

MOUNT ANGEL LETTER

June, 1995

A newsletter published six times a year by the abbot and monks of Mount Angel Abbey.



Dear Friends,

One of our confreres, the late, dearly beloved Father Ignatius Groeger, had a wonderful knack for saying things in unforgettable ways. One of his "sayings" had to do with monks dying in the monastery. "In the old days," he once said, "when a monk was dying we gathered around his bed and said the Rosary and prayed till he died. Then we buried him."

That is quite a wise a witty saying, almost worthy of the Desert Fathers, in fact. But even apart from its wit and wisdom, I was reminded of it by reflecting on two not totally unconnected monastic events, the one still in the future, the other in the not so distant past.

First, the past event. Not long ago we bade a final farewell to our confrere Father Luke, and we did it in a manner of "the old days." With the help of wonderful hospice care, we were able to keep him home in the monastery infirmary for his final days. What a wonderful experience it was. Early in the evening of his last day on earth, one of the young monks came to call me out of a meeting. Father Luke was asking for me, he said. So I went to his bedside and he did recognize me, but soon afterwards he slipped into a state of semi-consciousness. At that time there were about eight or nine of the confreres present and together we prayed psalms, sang hymns, and said prayers for the dying. Later, most of the community gathered in the infirmary room as we watched and prayed. When he breathed his last the next morning, several monks were again at his bedside. And so it was that having prayed with him and for him, we were ready for the next step: we buried him, with sadness surely, but also with a sense of joy because we knew that now he was finally home.

The second event is the coming solemnity of Saint Benedict which we shall celebrate on July 11. As I thought about Father Luke's passing, it struck me that while we cherish Saint Benedict's Rule as a way of life for those who wish to follow it, there are actually two things which it

teaches monks to do: how to live but also how to die.

In Chapter 4 Saint Benedict admonishes his monks: "Day by day remind yourself that you are going to die." Of course this admonition includes the need to "live in fear of judgement day," and to be constantly mindful that God sees all that we do. But there is this. A monk is to live a community life of love. He is to love his abbot, the brethren, and above all he is to love Christ, to whom absolutely nothing is to be preferred.

It is evident that there is a close connection between right living and right dying. If one can live a life of love as Saint Benedict envisions it, he has already succeeded in keeping death daily before his eyes and he will certainly be prepared for it when it comes.

I am sure the reason these two events brought Father Ignatius' saying to mind is precisely that they are connected. If there is anything that Father Luke will be remembered for by his confreres it is that he was an exceptional monk. He knew the Rule well, not so much because he read and studied it, but above all because he lived it. The proof was in the way he, who all his life had preferred nothing to the love of Christ, finally died.

All of this brings me back to where I began: Father Ignatius' saying. Many moderns would not find it a very adequate way to deal with the dying. But perhaps one reason is that many moderns aren't too successful at living and so don't know much about dying either. Perhaps a contribution we Christians—not only monks, but all followers of Christ—can make to our modern culture is to bear witness to right living and therefore right dying. If we prefer nothing to the love of Christ, we shall never hesitate to keep death daily before our eyes. Having kept it daily before our eyes, we won't fear it when it comes. For one who faces it and passes through it peacefully, there is nothing quite as appropriate for loved ones to do as wait and watch with prayer and song (even if

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Abbot Peter's Perspective

March 30.

This has been a month of all sorts of celebrations and observances. The festivities began on March 20 when we celebrated the solemnity of Saint Joseph. He is pretty important patron around here so we always give full observance to the day, both in the church and in the refectory.

On Tuesday, the feast of Saint Benedict, I was on the road. Brother Paul Weckert of Saint Martin's Abbey accompanied me to Saint Martin's, stopping at the airport to pick up our Father Boniface who had flown in from Boise. The occasion was a clergy day Saint Martin's was having as part of its centennial celebration. We got there for the 10:30 Mass. There were maybe thirty or forty diocesan priests present, several deacons and their wives, Abbot Maurus Macrae from Westminster, Bishop Nicolas Walsh, and I. Archbishop Murphy was the main celebrant and Abbot Neal preached. Afterwards we enjoyed a very nice dinner down in the new annex of the Saint Martin's pavilion.

On March 24, the vigil of the Annunciation, there was a dinner in the Seminary, to which some of the monks were invited. Faculty members who have published something during the past year were acknowledged. Brother Ansgar received an award *in absentia* (he is studying in Paris) because of the article he had published in *Theological Studies*.

Even as the celebrations for last week were winding down, a whole new spate of feasts and celebrations was winding up. The beginnings were signaled by the arrival last Thursday, March 23rd, of Abbot Odilo Lechner of Sankt Bonifaz Abbey in Munich. The invitation to Abbot Odilo had been long standing, but he had never been able to manage enough time to make the trip, which is both long and expensive. The occasion for this

invitation was to have him present for a special lecture on the German literature holdings in our Aalto library as part of a series planned to celebrate its twenty-fifth year of existence. The lecture was excellent. Professor Emerson wove three disparate themes very skillfully into one unified talk: a tale from Medieval German literature, a 19th century German novel of the Wild West, and the Engelberg monks who came west to found Mount Angel Abbey. I hope it will eventually be published in the *American Benedictine Review*.

One of the the major appointments of my abbatial career was made last week. I have appointed Father Konrad Schaefer as prior of Our Lady of the Angels priory in Mexico. The appointment is effective July 15. Father Louis will remain in Mexico.

Earlier this year we were planning jubilee celebrations. Father Dominic Broxmeyer and Father Louis Charvet are celebrating fifty years of ordination in May, and May 28 was set for their day. Father Patrick Meagher is also celebrating an ordination jubilee this year—his sixtieth. He will join in the May 28 celebration.

April 27.

We had a house full of people during Holy Week following the front page story in *The Oregonian* on Easter Sunday. It was a story about people coming to the Abbey to find peace and solitude from the rush of everyday life. It actually featured some of our Oblates. There was a photographer here during the Good Friday services. From the sound of the camera clicking I imagine Kodak, Inc. stock went up a point or two. The guest house phone was reported to have been ringing off the wall all day Monday. Many people, it seems, are looking for peace and solitude in their lives and the



Abbot Odilo Lechner, O.S.B.

monastery is one place where many people find it.

There have been some logging operations on the hill, at the west end of the kitchen road. The trees are past maturity. In the not-too-distant future they would not be salvageable, and possibly one or another would come crashing down in a winter storm as well. Plants which like lots of sun now have a better chance of flourishing in that patch. It will eventually be replanted with trees.

Keep us in your prayers, as we shall do for you.

Fraternally,
+Peter

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sung through tears), and then, finally, to bury him to wait for that time when Christ will come in glory.

+ Peter Lechner O.S.B.

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Volume 47, Number 3

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The MOUNT ANGEL LETTER is published six times a year by the Benedictine Monks of Mount Angel Abbey.

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