known as “Old Earth Creationists” come in a bewildering variety of forms (e.g., Gap Creationism, Day-Age Creationism, Progressionism), all intending to give some credence to the scientific findings on the age of the earth while adhering to a more-or-less literal understanding of Genesis.

The Supreme Court ruled that to require the teaching of creationism in public schools is counter to the Constitution’s separation of church and state. To get around this, intelligent design (ID) was formulated,

claiming to be “an evidence-based scientific theory about life’s origins.” It claims that certain biological features are too complex, manifesting such irreducible complexity as to be the result of evolutionary processes and so are evidence of intelligent design. However, this is not an assertion that can be proved scientifically nor can it be the subject of scientific experimentation. Moreover, to claim that the complexity requires divine action ignores the principle of natural selection, by which whatever works better survives, and otherwise it perishes—the survival of the fittest. There is plenty of time for wrong turnings, failed attempts, and new beginnings because the process covers billions of years. In fact, the fossil record demonstrates that is precisely what happened. If the process is controlled by an intelligent designer, where is room for so many missteps and new beginnings? There is certainly place for divine purpose in creation, but it works through natural causes.

The Dover court case referred to earlier is not unique. Other school boards (especially in southern states), dominated by fundamentalists, have attempted to impose ID on public school science curricula and have been challenged in court with the same result. The cases have provided strong support for scientists who have fought to bar ID from the science curriculum.

One would hope that with backing from the Vatican, the scientific community, and the U.S. legal system, all Catholics would take the hint. However, a recent issue of the *National Catholic Register* carries an article (“The Half-Truths of Materialistic Evolution”) in which the author rightly criticizes Richard Dawkins, a proponent of a materialistic evolution, but also espouses ID, using the ID buzz-words “irreducible complexity.” He makes reference to Chesterton, Sartre, Freud, and Marx, but not, as would have been more to the point, to recent popes. Rather than rejecting evolution, however, Catholic authors can find in it new ways of understanding God and his plan. See, especially, John Haught, *God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), and *Making Sense of Evolution: Darwin, God, and the Drama of Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).



JOSEPH JENSEN, OSB

Meeting of Abbots and Prioresses

Every year, the abbots of Benedictine houses in North America, along with the superiors of independent priories, meet for five days shortly before the beginning of Lent. These meetings are regularly held at some monastery in the southern states so as to avoid the risk of being caught in a snow storm. Every fourth year, including this year, they meet jointly with the Benedictine prioresses, so from the evening of Thursday, February 5 until the following Monday morning, forty-two Benedictine sisters and twenty-eight monks came together in Cullman, Alabama, with the abbots and priors being housed at St Bernard Abbey and the prioresses at the nearby Sacred Heart Monastery. Liturgies were held in the abbey church and most of the other sessions in a handsomely converted barn called “the Byre,” although the prioresses had their own business meeting at Sacred Heart on the final full day, while the abbots and priors held theirs in the abbey’s retreat center.

The joint sessions on the two preceding days featured presentations by Sharon Daloz Parks and William J. Cahoy on the topic of leadership within the monastic



Abbey church at Cullman (exterior)

community. Dr Parks, a well-known author, held faculty and research positions at the Harvard Business School and the Kennedy School of Government for sixteen years before becoming the director of Leadership for the New Commons, an initiative of the Whidbey Institute in Clinton, Washington. Among her publications are



Abbey church at Cullman (interior)

Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World and Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith. Her fellow presenter, Dr Cahoy, is dean of the School of Theology at St John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, where he himself had once been an undergraduate before going on to earn a doctorate in theology at Yale University. The two had obviously worked hard in advance to coordinate their presentations, which included numerous opportunities for small group discussion among those seated around tables in the audience.

An added feature of the workshop was the presence of Abbot Primate Notker Wolf and Fr Elias Lorenzo, the prior of the *collegio* at the Benedictine center of Sant'Anselmo in Rome. Abbot Notker informed the group of the considerable progress being made both in

renovating the buildings at Sant'Anselmo and in gradually implementing a strategic plan for the athenaeum, where Benedictine and lay students from all over the world work toward degrees in philosophy, theology, liturgy, and monastic studies. He said that as he nears the end of his sixteen years as primate, he will not be a candidate for any further re-election and therefore urged the abbots to begin reflecting on how best to surface possible successors for this important position, which includes general oversight of Sant'Anselmo as well as travel to Benedictine houses throughout the world to give support, encouragement, and advice.

The resident community at St Bernard was very hospitable, especially Abbot Cletus, Br Brendan, the guestmaster, and his assistant, Br Marion, while the sisters at Sacred Heart Monastery had the opportunity to welcome all of us to a festive meal in their new retreat center on the final night of the workshop. In addition, the opportunity for informal conversation with other Benedictine superiors about various topics helped make our days together very worthwhile. For me, a special treat was seeing Fr Edward Markley, a monk of St Bernard Abbey, for the first time in about forty-seven years, for he had lived with us at St Anselm's in the mid- and late 1960s while pursuing a degree in sociology at The Catholic University of America. During those years, he also served as the coach of our school's freshman basketball team, so he had especially fond memories of the varsity coach, Bob Dwyer, and of Br Placid Kerkhoff, who spent many hours in the gym. Fr Edward said he has nothing but happy memories of his stay with us, and we had a good time reminiscing about those years.

JAMES WISEMAN, OSB

Helping the Cause for Christian Unity

In a prayer service at St Paul's Basilica, Pope Francis has called for more focus on what unites Christians. During his talk he stated, "So many past controversies between Christians can be overcome when we put aside all polemical or apologetic approaches, and seek instead to grasp more fully what unites us." He continued to say, "We need to realize that, to plumb the depths of the mystery of God, we need one another, we need to encounter one another and to challenge one another under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who harmonizes diversities and overcomes conflicts." Saint Anselm's abbey and school, in the spirit of this new pope's vision, hosted a group of thirty Protestant students from Dominion Christian Junior High School in Reston, Virginia this winter. Their teacher Mr Garrett Cichowitz, and adult



Dominion Christian students in the abbey church

chaperones arrived at the abbey school on December 8, 2014. The solemnity of the Immaculate Conception was not a date that was specifically chosen. God works in mysterious ways, however, and a better day could not have been picked. After mass I took the students to the abbey chapel where Father Philip, visiting doctoral candidate Father Jan Dolny from Slovakia, and I each gave a short history of our vocation, and of our mission. A tour followed led by Father Philip, who gave a wonderful historical background to what the group were seeing as they toured the abbey.



The students in the abbey calefactory

Not long after that I received an email from Mr Cichowitz sharing positive feed-back from his students. This gave me the idea to have them share their experiences in writing and to publish selections from their letters as a small window on steps toward "Christian Unity and Understanding". Following are some of those reflections.

I received a total of eleven letters, the remainder of them can be found on our web-site at www.stanselms.org and it is in this "spirit" as we all strive in some small way to reach out to others by example, that God willing we can fulfill that hope of "Christian Unity".

ISAIAH LORD, OSB

Dear Brothers of St. Anselm's Abbey,
 Before visiting the Catholic St. Anselm's Abbey, my perception of monasteries in general was somewhat narrow. This is probably due to the fact that we (my class at Dominican Christian School) began our study of monasticism this year with St. Anthony the Great in the 3rd century, and have continued to study its development through the early and high Middle Ages. However, monasteries a thousand years ago are clearly somewhat different than monasteries today. I just hadn't applied this concept to my perceptions of what the monastery would be like....

A few things surprised me about the monastery experience. First, I did not expect the monks to have things such as computers, phones, a television, or an exercise room. This makes sense, however, because certain things like phones have become basic needs in our culture, and enjoying the simple pleasure of watching a football game with others is a good thing and not in any way excessive. I realize that monasticism develops with the culture around it, and compared to our culture today the monks still live in extreme moderation. I loved it when we talked with the monks about their history and life there and was able to ask them questions. Something I really appreciated about the monks was that although they live an ascetic, spiritual life, they were very honest about their experience with temptation and desire. Monks are often wrongly portrayed as slaves and quiet with no real joy or turmoil in their lives, yet I could clearly see the strong desires and emotions they wrestle with every day through the way they spoke....

Overall, I really enjoyed the trip because not only did I get to attend a Mass and see a monastery, I experienced the genuine faith and hope of the men living there to seek and enjoy God through a humble life.

Sincerely,
 Christy Claba, 110, Sophomore

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The Newsletter of St Anselm's Abbey is distributed free of charge by
St Anselm's Abbey, 4501 South Dakota Avenue, NE,
Washington, DC 20017-2795 (202-269-2300).
Names may be added to the mailing list upon request.
Editorial Board: Abbot James Wiseman, OSB; Matthew Nylund, OSB; Alessandra Styles.

ST ANSELM'S ABBEY

4501 South Dakota Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20017-2795

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Dear monks of Saint Anselm's Abbey,

Thank you so much for the opportunity you gave our class to visit the abbey and see firsthand a picture of your lives as Benedictine monks. As a fifteen year old, Protestant, sophomore in high school, my original perception of monasticism was an odd blend of Hollywood stereotypes and what I had learned in my church history class' study of the Benedictine Rule. Going into that visit, I honestly did not know what to expect.

Now I have a much clearer idea of what modern monasticism entails: I recognize that you are not cut off from or oblivious to the world. While it is clear that asceticism does have an important place in the monastic life, I was better able to understand that moderation is also important, since monks are still human. While I acknowledge that I do not agree with Saint Anselm or the Catholic Church on certain issues, visiting the abbey helped me to realize the many ways in which I do - it was clear that the monks do set a wonderful, Christ-like example.

Thank you so much,

Abigail Hudson

To tell you the truth, when I first learned my class was going to visit monks at an abbey, my mind immediately created an image of men with shaved heads scarily chanting in a circle by candle light. But after spending a day at St. Anselm's Abbey, I felt like I had truly had an enriching, eye-opening experience as to how a Catholic abbey runs.

When we arrived at the school, we were warmly greeted and welcomed to sit and observe the mass. When we were received into the abbey, the monks were very kind and conversational, answering all our questions and teaching us a lot about the abbey. I'll admit I was surprised how much fun it was to spend time with them and to talk the hour. It was interesting to find that they still watched TV and read secular books, such as Harry Potter. Sometimes, I forget that monks are still people, living in the twenty-first century. Upon leaving, I found that I learned that monks today have found a way to carry up the cross in the midst of our modern world. They had dedicated their lives to God and continuing to pass on Catholic tradition to young Christians in the school. St. Anselm's taught us a lot about Catholicism, culture, and faith. It was an enjoyable and insightful visit.

Sincerely,

Katelyn White

Age 14
Grade 9