



Monastery of the Ascension

THE DESERT CHRONICLE

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Gratitude

By Hugh Feiss, OSB

THE OTHER DAY I WAS SITTING IN THE DINING AREA HAVING A CUP OF DECAF AND THINKING ABOUT HOW MUCH I HAVE TO DO RIGHT NOW, WHEN SOMEONE walked by with a big armful of gorgeous rhubarb. I never saw who it was. However, today as I returned a cat carrier to Dr. Allen's office that he loaned me after giving Catfael (see below) a haircut yesterday, it dawned on me that the rhubarb and the haircut are instances of a remarkable flood of generosity that flows over the monastery from countless people near and far. It is budget time right now, a reminder that we would not be able to balance our budget if it were not for the kindness of many people.

Christianity is in fact a religion focused on grace, graciousness, gift: the world exists through divine generosity, we are saved by the love that inspired Jesus' gift of himself to and for us. We just celebrated Pentecost, the gift of the Spirit into our hearts. The Spirit is often referred to as the mutual "gift" of Father and Son. Perhaps that implies that gratitude finds a place in the heart of the divine relations that constitute God as Tri-personal. In any case, we cannot pay back to God what we have received from God, just as often we cannot pay back what we have received from human beings. On the quid side of the quid pro quo equation, only our gratitude can serve to balance the scale, not with justice, but with the only thing we can give in return, which is thanks.

Having been away from the monastery for a month or two, I notice some things have changed. There is a very nice cement walkway to the columbarium, which looks nicer than it has in my memory. The shop next to the garage has been cleaned up and put in order (I needed an 11 mm socket to change the license plates on a car, and lo and behold I found one easily). The bookstore has been remodeled and reorganized. Some of the flower beds have been weeded, the courtyard is spiffed up as usual. Catfael has been tended to in my absence. There is a new computer in the conference room. How can one not be grateful?

Two of the nicest poems in the Bible—Daniel 3:52-90 and Psalm 104—are prayers of praise in gratitude for the wonders of the world. Maybe if we said these prayers more mindfully, gratitude, by being expressed, would be implanted deeper in our hearts. "Give thanks to the Lord, who is good, whose love endures forever." (Ps. 106:1)•

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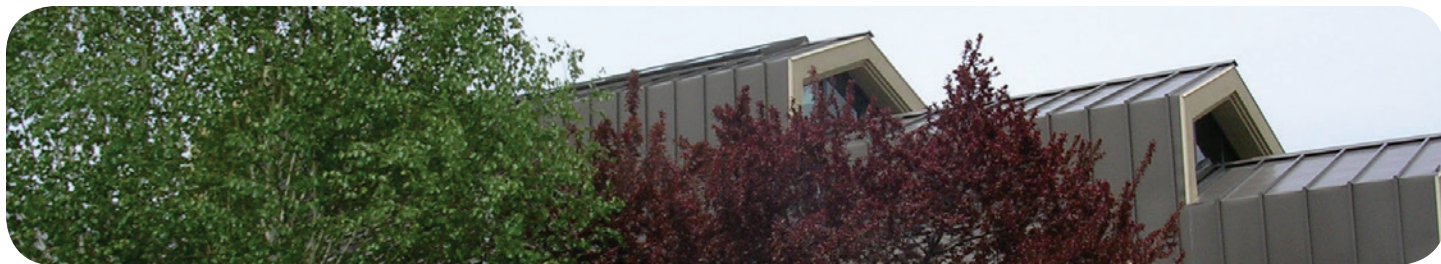
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From the Prior's Pulpit

ALMSGIVING

By Fr. Kenneth Hein, OSB

IT IS MY CUSTOM TO TREAT A TOPIC BY FIRST DEFINING THE ESSENTIAL TERMS. READERS ALREADY KNOW THE BASIC MEANING OF “giving.” The basic meaning of “alms” may not be so apparent, even though we know what it means to give alms. Mr. Webster tells us that “alms” is a word ultimately derived from the Greek *eleison*, which means “pity” or “mercy” as in *Kyrie, eleison* (“Lord, have mercy”). Now that we’ve got that out of the way, we can turn to the concept and practice of almsgiving according to our Judeo-Christian heritage.

In the Old Testament, the Israelites are often reminded of God’s mercy to them and told that in turn they are to be kind to others: “You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child. If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry...If you lend money to one of your poor neighbors among my people, you shall not act like an extortioner toward him by demanding interest from him” (Exodus 22:21-24).

We can better understand and appreciate these rules, when we note that they were codified into law after the Jews had been released from slavery in Babylon (586-538 B.C.). Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. and allowed the captive Jews to return to their homeland in the following year. As the Jews returned to Israel, they found that their homes and lands had been taken over by others. Great social and economic inequality resulted. The rich got richer, and the poor got poorer. The Jewish leaders and priests intervened with these “social laws” in order to better the situation of the poor and to facilitate the rebuilding of the Temple that the Babylonians had destroyed. Thus the time between the rebuilding of the Temple and the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. is known as “the time of the second Temple.” It is this period

of history that forms the bridge between the Old and the New Testaments.

During this period, many scribes recorded various rabbinical interpretations of religion and law. So it is to be expected that concepts about matters of charity and almsgiving would readily come over into early Christianity and the writings of the New Testament. Jesus’ exhortation that his followers should “store up treasures in Heaven” (cf. Matthew 6:20) reflects his knowledge of the rabbinical tradition that by alms one can acquire merits that bring forgiveness of sins and lead to everlasting life. The analogy with financial lending and borrowing was generally used in treating the subject of giving help to the poor, who are the recipients of God’s merciful love and care. Thus the giving of alms to a poor person was tantamount to lending the money to God, who would not default on repaying the loan. “Whoever is generous to the downtrodden makes a loan to the Lord. He will repay him his due” (Proverbs 19:17).

While the idea of almsgiving was a source of much contention between Catholics and Protestants for centuries in regard to “faith and works,” perhaps much debate and ink could have been spared, if the parties had looked more closely at the language used by the ancient rabbis, whose terms have also come over into our modern languages.

In English, for instance, the recipient of the loan is “the debtor”, while the giver of the loan is “the creditor”, which fundamentally means “believer”. Alms given to the poor are thus nothing less than a perfect “synchronization” of faith and works. This “synchronization” may be restated in Jesus’ words, “A new commandment I give you: Love one another even as I have loved you” (John 13:34).

(For an excellent treatment of this topic, see the article, *Redeem Your Sins by the Giving of Alms*, by Gary A. Anderson, in *Letter & Spirit*, Vol. 3, 2007, pp. 39-69).•





The last issue of the Desert Chronicle contained a summary of Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation, On The Joy of the Gospel. It invited responses. The comments of the four people who accepted this invitation are printed here.

The Common Good and Peace in Society

By Robin Boies

IN THE MID-1990'S MY HUSBAND AND I AND A FEW INQUISITIVE NEIGHBORS WERE INTRODUCED TO NEW INFORMATION ABOUT grazing herbivores. The concepts originated in Africa with Alan Savory and his partner Stan Parsons. Savory's observations of wildlife in Africa led him to some new theories about managing grazing animals. We dove into what was called Holistic Resource Management. We chose to swim against the current of conventional ranch management, amidst the background noise of a growing litigious element demanding the abolition of cattle grazing on public lands.

Savory's system wasn't just about managing grazing animals; it also introduced us to a new decision making model that was a consensus based collaborative approach to management.

There had been collaborative efforts before, but what made Savory's model different was the role of trained facilitators. This was a new process that identified a triple bottom line of ecological accountability, economic resilience and social and cultural preservation. The facilitator's job was to open up the middle ground so that diverse viewpoints could be heard. Their duty was to maintain a space of fairness and respect so that the process of resource management was grounded in integrity. All voices were welcomed, all participants were listened to, the practice of respectful and active listening was cultivated. After participating in a neighbor's collaborative group for five years, in 2000 we started our own ranch team. Then came 9/11. Our son joined the Army and spent a year fighting in Iraq. The violent events of 9/11 and being a soldier's mother changed how I looked at the so-called "war on the West," the struggle over governance of the public lands and their use. During these years there was a growing case load of aggressive litigation that was becoming the expected consequence of any action the federal agencies took. I began to think of our small collaborative effort in a different way.

My belief grew that our small work in collaborative land management was an effort for peace. It is just a small ripple in a small pond, but it felt like a non-aggressive counter insurgency campaign, civil disobedience, non-violent resistance.

As I read the excerpts and summary of "The Joy of the Gospel" in the *Desert Chronicle*, it resonated with my beliefs about how and why we try to manage in the way we do the land for which we have been given stewardship.

"Time before place": Our holistic approach to land management is predicated on the long view despite having to function within a bureaucratic system that often measures outcomes in a short time frame. Despite obstacles, if fundamental common goals have been agreed upon and trust is established, there can be lasting progress that leads to long-term resolution of conflict.

An awareness and acceptance that change is inevitable helps





us develop systems that are resilient while “remaining steadfast in one’s deepest convictions, clear and joyful in one’s own identity, while at the same time being open to understanding those of the other party and knowing that dialogue can enrich each side”. We become aware of our “spiritual deficiencies” and challenge them. We don’t “allow ourselves to be robbed of community”.

Our choice to join with our community of federal and state land management agency folk and the interested public shows that “*unity prevails over conflict.*” We seek resolution through dialogue; authentic dialogue lays a seedbed for trusting relationships to develop. Our meeting circle is literally a circle, no tables, no barriers. The circle physically represents a balance of shared power versus a system of power over. I’ve observed the circle empowering those who don’t usually speak, and inhibiting those who are accustomed to holding the power. Most are out of their comfort zone until it becomes the new norm for doing business.

It is really hard to explain what our management team meetings are like or what happens; you need to experience it to really understand. We are building a story of stewardship through our relationships, values that guide our animal husbandry and how we take care of the land. Story makes “the word flesh.” The question is did we live up to our deepest convictions?

One of the complaints about the collaborative process is “too much talk and not enough action”. “*Realities are more important than ideas.*” Someone has to go home and do the work. There has to be accountability and measurable outcomes or the words become just words. Words too easily and too often become expressions of ideological agendas that result in disunity and conflict, undermining harmonious relationships

and often resulting in counter productive actions.

Pope Francis’s concept of seeing our world as a polyhedron instead of a sphere, gives us a visual of the complexity of modern life. The polyhedron with its sharp angles and straight-line intersections, each individual piece a part of the whole, represents our greatest potential and our greatest challenge. It makes me recognize that we are in this together despite our differences; that *the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.*

The take away:

- Step out of our comfort zones.
- There is no peace without equality and dialogue.
- Don’t hide entrenched in doctrine and ideology.
- Adopt a holistic approach that embraces a broader context of truth; then differences have a larger space and opportunity to be reconciled in respect and love.
- See strength in the preservation of diversity.
- Be inclusive not exclusive; build a big tent.

I choose to work for peace, despite the fact that I fail every day. •

Harmonizing Diversity

Fr. Boniface Lautz, OSB

ONE OF THE THEMES CONSISTENTLY APPEARING IN *THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL* IS SUMMARIZED BEAUTIFULLY IN POPE FRANCIS’ words treating the social dimension of evangelization: “The message of peace is not about a negotiated settlement but rather the conviction that the unity brought by the Spirit can harmonize every diversity” (#230).

He further reflects on the necessity of recognizing that diversity is not automatically a source of division. He does not minimize the importance of acknowledging differences that prevent complete unity, but calls us to see what is true in what others say: “Even people who can be considered dubious on account of their errors have something to offer which must not be overlooked” (#236).

This is a message that taken to heart might well be put into practice by us all. •





The Spiritual Care of the Poor

Fr. Norbert Novak, OSB

“THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL” (“*EVANGELII GAUDIUM*”) STATES, “SINCE THIS EXHORTATION IS ADDRESSED TO MEMBERS of the Catholic Church, I want to say, with regret, that the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care. The great majority of the poor have a special openness to the faith; they need God and we must not fail to offer them his friendship, his blessing, his word, the celebration of the sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in the faith. Our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care” (#200).

This paragraph comes from a section of Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation entitled “The Special Place of the Poor in God’s People.” Pope Francis “wants a Church which is poor and for the poor.” “We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them.”

With this background, Francis now speaks to what he calls, with regret, that “worst discrimination which the poor suffer,” namely “the lack of spiritual care.” Pope Francis expects the faith community and its many ministries not to neglect the poor and the marginal in our midst. We see very little adult faith enrichment efforts to help the poor engage in growth in faith and human Christian maturity. There is little to help them discover in virtue ethics the skills, wisdom, and problem solving they need to choose gospel values. There is little to assist the working of the Spirit to help them to the faithfulness and

freedom of a disciple of Jesus. •

How available are opportunities for bible study amid the work schedules of the poor? Who is trained to accompany the poor so that they are welcomed to the liturgy and parish events? What supports are there to help parents share their faith with their children and young people in this changing generation? Who is there to help them grieve, find forgiveness and give forgiveness, to witness with courage, and seek the common good? Our parishes presently are poorly organized and ministers are not trained to offer this pastoral care and faith enrichment. •

Weak Beings

Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB

“THERE ARE OTHER WEAK AND DEFENSELESS BEINGS WHO ARE FREQUENTLY AT THE MERCY OF ECONOMIC INTERESTS OR indiscriminate exploitation. I am speaking of creation as a whole.” (Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, #215. All quotations in what follows are from this paragraph, unless otherwise indicated).

In 1990 Pope John-Paul II wrote *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility*. “We cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention both to the consequences of such interference in other areas and to the well-being of future generations . . . delicate ecological balances are upset by the uncontrolled destruction of animal and plant life or by a reckless exploitation of natural resources. It should be pointed out that all of this, even if carried out in the name of progress and well-being, is ultimately to humankind’s disadvantage.... An education in ecological responsibility is urgent: responsibility for oneself, for others, and for the earth.”

In 2000 the Catholic Bishops of the Pacific Northwest published *The Columbia River Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good*. That document, the product of a huge amount of effort by many people, looked at the past, present and hoped-for future of the watershed in which I have lived my entire life. Working on that document was an education in democracy and consultation, the compromises required for any joint statement, and the delicate balancing of human need for resources and employment with the health of the nonhuman environment. In the fifteen years since, I have not spent a great deal of time on environmental theory—scientific, ethical or theological—but I have been involved in a cooperative management effort of a ranch. In the process I have witnessed the joys and pains of building trust and consensus, and the harm that some well-intentioned environmentalists do by their inflexibility and disdain for the human element in environmental issues. I’ve come to understand more deeply





how “we human beings are not only the beneficiaries but also the stewards of other creatures.” Whether we like it or not, we are responsible for the health and survival of a complex environmental web of which we know very little.

“Thanks to our bodies, God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement.” We can feel these things, provided we are in touch with the world of which we are a part—something easier for us Westerners to do, who though we live in the most urbanized section of the United States are never far from forest or desert.

When Pope John-Paul wrote the words cited above, when the Bishops of the Pacific Northwest wrote their pastoral letter, they received positive attention in the media. I think that all who took part in the writing of the pastoral letter were affected by the process. However, now, fifteen years later, I wonder how much effect it has had toward bringing about the future it hoped for. For one thing, the “great recession” overshadowed environmental concerns. We had to get the engines of production and consumption running again. The Middle Class had to be saved, while the seldom mentioned poor seemed to exist only as the irredeemable group toward which the Middle Class might sink. The President wants to clean up coal-fired power plants, yet there is momentum for

a plan to ship American coal to China so they can burn it in their notoriously dirty power plants. Southern Idaho (a hot desert!) has almost no solar power. Sometimes it feels like we are living a kind of nightmare: a giant machine is grinding out unimaginable mounds of stuff and in the process eating away at the foundation on which it runs. Pope Francis wants people to have not just subsistence food, shelter and clothing, but access to healthcare, education and meaningful employment. The area in which I live is supposed to be a showpiece of economic development; about 70% of the children in the area qualify for subsidized meals at school.

I just finished Barbara Kingsolver’s novel, *Flight Behavior*, about an ecological disaster affecting Monarch butterflies. I found it unsatisfying as a novel—a bit preachy with an abrupt ending—but I liked some comments she made in an interview appended to the book. She said she was neither pessimistic nor optimistic, but hopeful. Hope she sees “as a mode of resistance,” it is “not a state of mind but something we actually do with our hearts and our hands, to navigate ourselves through the difficult passages.” Or as Pope Francis puts it, “Small yet strong in the love of God, like Saint Francis of Assisi, all of us, as Christians, are called to watch over and protect the fragile world in which we live, and all its peoples’ (#216). “Small yet strong in the love of God,” that’s hope, that’s us, that is the fragile world we have brought to the edge of disaster.♦



Bookstore Makeover

By Selby Coffman, OSB

THE MONASTERY
BOOKSTORE / GIFT SHOP
HAS BURGEONED FROM

A tiny operation into – well, a very small one. But it does have a new look, with office and storage space converted into maple panels with glass shelving.

A new passageway through the counter beckons to browsers, as does a chair for readers. “Spacious and attractive,” commented one customer.

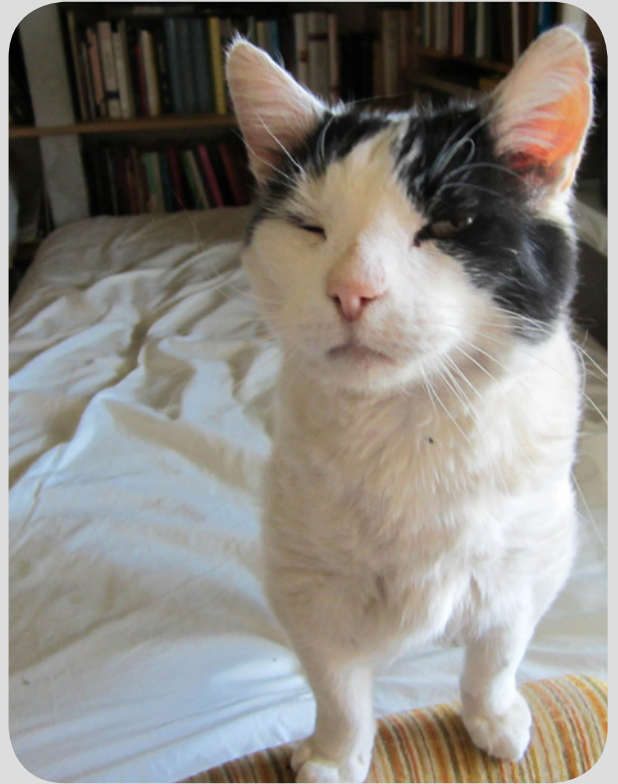
In other bookstore news, Fr. Kenneth has turned over the bookstore management to Br. Selby and an excellent team of volunteers headed by Teresa Kossman of St. Edward’s Parish. Many kudos to Fr. Kenneth, who capably and profitably ran the bookstore for several years, even while serving as prior, vocation director, and in other capacities.

The bookstore has an ongoing 25% off sale on selected items, which change monthly.

Come browse and relax at our store. Check out Flunking Sainthood by Riess, a hilarious and yet meaningful book. While

you’re here, help yourself to a cup of coffee, have a quiet moment in our chapel, and join us for prayer. •

25%
SALE



A Note of Thanks to Some Nice Two-Footers

Catfael

GRATITUDE IS A GOOD QUALITY, EVEN IN PEOPLE. SO LET ME THANK DR. R. D. ALLEN AND THE NICE LADIES AT THE Jerome Veterinary Hospital who take such good care of me and the other four-footers here at the monastery. I’m just back from there with a haircut, an exam, a shot, and—phooey—the likelihood of some precautionary anti-flea treatment (the neighborhood is deteriorating). I hate the ride over to the veterinary office, but once I get there, I actually like being there. Of course, having me visit is a big treat for the staff.

The two-footers do have a lot to be thankful for, me first of all, but also the other creatures who keep them company and protect them from a vole takeover. So let gratefulness reign. Prrrrrr. •





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"Guests are never wanting in a monastery. All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ . . . with all the courtesy of love"

– Rule of St. Benedict, Chapter 53

The Monastery of the Ascension has made hospitality one of its major activities, and guests are never wanting. In mid-June, between Road Scholar programs, we had the three welcome guests pictured below: Br. Alexandro Rubio, MSPS, of St. Matthew's parish in Hillsboro, OR, who was here to make a retreat in preparation for ordination to the diaconate; Kris Willoughby of Buhl, ID, an electrical engineer who was here to make a short retreat while he was between jobs; Sr. Rebecca Abel, OSB, of the Monastery of the Immaculate Conception in Ferdinand, IN, who is hear helping in our library for a month. If you are interested in spending some time at the monastery, contact Fr. Norbert Novak, OSB: norbert@idahomonks.org.



The *Desert Chronicle* is available in digital form on the monastery website: www.idahomonks.org. If you would like to receive the *Desert Chronicle* in digital form and cancel your paper subscription, please email Fr. Hugh: hughf@idahomonks.org and send him your email address.