

Fr. Bede Lackner

December 19, 1927 – November 10, 2020

In the eighth century, St. Bede the Venerable concluded his monumental history with a note about himself, that amid the efforts of meditation, monastic discipline, and prayer, he “always considered it a delight to learn, or to teach, or to write.” In his long life, Fr. Bede Lackner lived out his patron saint’s character more fully than most monks do.

Fr. Bede was born Károly (Karl) János Lackner in Vaskút, in southern Hungary, on December 19, 1927, to Stefan Lackner and Elisabeth Rutscher. He entered the Cistercian Order in 1947, at the age of 20, and persevered in monastic life for 73 years, until his death on November 10, 2020.

Fr. Bede knew the Cistercians early on: at the age of 12, he enrolled at the Cistercian school in the nearby city of Baja, and remained there through the Second World War, until 1946. He then went to the monastery of Zirc, where, just short of 20 years old, he commenced his novitiate on August 29, 1947, making his first vows a year later. He studied philosophy and theology in Zirc in the years immediately before its dissolution by the Communist regime on October 15, 1950. At that time a large group of monks were planning an illegal escape through the Iron Curtain into Austria, but Fr. Bede had a different, safer way out. His family was of German heritage – along with many so-called Danube Swabians in the area, who were brought into Hungary mainly in the eighteenth century to repopulate it after the expulsion of the Ottoman Turks – and so they fell subject to the post-war “population exchange” program by which those of German ancestry were forced out of Hungary (usually leaving all their property behind for government seizure). Thus, after many complex preparations material and spiritual, he left Hungary on November 17, 1950, with a provisional identity certificate from the Allied High Commission, to allow him to pass without any official citizenship to the American zone of West Germany. He arrived with his parents and sister to Schweinfurt, in Bavaria, where his family took up permanent residence.

Fr. Bede, however, was destined for further journeys: a month later he left for Rome, arriving there on December 21 to be met at Tiburtina Station by Fr. Benedict and reunited with some of the others who had fled clandestinely. Fr. Bede pursued his studies in Theology at Sant’Anselmo for just over two years, until January 1953, when he was called to join his brothers in the United States (to his surprise, he was eventually awarded a Bachelor’s degree for these studies, in 1958). During his time in Rome, he was ordained to the priesthood in the Capuchin church of St. Fidelis in Feldkirch, in far western Austria near the Cistercian Abbey of Mehrerau.

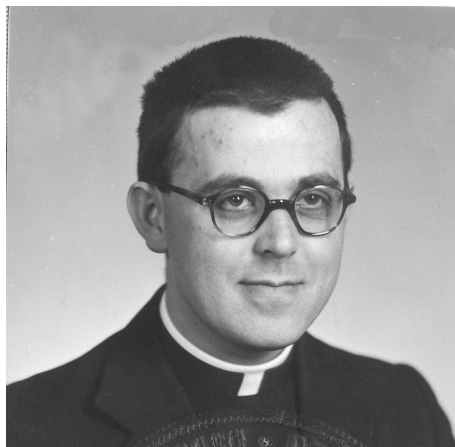
Fr. Bede arrived in the United States on January 20, 1953, coming to the monastery of Spring Bank in Wisconsin before the dramatic visitation at the end of that year and subsequent council meeting after which many Hungarians chose to leave Wisconsin to join the Dallas project. Fr. Bede, along with a small part of the Hungarians, chose



2005,
age
77



1975, age 47



1957, age 29

initially to remain in Spring Bank, perhaps in his case because he would be pursuing a Master's degree in History and Latin at nearby Marquette University. Fr. Bede finished his M.A. in 1959, writing a thesis on "Abbot Stephen Harding and the Rise of Cîteaux." At that point a complex dynamic developed between Fr. Bede's calling to more advanced study and the community's need for Middle School teachers in the new Cistercian Preparatory School. When the school opened in 1962, Fr. Bede was the Form Master of Form I, teaching them also History, Geography, and Music. But the year before, in 1961, Fr. Bede had begun doctoral

studies in History at Fordham University in New York, where he rejoiced to spend the whole day in various libraries, often skipping lunch. He had so impressed his professors that the dean wrote to Abbot Anselm describing Fr. Bede as a "first-rate scholar" whose "industry is breathtaking," and urging the Abbot to free him for doctoral studies and make him a college professor. Although Fr. Bede was embarrassed by this letter and urged Abbot Anselm to ignore it, he also expressed, with humble insight into his own character, his inability to teach the young boys: "I am not practical-minded, I am not aggressive; by nature I am reticent, more inclined to study, filing, research, digging into documents, translating. The youngsters need teachers who can open up to them, who understand them, their thought world, their problems, their games; who are able to mold their characters—a gift that is not given to me."

Fr. Bede undoubtedly exercised precisely that gift, but in his own way and in different fields. In the end Fr. Melchior took over as Form Master from Fr. Bede, who finished his doctorate a few years later in 1968. This bore fruit in his 1972 book, *The Eleventh-Century Background of Cîteaux*, a careful study of the crisis of monastic life in that century and all the many attempts to reform it, culminating in the success of the Cistercian Order. He significantly reframes the questions about the origin of the Cistercian Order, showing that its Founders were original mainly in their wise assimilation of reform ideas from many sources to produce "a well-rounded system of their own which was eminently suited to satisfy contemporary as well as future needs," "without succumbing to the then prevalent and seemingly victorious trend of eremitism or to popular movements which eventually ended in heresy."

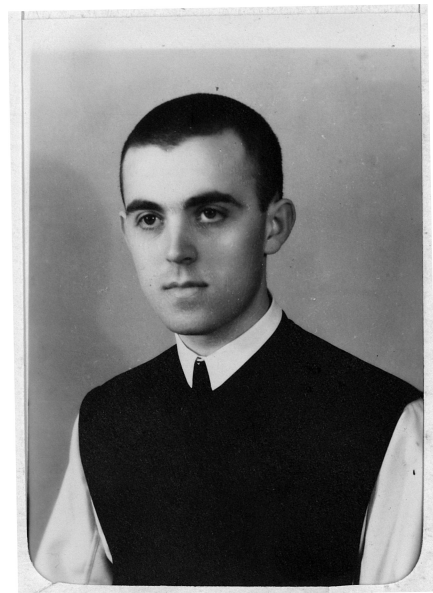
Fr. Bede's academic career moved quickly. Along with lecturing at the University of Dallas in those years and assisting in some ways at the Prep School, in 1967 he began teaching Church History at Holy Trinity Seminary. He taught there for fifteen years, an admired teacher, spiritual director, confessor, and friend for many alumni. In 1969 he took a position at the University of Texas at Arlington. He earned tenure in 1972, and taught there full-time for 32 years until his retirement in 2001; then he was named an *emeritus* professor and continued to teach for almost a decade more, into his early 80's. The faculty officially honored him, saying, "He was conscientious and well-received in his scholarship, gentlemanly and modest in imparting his vast knowledge of European and religious history to generations of students." He wrote, contributed to, or edited a dozen books, and produced a steady stream of essays, translations, book reviews, and conference papers. Although his focus was medieval and monastic history, his work covered many aspects of early modern history, too: in addition to survey courses, he taught special courses on the Medieval Church, the Reformation in England, Aspects of Byzantine History, Erasmus, Italian Renaissance Cities, Charlemagne, the Crusades, Medieval Educators,

the History of Religious Toleration, and more. By his careful work, meditation, note-taking, and consideration, he brought his mind as close as possible to the founders of our Order and to the many holy men and women who sought Christ in the opening years of the modern world. In this way he became a kindly witness of Christian truth and human goodness, offering a gentle, diligent, intelligent, and devout mind to the students in the secular university.

In the two decades after he retired from full-time teaching, he rejoiced to witness the arrival of many young monks in the monastery of Dallas. His quaint mannerisms, quiet presence, and simple life, his hidden attentiveness that would suddenly spark out in a curious question—by these means he left a subtle and beautiful impression on many monks. He encouraged the monastic students with an adaptation of the Benedictine motto *ora et labora*, to which he would add *et scribe*: “pray, work, ... and write!” “Just one idea a day, and soon you have a book.” He would also remind the monks that devotion to the Virgin Mary is one of the truly distinctive qualities of Cistercian life. Although he thought early on that he did not have the practical, “vivacious,” extroverted spirit to teach children, in the monastery as in his university work, his humble, reserved presence slowly formed many minds, molded many characters, and charmed many friends to whom he remained devoted.

Fr. Bede was engaged in his scholarly work and correspondence until the last year of his life. In the night of November 20, 2019 he suffered a sudden, major stroke. Although he recovered remarkably and came home able both to walk and to converse, he remained largely confined to his room with very little energy, relying on the monks and the two wonderful nurses to help him. In his last year, in the face of his weakness, confinement, and slow detachment from the world, he showed a steady peace and calm that were inspiring to the visitors he loved to receive. Almost a year after the stroke, an infection led to kidney failure and sepsis. He died peacefully on November 10, 2020, after only a few days in the hospital.

A rosary will be held at 7:30 P.M., Friday, Nov. 13, in the Cistercian Abbey Church. The funeral mass and interment will take place in the Abbey Church at 10:00 A.M., Saturday, Nov. 14. The services will be both open to the public and livestreamed on the CistercianDallas YouTube channel. Memorials may be sent to the Monastic Fund at Our Lady of Dallas Cistercian Abbey.



1947, age 20