



Mount Saviour Chronicle

THE BENEDICTINE MONASTERY OF MOUNT SAVIOUR
P.O. BOX 3066, ELMIRA, NEW YORK

NUMBER 16

ALL SOULS' DAY, 1960

Dear Friends of Mount Saviour,

This year the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed will take on a special significance for us, because for the first time we shall visit on that day the grave of one of our own—Brother Christopher Claas, the first of us whom Christ has called into His glory.

Although every person remains an impenetrable mystery, far beyond the range of human understanding, yet we are able to catch a glimpse, here and there, of God's loving intentions and of the means He chooses to realize them in



Photograph by Dick Eisenhart

the course of a man's life. In Brother Christopher's case we cannot help thinking that God lifted the veil somewhat in the remarkable circumstances of his death.

It happened on July 15. The community was rejoicing in the honor of a visit from the Abbot of Solesmes, Dom Jean Prou. Naturally we were eager to be at our best. But as is usual at such critical moments, the unexpected happened. We had gathered together in the refectory to begin the prayer before dinner when a humming sound, rapidly rising in intensity, indicated that the loud-speaker was out of order. Brother Christopher had volunteered to be substitute reader at table that day; under the circumstances, the bad behaviour of the public-address system offended more than usually his sense of order and efficiency. He ran upstairs to adjust the controls, then hurried back in time for the blessing and to begin the reading. After a few lines his voice began to tremble, then ceased. He slumped over the book. Some of us ran to him; by the time we had carried him out of the refectory, he had lost consciousness; his heart, weakened by rheumatic fever when he was young, had proved unequal to the sudden excitement and the effort. He received absolution and Extreme Unction, and within a few minutes was gone. Stunned as we were, there was for the community great consolation in Dom Prou's presence, for the words he spoke, rising from the heart of a true monk, helped us to realize the majesty and peace inherent in a monk's death. Of course, "technically speaking" it is true that Brother Christopher was not a monk, because he had never made Solemn Profession. But in the longing of his heart he was. The fact that the external realization of his desire was denied him here on earth was part of his own personal way to God.

Brother Christopher died reading the Word of God to his brethren; a monk could scarcely ask a better last "obedience". It was the seventh chapter of the Second Book of Samuel, in which the Lord gives the prophet Nathan a message for King David. Now firmly established on his throne (for "the Lord had given him rest on every side from all his enemies"), David is eager to complete his work by building a resting-place for the Lord in his new capital city of Jerusalem. At this very moment Nathan gives David a surprising verdict: the work of building the Temple is to be left to others. It is not to be allowed to David. "Shall you build me a house to dwell in? . . . The Lord will make you a house." This passage, with which

Brother Christopher was well acquainted (for we had often spoken of it in the past), seems to reveal the deepest meaning of his mission here on earth.

Born June 10, 1920, the son of Peter and Marie Hinterland Claas, Brother Christopher received the name of Albert. He had one sister, Wilma, to whom he was always deeply devoted. Although his parents were not able to provide him with much of this earth's goods, they gave him what is more important, a happy home. Yet deep down in his heart he was dissatisfied with the shallowness which surrounded him in his public school. A highly sensitive boy, he possessed that real nobility of heart which finds expression in a natural enthusiasm for all great and heroic ideals.

The war came; he was eager to serve his country. But when the Army discovered the weakness of his heart, he suffered the terrible blow of being rejected for military service. For the first time, "the theme of God" could be heard in the symphony of his life. "You want to build me a house? No! I shall build you a house."

Through the humiliating experience of this natural incapability, God began to lead Albert into the glory of His mercy; his pride had been shattered, but only that God's greatness might be the more apparent to him.

The Catholic heritage of his Austrian mother may have played a part in his decision; the example of his best friend and his family, who were good Catholics, certainly had an influence on him; but the decisive factor in his conversion to Catholicism was his natural sense of truth, and of absolute truth. He hated compromise and pretense, and God's grace used this natural disposition to lead Albert into the Church. Once he had gained a living contact with the Word of God in the Bible, he saw that his only choice was either to accept the Old Testament and to join spiritually with the Chosen People, or to believe in the Messiah Jesus and to enter the Church. It shows the clarity and depth of his thinking that his choice was between Judaism or Catholicism, and that he saw no third possibility.

Let him tell us himself what happened to him in the three decisive years of his life, between 1950 and 1953. In a Christmas letter which he sent from the Austrian monastery of St Georgenberg to his father, he writes: "Hurrying down to the Church (for Midnight Mass) I knelt in the first pew and wished all of you a silent blessed and merry Christmas, and prepared to celebrate privately the anniversary of my first communion, received in 1950 at Cliffside Park, N. J. from Fr Ballinger and now three years later in an Austrian monastery. Austria was the moon three years ago, three eventful years ago: the visit to the Trappist monastery in Rhode Island; the decision to become a Catholic and the terrifying first confession; first communion, confirmation; your move to Florida; another visit to the Trappists who had moved to Massachusetts; the consideration of Jerusalem; three sieges of pneumonia; my health restoring and the memorable visit with both of you in the "Land of Sunshine"; the rebirth by surgery in Philadelphia; appendicitis; loss of my job with X and the new employment which I never liked; 1953's summer of indecision after I had finally paid all the medical bills and was able to quit the disliked job, meeting Father J (an Austrian monk, visiting in the United States) through Father Ballinger; suggestion and decision; Bon Voyage; 7 days crossing the Atlantic; Southampton, LeHavre, Paris, Switzerland, Innsbruck, the fabulous castle, trains, trains, trains; the first

glimpse of the magnificent location of St. Georgenberg; a momentous three years, but I have deviated into one of those recaps the newspapers will be featuring at this year's end."

For Albert, to become a Catholic meant to give himself completely to God's service, and he thought that this was not possible for him without imitating the example of Abraham, leaving "his country, his kindred and his father's house." For awhile he considered joining Abbot Leo Rudloff at Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem, but then he decided to try his vocation at St Georgenberg in Austria. After he had lived there for a time he came to see that he had put the cart before the horse: his efforts were taken up with learning German, while the more important indoctrination into the monastic life and into the liturgy of the Church could not be adequately pursued. In spite of deep love for St. Georgenberg, its Abbot and community, he felt increasingly lonesome and, as a result, withdrew more and more into himself. Sure of his monastic vocation, he could not convince himself that St Georgenberg was a place where he could live a life completely integrated with the monastic family. The following sentences, written to his sister at this time, show how well he understood the spirit of St. Benedict: "Life in a monastery is a very ordinary thing . . . one is never required to labor or mortify beyond human endurance, very much the contrary. People are not familiar enough with the ordinary monk; they found their opinions on the exceptions, those extraordinary examples of fasting and penance which mark the saint. . . . Prayer, work and study, one complementing the other, form the basis of the common life of the monk. These have strength in union, in the family conception of St Benedict. One is able to work without thought of success and financial gain, without coping with selfish competition; and with these liabilities removed one can dedicate whatever work one does to God and to the welfare of the community. You have no idea of the freedom implicit in a monastery. The formula of life found in the rule of St Benedict is based on the prescriptions of the Bible. Nothing abnormal, nothing unnatural, nothing monstrous or miraculous, only simple everyday living, but with a purpose of serving God and fellowman constantly the essence. I believe at the moment, however, that it is where I was brought up, where I am familiar, where I have already things in common that I have a better chance of fully realizing the grace of a monastic vocation."

Early in 1954 Albert returned to his own country. After various attempts to settle his future, he came to Mount Saviour in November of that year. He had heard that we were in dire need of a secretary, although what attracted him was certainly not the tiny salary offered to him, but the desire to help the monastery, which was poor and struggling, and the possibility of eventually becoming a choir monk. He had been with us on a visit in July 1951, when we were first beginning. At that time his critical eye had discovered many defects, and he had had misgivings about our future. Returning three years later, he realized that the monks were succeeding "in spite of themselves", as he put it in a letter to a friend. He saw that God's blessing supported what His human instruments were unable to achieve by themselves. "You want to build me a house? No! I shall build you a house." The theme of God in Albert's life was apparent to him in the development of Mount Saviour. It was this inner affinity, which I am sure, kept him with us through all disappointments, vacillations, fits of impatience, to which his sensitive nature was constantly exposed. It is true that he

did not as yet realize clearly what the theme of God in his life was. He could not. He had come to help us, knowing that he had many natural gifts with which he would be able to serve the monastery. He wanted to build God a house. Indeed, his contribution to the material stabilization of Mount Saviour was great: he organized the book-keeping; he acted as "procurator", being in charge of buying. But his main interest was the farm, where he worked in close contact with Father John, not only in planning but also in the performance of daily chores. To him the farm was not merely a business enterprise, but a way of life eminently suited to the monk, who is called through manual labor to take a prominent share in the penance which divine justice has inflicted upon all sons of Adam.

Albert's very efforts to help the monastery in the material sense became an obstacle on the way toward the fulfillment of his spiritual ambitions. He became so deeply absorbed in so many tasks that it became impossible for him to enter the canonical novitiate. That he was unable to do so was his greatest sacrifice. On the feast of the Finding of the Cross, on May 3, 1956, he was invested as an oblate novice and received the name Christopher — "Christ bearer". "O Christopher, you are worthy of such a beautiful name, because you carry Christ's cross in your flesh and Him in your heart."

These words of the liturgy of his patron saint marked his whole monastic life. He had a great devotion to the sufferings which Our Lord endured in the garden of Gethsemani. The wounds in his own heart grew deeper and deeper. His final oblation, on July 10, 1958, did not give him the feeling of being settled in God's house. He had to abandon one ambition after the other. His heart began to trouble him again and he had to give up all the work on the farm. The presentiment grew more and more acute that he did not have long to live. He spoke of the need to train another member of the community to take his place.

But what looked like complete frustration was in reality God's way of building him a house. He visibly mellowed in his relations with his brothers in Christ, while his deepest thoughts turned toward the Last Things. In all its suffering and loneliness, his spirit was well prepared for the coming of the Bridegroom.

We shall not forget the expression of peace radiating from his youthful face as Brother Christopher lay in the crypt at the feet of Our Lady Queen of Peace. What a joy to see him in his monastic habit, dressed for the day of resurrection. He had succeeded — in spite of himself. God had dissolved the abode of his earthly sojourn and had prepared for him an eternal dwelling in heaven.

Now he is interceding there for all of us who look forward with longing to that city which has true foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

F. Ramsey Wingon, O.S.B.

ALL SOULS

We shall remember in our Masses on All Souls' Day and throughout November the names of the departed sent to us for this purpose. A list for the names is included. These lists will be placed under the altar for the month.

MASS OFFERINGS

We are in great need of Mass offerings, especially for Low Masses. Our friends are asked to remember us when they wish to have Masses offered.

Priest-oblates and other priest-friends are asked to send us stipends which they cannot personally take care of, or to secure stipends for us.

We shall be glad to send to those who request them a supply of Mass cards for the living and for the dead. (Please specify the number of each). The cards should be filled out and sent to the family of the deceased or to the person whose name day, birthday, wedding day, or other special anniversary you may wish to remember by the gift of Masses. Then send us the name of the person for whom the Mass is to be offered, indicating whether he is living or deceased, together with your offering and your name and address.

THANKS

Our warm gratitude to:

- all who sent expressions of sympathy and arranged for the Holy Sacrifice to be offered for Brother Christopher;
- Charles Hughes and his sons Raymond and Charles, Jr, for their personal interest and great assistance in arranging for Brother Christopher's funeral;
- Dick Eisenhart and the editors of the Syracuse "Post-Standard" for the excellent photographs and account of Mount Saviour which appeared in the pictorial section of the October 2 issue; for the cover they selected a picture of Brother Christopher;
- the friends who provided us with salads and other good things to serve our extra guests on the occasion of Brother Christopher's funeral and of Father Martin's ordination;
- those who sent donations and articles for Dedication Day;
- the committee members and others who made such thorough preparations for and worked so hard on Dedication Day;
- the Town Commissioner and Board of the Town of Big Flats, its Road Supervisor and his assistants for the re-surfacing and care of our road;
- all who have made contributions to the monastery since the issue of the last "Chronicle" — especially those to whom individual notes have not yet been sent.

We are deeply aware of all the kindness and generosity of our friends and we pray especially for them every day. May God reward them abundantly.

. . . N E W S . . .

Father Peter Minard, our Novice Master since December, 1954, returned in June to his abbey, Saint Martin's, Liguge, France. It is impossible to express adequately our debt of gratitude to him for his careful training of our novices, his generous giving of himself to the labors of librarian, teacher, archivist, for his vigorous work on the farm, in the kitchen and wherever he was asked or volunteered, as he often did, to help. His example of monastic regularity and his great contribution to Mount Saviour in these formative years are of permanent and incalculable value. Our deep gratitude and our prayers will always accompany him. News of his being sent to the inter-racial monastery of Notre Dame de Mont-Pelee, Martinique, has just reached us.

Father Raphael Hombach, monk of Maria Laach, spent the summer with us, arriving May 20, leaving September 25. He gave great assistance in our study and arrangement of the ceremonies and customs. We are very grateful to Father Abbot Basil Ebel of Maria Laach, as well as to Father Raphael, for the latter's visit.

May 23. Frere Gerard and Frere Laurent of the Protestant Community of Taize, in France, came for two days, in the course of which they discussed their approach to ecumenical work.

June 9. The Right Reverend Bonaventure Knaebel, O.S.B., Archabbot of Saint Meinard's, Indiana, made us an overnight visit and spoke to the community about the Archabbey.

June 12. Day of Recollection for the Oblates of Rochester and Elmira and vicinity.

June 21. The Most Reverend Ansgar Nelson, O.S.B., Bishop of Stockholm, Sweden, spent part of the day with us.

Dom Jean Leclercq arrived for a visit of several days, during which he gave us a morning and evening conference and held discussion periods on monastic history and customs and their bearing on monastic practices today.

June 23. Thomas William Kelly of Jamesville, N. Y., was received into the novitiate and given the name of Hugh.

July 1. Reverend Father Damasus, Father Raphael, and Father Augustine left for the convent of the Benedictine nuns of Regina Laudis, Bethlehem, Conn., to attend the Consecration and Solemn Profession of Mother Miriam Benedict whose parents are close friends and oblates in Elmira.

July 4. Reverend Father Damasus left for the summer camp of the Buffalo Diocese Seminarians where, at the invitation of the Most Reverend Joseph A. Burke, D. D., Bishop of Buffalo, he gave a week's conference on Christian Art.

July 13. The Right Reverend Dom Jean Prou, O.S.B., Abbot of Solesmes, and his secretary, Dom Gerard Dautremer, arrived for a visit of several days.

July 21. Father Thomas Phelan of Troy, N. Y., showed slides and spoke on ancient Celtic monasteries and churches.

July 24. Father Anselm Strittmatter, O.S.B., Novice Master of Saint Anselm's Priory, Washington, D. C., arrived for the ordination of our Father Martin, at which he was Father Martin's assistant. Together with Father Anselm came Father Hilary Hayden, also of Saint Anselm's Priory, and Father Valentine Kochler of Saint Vincent Archabbey, Latrobe, Pa.

July 25. The Feast of Saint James. Our bishop, the Most Reverend James E. Kearney, D. D., of Rochester, honored us by coming to confer the sacred priesthood on Father Martin Boler. The ordination was attended by Father Martin's parents, brother, a number of relatives and friends and by members of the local clergy and friends of the community. Father Martin celebrated his first High Mass on the following day, the feast of Saints Joachim and Anne.

August 5. A short visit from Father H. A. Reinhold.

August 7. Professor Norman Daly of Cornell gave us a stimulating lecture on avant garde painting in the United States.

August 14. Dedication Day. About 800 persons visited during the day. A very good spirit was evident and the day was successful as well as enjoyable, due in great measure to the committee, those who worked at the various booths and games, and the Scouts and others who helped with preparations, parking and organization generally.

August 15. Father David left for the Buffalo Seminarians' Summer Camp to give a week of conferences on Christian Art.

August 21. Father Augustine left to attend the National Liturgical Week at Pittsburgh.

August 24. Mr. Anthony Walsh, founder and director of Benedict Labre House in Montreal, spoke to us about this particular work, and about work among and for the poor generally.

August 28. William Newey of Decatur, Georgia, was received into the novitiate and given the name of Paul.

August 29. Our annual Fall Picnic, a most enjoyable occasion, was a dinner provided for us by our good friends and neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Ekes, in the yard of their home. Our hearty thanks to them and to Karl, Paul, and Judy Ekes.

August 31. Father Hildebrand Meienberg, O.S.B., of Saint Benedict's Priory, Fribourg, Switzerland, making his retreat here, showed us slides of churches in Switzerland, and of African missions.

September 3. Mother Gertrude, Superior of Saint Walburga's Convent, Boulder, Colorado, and two companions arrived for a three day visit.

September 22. Fathers Benedict Tighe and Basil DePinto returned home from their studies abroad.

September 23. Very Reverend Dom Denis Martin, Prior of Toumliline in Morocco arrived. In the afternoon he showed us slides of monastic missions in Africa. In the evening there was a buffet supper to welcome home Fathers Benedict and Basil and to bid farewell to Father Raphael who left on the 25th to return to Maria Laach.

October 3. Bishop Averky, Abbot Laurus, seven of the community, and three laymen from the Russian Orthodox Monastery of the Holy Trinity, Jordanville, N. Y., came in the afternoon. After a collation and inspection of the monastery and chapel they attended Vespers.

The number of novices, postulants, and candidates now totals nine. This has made it necessary to use Saint John's Guest House for the Novitiate. Extension of guest facilities at Saint James's has begun.