

Mount Saviour Chronicle

THE BENEDICTINE MONASTERY OF MOUNT SAVIOUR
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Dear friends of Mount Saviour:

Snow already covers the ground in front of the Casa window, and a cold wind blows hard to make it known that his master, stern winter, has taken over the reins to rule our days. In the rhythm of our monastic life winter plays an important role. It is the season when wanderlust lessens and the mind is instead more eager to launch out into depths of its own. It is the time of recollection and contemplation, and this not only for monks but for you, our friends, as well. I would like, therefore, to offer you our best wishes for a blessed Christmas by way of reminiscing with you on some of the phases my own soul has passed through on its route to recollection and contemplation. It is my hope that this may help you take fuller advantage of the grace of faith and the gifts of wisdom and understanding offered you during this season when through the mystery of the Word made flesh the light of the Father's glory shines anew upon the eyes of our mind.

Through meditation on the Word . . .

I went to Maria Laach in the late Fall of 1920. Rising was at an early hour: 4:00 a.m., when, needless to say, it was still dark. It was the custom after Vigils for the novices to go to the novitiate for their reading, all of us on our knees around a table, each with his book before him. At this early hour of the day such an arrangement had distinct advantages, and in the days of our 'first love' we did not mind the uncomfortable posture. This was my first attempt at meditation. My novicemaster, Father Albert Hammenstede, had given me the Gospel of Saint John as 'material'. I shall never forget this first encounter with the Gospel of the Word made flesh. What a tremendous discovery it was! Here the greatest of all contemplatives did not hesitate to feed the imagination of the reader with carefully painted pictures of the earthly scene. With vivid strokes he sketched the character, the attitudes and reactions of groups and persons around the Lord, prisms the human soul; and from this concrete, visible, and human setting the person of the Word made flesh arose in unique majesty, in infinite contrast with and

still a consummation of all around Him. Saint John did indeed write of what was from the beginning, what he had heard, what he had seen with his eyes, what he had gazed upon, and what his hands had touched: the Word of Life (cf. I John 1:1).

. . . made flesh . . .

Great were the delights of this first winter in the monastery. I thought I was approaching the higher degrees of contemplation! Father Albert took a more sober view of my spiritual accomplishments. He was an artist at heart, his parents had provided him with an excellent education, he had travelled extensively, and he was a marvelous story-teller, making him unfailingly welcome at recreation. His approach to monasticism was that of a humanist. He did not approve of any short cut to contemplation which tried to eliminate too soon the contact with the visible things given to us as stepping stones to reach the invisible. He foresaw premature drying up of the wellsprings of contemplation in us if we were not given the opportunity of broadening our views and relating ourselves to the breadth and heights and depths of God's creation.

. . . in the Church . . .

While our novicemaster won our hearts through his sense of humor, his kindness, his understanding of human nature and his nobility of soul, our Abbot, Ildefonse Herwegen, contributed an even more important element to our spiritual formation: a deeper appreciation of the blessings of the common life and of the order which makes it possible. The most decisive experience in my life up to the time of my entering the monastery had been the revolution of 1918 which did away with the monarchy in Germany and established the Weimar republic. As a result I was rather suspicious of authority and believed in 'youth' as the gate to the future. The monastic world into which I entered was firmly rooted in 'number, degree, and measure'. It was determined by tradition — which I considered synonymous with stagnation. There seemed to be little room for the 'elan' which every generation demands in new

form. My problem as a novice was how 'life' could be related to 'form'. Father Albert encouraged me to write a paper on it. When I handed it to him, it raised some concern in high quarters. Abbot Ildefonse was a 'Roman' at heart, and as a monk of Saint Benedict he was a convinced 'cenobite', a man of the common life. When he read my paper he felt that the Teutons were again attacking the walls of Rome, and he did not hesitate to jump into the breach with a series of conferences on the relation between the individual and the community. They opened new vistas to me and mark a turning point on my way toward a deeper understanding of the contemplative life. I began to see that unity cannot exist without authority, that charity is inseparable from justice and order, that man cannot have God for his Father without having the Church for his Mother. Abbot Ildefonse saw clearly the danger of the individualistic trend in man which may use the ideal of the contemplative life as a pretext to withdraw from contact with other people, and he considered the life under a Rule and an abbot as an essential element in the spiritual formation of a contemplative. He applied the same principle to the interior life of the monk, according to the directive of Saint Benedict that "the mind should be in concord with the voice". This means that the monk for the purpose of contemplation does not withdraw into himself, but joins in the contemplation which the Church practices in her public prayer and in the celebration of the Eucharist.

... by memory ...

The novitiate came to an end all too soon. After temporary profession studies began. It was felt that my inclination for 'life' at the expense of 'form' called for the checkmate of a Roman education, so I was sent to the Benedictine Academy of Sant'Anselmo on the Aventine hill, where Father Joseph Gredt taught Thomistic philosophy in undiluted form. The Prophet Ezekiel was taught in a vision to eat the scroll of the Law. Of Father Gredt it might be said that he had eaten his own book, the *Elementa* of Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy. He was identified with his book, and there was no way out for his students but to learn it by heart. Because I had to take a doctorate under his direction I had to learn both volumes page by page. I had never exercised my memory before going to Rome, and no one knows the troubles I saw at the beginning, but lo and behold after a while I discovered memory and it grew better and better as the years with Father Gredt went by. Only much later did I appreciate the value of good memory for the very life I had pledged by my profession as a monk, for a good memory is indeed the mother of contemplation. For centuries the Jews have memorized the Law and their Liturgy. The Mohammedans know the Koran by heart. The Christians of old did the same with considerable sections of the Bible. There was a time when no one could be consecrated bishop who did not know the Psalter by heart. One should not underestimate the strength, stability, and unity of a society so constructed. But where are our mem-

ories today? If they exist at all, they are empty. Practically no effort is being made either in schools or in homes to hand down the wisdom of the ages from one generation to the other. Bible stories, fairy tales, poems, proverbs are disappearing from the horizon. The memory ceases to be a store house from which parents or teachers bring forth new things and old. All this is a tremendous loss to our whole civilization, but especially to our spiritual life, to our ability to concentrate, to meditate, to pray, and even to converse with our fellow men. Monastic tradition is totally different. It is interesting to note that Saint Benedict in his Rule uses the word 'meditate' in the sense of learning by heart, which is done by reading or reciting audibly to oneself. Memorizing demands repetition; the words to be learned have to be ruminated. It is this process of rumination which allows the word to penetrate the heart, as it is said in Scripture: "My heart grows hot within me. Through my meditation a fire has been kindled" (Ps. 38:4). Memory, therefore, plays an essential part in the spiritual life of the monk: it is a bridge between the word and the heart.

... and by interpretation ...

Do not think it was only in the exercise of my memory as a student of Gredt that I profited in Rome. Dear Father Joseph Gredt was a true philosopher, belonging to a philosophical 'school'. He was well aware of this, and it had its effect on his thinking. He was not impressed by 'originality'. The greatest danger for a philosopher was, in his mind, what he called 'bottomless profundity', of which he found so much in German philosophy. When I told him I would like to write my thesis for the doctorate on Max Scheler's idea of love he raised the wrinkles of his forehead into a high laminated arch of complete astonishment. For him love was no problem. Still, he consented, and as time went on his interest grew. I don't say he fell in love with the topic, but he did his best to turn all the lights of Scholastic philosophy to penetrating the Nordic fog of Scheler's concepts, and I profited a lot from it all. Living in the light of Thomism with a guide steeped in its doctrine, like Father Gredt, was another great gain of my years in Rome. It is impossible to replace living teaching such as his was with the reading of books.

It is evident that so much absorption of doctrine has its limitations: life might be lost in the process of assimilating form. Scholastic teaching tried to avoid this danger by various means, one of them the deliberate cultivation of the art of commenting on the works of a master. To write commentaries on the classical sources of natural and supernatural knowledge, such as the works of Aristotle and the books of Holy Scripture was, in the Middle Ages, the condition for promotion to the dignity of 'magister' (teacher). Here again I see an important element in the formation of the mind which is sadly lacking today. Contemplation demands imitation, rumination of God's revelation, principally through interpretation, the means of the mind's responding in an active way to revealed truth, and the indication of the disciple's progress to the art of the master.

What he has been taught has come to life in his own thinking, and as a consequence he is able to open it up to others, not by a process of mere repetition, but by rethinking, developing, and applying the doctrine received. Such creative interpretation is an essential part of human civilization in general. Infinitely greater is its importance in the realm of revelation. The Church is the bride of the Word made flesh; she inclines the ear of her heart to the saving news of redemption in order to hand it down from generation to generation, through the services of ordained teachers. The bishops are the teachers of their churches. Men like Saints John Chrysostom, Augustine, Ambrose, and Gregory wrote commentaries on practically all the books of Holy Scripture. Today most of this work of loving and living interpretation is being done by priests, primarily in the homily at Mass. But in a special way it has always been the function of monks to preserve the treasures of ecclesiastical tradition, not only on the shelves of their libraries, but in their own spiritual world, a world of recollection, of quiet concentration on God's Word, and on His wonderful works. The monks are the living memory of the Church. They do not have to exhaust themselves trying to keep up to date, or even ahead of the times. This attitude does not reflect backwardness nor sterile conservatism, but means constantly returning to essentials, which has so often in history opened the way to organic progress. The motto of the monk is the word from Lamentations (5:21): "Renew our days as in the beginning."

... may Christ be born in your hearts.

On my return to Maria Laach I was drawn into the collective effort of the whole community, under the guidance of Abbot Ildefonse, to 'interpret' the liturgy of the Roman Church through the study of its history and theology. The effects of this effort were not limited to the community itself. They were felt all over Germany, and in fact all over the world. It was a classical example of the importance which monastic interpretation can have for the whole Church. It was my happy lot to be able to take part in this work by writing a commentary on the chapters of the *Summa theologiae* of Saint Thomas which deal with the sacraments in general, with baptism and confirmation, and with the Eucharist.

Another commentary on the Mass was just in process of appearing when I was sent to the United States in 1938. This transplanting opens a completely new phase on the road to contemplation, which we could go into on another occasion. Let these few thoughts do for the moment, and may they bear fruit in your spiritual life. This is the time for recollection, for spiritual reading, and for meditation. Please don't sit on the floor! But there is no reason why you could not take the Gospel of Saint John, reading it slowly, taking one episode after another: the gathering of the Apostles, the wedding feast at Cana, the first visit of the Lord to Jerusalem, etc. You will soon realize that Saint John usually combines an episode with a sermon of Christ; that is the method of the Word made flesh.

Your response should be to follow Saint John by picturing to yourself the episode in its concrete setting. Then let the word of Christ lead you from this 'sign' into the light of his saving love. Then let both, the sign and the teaching, sink into the depth of your memory. Don't rush from one flower to another in nervous haste, pushed by the automatic drive of your impatience. Relax, take your time, reconstruct the scene in your memory, ruminate upon it, make it your own. Then take another step, hand it over to others, explain it to your children or to others eager to share in Christ's riches. If there is no one about, write it down very simply for yourself and for God, as a little token of recognition and thanksgiving. In this way the Word of God is born in your own heart. By the mystery of the Word made flesh the light of God's glory shines in our minds, and while we begin to recognize God in a visible way we become drawn by Him to things unseen. What happier Christmas could there be! All here at Mount Saviour hope it will be yours.

F. Damascus Wignam, O.S.B.

BOOKS

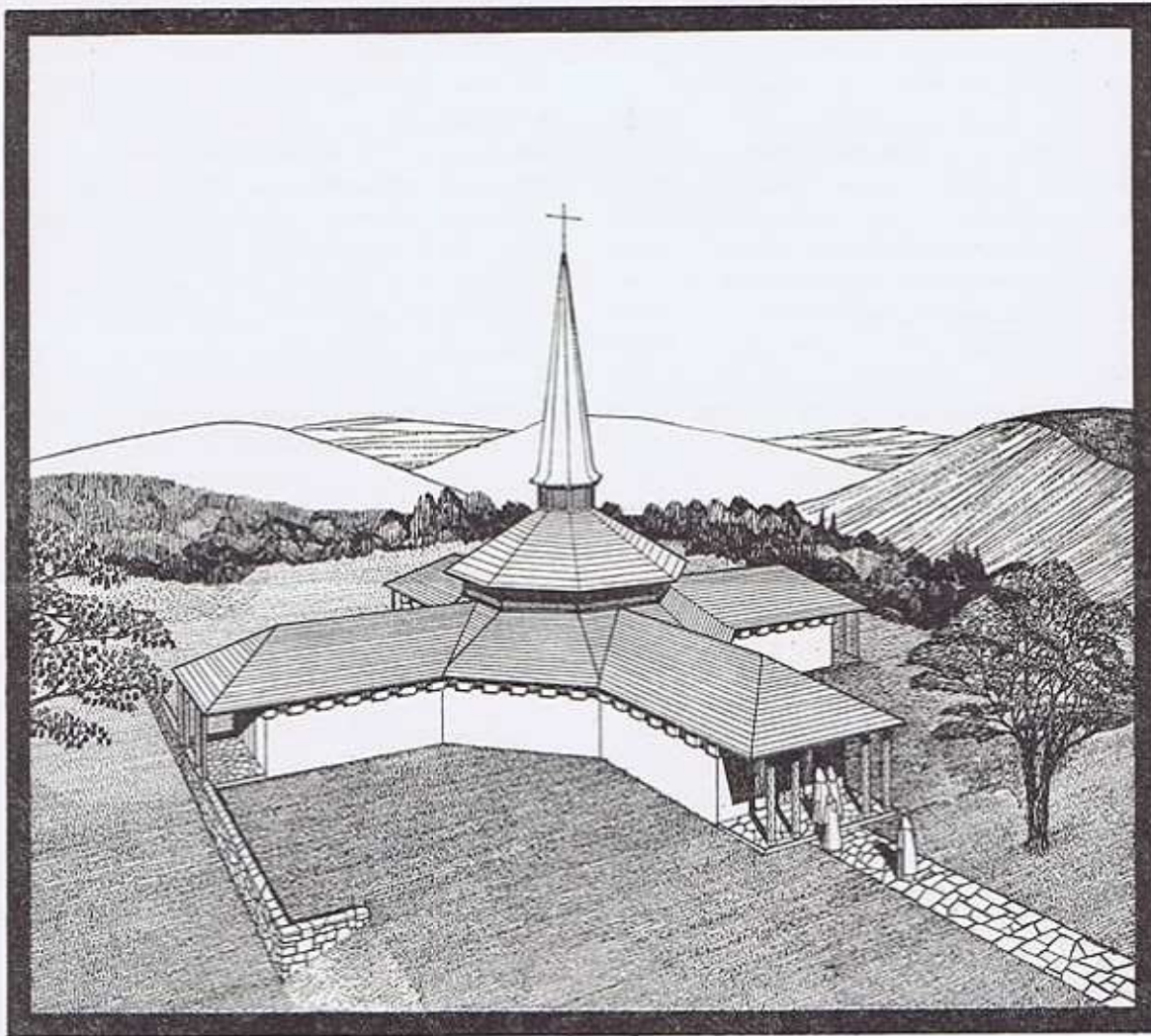
To complement the Christmas message of Reverend Father Damasus we recommend the following books of friends of ours. To indicate their contents we include a list of chapter-headings.

Daniel Berrigan, S.J., *The Bow in the Clouds: Man's Covenant with God*. New York: Coward-McCann, 1961, \$4.50. The Fall; Abraham and the man of faith; imagination and Covenant; prophecy and society; all things new; the Christian and creation; Incarnation and apostolate; the first new men: the Twelve; Catholicism and the intelligence; sacrifice and man's hope.

Thomas Merton, *The New Man*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1961, \$3.50. The war within us; Promethean theology; image and likeness; free speech; spirit in bondage; the second Adam; life in Christ; sacramental illumination; called out of darkness.

REGINA LAUDIS BENEFIT

Christmas Cribbs from different parts of the world and a Christmas tree trimmed with 16th and 17th century Neapolitan figures, belonging to the collection of Mrs. Howell Howard, will be exhibited from December 26th to 30th inclusive, at 36 East 74th Street, New York City. The exhibition will be open from two to six o'clock in the afternoon. Tickets, \$2.50 per person, will be sold for the benefit of our sister community, the Benedictine Convent of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, Connecticut. We urge all our friends in the New York area to avail themselves of this opportunity to see Christmas religious art of unusual character and great beauty. It is seldom that such a remarkable private collection is open to the public. Above all, we wish to encourage this support for the nuns of Regina Laudis. Tickets may be obtained through Mr. Kenneth Mullane, 468 Riverside Drive, New York City. Phone: UN 4-3676.



THE CHAPEL

Our picture of the chapel shows how it will look after proposed additions and alterations. In arriving at these changes, we have tried to maintain, so far as possible, the 'image' of the chapel with which we and our friends have all become familiar and which has pleased us so greatly over the years. The changes in our master-plan, shown in the *Pentecost Chronicle*, and the need for more space in the chapel, have, however, necessitated these modifications.

You will first observe three additional naves, so that we have an octagon in a "Greek Cross", i.e. a cross with equal arms. The main entrance for visitors will be in the east nave, which you see in the picture being entered by monks. Parking for visitors will be so placed that they walk to the east entrance across a level 'court', as shown in the lower left foreground of the picture. The main altar will be redesigned so that the celebrant faces east, as is proper, and will thus face towards this nave with the main entrance. The present south porch is so attractive that we have wished to repeat it at each extremity of the building, since these are all the same and will all be used as entrances.

For the altar where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, a new chapel will be built. Instead of the small niche back of the main altar, there will be an area, large enough for a small congregation, but intimate and quiet, to serve better the devotion of the visitors and monks. This chapel will be reached by stairs in the north nave. The crypt and

shrine of Our Lady Queen of Peace will remain as at present, except that under the east, west and south naves there will be sacristies.

One of the most pleasing characteristics of our present chapel is the provision for the entrance of much light from the upper and lower tiers of windows. To preserve this, and even enhance it, with the addition of considerable wall space, we have established an alternating rhythm of square windows and solid blocks in a sort of frieze running around the whole chapel. In the lantern of the octagon, the windows are increased in size to fill the distance between the arches. This, while letting in more light, also emphasizes the structure of the building by revealing more clearly the arches.

Those familiar with Mount Saviour will notice that the south porch is shown opening on to ground raised to the level of the chapel floor. A reason for the ground elevation and for the length of the naves is that the master-plan is designed in a pattern of nine 120 foot squares. As the two monastery buildings back of the chapel will each fill such a square, so the chapel, with the square on which it stands, should achieve the same full dimension.

We hope that these changes, first required by the need for more space, will not only meet the material demand, but will strongly confirm while they organically expand the original beauty, both simple and great, of Mount Saviour's oratory.