


# Mount Saviour Chronicle

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Reverend Father Damasus and the Community  
wish you a blessed and joyous Christmas and New Year.

Dear Friends of Mount Saviour:

The other day, in our philosophy class, we were reading the "Confessions of St. Augustine" in order to enter, in our own small way, into the gigantic struggle through which this great genius tried to ascend from the visible to the invisible, from the temporal to the eternal, from the flesh to the spirit. We came upon this magnificent passage: "He (God) built for Himself here below a lowly house of our clay, that by it He might bring down from themselves and bring up to Himself those who are subject to Him, healing the swollenness of their pride and fostering their love: so that their self-confidence might grow no further but rather diminish, seeing the deity at their feet, humbled by the assumption of our coat of human nature: to the end that weary at last they might themselves down upon His humanity and rise again in its rising." (Book VII, ch. 18)

I had been thinking about this Christmas Chronicle and the message it should bring you. I was desirous to join "mystery" and "reality", the mystery of the Lord's coming, and the reality of our life as well as yours. The words of St. Augustine seem to point the way. Our "reality" at Mount Saviour shines in the light of the new building which will finally be ready by Christmas. For most of our Juniors, this means that, for the first time in four, or even five, years since they have been at Mount Saviour, they will have the benefit of a cell of their own where they will be able to read, to study and to pray in solitude.

However, God's children would still be without such a house if it had not been for the goodness of our friends. When we started the building two years ago, we lived in a state of great simplicity of heart, to put it mildly. I remember vividly how I told some friends in Detroit that we would be able to build the whole thing—the building is 80 feet by 40 feet and two stories high—for about \$7,000. To my uncomfortable surprise, I saw their eyebrows raised in high arches of doubt. They had just been through the experience themselves and knew what it was all about. We did not know. Thank you, holy simplicity, because without you we would never have dared to tackle such an undertaking, and without the continuous assistance from many good people, we would never have been able to finish it. How often did we get stuck, and still at the critical moment somebody always turned up enabling us to go on. But if I were to go into more details of events and names this Christmas Chronicle would not achieve its purpose. It would seem much better that we turn from the house of cinderblock-reality to its "mystery", with St. Augustine as our guide.

## *The House of God*

"He built for Himself here below a lowly house of our clay." To St. Augustine, the Word made flesh is the "house" which God Himself has built and of which all other houses are a shadow. The idea of the "House of I" is so firmly associated in our minds with the visible buildings we call "churches", and especially with those majestic cathedrals the Middle Ages have built in many parts of Europe, that the original meaning of "God's House", in the sense in which this term is used in the Sacred Scriptures, might completely escape us. It

occurs for the first time in the story of Jacob, the third of the great patriarchs of the Old Testament. If we consider it in its context, we shall see that the idea connected with this word is not that of a mighty, imposing Temple, the symbol and throne of God's majesty, but that of God's descent into the humble, simple world of man. A "house" is not a palace. It is the place where the "common man" leads his daily life, in the company of his family. For, and this is essential, the "house" is not, first of all, the material building, but the family group whose foundation stone is the father. God makes his home in man's home, in the circle of the family. Jacob, the first to whom this mystery was revealed, was a "family man", or, as Holy Scripture puts it, "he was a man of peaceful pursuits, who loved to stay at home." (Genesis 25:27) The Jewish sages say: "Abraham is the root of the *life* of Israel, Isaac is the root of its *mind*, Jacob is the root of its *heart*." And comparing the three patriarchs to the chariot that carries the Divine Presence (cf. Ezechiel 1:5), they explain that Abraham carries it through his generosity, Isaac through the fear of God, Jacob through spiritual beauty and trust. "Trust is the measure of Jacob who was a meek and just man. He held the balance between the fear of his father and the generosity of his father's father. He brings everything into harmony, and is himself the peace. The measure of Jacob is the foundation stone of the building."

### *Beth-El*

We can imagine how Jacob felt when he had to leave his father's house to flee before Esau. He was not like Abraham who came into the Promised Land with wife and relatives and servants and heavy with possessions. (cf. Genesis 12:5) He was all alone. His staff was his only companion. Is he another Cain who was "cursed from the ground, a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth" (Genesis 4:11,12) because he had killed his brother? But Jacob was not a fratricide. God was with him, but he knew it not. Gradually the mystery of "God's house" and — let us already use the expression — the mystery of the "Emmanu-El" (El -God- with us) begins to unfold. First, in the vague form of "the place". This is the keyword of the story. (Genesis 28:11-22) Jacob "lights upon the place", as the Hebrew text says. There is no well there, no tree, no building. Nature has nothing to

offer at the place the Divine Presence has chosen to descend upon Jacob. "Something" stops him there. Darkness settles fast. Tired from the journey and with a heavy heart he takes a stone upon which to rest his head. His first house! Oh misery of exile! Oh merciful sleep! Merciful not only because it frees him from his anxiety, but also because a new dimension opens to Jacob. As the Book of Wisdom says: "He was shown the kingdom of God." (Wisdom 10:10) The vision develops in three stages, leading from surprise to amazement as it gradually unfolds the full reality of the Divine Presence. First: "Behold, a ladder!", obeying a Power which is on high, but which lets the ladder down, until it is firmly set right there where Jacob is asleep, while its top reaches into heaven. What a change of direction for the poor wanderer, from the horizontal, where exile waits for him, to the vertical, where in heaven his real home is. Then, a second "Behold!": *Angels of God* ascending and descending upon it! Angels are God's messengers, the instruments of his rule here on earth. They are the servants of the Holiest, who deign to minister to the heirs of salvation and keep their life in constant contact with the Will of God. Finally, a third time: "Behold!", and here the vision reaches its climax: "*The Lord standing beside him!*" Not only is Jacob in all his desolation surrounded by God's messengers; no, God himself is with him. This is the decisive revelation: "*I am with you!*" (cf. Gen. 28:15) It makes such an impression on Jacob that, at his awakening, he immediately exclaims: "Truly, the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not!" (v. 16)

### *From Beth-El to Beth-lehem*

Jacob awakens not only bodily, but spiritually. He enters into a new world. He did not know that the Divine Presence does not remain aloof from the misery of an exile, that, on the contrary, God seeks a resting place here below, and nowhere but with him and with his house. The thought of it overwhelms him, fills him with fear. Moved to the very depth of his heart, he cries: "This is none other than Beth-El, God's house! This is the gate of heaven!" (v. 17) We should allow this scene and these words to exercise their full impact upon us. Here we find ourselves at the fountainhead of that river of grace and salvation which continues through the generations of the "House of Jacob" and of the "House of

David", until it reaches Joseph, the husband of Mary. not only had a Jacob as his father in the flesh, but also possessed the spirit of his ancestor. Trusting, in the night of his doubts, the word of the angel, he recognized in Mary the "place" where the Divine Presence had come to rest, though he knew it not. (cf. Matthew 1:19,20) When "the days were fulfilled and Mary brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7), willingly and humbly yielding his place to God, he could repeat with much greater awe the words of Jacob: "This is none other than God's house, this is the gate of heaven!" If we remember that "all this was so ordained to fulfill the word which the Lord spoke by his prophet: "Behold, the Virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a son, and they shall call him *Emmanu-El*" (Matthew 1:22,23), we see how closely Beth-lehem (house of bread) is joined to Beth-El, the place where the Lord had revealed himself to Jacob as "I am with you". It is true, Jacob is only one individual, but at Beth-El he acts as the father of his house, and therefore he says of the stone which he erects and anoints as a memorial: "This stone will become a house of God." (Genesis 28:22) His house is present in him, as Osee, the prophet, says: "At Beth-El He spoke to us." (12:4) The God of Beth-El is the God of Jacob's house.

#### *Emmanu-El*

The Emmanu-El who is born of the Virgin Mary, is not the God of a "house" in the order of flesh and blood, but in the order of the spirit. When Joseph, son of Jacob, decided to take to himself his wife who was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit, he himself left the order of the flesh and passed into that of the spirit. Just as John the Baptist is the last of the prophets, so Joseph is the last of the "fathers" in the line of the human stock from which Christ came. He takes leave of the "house", as the Old Testament had known it, which carried the Messianic seed from generation to generation in the continuity of the same blood, and in loyalty to the Covenant. He sees the ties of blood replaced by those of the spirit. Another "house" is being built in his own little family. St. Paul calls it "the Church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth." (I Timothy 3:15). The little babe in the manger is the

foundation stone. As Jacob's pillar became God's house, so will the Emmanu-El become the chief cornerstone of a spiritual structure built of living stones, a temple dedicated to the Lord, (cf. I Peter 2:5,6) But, that this may happen, the "temple of His Body" will be destroyed, and will be raised up by Him again after three days. (cf. John 2:19,20) The last of the sons of David according to the flesh builds the house of God not on the continuity of generations but on the "new covenant in His blood" (cf. Luke 22:20), which He hands down to His apostles and their successors on the eve of His death at the Last Supper. "He took bread, and blessed and broke it, and gave it to them saying: "This is my body, which is to be given for you; do this for a commemoration of me". And so with the cup, when supper is ended, "This cup", he said, "is the new testament in my blood which is to be shed for you." (Luke 22:19,20) From that time, the New Israel is being built through the law of the Cross which leads all "men of good will" (cf. Luke 2:14) through participation in the death of Christ into that union where the Body and Blood of the Emmanu-El become our food and make us truly God's House, another Beth-lehem.

#### *Living Stones*

Dear friends of Mount Saviour, all of us are busy building, each in his own way, the House of God. At Mount Saviour, our minds and hands have been much occupied with the building of a material structure. Now it is built, and we dedicate it to St. Joseph. From this little meditation on the mystery of "God's house", you can see that St. Joseph played an important part in building it, although his contribution did not lie so much in the things he did but in what he gave up, in the fact that he yielded his place to God. He was the first to bend his head that he might enter the "lowly house of our clay" which the Word of God was building in Mary's womb. His greatness lies in that he was content to be "left out", as it were, that all room might be given to God's Love. Is this not the essential point in the monastic life? Is it not the basic law of every Christian life—to give room to God's Love? Christian life begins with *faith*. What else does faith mean but to stop scanning the horizon, desperately and on our own, for help in our need, and instead to allow God's Love to set down the ladder from above, firmly upon the ground of our existence.

on earth, and then look up to the top where it reaches heaven? Let us then celebrate Christmas in *faith*. Let us leave the "inn" of man's world with all its costly gifts. Let us join the shepherds on their way to the stable and when we see the Child in the manger, let us adore the glory of the Word made flesh and exclaim in awe and gladness: "This is God's house, and we did not know it!"

Christian life grows through *humility*, a word which in our imagination is often associated with some artificial bending of the neck. In reality, humility is neither negative nor artificial. It does not refuse to ascend, but it ascends by descending. St. Benedict saw this mystery of humility hinted at in the angels whom Jacob saw ascending and descending upon the ladder. "By that descent and ascent", he says, "we must surely understand nothing else than this, that we descend by self-exaltation and ascend by humility. And the ladder thus set up is our life in the world, which the Lord raises up to heaven if our heart is humbled." Let us celebrate Christmas in *humility*, by putting on the mind of Christ, "who, though He was, by nature, God, did not consider being equal to God a thing to be clung to, but emptied Himself, taking the nature of a slave." (Philippians 2:5-7) Weary of climbing the freezing heights which self believes it has reached when it says: "I will not serve", let us cast ourselves down upon God's humanity that we may rise again in its rising.

We would miss the full meaning of Christmas and its application to our own life, if we did not see in the Word made flesh the foundation stone upon which God's House is built. We should draw near to Him as the living stone, rejected indeed by men but

chosen and honored by God. Let us be as living stones built thereon into a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (cf. I Peter 2:3-5) The Child has been born to be offered. His body is a temple which will be destroyed. When we read that Mary wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger, our thoughts reach out to the end, when "a man named Joseph, a councillor, a good and just man, who was himself looking for the kingdom of God, took down the body of Jesus and wrapped him in a linen cloth, and laid him in a rock-hewn tomb." (Luke 23:50-53) However, we also know that by offering the body which is born at Christmas to be killed on the Cross, the Word made flesh breaks down the walls of enmity, becomes our peace, the measure of the building, in whom we are being built together into a dwelling place for God in Spirit. (cf. Ephesians 2:22) Let us celebrate Christmas in *charity*, following always the "law of the house": "No one doing what he considers useful for himself, but rather what benefits another." (Holy Rule, 72)

In this way, we shall never lose heart. On the contrary, even though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For we know that if your earthly dwelling will be destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made by human hands, eternal in the heavens. (cf. II Corinthians 4:16, 5:1) Spread out your wings and fill the breadth of our land, o Emmanu-El! (Isaias 8:8)

Devotedly yours in Christ,

*H. Desmond Winzen, O.S.B.*

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We strongly recommend: "The Bridge, A Year-book of Judaeo-Christian Studies" Vol. 2, edited by John M. Oesterreicher, Director of the Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies, Seton Hall University. Available at the Mount Saviour Religious Articles Shop . . . \$3.95.

We wish particularly to express our deep gratitude to National Homes Corp. Horseheads, New York for a generous gift of furniture which has been used to refurnish completely St. John's Guesthouse.