

LETTER FROM THE ABBOT

Christmas, 1994

Going to Bethlehem during the Midnight Mass

A Christmas Story: Saint Bernard's Christmas Dream

This Christmas story is almost 900 years old. It must have happened a couple of years before 1100 AD, when Bernard of Clairvaux was about 8-10 years old and had his first deep religious experience: a vision of the Nativity during a Midnight Mass. The story is told by Bernard's best friend, William of St. Thierry. The original text of what you read here was written between 1146 and 1148. Even the English translation shows traces of embellished medieval prose style. Nonetheless, the historical nucleus comes from a first-hand witness: Bernard's intimate friend, a Benedictine abbot who, under his friend's influence, joined the Cistercians for the last decades of his life. In fact, William died five years earlier than Bernard and left his work on Bernard unfinished. He says that he began to write about Bernard without his friend's knowledge and approval but felt that he was to die earlier than Bernard and did not want to take with himself to the grave the privileged information he had received. Here is William's account of Bernard's Christmas vision.

The solemn night of Christmas was approaching and, as it was customary, everyone was preparing for the feast. They went to the midnight service. Because its beginning ran a bit late, Bernard, sitting and waiting with the rest, dropped his head and fell asleep.

At this moment the holy birth of the child Jesus was revealed to this child of God, increasing the boy's budding faith and starting him off in the contemplation of the divine mysteries. For the Lord appeared to him at the start of His human life - in the words of the Psalmist, "as a bridegroom leaving behind his bridal chamber." He felt that he had become an eyewitness of the nativity scene, as the Word made flesh left the womb of the Virgin in the form of an infant "more beautiful than all the sons of men," drawing to himself the mind and heart of the little boy who at this moment stepped beyond the immaturity of childhood.

Bernard became convinced, and up to this day he still says, that in that hour he was present at the very first Christmas.

Indeed, those who have been privileged to rely on his help easily believe how much grace he was granted by God at that hour. For up to this day he shows a remarkably deep understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation and speaks about it with unusual abundance. This is why at a later age he published among his first works one in praise of the Mother, her Child and the holy birth - a short but famous work, commenting on the first chapters of Luke beginning with the verse: "The angel Gabriel was sent from God."

Bernard's Christmas Dream inspired not only the early Cistercians but gave impetus to the medieval celebration of Christmas during the next century leading to the popular devotion of setting up Nativity scenes. This devotion was spread all over Europe by St. Francis of Assisi and later became a worldwide custom.



**LET US GO TO BETHLEHEM! . . .
THE COMMUNITY OF THE CISTERCIAN ABBEY WISHES YOU
A BLESSED CHRISTMAS
AND A RENEWED VISION OF THE CHILD BORN FOR US.**

Monastery News

In Memory of Fr. Rudolph Zimányi, O. Cist.

On November 22, we lost a long time member of the Abbey community just after his retirement from the teaching staff of the University of Dallas.

Fr. Rudolph was born in 1923 in Hódoscsépány, a small village that remained dear to him all his life. In grades 5-12 he was a student of the Cistercian School in the nearby city of Eger, where the Hungarian Cistercians began to teach in 1776. In 1942 he entered the monastery of Zirc where he made his novitiate and completed his studies of philosophy and theology. He was ordained a priest in 1947 and was sent to Paris to study French. Soon he received notice from his abbot that his monastery was about to be suppressed and that he should remain abroad, continuing his studies. The suppression of Zirc took place in 1950, and almost 40 years of oppression followed. With other refugees of his abbey, Fr. Rudolph was told to move to the Cistercian Monastery of Spring Bank in Wisconsin.

The rest of his life is connected with the beginnings of Cistercian life in Texas. Since it was not possible in Spring Bank for the Hungarian Cistercians to continue their way of life combining monasticism and education, they needed to move on. Fr. Rudolph himself needed to complete his own education. He moved to Milwaukee to study at Marquette; then for doctoral studies he moved to Chicago's Northwestern University. In 1955 the first group of Cistercians began their life in Dallas, the University of Dallas opened its doors in 1956, the construction of the Cistercian monastery "Our Lady of Dallas" started in 1957. Concluding his doctoral studies, Fr. Rudolph began his 33-year career of teaching French language and literature in the fall of 1960.

He chose a field of research that obliged him to become acquainted with three centuries of French literature. Since he wrote his dissertation on the influence of the writings of Blaise Pascal (17th century) on the Catholic novelist François Mauriac (20th century) he has collected over the years and studied all that has been written

by or about either of the two. In his unassuming and not just modest but shy way, Fr. Rudolph carried in himself an extraordinary familiarity with French "belles lettres."

Most of his priestly life he was involved in pastoral assistance. Shy of the pulpit, he preferred to exercise his ministry in the confessional in numerous parishes, for the longest period of time at St. Maria Goretti in Arlington.

On the most private level of his personality, Rudolph Zimányi was a remarkable lyric poet, publishing in his native tongue several volumes of poems. His name was known to Hungarian emigrant writers, and even before the collapse of Communism, he was listed in Hungary among the significant poets living abroad.

While alive, he would never have allowed me to do what I did for the sermon of the funeral mass: I translated two of his poems into English (with the imperfections of *my* style). Here they should stand in memory of an exquisite poet who often felt isolated from his environment by his poetic outlook and talent.

Curriculum vitae

my eyes fell into the sea
and disappeared among the waves

the four winds threw apart
in four directions my four limbs

but my heart, this heart, the orphan
was left behind in a little farmhouse
for ever to stay.

The last lines of his poem entitled *Illness* (1976) sounded prophetic at the funeral. They told almost exactly the story of his last two weeks as the illness began its "frantic dance," and he reached the point of peaceful surrender:

They come to engulf you like flames:
these are the redheaded daughters of pain
embracing you with growing passion.
Merciless, they force you to dance with
them

to the point of violent frenzy.
In vain you try to escape, you cannot.
Finally, you surrender,
and the waves of an ocean of fire
take hold of you to send you off
to an unknown distant shore.

He was carried to a distant shore after several months of much pain and suffering from a cancer that spread throughout his body. But God's mercy brought the end much sooner than expected. On November 22, in the morning I gave the community a note about our schedule of 24-hour vigil at his bedside. On the same evening he died at 8 PM, very peacefully. Into the death notice sent to the worldwide network of the Cistercian Order I wrote with great conviction the traditional phrase: *pie obdormivit in Domino*. Indeed, he fell peacefully asleep in the Lord. With him gone, the Shores of the Beyond do not feel as distant as before.

"Chapel" News

What's in a Name?

Although the official name is the "Cistercian Abbey Church," many times it is called "the Chapel"? Schools have "chapels," but a monastery refers to its place of worship as "our church." Our "place" fulfills both functions and, therefore, legitimately carries both names. Maybe the alternate use of both names has already become a tradition.

Special Function in the Fall Semester

In September we began - cautiously - the observance of First Fridays. Right at the beginning we had a conflict with a home football game that made us more cautious. But the response grew from month to month. Much credit goes to the *Collegium Cantorum* who supported our First Friday masses with their singing, so uplifting, prayerful, selfless and dedicated. So, now, at the end of the experimental phase, we decided to go on for the rest of the academic year. Mark on your calendar the First Fridays of spring 1995. On January 6, the music will be Gregorian chant, the rest of the First Fridays the *Collegium* plans to perform.

All Soul's Day Observed

The response to our effort to "start a tradition" has been extremely positive. I received about 500 names of loved ones to be remembered. Last minute typing-printing-rushing caused many typos but the participation was, indeed, great. Gabriel Fauré's mass performed by the *Collegium* and a selection of fine guest musicians

helped convey to our feelings a message that goes beyond the power of words.

It seems that we need very much to remind each other of the realm of everlasting life as a matter of hope and peace, conquering both the fear of death and the sorrow over temporary separation. Our Abbey and School, together with the University community that joined us, feel the obligation to keep alive the memory of our deceased friends and benefactors. Finally, we should teach each other and especially those who suffered recent losses of family members and close friends to mourn in the light of faith and with an assurance of increased spiritual closeness that bridges over the loss of physical presence. We plan to continue this tradition.

Christmas Music of the Middle School

On December 6, the Church (chapel) hosted the yearly Christmas Concert of the Middle School. Most of the credit goes to Kelly Shea (wife of Joe Shea, class '78) who prepared, conducted and accompanied the boys, and to the organist of the evening, Mrs. Emily Hartnett, mother of "a clan of alumni" (Will, '74; Jim, '75, Bobby, '77; Jay, '83; Fred, '87).

Plans and Invitations

Besides the events already mentioned we have the following events planned for the rest of the year:

Christmas Mass at Midnight
preceded by Abbey's Office of
Readings at 11:45 PM
New Year's Eve Eucharistic

Adoration
8 PM through Midnight
Holy Hour of Readings and Songs
8 - 9 PM

Personal News/News of the Monastery

Many friends are asking about *Fr. Gilbert*. Shortly after his return to Hungary one of his brothers died of cancer after much prolonged suffering. On the bright side, he enjoys the slow but steady progress of the community in Zirc, where he teaches a group of novices and junior members.

After a quick recovery from his bypass, *Fr. Moses* spent two months on a study trip to France. He spent six weeks in

Avignon as the pastor *pro tempore* of St. Joseph's parish and ten days in Paris, preparing a special issue of the *Claudel Studies* about "Paul Claudel, Simone de Beauvoir and Elisabeth Lacoïn (Zaza)." After the publication of his volume on *Christopher Columbus in World Literature* earlier this year (New York: Garland) he added three articles: one on "Birth of the Columbus Myth," another on the so-called "Grand Odes" of Claudel, and a third on the educational activities of the Cistercians in Hungary. Meanwhile he has received a long-awaited sabbatical for the Spring Semester and plans to work on projects for publications.

Plans for two years of post-graduate studies of theology in Rome have been finalized for *Br. Paul*. He will receive his M. A. in theology from UD in May. Beginning in the fall of 1995, he will study for two years at the University *Gregoriana* in Rome.

This September, *Fr. Roch* was invited to give a paper at a conference organized by the International Theological Journal *Communio*, at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. The presentation, entitled "Why a New Evangelization?" will be published in the winter issue of the journal.

At the end of October, *Fr. Robert* delivered an address at the regional meeting of the Philadelphia Society in Charleston, SC, on the public influence of Melvin E. Bradford, a recently deceased English professor of the University of Dallas, nationally known for his scholarship.

As an elected member of the *Cistercian Order's Synod*, I spent a week in Rome at the beginning of September. The main task of the Synod was the preparation of the next General Chapter to begin on September 1, 1995. The most newsworthy topic of the Chapter will be a constitutional reform of the Order, providing for the full participation of the Cistercian Nuns in future General Chapter. For the last decade, the Cistercian Nuns have participated as "observers" without the right to vote. At the last two chapters (1985 and 1990), however, the "observers" have been allowed and encouraged to participate actively at the sessions.

By using more effectively our resources, our new prior, *Fr. Peter* has worked out an extended Cistercian participation in the *pastoral work* of the Dallas Diocese. As a result, we now take care of the following tasks.

Keeping his Sunday assignment at Carswell Naval Base in Ft Worth, *Fr. Melchior* continues his ministry at St. Monica's.

On Saturdays at Christ the King parish, *Fr. Pascal* regularly hears confessions, while *Frs. Robert* and *Gregory* alternate for the Saturday evening mass.

Besides masses on Sunday, *Fr. Matthew* says the weekday mass twice a week at Holy Family in Irving.

Fr. David helps out with weekday masses at UD's Chapel of the Incarnation. Having recovered from the injuries of his accident, *Fr. George* is finally able to resume his daily schedule of masses at Mt. St. Michael.

After his return from Europe, *Fr. Benedict* is again saying mass each Sunday at the Convent of the Holy Family Sisters in Grand Prairie.

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