



March 2013

# A LETTER FROM THE ABBEY



## Briefly

### Letter from the Abbot

Fr. Abbot Peter comments on the Lenten Season. See p. 2.

### Monks Serve for Pope Benedict

Fr. Stephen Gregg and Fr. Joseph Van House reflect on serving for Pope Benedict. See p. 3.

### Monastic Memories

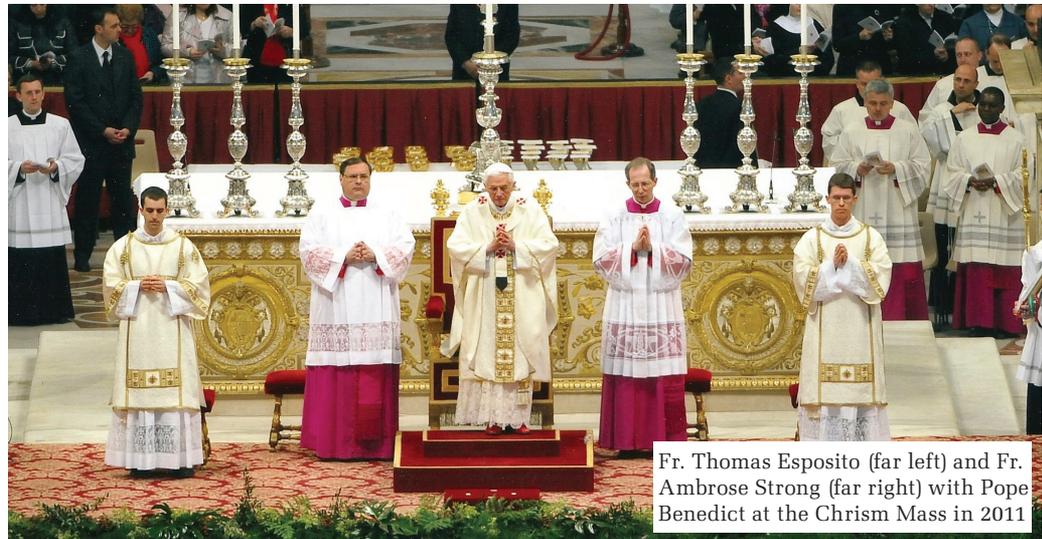
Monks remember their Priestly Ordinations. See p. 4

### St. Bernard on Lent

Fr. Denis continues his Spirituality Series with an essay on St. Bernard See p. 5.

### Model of Discernment

Fr. Ignatius Peacher, the Vocation Director, reflects on the call of Abraham as a model for faithful discernment. See p. 5



Fr. Thomas Esposito (far left) and Fr. Ambrose Strong (far right) with Pope Benedict at the Chrism Mass in 2011

## THE RULE OF BENEDICT

### *Pope Benedict's Role in a Monk's Vocation*

by: Fr. Thomas Esposito

A thin crescent moon hung quietly to the left of St. Peter's dome at 7pm Ash Wednesday evening. To one standing in the piazza gazing at the illuminated church, the faint but vivid sliver smiled, radiating a white color as dazzling as the jagged lightning bolt which had connected with the dome's cross on Monday night. The Holy Father did not deliver a discourse about the moon on this occasion, as John XXIII did once long ago; he had already spoken inside the basilica, presiding at the last public Mass he would ever celebrate as bishop of Rome.

He wasn't supposed to celebrate Ash Wednesday Mass in St. Peter's, though. Tradition always puts the Pope at the basilica of Santa Sabina on the Aventine Hill for Ash Wednesday Mass. Since Santa Sabina is a mere two blocks from the General House of the Cistercian Order, I had created a foolproof game plan for the occasion: I would meet the University of Dallas students at the Circus Maximus,

walk them up the Aventine, place them along the procession line the Pope would take from Sant'Anselmo to Santa Sabina, and then bring them back to my place to celebrate Mass in English. Getting into Santa Sabina is an impossible task and the procession affords a closer look at the Pope than one gets in St. Peter's Square, since the crowds aren't as huge for the Ash Wednesday event.

Such a glorious plan, however, was utterly hijacked on Mardi Gras by none other than the man himself who, upon announcing his abdication from the chair of Peter the day before, realized he would need a larger venue to house the host of adoring masses who would flock to see their outgoing shepherd. Thus the "Ash Wednesday on the Aventine Papal Extravaganza" went for naught.

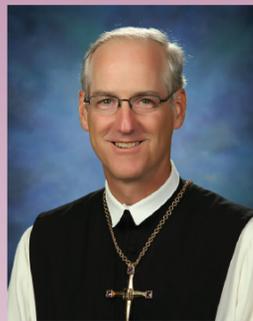
Despite my disappointment at having the Pope derail my best-laid plans, I resolved to attend the Mass at St. Peter's. The chance meeting of a friend in the piazza led me to acquire a ticket allow

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## From the Abbot's Desk ST. BENEDICT ON LENT

St. Benedict's simple advice to his monks on observing Lent can benefit all of us – whether we live in the monastery or not. He begins his chapter with the words:

*Although the life of a monk ought at all times to have the character of a Lenten observance, few, however, have the strength for this and so we urge all to safeguard together their manner of life with all purity during these days of Lent and to wash away the negligences of other times.*



Fr. Abbot Peter Verhalen

As so often, St. Benedict states the ideal – the monk ought to live the entire year as if it were Lent. And then he acknowledges the reality – his monks do not have the strength for such a life – and recalibrates his expectations.

We would all benefit from thinking about Lent in a way that we really could extend it throughout the year. In this little passage St. Benedict characterizes Lent in two ways: it is a time to safeguard one's manner of life, and a time to wash away the negligences of other times. We typically think of Lent in the second way, as a time to wash away, to do penance for, the sins we have committed at other times of year.

Necessary as it is to acknowledge and atone for our sins, we would benefit from thinking of Lent as a period when we “safeguard our manner of life.” The phrase is unusual, but speaking to monks, St. Benedict must have been thinking of their manner of life as monks. The essence of that life is seeking God.

In helping young men determine whether they have a vocation, St. Benedict says that one must determine whether he truly seeks God. Everything else should flow from that. Lent is a time when we refocus our eyes on the goal, on God himself, and ask ourselves whether our actions and attitudes all contribute to reaching that goal.

We may, indeed, try to cut out a particular sin, abstain from some food or drink, sleep a bit less and pray a bit more. Lent is a blessing that can really benefit us if we realize it is all about clarifying the intention behind all our thoughts, words, and deeds – the intention of seeking God and returning to him.

## REMEMBERING POPE BENEDICT

ing me to distribute Communion at the Mass (it's good to have friends in Rome). Instead of Communion, however, I wound up distributing ashes. Immediately after the Holy Father's homily, I joined a legion of deacons and priests who formed a semi-circle around the Confessio, facing the weary Pope seated in front of the altar. I stared at him the entire time, hoping that my face conveyed my sense of confused sympathy for the decision he had announced just two days previous. Each of us held a bowl of ashes which he then blessed, and we dispersed to the various parts of the basilica to bestow a thumbprint of ash on the heads of the faithful.

The election of Pope Benedict XVI on April 19, 2005 was the event which confirmed my decision to enter the Cistercian Abbey in Dallas. I had known for several weeks that God had earmarked me for the Abbey, and had begun to fill out the application forms somewhat begrudgingly – but the resolution necessary for such a vocational leap was lacking. On the loggia overlooking St. Peter's Square, the newly chosen Successor of Peter spoke of himself in his calm, soothing voice as “a simple, humble worker in the vineyard of the Lord.” Those words, which I heard on a radio broadcast in my car, acted as a sharp blade slicing away the vocation-restricting ropes I had tied around my will. Benedict galvanized my lagging spiritual legs to run without fear under the standard which he himself had just assumed; I remember thinking that I wanted to enlist in a Church led by him. My grateful love to him for this grace (in the form of a final push into the Abbey) will never fade.

I heard those exact words again at the Ash Wednesday Mass, but the voice proclaiming them was not Benedict's. It belonged instead to Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Pope's Secretary of State, who weaved them into an unbearably beautiful farewell note delivered before the final blessing. With the exuberance and liberal use of adjectives befitting an Italian,

he thanked the Pope for being “a luminous example of a simple, humble worker in the vineyard of the Lord.” A video I watched after the Mass shows Benedict blinking his eyes at that moment and nodding, acknowledging that the Cardinal had lifted those words from his first papal pronouncement on the loggia. With his normally steady voice trembling, Bertone concluded by noting that this was a vineyard worker “who always knew in every moment how to accomplish what was most important: to bring God to man and man to God.”

After an immensely bittersweet “Grazie,” he proceeded to greet the Successor of Peter. The basilica walls were instantly tasked with bouncing the thunderous applause of heart-broken hands around the temple constructed to house the bones of Peter himself. Rare tears blurred my vision of the baldacchino towering over the Pope. Perhaps, they flowed because our only opportunity to show our confused love for the departing Holy Father was the woefully inadequate gesture of slapping our hands numb.

The Holy Father carried my will into the monastery with those initial words eight years ago. To hear them again at his final public Mass, bookending his tenure as bishop of Rome before he himself takes up the monastic life, rendered me a tearful, spiritual orphan. With characteristic humility, the tired Pope quietly accepted the prolonged applause and cheers of the sorrowing faithful for a few moments before pleading, “Thank you – let us return to prayer.” Then he gave us his final blessing.



Fr Thomas Esposito greets Pope Benedict after the Chrism Mass in 2011.



**Fr. Joseph Van House:** This is from New Year's Day Mass for 2009, as I was serving as deacon in St. Peter's, helping the Holy Father with the incense at the beginning of Mass. I remember that he was very calm (unlike me) but very focused during Mass, and present to what he was doing. I also remember he put a lot of incense in the thurible!

After mass, he took the time to greet each of the deacons and altar servers individually. When he came to me he looked me right in the eye and asked in Italian “Where do you come from?” When I said “Dallas” his eyes lit up with recognition, and I was able to tell him that I am also a Cistercian, and that we appreciate all he has said and written about Saint Benedict and Saint Bernard, he clearly understood me and was very pleased. I was most impressed by his way of being personally present to me in such a short encounter; it was a confirmation of what I had seen the previous time I had met him, under similar circumstances. It was a graced and touching moment in my life - a reminder that I and my loved ones are important not only to Jesus, but also to his principal representative on earth.

**Fr. Stephen Gregg:** After singing the Passion of St. John at St. Peter's on Good Friday 2012, I greeted Benedict XVI.

I could not hope to say all that I wanted to say, so I just planned on sharing a glance with him for a moment. He has remarkable, bright eyes.



# UPCOMING PRIESTLY ORDINATION OF BR. ANTHONY

On April 6th Br. Anthony Bigney will be ordained a priest by Bishop Kevin Farrell. The ceremony will take place in the Abbey Church at 10:30 am. His First Mass of Thanksgiving will take place the following day, at 9:00 am. Receptions will follow both events in the Abbey Courtyard.

## MONASTIC MEMORIES

*What do you remember from the day you were ordained a priest?*



Fr. Augustine Hoelke

One thing I remember about the day I was ordained a priest is being so nervous and overcome with emotion that I hid in a confessional for a few minutes before the Mass began and just sat there in the dark drinking a bottle of cold water. It helped.



Fr. Robert Maguire

I can still feel the pressure of Bishop Tschoepe's strong agrarian hands pressing down on my head as he said the words of ordination; and then, without losing contact he pressed a second time as if to say, "This will last forever!"



Fr. Roch Kerestzy

Late in the evening of my ordination, a fellow Cistercian who was preparing for his ordination the following year knocked at my room and asked, "Do you actually feel the indelible seal of the priestly character imprinted on your soul?" I told him I feel nothing but a happy daze that the incredible has happened: I am a priest of Jesus Christ. And this happy daze continues up to this very day, 53 years afterwards.



Fr. Paul McCormick

For me the strongest memory was sharing that day with so many family and friends. My family, who had witnessed my struggle with discernment for so long, was all there, with the exception of my maternal grandmother, who had passed away. She had always been the most supportive of my priestly call. I also shared that day with many of the youngsters from my incoming Form I and their parents - some of whom I met that day for the first time.



"I HAVE BEEN SO BLESSED THROUGHOUT MY ENTIRE FORMATION PROCESS. I HAVE SO MANY PEOPLE TO THANK FOR HELPING ME TO GET TO THIS POINT IN MY LIFE: FAMILY, FRIENDS, FELLOW MONKS, TEACHERS AND STUDENTS. CONTINUE TO PRAY THAT MY PRIESTLY MINISTRY BRINGS THE MESSAGE OF CHRIST'S LOVE TO THOSE I MEET."

Br. Anthony

*The area in front of the Abbey Church has undergone a few landscape upgrades over the past few weeks.*

## ABBNEY LANDSCAPING



**1 MOVING MARY** - The statue of Mary, which had stood guard over a small garden at the top of the hill, is carefully wrapped until she can be moved to a more central location closer to the church. **2 A DIRTY JOB** - The front lawn is dug up in order to place a walkway and terrace. **3 GATHER US IN** - The new stairs and terrace is poured and laid out. Flat limestone slabs will be fitted into place. **4 THE FINAL PRODUCT** - This rendering shows what the project will look like: A place to gather as a community before and after mass, in front of the newly relocated statue of Our Lady. The project is set to be finished before Easter of this year.

*Cistercian Spirituality*

# St. Bernard's Threefold Lenten Call

by: Fr. Abbot Denis Farkasfalvy

The Rule of Saint Benedict has a chapter on Lent. Contrary to what many people may expect, the focus of this chapter is not about what you should give up for Lent. It's not even about dietary regulations for Lent. But rather it is about the spirit of Lent. Instead of additional hardships imposed on all "from above," Benedict promotes a healthy voluntarism in the monastery: come up with some special additional personal "offering" on your own, disciplining yourself in one thing or another.

But he insists on avoiding showing off with some form of extra austerity that may satisfy vanity rather than promote the health of the soul. Each monk should obtain his Abbot's approval for his "offering" for Lent.

This chapter was taken seriously by the early Cistercian Fathers: Saint Bernard quotes it time and again. But for Bernard the beginning of Lent is more importantly an occasion to outline the basics of his spirituality. It seems that on Ash Wednesday he always gave a short homily to his monks. Of these many sermons, six have survived. Each is a gem about foundational truths about spirituality.

My favorite is his second sermon for Lent - really "the beginning of Lent." He quotes the liturgical text taken from the Old Testament: "Turn around in your whole heart" (Joel 2:12), asking afterwards: "In what way and in what direction should we turn around our life?"

The answer comes from a fundamental text of Bernard's spirituality: "Unless you convert and become like a child, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 13:20). What God is asking you is apparently simple and easy: be like a child. If you asked for a heroic accomplishment, people would probably compete to achieve it. What Jesus actually asks of us is not competition but to be humble. He gave us examples: he became a child at the Incarnation, a poor man in growing up, a prisoner when arrested, and a criminal when he was executed.

While he was none of these, he

accepted humiliation for our sake. He asks us not to become inferior but to embrace the truth: confess to God we are sinners and his creatures; realize that we are brothers and sisters to our fellow creatures; have the self-recognition to understand that we need forgiveness and grace.

The life to which God calls us falls in line with these three dimensions: turning away from anything contrary to God's will; abstaining from all that promotes the self at the expense of the others; making ourselves available to serve God's

will just as Jesus came to serve not to be served.

"This conversion is not something you can do in one day: would that we might accomplish it in a life time" (2nd sermon in Lent, no.2).



## ABRAHAM: MODEL OF FAITH

by: Fr. Ignatius Peacher



Continuing the theme of vocation stories from the Bible, let us turn now to Abraham. In Genesis 12, God asks Abram to leave his land, his relatives, and his father's house and go to a different land. We don't know why exactly God chooses Abram, and the same is true for those called to religious life and the priesthood. God is free to choose whom he wills.

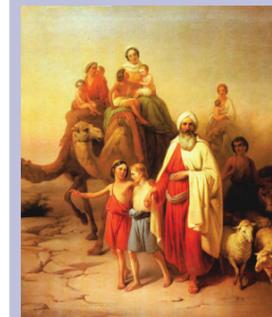
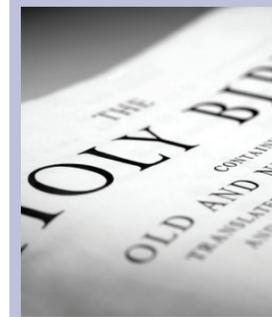
Note that God is asking Abram to take a bold step that includes relinquishing important things and people. At the same time, God promises to reward Abram with land and numerous descendants if he follows His directive. To this, Abram's response is to "put his faith in the Lord."

This is a major aspect of the discernment process: to put faith in the Lord. Often a person wants to know with more certainty if God is really calling him to a religious vocation, and yet God refrains from giving it because he wants the person to act with faith.

It is not an unreasonable thing that God expects. The first step i.e. deciding to join the monastery or convent or seminary is not a life commitment; that comes later after several years of discernment. God doesn't give 100% clarity at the beginning because He wants us to trust him, and by doing so He strengthens our faith.

A person comes to learn about himself and God through the process of trusting and following God without knowing exactly where it will lead.

Because Abram was chosen and accepted God's plan for his life in faith, Abram's life changes radically as the forefather of God's chosen people. With this new life comes a new name, "no longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham." In a similar way, a young man or woman who enters religious life embarks on a new life that is closer to God and therefore often receives a new name to signify the change.



If you are discerning a religious vocation and would like to discuss your calling with Fr. Ignatius, Vocations Director, he can be reached at [fr-ignatius@cistercian.org](mailto:fr-ignatius@cistercian.org)

## Abbey Church Services

### UPCOMING EVENTS

#### Easter Vigil Mass

March 30<sup>th</sup> 11:30 pm

#### Easter Morning Mass

March 31<sup>st</sup> 9:00 am

#### Fr. Anthony's Ordination

April 6<sup>th</sup> 10:30 am

### DAILY SCHEDULE

#### Office of Readings

& Morning Prayer 6 am

Evening Prayer 6 pm

Daily Mass (Mon - Sat.) 6:30 am

Mass on Sunday 9 am

Confessions (Wed) 4:00-5:00 pm

First Friday Mass 7:30 pm

The Collegium Cantorum will join us for Mass on the First Friday of every month during the school year.



*Cistercian Abbey Our Lady of Dallas*  
3550 Cistercian Road  
Irving, Texas 75039

Fr. Thomas Esposito and Fr. Ambrose Strong (right) serve as deacons for Pope Benedict XVI at the Chrism Mass in 2011.

## Flannery O'Connor's stories continue to inspire

by: Fr. Gregory Schweers

One of the stock questions which teachers of English get asked, of course, is "Who is your favorite writer?" Naturally, I have to make the answer more complicated than the question, because, well, I'm an English teacher (And we all know that English teachers are dedicated to making the simple sound complex!) However, my simple answer would be this: in American literature, my favorite writer is Flannery O'Connor.

The look of disappointment I see on many of your faces tells me she's not as well known as she ought to be, which, I suppose, is why I've spent the last couple of years writing about her myself. Flannery O'Connor was a Catholic from Georgia who was born in 1925 and spent her too short life (she died in 1964 of Lupus) writing dozens of superbly crafted short stories, 2 novels, and 2 delightful volumes of critical essays and personal letters. But, why her, you may

ask!

Simply put, Flannery O'Connor's fiction speaks to the modern mind with images that are grotesque, deeply funny, artfully cynical, and violent. In short, she's the perfect modern writer! Her masterful short stories take us on a whirlwind ride through the Deep South where a psychopathic killer knows more about Jesus than the 'Christians' he kills; where a one-legged Ph.D. in philosophy is outwitted by an 18-year old Bible-toting Nihilist she falls in love with, and where a good "Chrastian" woman (a racist!) discovers that freaks, white trash, and blacks will parade into Heaven while she languishes at the back of the line as the Saints go marchin' into Heaven! Do you feel your blood pressure rising yet?

But, curious readers, STOP reading what some boring English teacher has written; and beg, borrow, or steal a copy of her short stories. Start with the three stories I've just mentioned above:

*A Good Man is Hard to Find; Greenleaf; and my personal favorite, Revelation.* And, if, after 2 or 3 pages of that first short story, you are not shouting 'Halleluiahs', uncontrollably laughing, or pinching yourself in disbelief, call me for your money back!

