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News from the
SOCIETY OF SAINT JOHN
Star Route 1, Box 226
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THE SOCIETY OF SAINT JOHN AT JACOB'S FALLS

We are a community of men living a Benedictine lifestyle on the shore of Lake Superior in Michigan's Keweenaw peninsula. We observe the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience and strive to devote the totality of our lives to the love, praise, and service of God. We gather for prayer five times daily and spend the remainder of our time in work for the support and maintenance of our community and for the upbuilding of God's Kingdom through the arts.

To protect, nourish, and foster our life of prayer, fraternal charity, and artistic development we pray and work for the foundation of a monastery dedicated to Our Lady, Queen of Heaven and earth, the ever-virgin mother of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We have humbly begun our pilgrimage in our community at Jacob's Falls.

Deriving its name from a nearby natural landmark, Jacob's Falls is located along Sand Dunes Drive (highway M-26) in Eagle Harbor Township of Michigan's Keweenaw County. The property is bounded on the South by the gorge and falls of Jacob's Creek and on the North by the agate beach of Lake Superior's Great Sand Bay.

Our community house, a former one room

school, is perched on a foundation of cedar poles about twenty feet above the shore. Thanks to the generous help and support of St. Paul the Apostle Parish in Calumet, the building was winterized this past Fall. Despite its rather exposed location on the lakeshore, it now affords our community a secure, if somewhat cramped, living space.

Three small cabins offer rustic accommodations for guests during the Spring, Summer, and Fall; and a former restaurant building provides space for the various cottage industries at which we work for the support of our community. The highway runs the length of the property and allows easy access to all the buildings, even during the very snowy winters.

While perhaps not as large or secluded as might be ideal, Jacob's Falls possesses serviceable buildings, a variety of terrain and plantlife, and a lakeside location with an unimpeded view to the Northwest. From here we can see the sun set over the Lake eight months of the year and experience the ever-changing moods of the world's largest body of fresh water. It is a good place to contemplate God as He manifests Himself in the wonders of His creation; a good place to undertake the pilgrimage of religious life.

LIVING CLOSE TO NATURE

At Jacob's Falls we strive to remain close to Nature and in harmony with its varied rhythms. The movement of the sun determines our times of prayer, and the changing seasons suggest the character and duration of our work. In all things we strive to unite ourselves with the flow of God's universe and join our lives to its unending hymn of praise.

God's creation is very good, and it speaks to us His loving concern and providence for His creatures. Certain aspects of our daily life at Jacob's Falls forcefully remind us of our total dependence on this divine providence.

THE WOOD PILE

We heat our community house and cook our meals with wood. Last Winter, much sobered by the warning of a longtime resident of the area that, while we could live without running water, we would die without wood, we tried to have an extra large supply. By cutting dead trees we found on our property we augmented what we had been able to purchase and began the Winter with six cords of firewood neatly stacked beside our community house. However, an antique stove, an uninsulated house, and an exceptionally cold Winter conspired to use up our woodpile sooner than we had anticipated. By mid-February, with at least six weeks of cold weather still ahead of us, our firewood was gone.

Trusting in the Lord's mercy and love, we scoured the forests adjacent to Jacob's Falls and, by trimming dead branches off the trees, we were able to keep ourselves warm and cook our meals. We continued surviving in this manner for several weeks and, no doubt, could have done so for the duration; although as the weather warmed and the snow began to soften, access to the forests became increasingly difficult.

But then another aspect of divine providence manifested itself: the generosity the Lord inspires in people of good will. One morning, shortly after sunrise, while we were still at prayer, a pickup truck backed into our drive and a neighbor began throwing off

chunks of firewood. These were too long for his stove, he explained when we went out to greet him, but they would probably fit in ours. He had more such big pieces at home buried under the snow; if we wanted to dig them out, they were ours. Other friends followed suit, and we finished the Winter basking in the warmth of human compassion, surely one of the greatest manifestations of the Lord's loving concern for His creatures.

THE SPRING

Our community at Jacob's falls derives its water from a swift running spring at the South end of the property. From here it is piped to the former restaurant building as well as to our community house. This system was designed and installed many years ago when the property served as a small summer resort. Because of the danger of freezing, it is not operable from November through April. To this date we have not had the funds to replace it with a system that will function throughout the year.

Thus, for six months of the year we are obliged to haul our water from the spring which, in the Lord's mercy, never freezes. Some might consider this daily routine an undue hardship, and, indeed, it does involve a certain amount of labor and occupy time which might otherwise be devoted to other purposes. Still, it is a task common to most people only a hundred years ago, and one that, even now, is a way of life in many parts of the world. Enduring this minor inconvenience serves to remind us of our acceptance of poverty and of our solidarity with the poor of the world.

Even in the midst of blizzards, or on days so cold the truck won't start, the need for water continues. We are sometimes forced to face weather conditions it would be only human to wish to avoid. But in facing them we face the reality of God; we experience a breath of His power and catch glimpses of His indescribable beauty.

"You make the clouds Your chariot,
And walk on the wings of the wind."
(Ps. 104:3)



(Photo by Eric Munch)

Drawing water from the spring, a daily necessity during the Winter months.

Thus, a daily task reiterates our daily prayers.

It also makes us more conscious of our utter dependence on God and of His care for us. Water is the source of life, and this spring makes life possible for us at Jacob's Falls. When the creek is frozen over, and ice fills the Lake as far as the eye can see, the spring, like the font of God's grace, continues to flow abundantly; we have only to go to it and draw forth this necessity of life. Blessed be God, Who has given us this unfailing source of life-giving water!

THE BERRY PATCH

For three months last Summer our community supported itself by selling preserves made from local wild berries and fruit. The gathering of these gifts from God brought us into some areas we might not have otherwise visited and provided much food for thought.

Old mining locations and ghost towns, abandoned eighty years and more, grimly remind us of the impermanence of the works of man:

"As for man, his days are like grass;
he flowers like the flower of the
field;
the wind blows and he is gone
and his place never sees him again."

(Ps. 103:15-16)

Yet here, often at the base of immense poorrock (mine rubble) piles, we found wild apples and plums, sprung from the cores and pits left from the lunches of nameless miners three generations ago. In the grassy areas, where once had stood buildings and houses, only a few foundations and crumbling walls remain. But here are great stands of thimbleberry, thickets of raspberry, tangles of blackberry brambles, sugarplum and chokecherry trees, and, beneath the tall grass, a carpet of strawberries.

In other areas the hand of man is less evident, but God's goodness is manifested everywhere: blueberries blanketing sand dunes near the Lake; pincherry trees standing in meadows, their tiny ripe fruit gleaming like rubies in the sunlight; mint sprouting from crevices in the rocky gorges of tiny streams; bilberries dangling from their shrubbery under the trees on steep hillsides; all

remind us of God's presence and of His boundless plentitude:

"Abundance flows in Your steps,
in the pastures of the wilderness
it flows." (Ps. 65:12-13)

We were not the only ones to share in these blessings. The birds delighted in this profusion of wild berries and fruit. They swarmed around ripe pincherry, chokecherry, and sugarplum trees; and we picked many an apple and plum they had already sampled.

The bear is more thorough in her eating habits. Although we did not once encounter one of these shy giants while picking, we saw abundant signs of her presence. Young pincherry trees bent to the ground, broken branches on apple and sugarplum trees, bilberry shrubs stripped bare of leaves as well as fruit, all announced: Ursa was here!

But it was usually in thimbleberry patches that her passage was most evident. Thimbleberry canes often grow to a height of five feet or more, and the broad swaths of broken canes left by the nocturnal prowlings of the bear provide quick access to the heart of many patches. Sometimes, as we warily picked our way down these readimade trails, we would catch a whiff of her musty perfume lingering on the broad velvety leaves, a most powerful reminder that we were not the only ones picking berries for a living!

Despite all his achievements, man is essentially no different from the birds of the air or the beasts of the forest in his dependence on God:

"All of these look to You
to give them their food in due
season.

You give it, they gather it up;
You open their hand, they have their
fill." (Ps. 104:26-27)

Our life and work at Jacob's Falls, as well as the prayers of the Divine Office, constantly remind us:

"How good is the Lord to all,
compassionate to all His creatures."
(Ps. 145:9)

Jam Business in Jeopardy

The needs of man being more complicated than those of bird or bear, we were obliged to convert our berries to cash.

Working late into the night in the kitchen of the former restaurant, now renamed "Jampot", we processed our harvest of the Lord's bounty into jam and jelly. Income from the sale of these "Poorrock Abbey Preserves" supported our community into the Fall.

We are very pleased with our first venture in the preserves industry. What we learned about gathering and processing the fruit and berries should enable us to increase production substantially in future seasons. With the Lord's continued provision of bountiful harvests, this cottage industry could become a major source of livelihood for our community.

However, this occupation, with its benefits to both our spiritual and economic well being, is in danger of being closed to us.

Our production facility, the "Jampot", has not functioned as a restaurant in many years. For us to continue selling our preserves, it must meet certain state requirements and pass inspection.

Stainless steel counters and sinks will be needed, as well as a new exhaust system. These are expensive items which are well beyond the reach of our struggling community. But, by far the biggest expense will be provision of a "safe" water supply. Because of the possibility of contamination by surface water, the state health department does not consider a spring to be a source of safe water. We must provide a drilled well that meets state requirements.

The cost of these improvements will probably amount to five to seven thousand dollars. We struggle each month to meet our land contract payment, and this investment is well beyond our own resources. Yet, the resources of the Lord, Who fills the hearts of men and women with His love and generosity, are unlimited. We continue to pray for a solution to this problem. Trusting in His unfailing mercy, we remain confident that we will not be left unaided.

A LENTEN THOUGHT

Lent is a time of preparation. Just as the bleak and often stormy weather of February and March makes the arrival of Spring an occasion of great joy, so our period of self-denial increases our joy in the celebration of Our Lord's resurrection.

In former days, Lenten self-denial came naturally to most people. In the late Winter the grain and vegetables set aside from the Fall harvest often ran short, and people living an agrarian life were forced to tighten their belts. Lacking modern means of storage, the meat of animals slaughtered in early Winter could not be kept as the weather began to warm, and since chickens laid little during the dark days of Winter even eggs were in short supply.

These hardships made the arrival of Spring a natural time of hope and joy. While food might still be scarce, or at best, monotonous, the budding of the trees and the greening of the earth brought assurances of survival and the hope of better times to come. For these people living on the thin edge of life the Easter shout of alleluia held an intense meaning. The spiritual truth of salvation was mirrored and made very real to them by the harsh reality of their lives.

Through careful observance of the Church's prescriptions of fast and abstinence, the rich could achieve some solidarity with the poor during Lent and gain a share of their hope and joy at the springtime Easter celebration. Their self-denial ensured that they did not use their wealth to deprive others of the scarce necessities of life, and, by almsgiving, they could use some portion of their abundance to relieve the distress of the common people around them.

Today few of us in this land live so close to the edge. Subsistence agriculture has largely disappeared as a way of life among us, and most of us live and work several steps removed from the produce of the earth. Our industrialized society has brought about a super abundance that goes far beyond the mere necessities of life, and our poor,

while still very much with us, are relatively few and not as evident as they once were.

For these blessings we should be immensely grateful. The Lord has indeed favored our land and made it possible for us to help others in a magnitude unequalled by any people or nation in the past.

Yet there is also a great danger here. Sometimes our wealth and power blind us to the real source of our life. We tend to look on all of this as our own doing and forget that it is God Who has given us our talents and resources and set us in a time and place favorable to their use.

Today, believing that we as the People of God have progressed beyond the need for a multitude of rules and regulations, the Church is no longer so prescriptive in her call to self-denial, almsgiving, and repentance. Amidst the constant roar of a society stridently preaching self-indulgence and the pursuit of material gain, it is often difficult for us to hear and heed her voice.

But from those to whom much has been given, much is still expected. Millions of God's children around the world still die of starvation and disease. The Lord hears the cry of the poor; He probes the mind and the heart; and He gives to each man as his deeds deserve. When the time comes to strike a balance we pray we will not be found wanting.

May our observance of Lent this year draw us closer together in our love of God and all His children. May it help us to be mindful of the true source of all we possess and instill in us a deep gratitude for the Lord's many blessings. May our self-denial enable us to better help those in need and make us more joyfully disposed to truly celebrate the Easter mysteries of our redemption.

A PRAYER

Lord God, our strength and salvation, put in us the flame of Your love and make our love for You grow to a perfect love which reaches to our neighbor

Vocations Prayers Requested

We ask that you continue your prayers for us. The road ahead is long and arduous; we have only just begun our pilgrimage. May God grant us the strength to persevere in following the path He has set out for us.

Beyond our daily needs for survival and our need for business investment that we might become more self-sufficient, our overriding need is for more men to join our pilgrimage and share our life of prayer and work.

A candidate for membership in our community needs no special training or talent. He needs only a sincere desire to grow in the love and service of God and a willingness to devote his talents to that end through life in our community.

"How good and how pleasant it is,
when brothers live in unity!

For there the Lord gives His blessing,
life forever." (Ps. 133:1,3)

For this, above all else, we beg your prayers.

In Thanksgiving

God's loving concern for His people is often manifested in the love and concern we bear for one another. Our help for each other is, perhaps, our best way of carrying out His will.

To all who have helped make our survival possible at this early stage of our community life, we extend our humble and heartfelt thanks. Your gifts of food, money, firewood, labor, advice, and equipment constantly renew our strength and confidence. May our loving and merciful God shower His blessings upon you and continue to prosper you in His work.

We pray for our benefactors twice daily in a general way. If you have some specific intention for which you would like our prayers, please write to us. We will join your petitions to our own during our morning celebration of the Divine Office.

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