

## The Annual Meeting of North American Abbots

Although the Covid pandemic led to the cancellation of last year's meeting of Benedictine abbots and priors of independent monasteries, this year the annual meeting was again held. As usual, the venue was an abbey in the southern part of our country so as to avoid the possibility of a blizzard, so we met this time at St Joseph Abbey, about thirty-five miles north of New Orleans. Attendance was slightly lower than usual, but a reasonably good turnout of twenty-five superiors met from February 18 to 22. The meetings were held in the abbey's retreat



center, which has been very handsomely renovated after severe flood damage caused by a tropical storm in 2016. Not only were the rooms comfortable and the food tasty, but the corridors had many attractive framed paintings hanging on the walls.

These annual meetings always strike a balance between spiritual input from some invited speaker and business meetings for either the entire group or individual congregations. This year's speaker was Bishop Robert Barron, the well-known auxiliary bishop of Los Angeles who founded the Word on Fire Institute in order to present Catholicism to the modern world by using digital and traditional media. In his two talks on February 19 he noted that he has long had Benedictine connections, first by having graduated from the high school conducted by St Procopius Abbey in Lisle, Illinois and subsequently by making retreats at various abbeys, most frequently at St Meinrad Archabbey in Indiana. Not surprisingly, he features St Benedict among the "pivotal players" in his work of evangelization, which he defines as "declaring the lordship of Jesus and inviting people to share his life in the Church."

The six topics that Bishop Barron addressed in his two talks were humility, justice, beauty, intellectuality, community/liturgy, and being a spiritual master. His lifelong Benedictine connections made it easy for him to relate each of these topics to one or another aspect

of the Rule of St Benedict or the tradition stemming from the Rule. In this article I will briefly summarize some of his main points.

Just as the longest chapter of the Rule of St Benedict is on humility, Bishop Barron said that this virtue is especially important in our own day, when so many people seem to have lost the capacity to "hear a higher voice" and instead assume that they and not God are the "producers and directors" of their lives. St Benedict's teaching could be said to move a person from "ego-drama" to "theo-drama," from the merely subjectively satisfying to what is objectively valuable. It is *not* a matter of just finding "your own voice" but rather of letting an objective light break in, and Bishop Barron insisted that monasteries should be places where this can take place, especially through the practice of hospitality.

As regards justice, he noted that the research of Stephen Bullivant, a professor of the sociology of religion at St Mary's University in England, has shown that young people are really drawn to the Church's long tradition of social justice, which insists that we care for those who are poor or who suffer from one or another kind of disability. Even though Benedictines are not



St Joseph Abbey Church

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usually on the front lines of providing such help, their tradition of giving up private ownership in order to live in a radically communitarian way of life offers strong counter-witness in a world when so many people seem intent on their own material aggrandizement. Guests in our own monastery have at times remarked on how salutary such witness has been. One of our guests once wrote: "To see men live happily and so simply and to have all of their needs met showed me how little one really needs to be happy."

The website for the Word on Fire Institute says that they aim to "harness goodness, truth, and beauty to draw people into or back to the Catholic faith." In his talk to the abbots, Bishop Barron gave particular emphasis to beauty, arguing that it offers the most powerful entrée into an appreciation of the place of goodness and truth in the Christian life. He regretted that just as the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy in the eighth century and the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth led to the destruction of many beautiful works of art, similar works were removed from many Catholic churches in the 1970s and 80s, thereby impoverishing the spiritual life of those who worshipped there. On the other hand, he said that wherever the beauty of monastic chant continues, this will have a deep effect both on the monks themselves and on persons who attend their liturgies.

Concerning "intellectuality," Bishop Barron regretted that in some recent decades textbooks for religion courses in elementary and high schools have dumbed things down, whereas many people have left the Church mainly because they did not get adequate answers to their serious questions about the faith. He noted that he has at times participated in "Ask Me Anything" (AMA), an interview format available on a number of websites. He has welcomed the opportunity to dialogue with persons who are not religious or are even anti-religious and he expressed the hope that a number of young Benedictines could be trained to be on AMA, where they would likely reach more people than if they were professors in a classroom.

Toward the end of his final talk, Bishop Barron was running out of time and so discussed his final two points only briefly. On community and liturgy he noted that many people are avidly searching for the kind of community that ought always to be found in the Church and that guests do regularly find when they spend some time in a Benedictine monastery. Finally, he insisted that young people today are not looking for "managers" but for spiritual masters, and that monks should always be

available for this kind of service. Among other things, this means their showing by word and example that a genuine spiritual life begins first with grace, moves only then to an awareness of sinfulness and the need for purification, and from there leads to mission. Just as Jesus once sent the Twelve on mission in Galilee and the surrounding areas of Israel, monks today are called to be missionaries in their own surroundings.

The next day, before the 11 AM Sunday mass, Abbot Primate Gregory Polan addressed the group, recalling at first the many problems caused by the Covid pandemic. Two communities in another part of the world have had to live exclusively on food they grow in their own gardens, and two communities in Europe have lost their abbots to the disease. On the other hand, the pandemic has given most Benedictines more opportunity for *lectio divina* and personal prayer since they are no longer so heavily focused on their various tasks. He was also pleased to report that life at the international university of Sant'Anselmo in Rome is going well, with 125 residents, a new rector, and several new deans. Generous donations have made possible the renovation of an entire floor in the guest quarters, a major improvement over the sparse accommodations of previous years. As regards the synod of 2023, Abbot Gregory has himself been appointed to the commission for spirituality and has been attending meetings of that group. He also noted that the next Congress of Abbots will be held in September 2024.

Later that day a short presentation was given by Fr Charles Benoit, a monk of St Joseph Abbey, who spoke of a recent *Motu Proprio* of Pope Francis that is part of his attempt to promote subsidiarity in the Church by allowing local leaders to make decisions that had previously been reserved to one or another Vatican congregation.

Besides these meetings, there was ample time for the abbots to converse with one another at meals and at evening socials, and I myself had the chance to spend some time with Sister Patty Huffman, whom I knew from her years at Seton High School in Bladensburg, Maryland and who drove to St Joseph Abbey from her current assignment in New Orleans on Sunday for mass and a meal at the retreat center. The next day I was able to spend several hours with an alumnus of our school, Dennis Kehoe, and his wife Connie. They are both professors, Dennis teaching classics at Tulane and Connie teaching philosophy on the adjacent campus of Loyola of New Orleans. These visits were a welcome addition to the horarium of the abbots' and priors' meeting.

JAMES WISEMAN, OSB



# Three Easter Images

(A conference by Fr Boniface von Nell, OSB, presented to the oblates of our abbey on April 11, 2021)

Today we celebrate the last day of the octave of Easter. Christmas and Easter are the only two feasts in the liturgical calendar that have an octave. An octave prolongs the celebration of a feast, in this case the feast of the resurrection, for a full week. At one time this Sunday was called "Low Sunday" in contrast to the more elaborate ceremonies of Easter itself. Today, it has become a feast in its own right, for we celebrate this octave as Divine Mercy Sunday.

In celebration of Easter and its octave, I have decided on a conference a little different from the ones I usually give. Today's conference will center around three images: two Byzantine icons and a modern icon/image, all of which are related to Easter. The Byzantine icons are the Harrowing of Hell and The Holy Myrrh-Bearing Women. The more modern icon is the image of Divine Mercy whose feast we celebrate today.

I would like to remind you of a few facts about looking at icons. In the West we think of statues and paintings of the sacred as reminders of the holy, reminders to draw us to God. In the East an icon is seen as a means of entering the mystery it portrays, or communicating with the saint it depicts. Perspective is also different. In the West, we are used to a "window perspective" where points move to a vanishing line on the horizon. But in a Byzantine icon the vanishing point is behind the viewer, so that the person looking at the icon is included in it.

## The Harrowing of Hell or Christ's Descent into the Underworld/Hades/Hell

In this icon, we not only look at, but we enter into the icon, and become part of it as well. As we progress, see where the Holy Spirit leads you. The setting is a cave, that is, under the earth. The icon depicts Christ descending after his death into the realm of death and Satan. Christ is shown in golden robes symbolizing his divinity. The light coming from him vanquishes the surrounding darkness.



The blue shape around Christ is called a mandorla. It symbolizes the uncreated light that the apostles witnessed emanating from Christ at the Transfiguration. It becomes darker as it moves towards Christ. This symbolizes that the more we get to know him, the less we comprehend him. To know God, to experience him, is to walk in the darkness of his light.

Underneath Christ's feet lie the smashed doors of Satan's kingdom forming a cross, the sign of Christ's victory, as the doors fell. Scattered all around in the abyss below are the nuts, bolts, hinges and other hardware from the doors. They show the complete devastation that Christ's victory caused the realm of darkness, which is now bathed in his light. In many icons of this type a figure lies prostrate beneath the fallen doors. He represents death or Satan.

Christ reaches out to Adam and Eve, pulling them out of their tombs to eternal life. On either side of him stand the righteous ones of the ancient covenant. We recognize David and Solomon by their crowns and John the Baptist by his halo, and there are many more. This symbolizes the redemption which has come for all people and foreshadows our resurrection at Christ's second coming.

When Christ died on the cross, all hell rejoiced. Satan and his minions were finally rid of that troublemaker who threatened their kingdom. But through his suffering and death, he, Christ, became the victor over Satan, sin, darkness, and death. The very cross used to put Jesus to death now became his weapon against the forces of evil. "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55).

Christ's victory, his resurrection, is not just an historical event. It is present to us in the eternal now and is meant for us too. It not only foreshadows our own salvation, our rising with him and sharing his glory. It has meaning for us where we find ourselves today. We ask ourselves "What are the vestiges of darkness that still hold us in even small ways? How can I let the light of Christ into my own life so that he can be free to act in me as he wills? How can I let the light of the risen Christ flow through me out to others? How can I help bring the victory of the cross over Satan, death, and darkness to a world so badly in need of God's merciful love?" Let me begin by thinking of the little everyday ways. Allow him to reach out and pull me up, and with me many others.

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

## The Holy Myrrh-Bearing Women

The first icon has taken us deep into the earth, depicting Christ's victory over Satan, sin, and death. Our second icon, the icon of The Myrrh-Bearing Women, takes us back to the surface of the earth, to Christ's empty tomb.

The first thing we notice is the tomb with the discarded grave clothes lying within it, the cloth which covered the face and head of Christ lying separately, just as the gospel

tells us (John 20:7). An angel sits at its head directing the women's attention to the empty tomb.

Four women carrying jars of spices with which they intended to anoint the body of Jesus stand in shock and amazement nearby. Their bodies are inclined in veneration at the mystery which they behold.

Our icon shows four women. The number of the women in the gospel accounts varies. And no wonder that there are differences in the accounts. The gospels seem almost breathless in their telling. It is as if a lightning flash has suddenly burst in on the scene. And in fact, it has! The resurrection of Jesus and all its implications is an overwhelming event, changing the way humans look at life, at death, and at the world around them. It is a cosmic event. We have become so used to the description of this great mystery that it is hard for us to imagine the effect the resurrection had on those first witnesses. May we recover some of that awe, wonder, and love as we contemplate the risen Lord Jesus.



Near them stands the figure of Jesus. "They [the women] went away quickly from the tomb, fearful yet overjoyed, and ran to announce this to his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them on their way and greeted them. They approached, embraced his feet, and did him homage." (Matthew 28:6,8). They were doubly sent, by the angel and by Jesus, to tell the good news to the apostles. They became apostles to the apostles.

The women were an intrepid bunch. They were among the women who had followed Jesus and his disciples during his public ministry and they stood at the foot of the cross, watching his agony with broken hearts. They had prepared the spices with which to anoint his body, had gotten up early and hastened to the tomb. They loved Jesus with a deep love; they had to express their love concretely in this final gesture. They were courageous; their actions stood in stark contrast to the apostles and other disciples who cowered in fear behind locked doors. They would be the first to hear about and meet the risen Christ.

The women needed to do something to express their love for Christ. What can I do to show my love for Christ? What are the spices I can prepare for him? The Myrrh Bearers became the first to proclaim the resurrection. How do I in my life, words, and actions proclaim the good news?

### The Divine Mercy

Today, the Sunday after Easter, the Church celebrates Divine Mercy Sunday. In the 1930s, St Faustina Kowalska, a Polish religious sister, was granted visions of Christ. Her exterior life was insignificant, but it hid an interior life of extraordinary union with God and one filled with extraordinary gifts. Jesus gave St Faustina a special

mission, telling her, "I am sending you with My mercy to the people of the whole world. I do not want to punish mankind, but I desire to heal it, pressing it to My merciful Heart." In 1931 Jesus appeared to her wearing a white garment with red and pale rays emanating from his heart. In her diary (Diary of St Faustina, Notebook I, Items 47 and 48), she wrote that Jesus told her: *Paint an image according to the pattern you see, with the signature: "Jesus, I trust in You." I desire that this image be venerated, first in your chapel, and then throughout the world. I promise that the soul that will venerate this image will not perish.* The painting was finished in 1934 by a Polish artist under her direction although she herself was disappointed, for it could not show the true beauty and glory of the Lord.

Jesus also asked for the establishment of a feast of Divine Mercy to be held on the Sunday after Easter. "My daughter, tell the whole world about My Inconceivable mercy. I desire that the Feast of Mercy be a refuge and shelter for all souls, and especially for poor sinners. On that day the very depths of My tender mercy are open. I pour out a whole ocean of graces upon those souls who approach the fount of My mercy. The soul that will go to Confession and receive Holy Communion shall obtain complete forgiveness of sins and of punishment." (Diary, 420). This feast was established by St John Paul II in the year 2000.

The theme of divine mercy is an ancient one and runs throughout Scripture. It was love for the human race and mercy that made the Word become flesh, suffer, and die for us. It is the divine love and mercy that unites us to Christ and makes us sharers in his resurrection and divine life. The message and image of divine mercy are a continuation of the Easter mysteries into our own lives. Since the original painting of Divine Mercy was made,



there have been many variations. They all show the figure of Christ clad in a white robe with red and pale rays issuing from his heart. St Faustina was told that "The two rays denote Blood and Water. The pale ray stands for the Water which makes souls righteous. The red ray stands for the Blood which is the life of souls. These two rays issued forth from the depths of My tender mercy when My agonized Heart was opened by a lance on the Cross. Happy is the one who will dwell in their shelter, for the just hand of God shall not lay hold of him" (Diary, 299). By means of this image I shall grant many graces to souls. It is to be a reminder of the demands of My mercy, because even the strongest faith is of no avail without works" (Diary, 742). At the base are the words "Jesus, I trust in you."

We reproduce here a modern icon of Divine Mercy, written through the hand of Kathy Baron, who kindly



allowed us to use her work. In describing the icon, she writes that she added basic iconic elements: *“Jesus is standing before a mandorla, shaped like an almond—a symbol of life in ancient Semitic cultures. The mandorla stands for the glory of God. It is painted in three rings of dark color, representing the mystery of the Triune God, for in His essence He is unseeable and unknowable.*



*“Christ’s halo is a symbol of the Holy Light and radiance of God. It is inscribed with Greek letters that say I AM WHO AM. The IC XC above are also Greek: they read “Jesus Christ.” Every icon has the name of the person depicted written on it so there is no doubt who it is. (An icon does not attempt to be a physical likeness, but a spiritual portrait.)”*

Although Jesus Christ has ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father, his infinite love for us draws him eternally to us. His abiding presence in the mystery of his body and blood is proof of this. In the

icon of Divine Mercy, he continues to draw us to himself.

There is another aspect of this image that is important. In this image, Jesus depicts himself as the merciful Savior, in whom we can place all our trust. The corollary of this image and devotion is that as his disciple, I must reflect that mercy in my dealings with others. I must ask myself, *“In what ways do I and can I show to others the mercy of the Lord, Jesus Christ?”* In reflecting the love and mercy of the Lord to others, I give witness to the world that *“Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.”*

#### Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. How can I let the light of Christ enter my own life so that he can be free to act in me as he wills?
2. How can I let the light of Christ flow through me to others?
3. How can I help bring the victory of the risen Christ to a world badly in need of God’s merciful love?
4. In what ways do I or can I show Christ’s merciful love to others?

BONIFACE VON NELL, OSB

## *Afghanistan from an Afghan Point of View*

First of all, I am grateful to Allah for everything I have, for my well-being, for having my parents, my family, and my dear friends. I have to thank my dear and kind parents for being by my side all the time and for supporting me in every stage of my life. Besides my family, I have friends who are always there for me in Afghanistan and in the US and so I have never felt truly alone. I am really thankful from the bottom of my heart for my parents and my friends who have supported me in writing this article.

The article is about Afghanistan and the ongoing internal situation in that country after the overthrow and collapse of the Afghan government by the Taliban on August 14, 2021. I see the need first to talk a bit about myself to ensure that my readers will know that this article is written by an Afghan who was born and has grown up in Afghanistan, and who is quite aware of the current situation in that country and is continuing to live there.

Aside from my identity, which I do not want to specify, I was born in Kabul in 1999. My father was then serving in the Afghan Air Force. My mother was and is a housewife. Although she had done well in school, she could not complete her schooling because of Taliban interference and control about 20 years ago. She was never able to fulfill her dream of becoming a physician, although in another way she succeeded, for she made it possible for

us, her children, in conjunction with our father, to realize our dreams. My parents helped me to finish my secondary education in one of the top schools in Afghanistan, the Ariana Afghan-Turk High School, which functions in about 120 countries around the world. Later, I was able to obtain a bachelor’s degree in economics from Kabul University, one of the most important universities in Afghanistan. My father and mother also helped my siblings to achieve approximately the same goals in terms of their training and education. Hence, I can never support a policy of barring girls from going to school (as this had been imposed on my mother in a way that prevented her from achieving her dreams). From her, I have benefitted from learning the Quran and the relevance of other Islamic principles.

After graduation, I began my work life as a Dari, Pashto, and English language translator with the US forces. I worked with them for almost two years. The job was not relevant to my field of expertise but, in other ways, it greatly helped me in increasing my abilities and capacities. Working with one of the world’s superpowers inevitably changes one’s abilities and capacities. One grows in certain ways, in ways that are at times unexpected.

My reason for engaging in this type of narrative is to indicate how the aspirations of an Afghan family and

Afghan youth, whether male or female, are now blocked and thwarted in terms of their education and employment after the Taliban seized the reins of governmental authority in my country and dismissed many persons, especially women. According to one survey, about 90% of formerly employed journalists lost their jobs— among them, female journalists who have suffered the most in the wake of the Taliban seizure of power. Female school instructors are not allowed to continue offering their services and must now stay at home despite having professional teaching degrees. They had all functioned as financial supporters for their families but are no longer able to provide this support.

The overriding issue, however, is not restricted to questions about the extent of one's education and learning. If, on the one hand, you cannot even provide food for yourself or your family at least one meal each day (for your children, your parents, and your siblings), how can you be concerned about the importance of education and learning? Similarly, how can you be very concerned about questions of education and learning if you are constantly thinking about the possibility of war between opposing parties? Will you not be more afraid to have the Taliban knocking at your door, handcuffing you in front of your children and your wife because you had worked for the former Afghan government and fought against the Taliban, or in some way cooperated with the US forces? I think that no one can understand this situation without having directly undergone this kind of experience.



*Looking across Kabul*

After the collapse of the Afghan government, nothing has been the same any more in the country. Because I had worked with the US forces I cannot go out very often, but from the way things are being depicted on TV and in social media, and from reports and news I get from neighbors and friends, it is clear what people are going through. If you walk through downtown Kabul, you can find yourself saying that everything has been destroyed. Our life has ended. You do not see any hope in people's eyes. Extremism is rapidly growing and increasing. Violence and horror are expanding around the city. Wearing a turban and Afghan dress is quite normal in Afghan society, but carrying an AK-47 rifle, with its rounds and bullets wrapped around your shoulders, is not normal, and

seeing these things instills fear in us as people. Those who had worked with the previous government cannot go out freely and cannot go to different government departments, not even to get a passport. It is too dangerous. According to reports that I have received, anyone who goes to a passport office is identified by the Taliban using biometric processes. One is then separated from others and taken by the Taliban to an unknown location where no one knows or can find out what has happened to you. Some are tortured and persecuted because they are seen as enemies, having previously fought against the Taliban. One cannot oppose the Taliban or resist them through expressing any criticisms since the media are all censored, strictly controlled by the Taliban. Fear of violent death inhibits many. The Taliban will shoot anyone who speaks against them and, unfortunately, no one seems to care. No justice seems possible. No one enjoys the protection and the rule of law.

After speaking with some young girls who are either students in school or university or who had been employed by the previous Afghan government, I learned that none of them are hopeful that it will be possible for them to continue their studies. No future seems to exist for them, no opportunities. They all think about leaving Afghanistan by finding some way out. Afghan female journalists cannot attend to their duties as they had done in the past. They are not allowed into any halls where the Taliban give press conferences. Young girls are identified and, instead of being allowed to continue their studies, are forced to become the marriage slaves of Taliban fighters. According to reports that I have received from persons that I know, the guns and equipment that had been supplied to Afghan security and defensive forces by the US have been transferred to the Taliban and are taken to unknown places. The Afghani people continue to need and want US help and aid as this had been given to support them over the last twenty years. They want to be released from the perils of Taliban brutality.

You miss seeing any smiles that children used to have while heading to school, the happiness that a father had when leaving home to head to work. Perhaps he has not been paid for more than five months and is thinking about what he should do when he comes back home in the evening since, after leaving his home earlier in the day, he found no opportunities to get a job and make a living. If you enter any Afghan house, you will see that even having a loaf of bread for one's family is becoming difficult. A child asks his or her parents what has happened now, since some months ago they had had everything they needed for meals. Parents, however, have no answer to give; they can only be silent, having nothing to say. Hence, one can understand why Afghanistan now ranks as the least happy country in the world. People are severely damaged, socially and psychologically.

The Afghan economy is heading into a major downturn and it is sinking deeply into an extended economic, humanitarian crisis. To speak about this economic downturn in simple words: not having a loaf of bread at least once a day for oneself and one's family, or having less than

a dollar a day for income, is what economists refer to as a condition of poverty. The collapsed Afghan government had announced that ninety percent of the population were living in poverty, and I now think that the situation has steadily worsened. Afghanistan has a consumer economy, and yet we also export what is needed to meet the basic needs of our daily life. Along with these factors, severe unemployment and the increased value of the US dollar have accelerated inflation, probably about as much as tenfold. Analysts say that we are moving toward a recession, although I myself think that we are already deeply into one.

When the previous government was in power, many families were fleeing their hometowns and coming to Kabul because of the ongoing war between the Taliban and the Afghan government and because they were trying to make a better living for themselves. While most Kabul residents worked for the government and so received a government salary, and while some were able to save part of their salaries, many received an income that was sufficient only for meeting primary, basic needs. While, for instance, I was able to devote my salary to the cost of my studies, others were supposed to use their salaries to support their often large families (families of maybe ten persons). Currently, they have no income, and no salary has been paid to them since the Taliban took over. The US withdrawal has naturally damaged the Afghan economy, and the overall result has been a widening circle of poverty. The absence of material conditions has disrupted the life of many families. Family violence has been steadily increasing, and much of this violence has been borne by Afghan women and their children, creating anxieties and fears that have dire social consequences.

Humanitarian assistance organizations which are providing help and assistance for Afghans are not properly organized, and the Taliban mostly benefit from their help rather than those who most need assistance. Humanitarian assistance organizations need to be directly in touch with people; they need to know about regional differences; and they need to identify those who most need help if they are then to provide the needed assistance.

Concerning our worsening economic situation and as a result of this, increases in the frequency of robbery, murder, family violence, and violence against women have become rampant in ways which point to forms of mutual causality. You cannot be safe or feel safe if you carry 500 Afghans on your person. In addition, we are lacking political stability which, as an issue, merits a separate, extended discussion of its own, whereas in this article my aim has been to focus only on our current social and economic situation. It goes without saying, however, that lack of political stability worsens our economic situation. It is more difficult for anyone to start a business or to invest in any of our economic enterprises.

When Taliban political leaders appear before the public media and give assurances that Afghanistan will not threaten world peace and that no country should feel threatened by Afghanistan, I think that the explanation is the fact that the Taliban are not very well equipped. They lack sufficient resources for threatening anyone with harm. However, if the US releases Afghan funds for the use of the Taliban, they will use these funds to equip their fighters and to prepare themselves for a new round of fighting. Taliban policy is geared to maintaining relations with other terroristic groups in Iran and Pakistan and to uniting them in a common interest: to encourage them to find ways to attack European and American countries for the purpose of seeking some kind of revenge. As I have already noted, the Afghan people want the US to remain by their side, although the Taliban believe that if the US once again comes to Afghanistan, the Taliban and their allies will be destroyed in light of the fact that the US is, after all, a superpower and could decide to establish a powerful government in Afghanistan which would be not in the interest of Taliban beliefs, goals, and objectives.

In concluding: no easy, quick solution exists for solving our current difficulties. We can only hope that our friends and helpers who live in the US and elsewhere will find a way to make wise, prudent decisions. Material conditions aside, as we attend to our humanity and to how we exist as human beings, we all know that so much depends on what could be happening within ourselves. So much depends on the manner of our perception and the quality of our understanding.

## *Rebuilding Family and Education: Introducing the Work of the Holy Family*

*(The second of two parts)*

Part one of this article left us with a fundamental set of problems in the education of children for modern civilization. Family has been gutted, and the soul has been truncated to serve utilitarian purposes. Even with outlets into worlds of social media and gaming, that truncation

not only remains but becomes more deeply reinforced through an alienation of self from oneself. Many of us do not know the deepest mysteries of our hearts, minds, imaginations, and feelings. Only genuine family life and authentic friendship can restore this self-knowledge and this communal friendship. If that restoration were





David Fleischacker

widespread enough, it would provide the basis for a more life-filled civilization.

What we are calling The Work of the Holy Family exists as both a response to these enormous problems and an enduring path forward toward a healing and flourishing of family life,

the restoration of parents as primary educators of their children, the grace-filled role of the church in forming and educating her children, and the relationship that secondary educators have in assisting the family to raise vibrant citizens of this world and the next. This Work flows from the love of Mary and Joseph for their Son as He hands all of his brothers and sisters into his Father's loving embrace. Family will be at the center of this work. For that center to be real, it needs to have husbands and wives as its center. A first answer is to create "mom and pop" micro-schools and a second is to build those schools upon the educational practices of Maria Montessori and St John Henry Newman.

### **Husband and Wife Catholic Micro-Schools**

The rationale for centering a school around the leadership of husbands and wives is to begin forming schools that follow the rhythms of family life rather than those of industry. Industry tends to be structured around a president or CEO, with timelines and schedules, quality control, efficient production processes, sales and marketing, and consumer satisfaction. Human formation, however, requires something different, especially in respect to children. And that difference is found in the rhythms of a healthy family. In family life there is an ongoing and deep awakening to the whole of creation as well as to the dialectical unfolding of salvation. Within a family, the natural rhythms of the school would include holy days of obligation, birthdays, and more significantly, maternal and paternal responses in everyday situations to children in their families. It will include a deeper appreciation for all the gifts of life, for the food that we eat, the gift of our hands and our senses, the gifts of language, and the real liberty of becoming a responsible and loving person who is dedicated to family, friends, country, and faith. Motherly and fatherly informed time needs to be given to all these most important facets of life. In an industrial setup, most of these things would be understood, or at least felt, as disruptions of the schedules and timelines and as nearly useless for purposes of meeting product outcomes.

### **Why Newman and Montessori?**

When looking back upon the history of Catholic education, one finds many great names. One can think of St Augustine or St Thomas or St John Bosco or St Ursula or

St Elizabeth Ann Seton. In reality, this Work of the Holy Family builds upon all of them. But, in particular, it takes these two more recent educators as its primary starting point. Newman and Montessori themselves built upon the great wealth to be found in the history of Catholic education. They are helpful because they span and encompass modern history; they were among the first to address education as it exists within our new modern world order. They discovered principles and practices that allow us to address the current modern challenges. And both were effective educators.

There are now over eight hundred public schools in the United States within inner cities that have adopted the Montessori model because of how well such schools work in mixed and poor populations. These are precisely the types of places that the Work seeks to serve: hence, inner city and rural parish schools that are collapsing or which have closed would be ideal starting points. It simply works. Montessori herself showed how this model works in all contexts (and not just in those in the greatest need) to the point where her schools offer effective hope across the full spectrum of religious, economic, political and cultural boundaries.

Newman's Birmingham boys' school, which he served for the last three decades of his life, was also very successful. Newman, with his fellow Oratorians, formed a school that helped young boys to become men in the modern world of his time. Their successes were many, and even today we recognize in alumni of his school (J.R. Tolkien being one example) Newman's understanding of education and its relationship to the family, the Church, and culture.

In bringing together these two great educators, I must credit Phyllis Wallbank, who passed away last year. She was a good friend of our institute at St Anselm's Abbey. She was as well, a life-long educator, an advanced international trainer for Maria Montessori, head of the British Montessori Association for many years and was the vice president of AMI, the international association for Montessori education. In Phyllis's work, she brought together Montessori and Newman. Her school combined the maternal depth and richness of Maria Montessori and the paternal love and protection embodied in the work of John Henry Newman.

There is one fundamental principle found in both Newman and Montessori that is worth highlighting. Both saw that one key in education is understanding the developmental nature of the child. For Montessori, there are four stages of development which she called the "sensitive periods of development." Newman affirms three of these stages. The first is the stage of the absorbent mind, roughly 0-6 years of age. This is when the child's entire being is becoming attuned to the immediate and everyday world and culture that surrounds him or her. The motor-sensory capacity of the child develops rapidly during this stage and the first steps in language are emerging. The child thirsts to imitate what the adults do. The second is when the world beyond the crib and



the immediate begins to emerge. This is the larger world mediated by meaning that includes the past and the future and things that are far away. This takes place roughly from 6–12 years of age. The third is when adolescence sprouts, and the child’s body and imagination and feelings unfold into that of the adult. An intense search for one’s identity and place now spring up from the depths of one’s soul. This is the self-mediating stage and roughly takes place from twelve to eighteen years of age. The fourth rises out of a growing identity of self within the world to a self that then wants to give itself away for a greater good. It is the time of missionaries and martyrs, warriors and self-sacrifice. It is the time when vocation rises into an eternal longing. This is the stage of mutual self-mediation and takes place at roughly eighteen to twenty-four years of age.

Education that is authentic helps to mediate the growth at each one of these stages of human development. Family life is central to this. And it is both the privation of family and the need to rebuild a more rich and vibrant form of education that has given birth to The Work of the Holy Family.

This work started three years ago in Mandan, North Dakota when a pastor called me seeking a principal. Through prayer, my wife and I changed careers, and we gave ourselves over to building a domestic school of the Holy Family. That is a much longer story, however, for another time (and another article).

Domestic Schools of the Holy Family serve the first three stages of human development from birth to eighteen years. A husband and wife take the place of the principal of the school. They will leaven the school with the rhythms of family life. They will build evangelizing friendships with families, which includes extended families, those in nursing homes, the poor, the outcast, unwed mothers, and abandoned mothers (or fathers). The size of the school should be no more than the upper limit of the number of children whose families could become known personally by the couple running the school. Anything larger would require the school to operate more like an industry than a family.

But to generate these schools, we need a method of formation and training. And that is where the real Work of the Holy Family begins. Couples need training and formation. And this has fortunately begun, though it is still in its infancy. It started simply by bringing couples into our school. But it is now growing into an apprenticeship setup that will lead to the granting of certificates. These apprenticeships will revolve around the following areas:

1. Montessori, Newman, Mary, and Joseph.

2. Budgeting, carpentry, and materials construction.
3. Evangelization, family life, and parish life.
4. The different developmental stages of the child, training for the different levels of Montessori-Newman education, and a variety of apprenticeship experiences within the life of actually-running schools.
5. Training in working with and integrating children with handicaps, as all children should be welcomed and provided such a home.

While this apprenticing is taking place, apprentices will work as aides in classrooms: thus gaining hands-on experience with classroom environments, relationships with children, and relationships with the families of the children.

The Work of the Holy Family is planning on adding a few more facets over the next few years:

1. A non-profit corporation that will provide for the ongoing advancement of materials and activities for each classroom environment.
2. A resource center that gathers ideas from around the region and world as a resource for couples and teachers. Scholars and scientists will bring forward and share a rich tradition of education and then help to generate new ideas from these discoveries.
3. A missionary support force that will help young couples to set up new schools or transform existing ones.
4. Domestic Collegiate Residences of the Holy Family that are modelled on the collegiate residence of St John Henry Newman. These will serve the fourth stage of human development (18-24).

In short, if we need to recover the primary cell of civilization as it exists in any culture, if we need to rebuild the educational environment so that it will be more effective in the formation of children, if we need to evangelize parents and to help them to rediscover their role as primary educators, this Work of the Holy Family promises to be a powerful solution. Even if it fails to become widespread, seeing the joy in children and young adults in our school has demonstrated the power of bringing Newman and Montessori together under Mary and Joseph. When we serve the least, we find their child, the child Jesus, in every child and through Him, the heart of His Father.

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PRINCIPAL, SAINT JOSEPH CATHOLIC MONTESSORI SCHOOL  
AND SCHOOL OF THE HOLY FAMILY

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