

III. Blessed Anasztáz János Brenner

János Brenner was born on December 27, 1931, the middle child of a happy and deeply religious middle class Catholic family in Szombathely, a small city of West Hungary. The father's name was József Brenner, the mother's Ilona Wranovich. If we look at the parents' picture, the face of the father appears calm and melancholy, the mother's eyes sparkle with an innocent pride, joy, energy and playfulness. You know she can handle whatever obstacle comes her way. Jancsi (nickname of János), even as a little boy, at times beams with unclouded, rapturous joy, on other pictures, his face shows a serious and pensive mood. He attended several schools as his parents moved back and forth between Szombathely and Pécs, but it was the spirit of the Cistercian gymnasium (Prep School) at Pécs that influenced him most and determined the rest of his life. The headmaster of the school, Fr. Szaniszló Kúhn, treated his students with warm, personal love and the many extracurricular activities, such as boy-scouting, sports and the activities of the Congregation of Mary helped to forge many friendships and left lasting memories in János's soul. The Catholic schools were taken over by the Communist state in 1948 and Janos decided in 1949 to finish his high school studies in Zirc as an oblate of the Cistercian community.¹ He did not reach easily this step which already implied his intention to become a Cistercian monk and priest. In the novitiate journal he writes about his early adolescence before the momentous decision:

I went astray, I let vanity dominate me, I craved for power and for the recognition of my talents which I have not even had. At that time, I did not understand that I should consider everything as refuse for Your sake, I was rather seeking enjoyment in parties and dances and did not realize that my soul was seeking something beyond and above these. I did not notice that the empty chatter of social gatherings did not interest me, that in my heart the rhythm of silence was beating and that my task is something quite different than these. I closed my eyes and stopped my ears. I was straying about for three years at the brink of the darkest moral precipices, and now, looking back, I am amazed

¹ After the suppression of the Cistercian schools, Abbot Vendel established an unofficial school, unrecognized by the State for those young men between the age 15-17 who aspired to become Cistercian monks.

that I did not fall, not even once. You alone could do this. I thank you, O Goodness, that you were standing by me and I ask you to forgive me that, in spite of this, I have resisted you so long.

Defying the near certainty that the Order in Hungary will be suppressed in a few months, János entered the novitiate in Zirc on August 19, 1950 along with 18 other young men. He took the white habit of the Cistercian novices and received the name Anasztáz. The large group began their year of prayer, study and work under the guidance of the Novice Master, Fr. Lóránt 'Sigmond, with the help of several other fathers who taught them a variety of courses, such as Introduction to the theology of spiritual life, Rule of St. Benedict, Psalms, Liturgy, History of the Order and a philosophy course. On September 7 the Government published a decree which prohibited the functioning of almost all religious orders in Hungary and set October 15 the deadline for the total emptying of the Monastery of Zirc. Abbot Vendel was arrested on October 29 and, in addition to remaining novice master, Fr. Lóránt became the acting superior of 185 Cistercian fathers, 44 junior Cistercians and 19 novices. He placed the novices into private homes of Catholic families and many of the junior Cistercians into diocesan seminaries. Br. Anasztáz was accepted into the seminary of Sombathely, and after its suppression, he continued his studies in the seminary of Győr. Besides his bishop, no one in the seminary knew of János's Cistercian identity. Fr. Lóránt, however, kept in touch with all the dispersed confreres, and especially with the novices, by hand-delivered letters, hiking trips in small groups into the mountains or to Lake Balaton or the River Danube. The small groups were isolated to the point of not knowing about each other's existence so that, in case of discovery, one group cannot reveal the others' existence.

We can learn about the development of János's vocation from his journal and Fr. Lóránt's letters which I enclosed after János's journal excerpts. The first letters reveal Fr. Lóránt's concern about the cheerful, athletic, mischievous young novice who is interested in everything but does not feel really talented for anything:

Your long awaited and lengthy letter arrived and brought happiness for me and safety for your endangered ears.² You can write beautifully, my dear John, you almost bring tears to my eyes. This is not your fault but my weakness. I shed tears easily when I see something good,

² A joke in Hungarian: you pull the ears of a child for a mischief.

human goodness, but even more when I perceive the gifts of God's infinite goodness. My tears give thanks for your striving for goodness but even more for God's electing, educating and adorning graces. But you know, don't you, that the beautiful words, the skillfully crafted, articulate sentences, the intelligent and humble speech are not enough. It is not enough that your dress looks sharp and elegant when you appear in a letter before me. More important is the endurance, the tough conquest of the self, the patience in seeking the truth and the effort to love. It does not matter if on weekdays you look unkempt: the fighting soul has no time to dress nicely.

We see also from the journal entries that Janos writes in the somewhat flowery and romantic style of the spiritual writings of the age, yet the genuine mystical experience breaks through the conventions in its raw sincerity.

In his last letters, Fr. Lorant's fatherly (and motherly) concern is changed into tearful gratitude and joy as he sees God's gifts unfolding in Janos:

I cry when I hear your voice. I believe though that this is not the real cause for our crying: these are tears of joy because the good God is infinitely merciful to us, and even when punishing us, he teaches, heals and embraces us with infinite tenderness. It is impossible for us not to see how his divine power and grace are working in us and also in you. This is the great joy, that is why one weeps -- because, we see how good God truly is. Every line of your letter reassures me...

From his Journal and from his letter to Fr. Lórant, we discern the consistent recurrence of one single theme in different words, a theme which will define his vocation, his life and his death: God is fire and he wants to burn with this fire as a wholly burnt sacrifice. At the beginning of his novitiate he had a vision:

I saw a long corridor, which was gradually glowing hotter and hotter but where I was standing it was black and cold. At the end of the corridor there was a flaming heart upon a white-hot glowing throne. I understood from this that the Heart of Jesus is Lord above all and that I am still far away from the true love of his most holy Heart. O blessed are those who have reached the throne and have been burned away...

He returns in other texts to this image of the corridor in flames, through which he wants to run and reach the heart of Jesus. He later thanks for this vision but at one time he asks God not to give him too much grace because he is afraid of too much responsibility that goes with the grace. In his letter the image is no longer the fiery corridor but the bridge he must cross:

Can I get across the bridge? If I can't, why did the good Lord call me? If I can't he would have foreseen that! I feel I can't. The ego should have been dead long ago. Why did I start out with such strong willing if halfway through the journey the tiger and the leopard were going to stand in my way to attack and devour me?

Clearly, he knows that if he crosses the bridge, which means, if he is ordained and work as a priest, the wild beasts of the Communist Government will devour him. His "soul is full of fear."

After his ordination on June 19, 1955, he is appointed parochial vicar to Rábakethely, a small town near the Austrian border with three neighboring villages to take care from that town. The people of these places have not noticed any sign of inner struggle or restlessness. By that time he received the strength to cross the bridge and face the tiger and the panther. One of his parishioners said about him:

He had a certain radiation that one cannot express in words. People loved him, they tried to go where he was, and to listen to his words. There was something in him that attracted people: the readiness to serve, the love about which he did not only speak but lived it. He stopped to chat even with a beggar in rags. This was his greatest "crime": Both young and old loved him. Also the gypsies loved him. He gained many people for the faith and for the church. He could not pass by a person without stopping and say at least a few words to him. That perennial, kind smile on his face...

Someone else said about János's way of hearing confessions:

While making my confession, I felt he was looking into me, as if reading in my conscience. In a certain sense he was severe, but a true penitent in fact expects that. He was thorough and always gave direction and help. Confession with him was an experience,. I felt, as it were that I became cleansed. Something radiated from him.

Fr. Janos loved everybody but enjoyed especially talking and playing soccer with young people and teaching them.. He taught religion in the school to those who, in spite of great pressure, were signed up for it by their parents. He was so popular among the children, that the three children of the School Principal listened to Fr. János outside, under the windows of the classroom.³ The priest, in turn, walked back and forth along the windows so that the children outside could also hear him.

Such a successful priest was intolerable in the eyes of the AVO,⁴ so they ordered his bishop to remove Fr. János to a small place where he cannot do too much “harm.” The Bishop, who had great respect for Fr. Janos proposed him a transfer, but Janos refused: “I am not afraid, I stay here gladly.” When the Bishop reported the priest’s response, the AVO agent remarked: OK, then, you shall see the consequences.”

One evening, as Fr. János was riding home, some unknown people from the forest threw logs on the road in front of his motorcycle, but he managed to elude them. “They had no luck” –he remarked later, smiling. This was only a warning.

He celebrated his last mass on December 14, 1957. It was a bright winter morning. “Aunt Malcsi – he said t to the house-keeper, it is such a beautiful morning. I could embrace the whole world.”

After supper he accompanied the house-keeper to the door. She asked him: “Aren’t you afraid to be alone?” (The pastor spent the night in another village). “What should I be afraid of?” – he said laughing and closed the door.

Around midnight, a young man of 17, a former altar boy of Fr. János knocked on the door and reported that his uncle was gravely sick and would like to receive the sacraments. Fr. János immediately went over to the church, took the Blessed Sacrament and the oil of the sick and started out on lonely trail to Zsida, another village nearby. The young man soon excused himself and disappeared. Soon afterwards, Fr. János was attacked for the first time with knives. He seemed to have escaped from them but there came another group, close to the house of the allegedly dying man and they succeeded to throw him to the ground and stabbed him 32 times. The stab on his throat was the fatal wound. In the neighboring houses people heard his cries for help but nobody dared to come out to help him. The murderers wanted to throw the

³ The Principal would have lost his job if he had officially registered his children for religious instruction.

⁴ AVO or AVH was the acronym for the Communist secret police, the Hungarian equivalent of the Soviet

still living priest into a dry well, but when the dogs' barking began to wake up the village, they ran away. A doctor came only in the morning when Fr. János was already dead. He still held the Blessed Sacrament on his chest.

The police orchestrated a sham investigation and a meticulously prepared show trial found some alleged culprits who were convicted but soon freed from prison. Only the young man who lured out the priest from the rectory with the fake sick call spent 6 years in prison.

On May 1, 2018 a huge crowd of about 20 000 people, the Hungarian bishops, bishops from abroad, the apostolic nuncio to Hungary, and high dignitaries of the Hungarian Government, all gathered to the Emlékdomb Hill in Fr. János' native city, Szombathely. The Nuncio, Cardinal Angelo Amato, read Pope Francis's Apostolic Letter which allows that the "Servant of God, the Venerable Janos Brenner, martyr, priest, a shepherd according to the Heart of Jesus, serving his faithful and defending the Blessed Sacrament that he was taking to a sick person, from now on be called " Blessed" and that his feast day be held ... every year on December 15, the day of his birth in heaven..."

The Bishop of Szombathely, János Székely , reflected on the meaning of the present celebration:

On this place where the feasts of the atheist dictatorship used to be celebrated, today the light of the Gospel shines. Christ takes possession of the Emlékdomb and tells us that he is the Lord of history, the Lamb, who was slain and yet he lives. He for whom János Brenner sacrificed his life is more powerful than any earthly power...

From now on János Brenner has become our intercessor, exemplar and guide.



János Brenner in his high school student years



A true relic: the surplice Fr. Anasztáz was wearing when he was martyred

B) Excerpts from the Journal of Fr. Anasztáz

These journal excerpts date from the first two years of Blessed Anasztaz John Brenner's formation, novice and junior brother in the suppressed Cistercian community of Zirc. The genuine spiritual experience breaks through with elementary strength in many places of the conventional, at times flowery prose of a young man who wants to reach "the heights of the holiness of life."

There is no greater joy than when man who is nothing, can be even more annihilated in Christ and immerse himself into the infinite world of His soul filled with wonderful riches which are forever given over to us.

Even if the road is rough, I look at your pain-ridden face and follow you. I ask you only one thing: May I always fulfill most precisely what you give to me as my vocation. Whether you assign me a leadership position or a humble one, let me follow your footsteps everywhere and accept my task from your loving, caring hands with the humble heart of a child. May I always remain as simple and humble of heart as you were in your life on earth...I can only thank you with trembling lips as I am meditating on your great and manifold goodness for "your love is better than life, my lips will praise you with joy."

Aridity... a yawning void... a bottomless pit... hell... absurdity... Hold me up, Father, because the whirlpool of the abyss is swallowing me up. Woe to me, it snatches me away and then I will be lost forever. I offer you the bitter horrors of the spiritual trials. If you will it so, let your holy will be done. On the stone wall of the bastion of my life stands written this sentence: Under all circumstances let your holy will be done. Take my will, my heart, my all and give me [the grace] that I may be fully transformed into Christ, for this is my vocation. To burn, to be aflame in your love for sinners.

I grab with both hands and eagerly swallow the cup of sufferings that Christ gives me. For my life must mirror your life. And since you have suffered throughout your whole life, can I be continuously happy, without temptations, resting in your Father's lap? O yes, I feel this calms me down. O be with me in the dark night of temptations and in the bitter torments. Be with me, O most holy Heart of Jesus!

My heart is filled to the brim with the ever sweet poetry of God's love... To burn in the fire...I saw a long corridor, which was gradually glowing hotter and hotter but where I was standing it was black and cold. At the end of the corridor there was a flaming heart upon a white-hot glowing throne. I understood from this that the Heart of Jesus is Lord above all and that I am still far away from the true love of his most holy Heart. O blessed are those who have reached the throne and have been burned away...

October 24, 1951

You are fire, my God, powerful and inextinguishable. You burn and your burning wounds, but this wound is sweet as honey. You cause pain but this pain is desirable. He whom You have burnt once, wants to be consumed by sufferings. How good You are, my Lord, my God, my all. How much you have given me and how little and valueless is what I have done for you. Do you remember, Lord, how You healed my stomach ache when I received You? Do you remember how You cured my sore throat in one second. Do you remember the many graces I received from You, the vision of the mountain of perfection which is Love? I do remember. Thank you. And what did I return to You for all this? Forgetfulness, negligence and an uncaring attitude. O my Lord, remember Your holy wounds, You suffered also for me, have mercy on me. I remember my sins. My intellect has been obscured, my will, however, remained unbroken. I went astray, I let vanity dominate me, I craved for power and for the recognition of my talents which I did not have. At that time, I did not understand that I should consider everything as refuse for Your sake, I was rather seeking enjoyment in parties and dances and did not realize that my soul was seeking something beyond and above these. I did not notice that the empty

chatter of social gatherings did not interest me, that in my heart the rhythm of silence was beating and that my task is something quite different than these. I closed my eyes and stopped my ears. I was straying about for three years at the brink of the darkest moral precipices and now, looking back, I am amazed that I did not fall, not even once. You alone could do this. I thank you, O Goodness that you were standing by me and I ask you to forgive me that, in spite of this, I have resisted you so long. Be with me that I may make up for it.

October 27, 1951

I pray to you for prayer. Lord, I would like to burn away on my heart's altar! I want my life to become a continuous prayer! Give me the strength for it. I want to always live in you! Help me because You alone are holy, You God of infinite might and majesty. my soul is like a withering plant under the scorching sun. I am longing and languishing. Give me strength, give me the grace of prayer and I will revive. Wound me and burn me, burn me out as you do with a clay pot that I may be clean, fit for containing nourishment. Lord, keep me if only as a trash can! That would make me infinitely happy. Do not give me much grace because I am unable to cope with the increasing burden of responsibilities. Hide me in your side wound. What's going to happen to me? At any rate, I will be ground down. Use me, Lord, take away my will, my all and let my prayer also be yours, your loving, self-forgetting smiling back to the Father.

October 22, 1952

Oh, my sweet Jesus, I don't know how to thank You for all the wonderful graces that, through your infinite mercy, completely filled up my soul. I know I have no merit so I cannot thank You for your graces as you would deserve. I still want, I still would like to give you something. Accept me, form my heart according to your Sacred Heart, hide me in your side wound so that I may live only for your commands. Set my soul on fire with your infinite love, accept me as a holocaust. Allow me to melt down in the infinite sea of your holy love. stand by me that I may walk on a safe road. lead me on the slippery roads of life.

This morning, when I received You, You made me aware that You are in me. I felt You in myself. And yet I felt that I was in You as a speck of dust in the sea. Oh, my dear Jesus, my little brain gets worn out and faints at seeing the infinite. I thank You that, for a second, I was allowed to look into the infinite. Thank You that for a second you made me sense You. I thank You for everything, thank You. Oh, allow me to live unknown this way of life and that the simple soul which I obtained with Your holy permission may follow You on this thorny road of life with deep faith and infinite love. Oh, grant that the perpetual renunciation that I practiced up to now and intend to continue also in the future may greatly contribute to the preparation of my heavenly crown. I ask you, lead me along this way of life in the fiery furnace of suffering, since Your life also was only suffering and then lead me through the white-hot corridor of love where I also will be set on fire and thus arrive at Your flaming divine throne. You know that I am not seeking happiness in this life for I put everything in You, o Father of mercies. I know that You don't spare the suffering of those who are Yours because they profit from it immensely. You know what a grabber I am. You know how much I am attracted to what is beautiful, good and holy. I long for everything that is eternal for You are the beauty, You are the goodness, You are the holiness and the eternal infinite God. Continue to lavish Your graces upon my soul so that I may further deepen my spiritual life that I may please You alone, my dear Jesus. Be my shelter when I seek refuge in You from the world.

Oh, infinite Love, fulfill my old desire that you may deign to lead me to the heights of the life of holiness through Mary, your Virgin Mother. I ask You with confidence for You have never refused anything from your Holy Mother. I beg You and entreat youu, have mercy on me and form my heart according to Your Sacred Heart. The image you showed me about the life of holiness is still very much alive in me. Help me not only to get out of the ditch at the roadside, but allow me to go up the mountain. Do not merely liberate me from my faults but increase also the virtues in me. Oh, my dear Jesus, how close is the life of holiness and yet so far away. There are times when I see it in front of me, at other times it appears in inaccessible distance. Dizzying distances, immeasurable infinity, beatifying closeness.

Father, I want to be Your child. You know how much my soul exults when I can magnify You. How much I am happy when I can enjoy Your closeness, when I can delight in You, when I can talk with You, when I can look at You without reflecting, when I can contemplate You. You are the only true joy of my soul. Why, it exults in Your presence.

Father, You know how much I was striving to obtain the simple spirit of a child. For You said: let the little children come to me, for such as these will possess the kingdom of heaven. In truth I tell you, unless you become like little children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. To reach this realm is my only goal, the realm which from the beginning God has prepared for those who love him." Oh, my dear Jesus, I cannot imagine that there is such a man who does not love You? This is impossible without an infernal wickedness. Blessed are the poor in spirit for they possess heaven.

Father, You see I keep lifting my feet, You just be gracious and show me where are the stairs that lead to You.

I am begging You again and again, I am shouting louder and louder: Lord, lead me to the heights of the life of holiness. My Virgin Mother, my gracious, good Patroness, you too, beg your Son. St. Therese of Lisieux has shown the world a new form of holiness. It is a simple but deep spiritual life, surrender of the self throughout one's life to the Lord Jesus. It is meant to wipe off the tears from the face of the dear Jesus, the tears caused by the sinners who offend, slap and crucify Him, but, above all, they are caused by their ignoring and refusing his infinite love. I believe, this is the way of life, Lord, You destined me to embrace. Help me here, here push me upward. For this is the only way which is able to stand up to the modern paganism which shows us the many varieties of hell's face and tries to lure us astray from the road that leads to Christ.

I came to You, Father. Your prodigal son came to you. He who had not found on earth what he was longing for came to You. From You he received everything he was seeking and You filled his soul to the brim. I thank You that You grafted into me the attraction for eternal beauties and that you did not allow even one person to be lost, the one being me.

Infinitely generous God, forgive me my faults and stumbles of human weakness. O give me Your powerful strength, Your grace, that I may walk without sin, avoiding even venial sins in this valley of tears. Virgin Mary, spouse of the Holy Spirit, mother of Jesus Christ, my mother in heaven, pray for me your God-child! O how marvelously did I get into the current of divine life. God, God the Father is my father, the Virgin Mother is my mother who is the spouse of the Holy Spirit and whose God-child is my brother, Jesus Christ. How beautiful is your name, my dear Jesus. How beautifully sounds: Jesus! Jesus! O my good Lord, I am trembling when I think of the judgment which is to come. I love You fearfully, o good Jesus. Do not judge me according to your justice but according to your infinite mercy. My heart is anguished when I think of how much good I could have done but did so little. Be merciful to me, a poor sinner!

I thank You for the crumb you gave to me, the servant of Your servant. I know I am the last of the servants and do not deserve that at all. It, however, gives me peace, that „You do not reveal yourself to the wise and scholars, but to the children.” I thank You for the grace You gave me the last week: when I heard about the sufferings of the Lord, when his boundless infinite pains came to my mind, there emerged before me my own sins and the sins of the world. And I could not keep back the flood of my tears. I have never cried so much as then. Continue to give me the gift of the grace of tears for it is at the price of sincere tears that humanity improves, the prince of darkness is pushed back and the face of the earth is renewed.

O tell me, my dear Jesus, why do You hide Yourself sometimes from me? At times I see You in front of me, at other times from an incredibly long distance. At some of the turning points of my life you stand close by me, but when I stretch out my hand towards You, You disappear in order to show Yourself again from an infinite distance. And You do this several times. What should I do, then? Should I despair? At such times when dark clouds tower over me and the landscape darkens, I feel so much alone. Then I start going towards You on the dark road of life so that You may again show up and keep Yourself away from me. Even so, I continue seeking You. At one point I will find You. After 5-10-50-70 years? I don't know. But once you bound me to Yourself with the sacred chains of love, and I cannot live without You. My soul

took roots in the rich humus-like soil of eternity, please water it many times, many times every day, with the life-giving water of the sea of love.

We live in your house. We meet You there. I know from what they say, in how many ways this is possible. O tell me, could we not be always together? Don't disappear from me. Stay with me. Dwell in the chapel of my soul. Live in me. Hide me in Your sacred side wound so that, You in me and I in You, may live always forever. Take me out of this sinful world. Save me from the thornbushes of modern paganism. Free me from the embracing arms of Satan. Take me to Yourself, for I feel good only with You.

Lord, you saw my terrible spiritual battle when, with the eagerness of those souls who seek grace, I knocked at the door of Fr. Raynald. True, it lasted only for a short time but Satan tried out all possible and impossible means to thwart me. „If God is with us, who is against us?“ I thank You that You won the battle.

I thank You the graces that I received, the gift of the grace of tears. O tell me, my dear Jesus, would it not be possible to do a general confession every day? For after such a confession my soul is aflame with love. Hide me in Your side wound, hide me that I may remain unknown. „The inner life of the soul is God.“ You live in me, in my soul, my good Jesus and I live in You, my beloved Jesus. I have no greater desire than this. To be holy, to be sanctified and to sanctify others. Sacred Heart of Jesus, be with me!

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Here is a short letter that Br. Anasztáz wrote to Fr. Lóránt 'Sigmund, his novice master perhaps from the seminary without date.

The letter below came to us from Fr. Joseph Brenner, the younger brother of Fr. John. He wrote it to Fr. Lóránt 'Sigmund, but most likely he did not send it to him. Perhaps he decided to wait until the turmoil in his soul would settle down. Indeed, it is a cry for help of a soul who feels sinking into the abyss of doubt and fear.

He wrote the letter on November 30, 1954, seven months before his ordination. He knows if he is ordained, he will have to cross „the bridge“ when he will become the prey of the

„tiger and the panther” (the deadly power of the Communist state). If you read the previous journal excerpt, you noticed the vision of the fiery furnace, the flaming throne and his desire to be set on fire and burn away as a holocaust. But now, when the time draws near, he is frightened. But as he said about an early fight with Satan, God won also this battle. The people he served in Rábakethely and the surrounding villages testified that Fr. John was always radiating such peace and joy that people, especially the young, were drawn to him. The morning before he was killed, he cried out his joy to the cook of the rectory: Aunt Málcsi, this morning is so beautiful, I would love to hug the world!”

Our Dear Father,

My penmanship is not very good because I am writing in bed; hopefully it is still legible. Since Saturday we have been weighing each other down, the bed and I. I jumped the wrong way while playing volleyball, that’s all.

This letter might be way too human; please bear with me. I am struggling with words, ideas, feelings, and experiences. I feel like I maybe could put it into words, but only by screeching and stuttering, like a bad push-cart. I am not ashamed of being so shy (or at least that’s what I would like to convince myself). But I would like to hide somewhere... in the shadow of the good Lord, where nobody would find me.

Without beating around the bush, I admit I’m having a hard time. I am looking for a way out of this apocalyptic world. But either I can’t find it or it looks so steep that it strains my faith. I keep bumping up against the brainlessness of faith. I could easily slide into rationalism, but my critical sense holds me back from that. Reason is good only for identifying mysteries, but it stops before the ultimate questions. Reason closed in itself is a dead end, a self-referential carousel spinning around the mysteries. Existence itself is also mystery. It is rooted in contradictions. Reality is a dreadful balance of contradictions. Perfection also, I think, is a harmony of contradictions. The inner world of truly great men – it sometimes seems – is based on such a balance of weighty contradictions. The life of the soul is not one-dimensional. And aren’t there infinite dimensions in God, too? He is merciful and just, angry and joyful, he loves and hates, and all this to an infinite degree. Then there are the paradoxes of the Gospel.

Renunciation – possession: the only one who can truly possess is the one who renounces possessions. The birds rested on the hands and shoulders of St. Francis only after he gave up on getting them to fly to him. Humility – Pride: he who humbles himself will be exalted and vice versa. It seems clear that perfection is the synthesis of contradictions. This, however, goes far beyond the level of reason. What can reason do with the mystery, since reason is one-dimensional? Is faith the only solution? It's unsolvable on the natural level? The only bridge across the bottomless whirlpool of existence and across the death of understanding -- is faith, the razor's edge? Is this really the solution? Can I make it across? And what is on the other side? Is crossing even a sensible decision? This is not merely an intellectual problem. My thought is something I live out by experience. Why do I see if what I see is unintelligible? Why are there eyes if reason cannot comprehend what is seen?

Here is the other problem: even if there is a solution, it is too steep. Can I get across the bridge? If I can't, why did the good Lord call me? If I can't he would have foreseen that! I feel I can't. The ego should have been dead long ago. Why did I start out with such strong willing if halfway through the journey the tiger and the leopard were going to stand in my way to attack and devour me? What will become of me if I get lost in the undergrowth of pain and love can't find me anymore? The mountain ascent is full of rough bushes; my soul is full of fear. I am trembling in the fear of faith. But I want to believe. I will it. Please help me! I want something to grab ahold of. In the night of faith isn't there some emergency brake to pull and bring the daylight? I need some assurance; the silence is excruciating. God is always silent. He does not speak. But I still need to know what I can believe in. He does not say a word even to my most desperate cries.⁵ I believe that this also is love. I believe that everything is love. *Peto misericordiam Dei et Ordinis.*⁶

After all this musing: what is the relationship between understanding and lived experience? What should someone do for whom they both coincide? We can approach reality

⁵ Over this sentence Brenner has written a single word as self-commentary: "literary."

⁶ When a young man seeks admission to the Cistercian order, the Abbot asks him in the rite of clothing, "What do you seek?" ("Quid petis?"). Here, Brenner repeats his liturgical response: "I seek the mercy of God and that of the order."

only with the reason, and also with something else, I believe: with intuition.⁷ But even then, one must believe. The better my intuition the stronger my faith ought to be. I don't understand this either; this too is a mystery. For if I see, only love remains, faith ceases.

I also cannot swallow the question of passivity. Here I think we get into an *aequivocatio*. (This is only a theoretical reflection, of course I have accepted it both in theory and in practice.⁸ I am just experimenting.) I think there is passivity *in sensu proprio* when one is passive because he is empty inside and full of inhibitions outside. But there is also another passivity: the passivity of one who cannot be seen on the outside but is full of great struggles and conflict or he may even have a rich inner world.

A while ago I discovered some motherly features in myself. I was really ashamed. Then your words, Father, rang in my ears: "we must become mothers." I began to think of the many important roles women play in a responsible community. Behind the blind and brutal reality of emancipation, what deep-seated longings and unconscious needs lie hidden! It's also surprising that our century is the century of the Blessed Mother. The Church is our mother, our home, we are all brothers and sisters in her. Humanity has lost its home and is searching for a mother, for a home that is tender and warm. We are searching for love. I believe, I want to believe that love is our home. We need to find our way into this nest.

I remember the question we were working on last summer: what do I seek in Clairvaux, in St. Bernard? I've been thinking about it. Now I can give a more articulate answer. First of all, I seek a home in the *schola caritatis*.⁹ Only in love, in its opening up and expanding, do I find release. This is how I will be cleansed and go straight to God. It is my fundamental life-experience, my fundamental reaction to the things that affect me. This is still often hidden under an appearance of rationalism. But I also believe I will get past the inhibition. The second thing I seek is a worldview. I've been beating my head against this a lot. An *amor*-centric

⁷ Here and elsewhere when writing of epistemology, Brenner seems to reflect the influence of the philosophy of Henri Bergson (1859-1941). For Bergson, intuition is not a vague guess to be contrasted with certain knowledge, but a direct perception that does not come from a process of reasoning.

⁸ Brenner appears to be referring to a previous communication from Fr. Lawrence about "passivity."

⁹ The "school of charity." This is a classic Cistercian term for the monastery and monastic life.

worldview. That's why I put philosophy on top. I seek the traces of God in the world and in ourselves. I'm really interested in dogmatic theology, also in the development, the stages etc, of spiritual life; I am searching to find out what man is. Psychology interests me, so does the relationship between grace and nature, freedom-determinism (denn der [sic] Bildung is der Weg zur Freiheit)¹⁰, worldview-freedom; societal problems, friendship-solitude, marriage – the causes and medications of sexual pathology, neurology; medical science; physiology etc. I am very interested in the mystery of life, of body and soul... biology, genetics. Just as much, the structure and essence of matter... -- physics, astronomy, flying saucers, and everything else! Of course, from this angle everything interests me, as I told you last summer, even though I couldn't explain it then. I understand that I have to choose one or two areas, or else I will be yanked apart. But choosing one detail doesn't satisfy me because the whole gets lost, while choosing the whole doesn't get me anywhere. The refrain from Babits is always ringing in my ears: "What do you want with me, God?"¹¹ I am asking, not refusing. I hang my eyes upon Him. Only He can reach into the human soul's secret, unfathomable depths. I seek, I long, I toddle; one day He will lift me up.

Blessed be God who, as I believe, does not tempt us beyond our strength, but along with the temptation also makes it possible for us to become liberated. Of course I will really see this only after I get past it. As long as I am in the birth-pangs of temptation, I admit, I feel tortured. As I am drowning in these tortures I wish I could grab your hand, Father. I long very much to go home. Sometimes I weep for home. I am still a child; I need warmth. True, I want to bring myself even into the silence of the walls.¹² But there I would be at least at home. It is very different to die alone than to die together. My mother used to say during the bombing raids: „Come closer to me! Let us die together if the good Lord so wills it.”

¹⁰ "Culture is the way to freedom."

¹¹ Mihály Babits (1883-1941) is one of the great Catholic poets of Hungary. In the poem quoted, "The Candle of God," written during the rise of Nazi power in Hungary, the poet speaks in the person of a candle that God is holding against the winds of the world and of Hell.

¹² These "walls" are evidently those of the monastery itself.

I truly feel now how much we need you, Father. For you, Father, it would be better to be dissolved and be with Jesus. Is it so strange that the orphans who lost their Mother hang on to their Father?¹³

I think of you, Father, with love, trust and prayer.

A[nasztáz] Jancsi

s

First Sunday of Advent, December 1s, 1957

My Beloved Brothers in Christ!

The Church selects twice in a row Gospel readings about the Last Judgment. From two different perspectives. The last Sunday of Ordinary Time concludes the liturgical year; with Advent a new Liturgical year begins. Similarly, the last event of world history will be the Last Judgment and everything will be settled forever. With the First Sunday of Advent, on the other hand, a new year begins: a new season, the season of waiting for the coming of Christ. The Son of Man appears in a new light as he hastens to the Last Judgment: we eagerly look forward to his arrival. It is both a great beginning and end.

1./ First of all we are waiting for the arrival of Jesus' Nativity. We are waiting for the holy moment when in the stillness of Christmas night the Son of God descends to bring the long yearned-for peace on earth. For us this coming of Christ is a period of waiting for Christ's grace to conquer sin in us. We wait for peace to be born in the light of the Christmas tree. Peace be born both within our souls and amongst us. This is the most beautiful gift of the Christmas infant. We are awaiting God's goodness and compassionate mercy to appear among men. We

¹³ "Gaude, felix Mater Cistercium," "Rejoice, Citeaux, our happy mother," was a Latin anthem composed Fr. Emil [last name and dates??] and sung by Br. Anastáz and his fellow novices in Zirc.

are expecting the arrival of this child, this powerless child, this unarmed baby who is more powerful than all the rulers of the earth.

2./ We are also awaiting the arrival of Jesus to sit in judgment. For Jesus will come. "For as the lightning flashing from one part of heaven lights up the other, so will be the Son of Man when his day comes." "The Father placed all power in his hands to judge all men." "They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory to judge the living and the dead". God's glory manifests itself in this.

It will be the day of divine justice, the day when God metes out justice to all. Would God be just if he allowed the wicked ones to rule the earth, if he allowed evil to triumph, if he let both the good ones and the evil ones enter into God's joy? Would God be just if he did not give greater reward to those who endured here on earth great suffering, evil, humiliation and false accusation and remained faithful to God's Law, who gave up riches and plenty for the sake of serving God? No. Must not the day arrive when the secret deeds of everyone will be revealed? God must finally separate the sheep from the goats. All innocent suffering and heroic self-sacrifice will receive its reward and every secret crime receive its punishment. Nothing will remain hidden. Those who have done evil will stand ashamed before the entire world. Their deeds will be revealed to father and mother who may have died long before them and had taught them goodness. They will be revealed to their children for whom they tried to be a good example, and to all of their relatives, friends and acquaintances.

b./ Anyone who wants to bag a wild animal will never succeed if he keeps firing off his weapon in the woods. No one will catch a bird if he keeps whistling while sitting next to the bait. The fisherman sitting by the river doesn't keep drumming if he wants to catch any fish. God, however, acts differently. He beats the drum and announces the Last Judgment *because* he wants to catch human souls. He acts like a mother. She keeps calling her child and when he doesn't respond to kindness, she uses a raised voice and threat so that fear would move the child to come to her. God, too, wants to raise salvific fear in us, that's why he announces the Last Judgment.

This judgment that shames the sinner brings great joy to the just. Joy fills his heart that Christ will be our judge who loved us so much that he offered his life on the cross for us. The

Christ who will come in glory on the clouds of heaven is the same one who bore the cross on his shoulders and fell three times under its burden. The same Christ will be our judge who fed us with his holy body and blood.

My dear brothers! Jesus said that no one knows the day nor the hour set by God in his eternal wisdom. One must always be prepared for the unknown. Just like the woman who is awaiting her husband or son returning from a long journey. She doesn't go to bed even if he will be arriving on the late train. So, too, must we always be prepared. Saint Paul warns us: be vigilant and watchful! We must be vigilant like the Church celebrating the "Rorate" mass, fasting, praying, doing penance. We must make sure like the prudent virgins that our lights don't go out, so that when Jesus arrives in the middle of the night we will go in with him to the Lamb's eternal wedding feast.

D) Fr. Lóránt's letters to Br. Anasztáz

As he organized a clandestine novitiate, Fr. Lóránt often communicated with his novices through letters and periodic visits. We include below some of the letters he wrote to Br. Anasztáz in the seminary. These letters illustrate a beautiful relationship between two saints and martyrs. As Fr. Lóránt's concerns for Anasztáz turn into joy, the letters follow and mirror the development of the young seminarian's priestly soul. The letters are not dated but were written between 1950 and 1955, the year of Fr. Anasztáz's ordination to the priesthood.

My Dear John,

Your letter made me very happy since I haven't heard your voice for a long time. The first thing I did was to listen to your voice. I heard it and it reassured me. You bring up some problems God has given you to deal with. As you try to solve them and perhaps even struggle with them, you become stronger, your mind and perhaps your heart are also being shaped and formed. These issues are worth pondering, but only to a certain point because you will find a full answer only after a lifelong process of learning.

Here is an important and good question (of yours): "under the pretext of a vocation am I not just seeking myself in a sublimated fashion?" I wish others, too, would ask this question. No doubt, at the beginning one seeks mainly himself: he puts on God's robes and enjoys looking at himself. And yet, he does not seek only himself. In fact, he appreciates the robes, but he also appreciates God, or else, he would not put his robes on. It is true, though, that we should strive to seek and love God for his own sake. We will reach this stage only if we do not seek our own glory. This is the crucial point, not to seek my own glory. I may seek what is good for me since God, too, intends what is good for me. But I should not seek my own glory because "*qui gloriatur, in Domino gloriatur*—he who glories should glory in the Lord." Also, I should seek God's concerns for me and for others. If I am concerned with what interests God, I will also seek my own interest in the right way. It is quite true that there are many who never ask themselves this question ("do I actually seek myself?") and are offended at anyone who might express such a suspicion. In reality, you will find this (self-seeking) everywhere among humans. [...].

"What will become of me? I have a little talent for everything, but no real talent for anything" – you ask. That's a question of those people who want everything, all at once; knowledge and good judgment, theory and practice, inner life and outward success. Inordinate craving is at the root (of such an attitude). Concentrate on the task at hand. Go as deep as you can. Stop trying to become an expert in a lot of things so that you may become good at some. Our abilities are finite; so we should limit our existence

to what we have received. We are meant to become a member in the body, not everything. I should find my task within the body and fulfill that task. So, go step by step. At any rate, strive to be thorough. Do not seek instant success and fast results. Lay down the foundations. [...].

So much for the time being, my dear John. The Blessed Mother is with you; you, too, should be with her. Many times I offer you to her and she is so good that she accepts it. Love the body whose head cares for you and nourishes you with his blood. Be a good member of him, grow strong. If you cannot resolve a problem, then, above everything else, pray and ask for a solution from the Blessed Mother. She will certainly put things in order in your mind. I am at peace about you. You are full of mischief, but I believe that grace will bring forth something good even out of that. Strive for truthfulness. Do not embellish your self-image. Accept the fact that you do not see the solution [to a problem] rather than trying to force it. As a rule, things must mature slowly. Don't crave too much. You always make me happy if you write. I store your words up in my soul and offer them many times to the Blessed Mother. By the time you get a reply, I will have talked it over many times with her. You too, please pray for us so that we also may live.¹⁴

I embrace you with much love.

* *

M [agister].

My Dear John,

Your long awaited and lengthy letter arrived and brought happiness for me and safety for your endangered ears.¹⁵ You can write beautifully, my dear John, you almost

¹⁴ He means: live safe from persecution and in union with Christ

¹⁵ A joke in Hungarian: you pull the ears of a child for a mischief.

bring tears to my eyes. This is not your fault but my weakness. I shed tears easily when I see something good, human goodness, but even more when I perceive the gifts of God's infinite goodness. My tears give thanks for your striving for goodness but even more for God's electing, educating and adorning graces. But you know, don't you, that the beautiful words, the skillfully crafted, articulate sentences, the intelligent and humble speech are not enough. It is not enough that your dress looks sharp and elegant when you appear in a letter before me. More important is the endurance, the tough conquest of the self, the patience in seeking the truth and the effort to love. It does not matter if on weekdays you look unkempt: the fighting soul has no time to dress nicely.

I am glad you remembered a request of mine that you never compromise with yourself. Now I tell you more. Watch out that you do not make the Lord wait for you. He is good, patient and gracious, and he is even ready to accommodate you with providing a switch-back road (instead of a shorter steep climb), but it would not be nice for us to make him wait. It is worthwhile to accompany him. Many times he does not say where he is taking us; he is often in a hurry and we are huffing and puffing, but afterwards it becomes clear that it was worth going with him. If you can do it easily, write also at other times. It is good sometimes to put on a festive dress. At such occasions you look at yourself in the mirror which is also good occasionally.

My dear John, be good. I pray for you with much love. I trust you and I beg the Lord that you not sadden him. I am also looking forward to meeting you in the summer when your eyes again will tell me everything.

Love,

M

* *

My Dear Son,

I also read your letter with eyes warm with tears: it seems that we have become such teary-eyed people in our present misery. I don't know what it is in us that makes us cry: the

distance which separates us or the love that binds us together and does not let us be separated from each other? I believe it is both; while you were close and I saw you daily, you received my love in the shape of scolding. Now that you are far away, I embrace you in spirit – how could I scold you – I cry when I hear your voice. I believe though that this is not the real cause for our crying: these are tears of joy because the good God is infinitely merciful to us, and even when punishing us, he teaches, heals and embraces us with infinite tenderness. It is impossible for us not to see how his divine power and grace are working in us and also in you. This is the great joy, that is why one weeps -- because, we see how good God truly is.

Every line of your letter reassures me. I see from it how you stand before God, how you think in his presence, what you think about him, about his ways and his will. I pray, my dear Son, that you may not only see but also believe. Seeing is already a reward.

Sometimes it is like an advance payment but it is always a reward. Faith is what merits:

“Blessed are those who did not see and yet believed” – so spoke the Lord to Thomas.

That you are able to understand God’s ways so often is a reward. If not understanding (his ways), you still believe and obey, that is merit. “*obedientes fidei.*” (obeying out of faith). Abraham believed God and was ready to fulfill the hard and unintelligible command: sacrifice your son. Obedience to God’s commandments is wisdom, the way to happiness. This is what I ask for you from the Lord. You, too, please ask for it.

I now continue my letter after two weeks. In the interim its paper has gotten wrinkled a bit but not the love with which I think of you. My pen, too, is pouring ink abundantly, while at other times I have been pressing it in vain. So frail is matter, the flesh, but our love is not from flesh and blood but from the grace of the Lord with which we love God and everything and everyone that belongs to him.

Study much and gladly. Don’t take time away from prayer; enjoy sitting at the master’s feet, but when it is time for studies, study as much as you can. Study intelligently, chew on it; don’t try to understand everything, but leave something for future times, for the school of life experience and for the time when your personality will have matured. In the beginning we know things from the outside and only later do

we penetrate their depth. The young know perhaps more details now, but later you will see more clearly what is essential.

For the summer you might want to find some kind of practical job so that you are not separated from life and from people. The seminary creates a bubble for you, which has great advantages but also some drawbacks. Of course, as soon as you are out, I am expecting you very much. Don't let me wait long for you.

How is your health? Be moderate. To use a metaphor, he who has a weak spring should not stretch it too far. Find out what is harmful and what is good for your health so that you may provide for it, as much as possible, what it needs. [...]

I am finishing now, my Son, because my (fountain) pen's flow is unstoppable. And besides, I have nothing else to write about. Pray for us and pray for me too as I do not forget you either, and may God bless you.

Love

M

* *

The following is only a fragment of a letter for the ordination of Fr. Anasztáz.

Ananiah asked the Lord: "do you want a child like this to be ordained a priest?" The Lord answered: "go because I chose him to be an instrument to proclaim my name to the believing unbelievers, the unbelieving believers, and to the spoiled little princes, the children. I will show him how much he will have to suffer for me" (Acts 9:15).

The yoke of the Lord is sweet, his burden light; only we are a heavy burden for ourselves as long as we do not die to ourselves. The *vetus homo* [old man] agonizes in us for a long time and that is tough. But the *novus homo's* [new man] every heartbeat is invigorating, strengthening and encouraging. Our trail is winding between joy and pain but the joy always wins out. That is resurrection.

The Lord said to John: "Behold your mother." You, too, should tell her: "Behold your son." May the Saint of Clairvaux and this short excerpt help you: "*ipsam sequens non devias... ipsa propitia pervenis...* if you follow her, you will not go astray... if she is gracious to you, you will arrive..." I too extend my hand over your head that the Spirit of the priesthood may descend upon you. I will also ask for the imposition of your hands so that I too may share in the grace the child has received.

Love,

M

EPILOGUE

It happened at one of the Sustentation dinners, a solemn yearly gathering of Cistercian parents and alumni to thank the many donors to the Abbey and School. One enthusiastic speech followed the other in pointing out the successes of the School and the merits of the monks' prayer and work when, to conclude the event, Abbot Denis stepped up to the microphone: "I would like to tell you the secret of our success" – he said. And he read for us the last pages of Abbot Vendel's prison memoirs in which Abbot Vendel summarizes his own sufferings and declares: "The first thing I tell myself in retrospect is that for no earthly treasure would I give away the sufferings of these six years. I have been given an immense amount of gifts." As we sat half a world away and half a century later in comfortable surroundings, we began to understand that, united with the cross of Christ, the sufferings of Vendel Endrédy and of the many other Cistercians imprisoned by the Communist Government became seeds of new life for us, the living foundation of our monastery. Indeed „precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his saints." The big crowd, noisy and exuberant a few minutes before, left the banquet hall in reverent silence.