



Mount Saviour Chronicle

THE BENEDICTINE MONASTERY OF MOUNT SAVIOUR
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Dear Friends of Mount Saviour,

The universal sorrow which attended the passing of away of Pope Pius XII, of blessed memory, and the jubilation which greeted his successor, Pope John XXIII, show clearly that people in our days realize the person of the Vicar of Jesus Christ is an integral part of the manifestation of the "kindness of God, our Saviour" (Titus 3:4), which dawned on us first when the Word became flesh, and has continued ever since in the Church of God. The two letters we want to share with you at the beginning of this Christmas Chronicle, our address of homage to our new Holy Father, and the answer sent to us in his name by His Eminence, Cardinal Secretary of State, Domenico Tardini, may serve as our particular witness to the kindness of God, our Saviour, which through the one shepherd radiates over the entire flock.

November 4, 1958

"Holy Father, we, Prior and monks who serve the Lord Jesus in the monastery of Mount Saviour near Elmira, N. Y., from the bottom of our hearts offer you homage on this day of your coronation.

"We were longing to have a Pope over us. Today we acclaim with greatest joy the one whom the Holy Spirit has given as Abbot of abbots.

"Your voice sounds sweet in our ears. We are the sons of the Holy Father Benedict, living under the rule of obedience — and behold, your voice is the voice of a father, who teaches us the wisdom of peace through obedience. We love fraternal charity — and behold, the voice of our Pope John is the voice of a man, of a brother, of a friend, inspiring us with joyful love. In this New World, we are but little children, it being only eight years since our foundation — and behold, your voice is the voice of a youth, lifting up our hearts to sure hope.

"We give thanks to the Lord Who has not left us orphans. Pius lives on in John; may he live for many years to come!

"Holy Father, may our obedience be pleasing to you; may our love and our joy please you. They move us to offer, unceasingly, sacrifices and prayers to God for you."

Damasus Winzen, O. S. B., Prior

"From the Vatican, November 17, 1958

Very Reverend Father,

"The good wishes with which you and the members of your community greeted the August Pontiff on the day on which he received the Triple Crown, sounded in his ears truly like a voice of joy and of love.

"What you have expressed by your letter, so full of devotion, is sincere, is agreeable, and sweet.

"His Holiness feels impelled to express due thanks to such loving sons, and he calls down upon you abundant gifts from heaven that you may, at an eager pace, move on on the path of evangelical perfection to ever higher things.

"Know that he confirms these his fatherly wishes by giving you with great love his Apostolic Blessing.

"In the meantime, I am, with due respect, most sincerely yours

Domenico Tardini

THE WORD MADE FLESH

The glad tidings of the Nativity of Our Lord and Saviour will soon ring out into the world: "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory." (John 1:14) As often as we hear these awesome words, we shall never be able to exhaust their meaning.

The "Word became flesh": three words but heaven and earth are bound together in them. They proclaim the most intimate union of the purest expression of God's spirituality with the lowliness of human nature. No ordinary father or mother would speak about a child becoming flesh. St. John intimates that Jesus was not born as other children are born "by the will of man," but that he "comes from above." (John 3:31) The Word, who was God, became flesh.

The Incarnation is a mystery of God's descending love. Were we to try to express it in the plain language of the ordinary mortal, we would be certain to fail. If, for example, we were to say: The Word was changed into flesh, we could not continue with St. John: and He dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory. In fact, flesh would have conquered, if the Word had taken on flesh and ceased to be what He was before. Evidently, the term "flesh" stands for "man" in the full reality of his bodily nature.

Common sense may therefore suggest that we say: The Word entered into a man. However, this would mean the Word had found a man so endued with virtues, he was worthy of the closest possible association. Jesus would then have been one of the great and wise men of mankind, and the Word would have chosen him because of this.

This idea St. John evidently wanted to avoid. It would mean that man, through his own goodness, had succeeded in bridging the abyss between himself and God. The glad tidings of Christmas say precisely the opposite: The Son left His Father's glory to "become in all things like unto His brethren, that He might become a merciful and faithful high-priest before God to expiate the sins of the people." (Hebrews 2:17)

No, the Word did not only associate Himself with a human body as something which could be laid aside. When Christ appeared to His apostles after the Resurrection, and they were panic stricken, thinking they saw a spirit, the Word made flesh said to them: "A spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have." (Luke 24:37)

TRUE GOD AND TRUE MAN

By becoming flesh, the Word went all the way in His desire to become one of us. He took on our nature with its limitations, weaknesses and sufferings, to the extent of making them His own personal lot. The Son of God, by becoming flesh, owns our human nature to the extent that its actions are His personal actions. We can truly say of Him, that He "was born in Bethlehem," that He "died on the Cross," that He "rose from the dead." "Son though He was, He learned obedience in the school of suffering, and now, His full achievement reached, He wins eternal salvation for all those who render obedience to Him." (Hebrews 5:8-9)

TEMPLE OF GLORY

Marvelous is the profundity of the Scriptures! But if I were to go on expounding the union between divine and human nature in Christ, you might get discouraged and put this Chronicle aside saying: There he goes again off the deep end. But wait a moment. We shall presently return to earth. St. John himself does so, when he continues: "And He dwelt (tabernacled) in our midst, and we beheld His glory." The Word made flesh is the Holy of Holies, which in Hebrew is called "debir," or "place of the

Word" (cf. Psalm 27:2) St. John uses here the terminology of the Old Testament sanctuary, the "dwelling place" (mishkan) of God's glory. (Exodus 40:34-35)

In the sanctuary, the glory of God is revealed to all the people at the hour of sacrifice. (Leviticus 9:6 and 22) The memory of God's intimate dealings with His people in the desert kept the flame of longing for close union with Him burning in the hearts of later generations. When the Word was made flesh and dwelt among the disciples, this longing was fulfilled in a way which far exceeded all human expectations. The glory did not appear in a building of stone. It did not fill from time to time the empty throne on top of the ark. Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of man, born of the Virgin Mary, spoke of His own body as the temple: "Then the Jews said to him: What sign canst thou show us as thy warrant for doing this? Jesus answered them: Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up again . . . But the temple he was speaking of, was his own body." (John 2:18-21)

BUILDING GOD'S HOUSE

The fulfillment of the idea of the Old Testament temple in the person of the Incarnate Word of God had an enormous impact not only on the spiritual life of the Christians, but also on the culture they developed, and especially on the architecture of churches and monasteries.

The community of Mount Saviour, at this very moment, is faced with the important task of building our monastery. With Solomon, the great architect of Jerusalem, we pray: "Send Wisdom out of thy holy heaven, and from the throne of Thy majesty, that she may be with us, and may labor with us, that we may know what is acceptable with Thee." (Wisdom 9:10-11) Divine wisdom has to be invoked whenever a monastery is to be built, because it is more than any other building, the expression of the spiritual order which the Word made flesh establishes among those with whom it dwells. It ranks with the tabernacle Moses built according to the pattern shown to him on the mountain. (Exodus 25:9)

The Mosaic tabernacle was the symbolic expression of the relations between God and His people. It was "sanctuary" (in Hebrew mikdash; Greek hieron), and it was "dwelling-place" (Hebrew mishkan; Greek naos). As "sanctuary" it represented the way of man's approach to God, what he had to do to be "pure," worthy of the presence of the Holy One. As "mishkan" it symbolized the Divine Presence and His gifts to His people. The tabernacle was in form what the two tablets of stone were in letters, the Covenant between Jahwe and the Chosen People.

The monastery represents the peace and beauty of the New Covenant. A monastic community strives to live, in utmost purity, the spirit of the Messianic Age as shown in the life of the Christian community in Jerusalem which the Acts of the Apostles describes: "And continuing daily with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house . . ." (Acts 2:46) Obviously, the author does not want just to tell us the first Christians went to the temple for prayer and gathered in their homes for meals. The prayer in the temple and the "breaking of the bread" in the homes are both on the level of public worship. The remark indicates that, to the community in Jerusalem, the Presence was not restricted to the temple, but extended to the homes. This is the realization of an

ideal alive all through the Old Testament and expected to be realized in the Messianic Age.

Because the God of Israel is One and is the Creator of heaven and earth, His rule extends over the whole life of man, public and private. To perform the prescribed rites in the temple, and not to follow God's commandments in private life, amounts to serving many gods. "Surely thou seest, O son of man, what the elders of the house of Israel do in the dark, everyone in his private chamber, for they say: The Lord seeth us not, the Lord has forsaken the earth." (Ezekiel 8:12) The capital sin of Israel had been the separation of temple and home. "They have set their thresholds next to my threshold, and their posts next to my posts, and there was a wall between Me and them." (Ezekiel 43:8)

The new Israel of the Messianic Age will live according to the "law of the house" proclaimed by Ezekiel in his description of the ideal temple and the ideal community: "This is the law of the house: up on the top of the mountain the whole country! Round about in every direction is the Holy of Holies!" (Ezekiel 43:12) In the Messianic Age, the Holy of Holies ceases to be a very small place set apart to be absolutely holy. It becomes the center of sanctity in every direction.

THE LAW OF THE HOUSE

At the death of the Lord, the veil separating the Holy of Holies from the outside world was rent. The Temple of the Lord's body was destroyed. But at His Resurrection, it was raised up again. On Pentecost, it began to expand over the whole earth, the Holy Spirit "filled the whole house". (Acts 2:2) Only at Christ's Second Coming will this beginning be brought to its fulfillment in New Jerusalem where there is no temple anymore, "for the Lord almighty and the Lamb are its temple." (Apoc. 21:22)

While the Church is still on her pilgrimage through this world, in the age between the temple and New Jerusalem, we build churches. They are very different from the temple. They are the Holy of Holies opened to the whole People of God. There they come: children, women, men. All those, who are living members of Christ's Mystical Body, have access to the altar, to bring their gifts, and to receive the Body and Blood of the Word made flesh, which builds them up into one spiritual temple glorifying the Father.

Instead of remaining a windowless cubicle where "the Lord dwells in darkness" (III Kings 8:12), the Holy of Holies of the Old Testament has been turned into a family home. The oldest Christian churches were indeed private houses, and this not only because of the persecutions. They were never called "temple" but "congregation" (ecclesia). In these churches, the Divine Presence descended not upon the mercy seat, between the cherubim, but upon the family table. The glory beheld at the hour of sacrifice was now seen in the form of a loaf of bread and a cup of wine, and the new sacrifice itself was the "breaking of the bread".

The Messianic Day had indeed begun, the day of which the prophet Zachary had spoken: "In that day every kitchen pot in Jerusalem and Juda shall be sanctified to the Lord of Hosts, and those who come to offer sacrifice shall partake of them." (Zacharias 14:21) By praying in

the temple and breaking bread from house to house, the first Christians observed the "law of the house": "Round about, in every direction is the Holy of Holies."

THE CLOISTER

The spiritual heirs to the enthusiasm of the Apostolic Church in Jerusalem were the monks. They kept the fire of the "first love" (Apoc. 2:4) burning through the centuries. They wanted to live the spirit of the Messianic Age to the fullest. They realized the scene of their approach to God was no longer Mount Sinai with its darkness, storm and trumpet sounds; but Mount Sion, the heavenly Jerusalem, city of the living God, where they join the festive assembly of the angels to sing without ceasing the Canticle of the Lamb. The cloisters they built remain the most perfect expression of the basic principles of the Messianic Age: "Round about, in every direction is the Holy of Holies."

St. Benedict's concept of monastic community life was deeply influenced by the description, found in the Acts of the Apostles, of the community life of the first Christians. Although no directions are given by St. Benedict as to the arrangement of the monastic buildings, his ideas have led to certain architectural traditions which were formulated in a kind of "master plan" kept at St. Gall in Switzerland since about the eighth century. According to this plan the heart of the whole ensemble is the cloister, a quadrangle formed by the church on the North side, the living quarters for the monks, consisting of chapter house and calefactory on the first floor, the dormitory on the second, on the East side. To the South, was the refectory and to the West the "cellarium" or building for the provisions and utensils needed for the daily life of the monks.

This cloister was "Holy of Holies in every direction." It was the temple taking a complete hold of the home. The monks lived under one roof with the sanctuary. The chapter house and the dormitory were in closest connection with the choir at the East end of the church. The refectory to the South, parallel to the church, was an image of the upper room in Jerusalem where Our Lord, represented by the Abbot, presided over the meals of the monks, which themselves again foreshadowed the "supper of eternal life." The fact that the West side of the cloister was taken up by the storerooms, showed to all that the vessels of the monastery had to be considered as "sacred vessels of the altar" (Rule, ch. 31), a principle laid down by St. Benedict as the practical application of Zachary's prophecy: "In that day every kitchen pot in Jerusalem and Juda shall be sanctified to the Lord of Hosts, and those who come to offer sacrifice shall partake of them."

Silence reigned in the cloister to safeguard the exclusive rule of the Word of God over all the actions of the monks, who, in much speaking could not possibly avoid sin. Frequent processions along the cloister walks drew it again and again into the immediate radius of worship. The cloister garden was the place where those who slept in the peace of Christ waited for the Last Day in the shadow of the Cross which occupied its center.

All those who, for one reason or another, were not obliged to the full observance of the Rule, lived in separate building units, close to the cloister, but not in it. The sick had their infirmary, and the novices their "cell." The guest-house was located at the entrance into the monastic

enclosure, close to the porter's lodge. A kitchen for the guests is also found in this area.

The true meaning of the seclusion of the cloister, however, is not to provide the individual monk with "isolation for introspection" as is sometimes said. The cloister is separated from the rest of the world not for the sake of withdrawal, but in order to create in the world a stronghold of the Spirit where the monks live under the rule of stability; their entire being rooted in Christ and built up in Him, and strengthened in the faith, rendering thanks abundantly. (cf. Colossians 2:7) The reason for the seclusion of the cloister is best expressed by St. Paul in his letter to the Hebrews: "Jesus suffered outside the city gate that He might sanctify the people by His blood. Let us therefore go forth to Him outside the camp, bearing his reproach; for here we have no permanent city, but we seek for the city that is to come." (Hebrews 13:13-14)

MOUNT SAVIOUR

When we first came to Mount Saviour, we had grand dreams of a mighty abbey on a sight overlooking Big Flats. Since then, for spiritual as well as for material reasons, we have given up the idea of competing with the Middle Ages. The realities of life forced us to start building at the most economical place, right at the upper end of Madigan Road, where the chapel was erected in an octagonal form. This offered many advantages over a rectangle. It allowed us to put the altar into the center, bringing everyone present into living contact with the celebrating priest. Monks and guests form one circle around the altar and easily fuse into common song and common action. The octagon is indeed the ideal shape to express the "law of the house:" "Round about in every direction is the Holy of Holies!"

The heart of the chapel is the altar. The whole is set on an octagonal platform, which is covered with flagstone and decorated with the pattern of an eight-pointed star, laid out in brick. The support of the magnificent rectangular mensa, which Mr. Tomas Penning contributed from his own quarry at Saugerties, N. Y., is built of local stone and contains a reliquary which is closed by a simple but beautiful metal grille done by our neighbor, Tony Ekes.

The altar and chapel are the spiritual and architectural center of a monastery. At Mount Saviour, both express the idea that from the Holy of Holies, which is the beauty of the Word made flesh, the temple destroyed for our sake and raised again for us, sanctity radiates into every direction. The altar surrounded by the eight-pointed star and the octagonal chapel show that the Lord being lifted up from the earth draws all things to himself. (cf. John 12:32)

In the Middle Ages, the separation of the monks from the world frequently went to the extreme of excluding the lay-folk from the monastic services. In our days, the relation between monks and the faithful has changed a great deal. While it remains true that monastery churches are not parish churches, there are three important movements alive in the Church today establishing a much closer contact between the monks on the one side and the diocesan priests and laity on the other. The liturgical movement, the Bible movement and the retreat movement

work together to extend the Holy of Holies "round about, in every direction."

When Mount Saviour was founded, a high dignitary of the Roman Curia gave the advice: "Open the gates, Dom Damaso, don't shut them." Ever since, I have considered it the special mission of Mount Saviour to bring the guests close to the life of the community as long as both parties profit spiritually from such contact. This is one of the reasons why we are looking forward to building our monastery. It will enable us to have guests and retreatants up on our hill, closer to the chapel and the community. One of the most important units to be added to the traditional scheme of monastic buildings is a cloister for diocesan priests for they have a special claim on our hospitality.

This would require a second chapel and here another modification suggests itself for Mount Saviour. The relation between East and West is rapidly becoming the dominant theme of our spiritual development. East and West are meeting. Christianity belongs to both. A Benedictine monastery, rooted in a tradition common to East and West, is the natural bridge. Therefore, we are seriously planning to build a chapel which will correspond to the needs of the Eastern Rites. We do not intend to become "make-believe Easterners," but we would like to offer a haven to those priests and lay-folk in our own country who, under great personal sacrifices, keep the venerable liturgical and spiritual traditions of Eastern Christianity alive.

Dear Friends of Mount Saviour, the Christmas Chronicle is our "Christmas card" for all of you. It would be a desirable thing to address to each one of you a special little word for the Feast which celebrates the Word made flesh. This is impossible for obvious reasons. But I wish you would accept this Chronicle as a word through which we want to share with you the joy of building the house where God's glory dwells among us.

"Like the stones of a temple, cut for a building for God the Father, you have been lifted up to the top by the crane of Jesus Christ, which is the Cross, and the rope of the Holy Spirit. For your faith has drawn you up, and charity has been the road leading to God. You are all fellow pilgrims, carrying with you God and His temple; you are bearers of Christ and of holy offerings, decked out in the commandments of Jesus Christ. And with this letter I am able to take part in your festivity, to be of your company, to share in the joy that comes from setting your heart not on what is merely human in life, but on God." (St. Ignatius of Antioch, to the Ephesians, 9)

Devotedly yours in Christ,

F. Damaso Wignam, O.S.B.