

Volume II
Number 1

Magnificat

LENT
1986

News from the
SOCIETY OF SAINT JOHN
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PRAYERFUL SOLITUDE

The monk is called, above all else, to be a man of prayer. He withdraws from the press and anxiety of life in worldly society that he might be alone with the Lord. His life in monastic society is ordered around fixed periods of common prayer, and he is provided ample time, alone in the midst of his brothers, to develop his personal relationship with God. All other aspects of his life are directed to the same end. He surrenders his legitimate right to the joys of family and possessions that he might seek only his greatest joy: loving union with his creator. Renouncing even his own will, he strives to empty himself that he might be filled with God's infinite love. Through his ascetic practices he works to overcome the distractions and failings inherent in his human nature. Even his work, necessary for the well being of himself and his brothers, is of a nature that affords contemplative prayer. Knowing that God, who is everywhere, is to be found nowhere, except in his own heart, he spends the entirety of his days listening to the still, small voice of God within the confines of his silent cloister.

How far we seem from this serene ideal! Our "cloister" is a two room cottage beside a major tourist route. Here we pray, meditate, and study; prepare and eat our meals; discuss business and carry on our correspondence; sleep, bathe, and wash our laundry; when a priest is present, we celebrate Mass here; and here we receive our guests. Except for moments of sleep or prayer, it is seldom silent!

We are often called away, perhaps to conduct the normal errands of life in one of the nearby towns or to introduce ourselves to individuals or groups at some distance. Having no priest with us as yet, we must most often journey to attend Mass; our daily conventual Mass is still a longed-for blessing. Thus, despite our withdrawal from the world, we often find ourselves being pulled into its hustle and bustle.

It follows us back to the community as well. Our income earning work sometimes necessitates much scurrying about; so do other factors of life in this outpost. Furthermore, as Blessed Benedict

THE SOCIETY OF SAINT JOHN AT JACOB'S FALLS

We are a community of men embracing the Evangelical Counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience in the spirit of the Rule of Saint Benedict. In our monastic community at Jacob's Falls on the shore of Lake Superior in Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula we devote ourselves to a regular life of prayer and work for the praise, love, and service of God and for the upbuilding of His Kingdom through the arts.

foretoId (Holy Rule, Chap. 53), visitors and guests, who must be welcomed as Christ Himself, are never lacking here.

Growth of the community and enlargement of its structures will, no doubt, mitigate these circumstances. But, at least for now, the quiet cloister seems a distant dream.

Yet, even now, our life at Jacob's Falls is a monastic existence. It is built around a schedule of common prayer and affords some time for spiritual reading and contemplation. Our work takes place here at Jacob's Falls or in the nearby countryside; often it can be a contemplative experience. While true silence may be rare, there is much peace...especially in winter.

When the autumn rains have washed the last leaves from the trees, the summer people have all departed for gentler climes, and the shopkeepers have shuttered their doors for the season; as the County Road Commission pulls in its picnic tables and retrieves the rustic signs it has placed for the tourists, and traffic dwindles to a mere trickle; the pace at Jacob's Falls approaches frenzy. Screens come down; storm doors and windows go up. Summer buildings are closed and their plumbing drained. The chimney is cleaned and the survival of the woodpile debated. As heavy snow moves in off the Lake, bringing all the disparate elements of the landscape into white unity, there comes relief. One can prepare no more. At last, winter peace!

The work continues, of course. Winter survival is, itself, a full-time job. Wood must be brought in, ashes taken out. The drive must be scooped clear of its daily drifts. The snow keeps coming. Sometimes it seems there are not enough hours of daylight to accomplish all the necessary tasks.

But there is something peaceful, even holy, about this work. It carries with it no deadlines, none of the pressures and anxieties of the market place. This is work for survival, the reality of life in a hard place. It keeps us mindful of our human frailty, our dependence on God.



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The storms and numbing cold remind us of our personal insignificance in the face of God's mighty creation. Yet, they also bring to mind His love for us and His generous provision for our lowliness. Quietly watching the fire in the warmth of fraternal charity while a fierce wind whistles around the eaves, we can feel the reality of His presence among us.

So, too, do we feel Him in the vast silences of late winter, when even the Lake is mute, its restless waves paralyzed by the cold. His infinite quietude enfolds us during the long stillness of the pre-dawn interval, and we sometimes faintly hear the plaintive calling of distant owls seeking one another across the icy darkness.

Truly I have set my soul
in silence and peace.
As a child has rest
in its mother's arms,
even so my soul.

(Ps. 131:2)

HERE I AM – SEND ME!

We know that all things work together for the good of those who have been called according to His decree.

(Rom. 8:28)

The Lord's call comes through the many, varied influences that make each of us unique individuals. It is the cumulative effect of our environment, training, circumstances, and, perhaps, even of some hereditary disposition:

Before I formed you in the womb
I knew you,
Before you were born
I dedicated you.

(Jer. 1:5)

Certainly we often hear it first when we are quite young. In the trusting love of childhood, a few of us may enthusiastically declare with Isaiah:

"Here I am, send me!"
(Is. 6:8)

Happy the man who early hears the Lord's voice and perseveres in following Him. To very few is such bliss granted. The world regards service of the Lord as folly, and the call perceived in childhood often goes un nourished.

By the time the innocent love and pure longings of childhood give way to the propositions and well formed alternatives of youth, the world is often too much with us. We throw up obstacles and try to avoid the response we know we must make. Like Moses, (Ex. 3:11-14; 4:1-17) we make excuses and find reasons for God to send some one else.

Jeremiah (Jer. 1:6) protested that he was too young, that he lacked the experience to be an effective prophet. We may claim the need to first experience more of "life". But God is Life. What we want more of is not true life, but worldly pleasure.

Already you have devoted enough
time to what the pagans enjoy.
(1Pt. 4:3)

We may protest that we are sinners and unworthy of God's service. True. So are we all. But:

It is precisely in this that God proves His love for us: that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

(Rom. 5:8)

Can we sinners, then refuse to serve Him? Can we justify rejecting His love?

The Lord calls us out of love. St. Mark (Mk. 10:17-22) recounts that, in telling the rich young man what he must do to seek perfection, "Jesus looked at him with love." Yet this young man, who was by worldly standards leading an exemplary life, chose worldly wealth rather than the love Jesus offered. He went away sad. We can be sure that Jesus, too, was sad.

The Gospels tell us no more about this sad young man. He may have hardened his heart and continued to love his wealth more than Christ. Or, perhaps, his unhappiness provided another opportunity for conversion and acceptance of the call.

We may all be truly grateful that God, in His infinite mercy and love, is persistent. He is not put off by our fearfulness or sins. We cannot escape His love:

O where can I go from your spirit,
or where can I flee from your face?
If I climb the heavens, you are there.
If I lie in the grave, you are there.

If I take the wings of the dawn
and dwell at the sea's furthest end,
even there your hand would lead me,
your right hand would hold me fast.
(Ps. 139:7-10)

Even those who heed their own youthful excuses may yet echo the melancholy joy of Augustine:

Late have I loved you, O beauty
ever ancient, ever new...You called,
you shouted and you shattered my
deafness...You touched me, and I
burned for your peace.

TAKE UP YOUR CROSS

Jesus said to all: "Whoever wishes to be my follower must deny his very self, take up his cross each day, and follow in my steps."
(Lk. 9:23)

We hear these words often, yet we tend to lose sight of their importance; we pay them lip service, but largely ignore them in our daily lives. Yet, how can we do this? Our Lord sets these conditions on His followers, and He addresses them not to a select few, but to all of us.

As we prepare to celebrate the greatest truths of our faith, we who call ourselves Christian would do well to evaluate how successfully we fulfill these conditions our Lord sets.

Jesus did not make His own cross; He did not seek it out; He prayed that He might completely avoid it. But, when it was thrust upon Him by the sins of the world - our sins - He freely accepted His Father's will for our salvation. Through His obedient suffering and death, death itself is overcome; we who share in His suffering share also in His rising to the glory of eternal life.

The first Christians felt this truth in all its original intensity. Although it was a scandal and an absurdity to the world around them (1 Cor. 1:23), they made the cross their boast (Gal. 6:14). They saw their own sufferings as a revelation of the life of Christ within them (2 Cor. 4:10-11). Their sharing in the sufferings of Christ brought God's spirit in all its glory upon them (1 Pt. 4:14); it was a cause for rejoicing (1 Pt. 1:6).

But how can we, in our age of comfort and prosperity, relate to this? For the most part we do not suffer persecution or want, we have largely eliminated the pain from our span of seventy or eighty years, and we enjoy an embarrassment of diversions for our growing hours of idleness. How do we share in the sufferings of Christ? What cross is left for us to take up?

Are we, then, (unlike Jesus) to manufacture crosses for ourselves? Are we deliberately to seek out hardship and suffering? Ascetic discipline does, indeed, have a place in the Christian life, and some are called to pursue it with greater vigor than others. But its purposes are other than suffering for suffering's sake; in itself, asceticism is not a union with the cross of Christ.

Our answer lies in the willing and joyful acceptance of the many trials that come to us each day, the frustrations and anxieties that are integral to our particular lives. No matter what our physical or financial condition, we share the common hurt of loneliness and isolation, the emptiness of giving where there is no gratitude, the pain of loving without being loved in return. These are the common lot of mankind; these are crosses we can take up daily. But what are these when compared to what most of the world's people suffer?

More important to our situation is the call to self-denial. This is not mere fasting or doing without a few of life's small pleasures. (Although, again, such disciplines do have their place.) Jesus calls us to something much more radical than "giving up candy for Lent." We must give up our very selves, our self-will, our self-centeredness. We must live, not for ourselves, but for others. Our life's goal must be the well being of our least brothers, rather than personal self-satisfaction.

Here, then, is true self-denial and also a taking up of the cross. By giving relief to the poor and distressed we help carry their burdens; we take some of their sufferings upon ourselves. In this way we share in the sufferings of Christ: as we treat our Lord's lowly ones, so also we treat Him. On this we are judged. (cf. Mt. 25:31-46)

Therefore, we must give, not only of our surplus, but also what we cannot afford. (cf. Lk. 21:4) We must share our sustenance with those from whom we

have no hope of getting anything in return. (Lk. 14:2) We must not do it for the acclaim of others; if that is our motive, that will be our only reward. (Mt. 6-2) Rather, we must act out of love and obedience to the will of God who provides us with all we have and who bids us be the agents of His loving providence. He it is who will see us rewarded as we deserve:

Give, and it shall be given to you. Good measure pressed down, shaken together, running over, will they pour into the fold of your garment. For the measure you measure will be measured back to you.

(Lk. 6-38)

A Good Beginning

We continually thank our Lord and His Most Blessed Mother for the favors they bestow on us through the generosity of God's holy people. During the year since our first newsletter many individuals and a number of churches and organizations have contributed to our well-being. Without their help we could not have survived.

The blessings continue. Through the loving generosity of about seventy-five good people who responded to the appeal in our last newsletter, we have been able to establish a special account for the retirement of our land contract. To date we have been able to deposit about ten percent of the funds we must have by October 1, 1986.

We still have a very long way to go. But the Lord has granted us a promising beginning. We pray He will richly reward all who have thus far served as agents of His merciful providence.

We pray also that others will likewise respond to His promptings and give generously to this cause. God works through His holy people by their sharing of the blessings He has given them. We earnestly pray that all who share His generosity on earth may share also in His eternal glory.

URGENT APPEAL

It has been nearly three years since we were led to Jacob's Falls. When first we set foot in what is now our community house, we somehow knew that here was the tiny spot of earth that would shelter and nourish our infant community during its earliest days. We felt that it was, indeed, holy ground, and we thanked our Lord and His Blessed Mother for having brought us here.

The ensuing years have deepened our appreciation of the rightness of this place. The former one room school house perched above the shore of the Lake has served well as our community house. It provides shelter from the elements for our prayer and domestic lives, and its view to the northwest offers many opportunities for perceiving the power and beauty of God made manifest in His creation - the storms of spring and autumn, the serene summer sunsets, the vast whiteness of winter.

Three cabins provide rustic accommodations for the guests and retreatants that began to arrive last summer. The former restaurant building, our Jampot, promises to be a source of self-sufficiency in years to come. Our location on a State highway allows for easy access to our buildings at all times of year and brings us the many visitors who enrich our lives and, we pray, are also enriched by us.

Truly, this is a fitting place to lay the foundations of our monastic life.

To stay here and continue the growth that has already begun, we need your help. The balance on our land contract is due this fall. We still must raise about \$27,000.00, a sum far beyond the means of our poverty.

But the means of God are without end. From His plentitude He has enriched you in many ways. We beg you to share His generosity. Listen to His promptings within your heart. Your co-operation with His loving kindness will help insure our survival amongst you and our continued prayers on your behalf. May He richly reward your generosity.

A Gift of Land



Photo ©1986 Eric Munch

The Society of Saint John was recently blessed with a tract of woodland, the gift of Mr. and Mrs. John K. Clark of Laurium, Michigan.

The 23 acre parcel is located about a quarter mile East of our property at Jacob's Falls and is easily accessible by foot. Forested with second-growth pine and oak, the land is very hilly and affords inspiring views of the Lake and of nearby ridges and valleys, as well.

It will supply a portion of our firewood needs and provide a quiet haven for the peaceful contemplation of God in the wonders of His creation. It may also serve as a building site as our community outgrows its facilities at Jacob's Falls.

Thus, even before our first property is secured, the Lord provides for our future growth with an increase of our patrimony. We invoke God's blessings upon Mr. and Mrs. Clark for their cooperation in His loving providence.

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