

Mount Saviour Chronicle

THE BENEDICTINE MONASTERY OF MOUNT SAVIOUR
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CHRISTMAS 1964

Dear Friends of Mount Saviour:

Christmas is always an end and a beginning. If we take the twelve days of Christmas, from the Nativity to the Epiphany, we see this clearly. The old passes away and the new begins as Christ is born, as he submits to the demands of the Old Law through circumcision, and as he presents himself to mankind in the three mysteries which we commemorate on the feast of the Epiphany: the adoration of the three Gentile wise men, the baptism of Jesus, the miracle of the marriage feast of Cana. In each of these moments something withers, and something comes to be. Taken together these moments constitute one mystery green with the promise of redemption; of the new, the good, the everlasting life. Clearly the season of Advent and the season of Christmas are times of faith and of hope.

Mount Saviour is not a place where the winter rose blooms, pushing its way through a blanket of snow. For us the flora of hope are the evergreen and the frost-blackened laurel. The soil is poor and the winter is rugged; luxuriating is simply out of the question. We pray that a modicum of natural life will survive the months-long blasts of devil wind and be with us to greet an always coy and tardy spring. The atmosphere, then, is just right for monks. As we head into our fourteenth season of death in faith and hope it comes into our spirit to compare the first winter with the present in terms of the mystery of the monastic life as it has grown in us and from us in these years.

Christmas Past

The amenities were conspicuous by their absence that first Christmas. Our unpaved road passed regularly from solid to liquid and back again, freezing each time into an ever more raspish surface until the very fields became a more passable highway for our vehicles. Only a part of the house-monastery, St. Peter's, was centrally heated, and that by a furnace of no great quality. There was running water, true, but from a well too small for us, brought into a small tank in the basement of St. Peter's by a pump as noisy and powerful as an uncertain chipmunk! Those were the days, too, when the oldest generation of our youngsters took in the first of our tours of the Holy Rule of Saint Benedict, and the first of our voyages through the riches of the Canon of the Roman Mass. These conferences were given in the old chapter room of Saint Peter's, in the evenings after Vespers, to the light of a few new fixtures and a small hand-made wall light into whose base was carved phos and zoe, Greek for light and life. The lamp is still there, but much else has changed. It was just as well that all of us, 50-year-olds and 20-year-olds, celebrated our first

Christmas here in simplicity and joy, in faith and hope, looking neither back nor unreasonably far into the future. It was our first holiday season here, when to the Rule of Saint Benedict and our gestating monastic doctrine we added many of the home-made and home-making refinements that were to become so typical of our life. Mount Saviour was a babe, then, set down in the wilderness. The desolateness of its situation and the innocence of its attitude remain to this day praiseworthy ideals.

Christmas Present

Christmas present brings us a road long paved, a great new reservoir of water, and admirable boilers to keep us all warm. It is a time of new birth, as is always so when one moves to a new home. From the six or seven community members of the first Christmas, we have grown to nearly forty. Our new buildings reflect this in size and quality. Though the community has grown considerably and though the newer quarters will help us contend with winter in a way more apt to insure the ultimate victory of the monks, we realize that we cannot move to our new home in the spirit of landed gentry, to whom grand living is due. We have never ceased to dwell in tents up to this moment; by that I mean that our community has had to find shelter in a variety of structures scattered about the property. Never, to be sure, the equivalent of the cave or manger in which the Incarnate Lord was laid after his birth, but never, on the other hand, under the one roof which is both a symbol and promise of one family made out of many persons by the grace of God and environment. The grace of God has cast us into a desert place, and we cannot make it into paradise on earth. We know that, and we want this place to retain the spirit of the Infant Christ and of John the Baptist, that is, the spirit of poverty and austerity freely assumed. To do this, we must each Christmas die to plenty and be born again as the least of the least. This is difficult to do, for monks as for anyone else, but it is no more than Christ the Lord did for us. He emptied himself or stripped himself of his godly majesty, and became one of us. We felt this very keenly in the solitude of 1951 when the dimensions of the present monastery were no more than frozen pegs tracing the outline of the octagon of our chapel, showing like glistening knobs of ice through the snow that covered our hill during the holy Twelve Days. We felt it keenly, too, in the naivete of our feasting that first year, when the discipline of the house, which already compared favorably with that of well established cloisters, was relaxed to let in some of the human warmth of the Lord become Man. The sod turned

by the bishop for the chapel of the future had died for the moment, and the building was still on the drawing-boards; but the community as such had, thanks be to God, been born, and in the power of the Holy Child, a not very pretentious power, was looking across a bleak landscape to its first spring. We are immensely grateful to you for having been our support in all we have done, and shall always be indebted to you for having made the new Mount Saviour possible; but we shall always look to you for assistance in keeping our eye on the ideal of the Mount Saviour of the beginnings: small, poor, observant, loving, genuine. Without perseverance Christ the Child would not have become Christ the Servant, obedient unto death and resurrection. A monastery that does not persevere in its ideals forfeits the hope of following Jesus home to the glory of the Father. Pray that what we see in theory we have the courage to give birth to in our lives.

The Infant Christ of the Desert

It is still our wish to remain small, poor, observant, loving, genuine. What better way to do this, apart from living the ideal, than to assist in bringing into existence another community fired by the same desire. It has always been our hope to propagate the quiet kind of monastic life as rapidly as God would help us to do so. The number which we would consider ideal for a monastic community, particularly our own, has never been great. The new buildings offer sleeping quarters for about forty monks. If you consider that the community, full strength, numbers about forty, you will understand better why we started last year to put out some feelers about the possibilities of a new foundation. Because it usually takes a long time to find a place suitable for a monastery of our kind, it did not seem to be too hasty to send out a "scout" to explore various possibilities scattered over a wide range of territory. Father Aelred Wall was chosen for the job. He set out on a long trip, last fall. Beginning on the coast of Maine, visiting various sites in Ontario and Michigan, he finally went to New Mexico where friends showed him a site which captured his imagination. It was this site that we, too, were ultimately led to consider most seriously.

Early this year another visit to the city of Santa Fe, during which the newly installed Archbishop, the Most Reverend James Davis, gave his blessing to the proposed desert child, convinced Father Aelred that the place and time were right. Then came the most serious deliberations on the part of the community of Mount Saviour. We were facing the summer, and a particularly busy one because of the dedication of the new buildings projected for September. We were fairly numerous, but were we sufficient in numbers to take on a foundation? Could we finance the two monasteries, especially in view of the debt on our new buildings? Ultimately the community decided in favor of the move to New Mexico, making acts of faith and hope in all directions. At a somewhat improbable time, and under somewhat improbable circumstances, the Monastery of Christ of the Desert was born, and the three founders, Father Aelred as Prior, accompanied by Fathers Placid and Basil, set out for the West. Three wise men from the East? Coming to bear gifts? Christmas in June? Yes, and no. The clue to the answer lies in the providential fact that they entered the city of Santa Fe and took up residence in the Southwest on the feast of Saint John the Baptist, June 24, and will celebrate their first half-year of life on the Vigil of Christmas. The three men from the East are prophets, ministers, and kings of the little way, the poor way. They bear no gifts to the desert but their own persons; these they offer to the Father in the spirit of John the Baptist and the Holy Child, with courage and with charity.

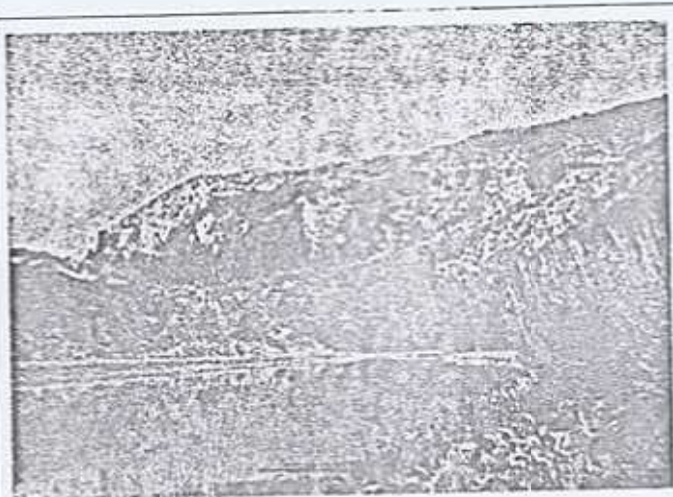
To found a new monastery means more to us than just sending out a group of pioneers, to equip them as best we can with the things they need and to help them over the difficulties of a new beginning. It means a new beginning for ourselves. We have always considered the vow of conversion of life as a constant appeal to re-examine and re-evaluate our life as a community. Just as the Church as a whole, so, and even more so, must we as monks return to the sources, not for the sake of an archeological reconstruction, but to renew our lives. This is the meaning of casting everything aside in the tradition of John the Baptist and going stripped for combat to the desert place. This is also the meaning of Our Lord's allowing himself to be cast into the desert by the Spirit and to be tempted by the devil. Christ, right after his baptism, when the heavens opened and the Father's voice proclaimed him to be the Son in whom he was well pleased, accepted the void of the desert as the Father offered it to him, and it became the place where the Father spoke to his heart, so that by the power of the Word the devil was defeated. This is the kernel of the mystery of the Incarnation, just as it is the kernel of the monastic life.

The Sources of Monastic Life Expressed in Contemporary Forms

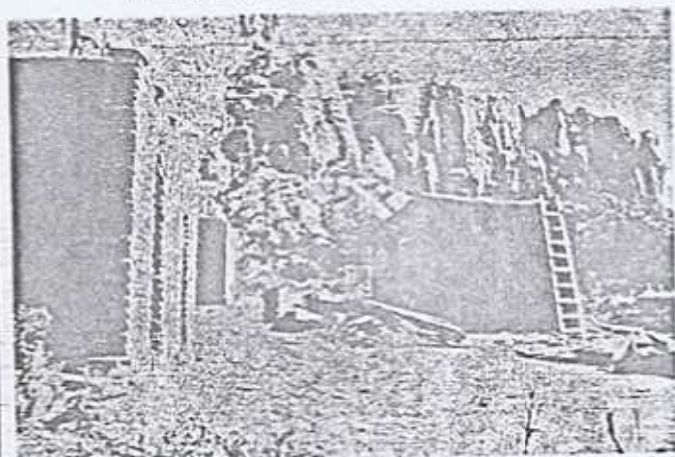
Renewal or rebirth of the monastic life is guided by two basic considerations which in their actual operation really join each other and become indistinguishable. The first is to return to the sources, the second, to express the spirit of the beginnings in forms that speak to the present.

Keeping these two considerations in mind, we might explore a little where they seem to lead in the concrete situation of Christ of the Desert. Our new desert-monastery is no founding. It is a child called into being by God and given a directive word for the purpose of recalling monasticism's initial spirit in all its explosive vitality. The sources to which we refer are those springs which together are responsible for the monastic tradition: flight from the world, prayer, obedience, work, lectio, the common life, solitude, silence, mortification, poverty, simplicity of life. All of these things remind us of Christ the Child, and of the Christ of the Desert; and are the springs that one finds flowing again and again wherever and whenever in the course of history monasticism renews itself.

The second consideration is to express this spirit, to which one has returned, in forms that are contemporary and immediately comprehensible to the particular age, the particular country, and the particular people concerned. And here is a real challenge. The Southwest is an enormous part of this country, and New Mexico one of the fastest growing States in the Union. It is, on the other hand, the cradle of "la santa Fe", the holy Faith of Christ, in this land. It is more than a playground, or resort for asthmatics and retired old folks, and more than a hatchery of new and big industry. In its very climate and landscape it embodies the contrast or paradox dear to the wholly Christian heart. There is the desert and the oasis, austerity and beauty; there is peace in the sense of solitude as well as of abundance. With an atmosphere so close to that of the Holy Land it is natural that Christians should seek it out as a place of revival or refreshment. The Protestant Churches have in fact realized this appropriateness and have established several large revival centres in the New Mexico desert. It is near one of these, the 25,000 acre Ghost Ranch, run by the Presbyterian Church, that our monastery of Christ of the Desert was established. The Southwest, home of the oldest and of the newest, cries out, then, for the presence of new "martyrs", new witnesses to the omnipresence of Christ. It is in answer to this cry that we have responded with our foundation.



The Chama River.
The monastery is off-picture, to the right.



The three new two-cell units, at the foot of the mesa. The adobe brick has yet to be faced with stucco for protection.



The original adobe house, restored, containing refectory, kitchen, and oratory. To the right, the Founding Fathers; from left to right, Fathers Basil, Aelred, and Placid.

The site of the infant Christ of the Desert Monastery is traditional in the sense that it is remote, beautiful, and in need of considerable development. It is at the end of a beautiful canyon near the town of Abiquiu in the diocese of Santa Fe. But it is not quite the Sahara! The Chama River adjoins it and is used to irrigate the acres under cultivation. The thirteen miles of dirt road that

lead from Route 84 to the door of the monastery are horrendous; but they have been brought to the attention of the road commissioner. The only structure found there at the beginning, a small adobe farmhouse, has been refurbished to shelter a proper but minuscule chapel, refectory, and kitchen. Tents served the founders for sleeping until small, adobe, two-cell units were built by local workers, with the help of the monks. Baths are taken in the adjacent Chama when the sluices in the Abiquiu Dam upriver are opened to feed the irrigation systems of the farms along the riverbank. Drinking water came first from a turgid well, was later brought in by truck, and is now flowing from a second well, newly dug. An outdoor washroom served for weeks; mirrors and washbasins were set up on a very makeshift basis in a grove of cottonwoods by the adobe house, the same cottonwoods that sheltered the sleeping tents. Now some things have been changed and the makings of a small "monastery pueblo" are there, with the four small buildings. Life has passed beyond the camping stage, but the ideal of keeping the monastery's fabric simple, small, and authentic remains. The material for the building is the adobe mud found at their doorstep, strengthened with straw, and made into bricks; the labor is and will be the monks' own, as far as possible; the dimensions are such as to guarantee, as much as one can "guarantee" such things, that the community will not grow to majestic proportions. The liturgy of the community is simple, and as fully adapted to the spirit of the Church of today as can presently be managed. The administration is uncluttered and mild, and hopefully will remain so, as such a small monastic household would allow.

There is no minutely detailed program for development, so we cannot let you know what Christ of the Desert Monastery will be like on its tenth birthday, but since you did not insist on such advance knowledge of Mount Saviour, we trust that you will be satisfied to have us introduce you to this amiable child of ours and show you a few pictures of it as it was just a few weeks ago. We are sure you will join the entire community of Mount Saviour and Christ of the Desert in giving thanks to God in this season of the birth of Christ for the wonderful things he has done for us this year. With Saint Mark, speaking of the stay of Christ in the desert we say of our own desert child: "The Spirit cast him out into the wilderness, and there he remained for forty days tempted by Satan. He was among the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." (Mk 1:12-13) "Forty days" is a biblical convention for signifying the unredeemed splendor of creation; the desert, the place where good and evil often show themselves in most violent contrast. With the help of the grace of God may Christ of the Desert have a long life spent in interceding for the "forty days" of time and for the "desert" of earth; and may the Father always find it in his heart to say to this, Mount Saviour's first Child: "Thou art my Son, my beloved; on thee my favor rests." (Mk 1:11).

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In sending our Christmas greetings to all our friends we wish to express once more the gratitude that is in our hearts for all the material and spiritual help that has made it possible for us to celebrate this Christmas in new and definitive surroundings. We shall always be grateful for the help, whether material or spiritual, which you are able to give us for the support of Mount Saviour and Christ of the Desert.

F. Aelred Winzen, O.S.B.