

For family, friends, and alumni of Cistercian Preparatory School

CISTERCIAN IRVING, TEXASONTINUUM

Spring 2015

Tom Pruitt,
form master
of the Class
of 2015

INSIDE

The escape
that changed
everything

Pondering Tom Pruitt

*Sage, seer, poet,
nurturer of young men*



Frank Tibenszky '50 (St. Imre's in Budapest) and wife Judy in front of the tapestry they donated to emphasize the connection between the Cistercian abbeys in Dallas and in Zirc, Hungary.

The Cistercians gave me the drive to succeed

My Cistercian education in Hungary gave me the building blocks for my future success in America. All that I am, in my humble life, I owe to my years under the guidance of the Cistercian monks.

It is wonderful to see that tradition being carried forward from the Abbey of Zirc in Hungary to Dallas.

We are delighted to highlight this connection through the donation of the Hungarian-made tapestry and to show our gratitude through a planned estate gift.

MEMORARE
SOCIETY

To remember Cistercian with a planned gift, contact Erin Hart.
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PREPARATORY
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Smokey recalls for us what it really is about

“Cistercian could have consisted of a cluster of tents and shacks along the banks of the Trinity River, and it would have been a great school because of the faculty.”

— Smokey Briggs '84

With the completion of last year’s building projects, the regular interaction among students and faculty has dramatically improved.



Letter from the headmaster
Fr. Paul McCormick

And, we remain extremely grateful.

Yet, as Smokey reminds us in his column, the facilities are only as good as the faculty who occupy them.

From its start, Cistercian has been blessed many times over by dedicated monks and lay faculty.

In our lead feature, we share the story of 21 Cistercians whose escape across the Iron Curtain in 1950 helped shape the abbey and contributed to the school’s early years, foreshadowing the

determination and willingness to sacrifice that continues to characterize our faculty.

The chaotic sequence of events detailed in the story reminds us again of the mysterious ways in which God works.

This issue also highlights the lifelong dedication of current faculty, including Dr. Thomas Pruitt.

Tom has served in an array of roles since 1978, from bus driver to arts advocate, from English teacher to Summer Programs director, touching lives at every turn.

This May, as form master, he graduates the Class of 2015.

Through the stories in our news and sports sections as well as Fr. Roch’s thoughtful counsel on pondering the end of life, one sees this same dedication and commitment to the students being lived out by those who sponsor various organizations, coach in athletics, and mentor.

And then comes Smokey, recalling for us all, once again, what it really is all about . . . how selflessly and with such dedication and competence, the teachers of Cistercian have made, and continue to make, the school special.

Volume 42, number 1

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Twenty-one Cistercians escaped Hungary in 1950. The trouble started after they crossed the stagnant Einsler Canal.

By David E. Stewart



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*Cover photography by
Jim Reisch*



Pondering Tom Pruitt 20

The sage, seer, and poet brings a passion for formation to the Class of '15. A passion he’s had for over 37 years.

By David E. Stewart

Cistercian Preparatory School was founded with the aim of preparing talented boys for the colleges of their choice by challenging their minds with excellent academic programs, molding their character through the values of Catholic education, and offering them guidance with both understanding and discipline. Cistercian Preparatory School does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, creed, national, or ethnic origin in the administration of its admission and education policies, financial aid programs, athletic programs, and other activities.

GETTING THE SHAKES Earthquakes rock school

Between April 2014 and April 2015, the area around Cistercian has been hit by 52 earthquakes, according to Fr. Mark Ripperger, who has monitored data from the United States Geological Society.

Most of the quakes have registered in the harmless range (below 2.7). But five hit the 3.0 mark or above. The school appears to have avoided any significant damage. So far.

ROAD TRIP Fr. Paul meets with alumni in Seattle and San Francisco

In the third week of March, headmaster Fr. Paul McCormick and director of development and alumni relations Erin Hart traveled to the northwestern alumni hotbeds of Seattle and San Francisco.

Both were enthused with the turnouts and the alumni seemed to enjoy themselves as well. Anticipate more trips in the future.



Fourteen San Francisco area alumni gathered at the home of Jason Mitura '03 to visit and catch up with Fr. Paul McCormick and Erin Hart.



Fr. Paul McCormick shares drinks and food with alumni in Seattle in March.



FUTURE COLLEGE ATHLETES WITH DOTSON (l-r) Dare Odeyingbo '15 (football at Vanderbilt), Matthew Merrick '15 (football at UT), Coach Malcolm Dotson, Ryan Watters '15 (soccer at Cornell), Nick Skalak '15 (football at Missouri), and Ben Tilden '15 (crew at Columbia).

CEREMONY RECOGNIZES ATHLETES Five seniors pursuing NCAA Division-I sports

On February 4 in the Upper School courtyard, five athletes in the Class of 2015 announced their intentions to play college sports. Several were foregone conclusions.

Ryan Watters '15 decided during his junior year to attend Cornell to play soccer. Watters has been a standout and captain of one of North Texas' four Development Academy teams for several years. At this elite level, players are prohibited from playing for their high school teams.

Dare Odeyingbo '15, who set all kinds of rushing records at Cistercian, had announced in August his verbal intent to attend Vanderbilt. He is expected to play a defensive end/linebacker hybrid position where he rushes the passer or drops back in pass coverage.

Matthew Merrick '15 verbally hooked his horns with Texas in November when he was offered a "grey shirt" tag, which means Texas will wait until January of 2016 to put him on scholarship. The quarterback completed 165-of-296 passes for 2,404 yards and 33 touchdowns this past season.

Ben Tilden '15 committed to Columbia where he will row in and around Manhattan and The Bronx for the Lions.

Nick Skalak '15, who had an outstanding season for the Hawks at offensive tackle, committed to the University of Missouri.



Cornell soccer recruit Ryan Watters '15, with form master Tom Pruit.

"We celebrate the success of all these student-athletes," remarked Andre Bruce, athletic director.

"It is a tribute to the five guys that they were able to achieve so much athletically while pursuing the rigors of a Cistercian education."

"In my 24 years," said Steve McCarthy, head football coach, "we have had only one Division-I recruit (**Ikenna Nwafor '12**). So this is truly a remarkable class and group of guys."

"Dare and Matthew were almost 'givens,'" he added, "but Nick was a hidden gem. He stepped up as a senior and capitalized on the attention generated by the other two guys. I am very proud of all three."

5 Number of *gymnasia* (college preparatory schools for grades 5-12) operated in Hungary by the Abbey of Zirc between 1912 and 1948.

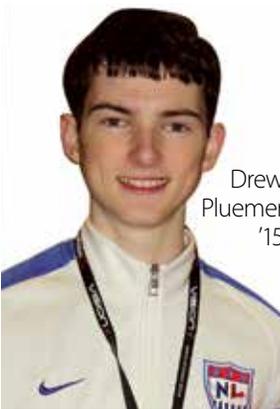
3.6 The Richter Scale magnitude reading of the most severe earthquake to hit the school. It struck on Tuesday, January 6 at 6:52 pm.

UPPER SCHOOL PRESENTS THE GOVERNMENT INSPECTOR

Over the weekend of April 17, the Upper School staged a production of *The Government Inspector*, by Nikolai Gogol, directed by Dylan Key.

PLUEMER HEADED TO WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS

Drew Pluemer '15 will represent TEAM USA in Chelyabinsk City, Russia at the 2015 World Taekwondo Championships from May 11-16. At age 18, he is the youngest member of the U.S. team headed to Russia. He first heads to Colorado Springs to train at the Olympic Training Center for a week and then the team heads to Russia to continue their training before the World Championships begin.



Drew Pluemer '15



Frank Tibenszky '50 (Budapest) and Middle School students in October discussing the tapestry he donated to express gratitude for the ties between the abbeys in Hungary and Texas.

**GIFT FROM BUDAPEST ALUMNUS
Tapestry celebrates connection to abbey in Hungary**

A tapestry donated by Frank Tibenszky, an alumnus of St. Imre's Cistercian High School in Budapest (Class of 1950), and his wife Judy was hung in Founders Hall this fall.

The 5-foot-square textile pictures the abbey in Texas alongside the Abbey of Zirc (pronounced zeertz) in Hungary, dramatizing the ties between the two congregations. (All of the Cistercians who came to America from Hungary were originally members of the Abbey of Zirc.)

On the afternoon of October 30, Tibenszky and his wife Judy addressed the students of the Middle School to shed light on the meaning of his gift.

"I feel like one of you," said the 83-year-old New Jersey resident, "because I used to be one of you. Of course, it was 1942 when I started at the Cistercians' school as a 10-year-old."

"I owe a lot to my Cistercian education," he said. "It gave me the drive to succeed."

He recalled Boy Scout outings with his beloved form master, who also served as his scout master.

"Through this gift, I hope to show



The traditions of the Abbey of Zirc (above) are carried on at Our Lady of Dallas Cistercian Abbey.

my gratitude to the Cistercians," said the long-time and still-working salesman of precision scales, "and to express my joy that there is a Cistercian school in America."

Like several of the Hungarian Cistercians who came to Texas (including Frs. Denis, Roch, Julius, Pascal, and Matthew), Tibenszky escaped Hungary in 1956 after the October Revolution.

Tibenszky learned of the Cistercians' school in Texas through meetings of a Hungarian-American association where he met Fr. Julius Leloczky.

MOCK TRIAL TEAM DOWNED BY TAG AT STATE

For the first time, Cistercian's mock trial team won a spot in the 36th Annual Texas High School Mock Trial Competition held in Houston in March.

The 11-man squad, led by coach Rwan Hardesty, matched wits with some of the state's large public school teams. Cistercian was eliminated by DISD's Talented and Gifted School at Townview and placed 14th out of 28 teams.

Team captains **Peter Dorn '16** and **Michael Molash '16** played pivotal roles, Dorn as an attorney or witness, Molash as a lawyer for either the defense or prosecution.

Jack O'Toole '16 demonstrated an impressive ability to think on his feet through his rebuttals at state," noted Hardesty.

"The showstopper had to be **Brad Bain '16**," she added. "His rendition of a rather inebriated attorney in rehabilitation cracked up everyone."

The team included mostly juniors plus one sophomore and two freshmen.

2 Number of road trips Fr. Paul has taken as headmaster to visit groups of alumni (not in his forms). Odds are he'll be "on the road again" soon.

14 Number of attendees at the San Francisco alumni gathering with Fr. Paul and Erin Hart in March at the home of Jason Mitura '03.



David Hocker '96, the Jim & Lynn Moroney Award winner, with presenter Gary Cunningham '72. The pair have contributed a great deal to the look and feel of the Cistercian campus.

JIM & LYNN MORONEY AWARD Alumnus of the Year Hocker shares his love of Italy, Cistercian, and the spaces between

For lovers of the Cistercian campus, the 2015 Jim & Lynn Moroney Award Dinner served up lots of delicious tidbits as landscape architect **David Hocker '96** received the Alumnus of the Year Award from architect **Gary Cunningham '72**.

Why was an alumnus from the seventies introducing a recipient from the nineties?

“My boss at HOK introduced me to Sam Hocker in the late seventies,” Cunningham explained, “to moonlight and convert his garage into a playground.”

The playground was for the yet-to-be-born David Hocker and his older sister.

Cunningham would later soothe the elder Hocker when his senior at Cistercian wanted to major in landscape architecture.

And Cunningham welcomed Hocker to move into his offices in 2004.

“At our first meeting with Fr. Peter,” Cunningham said, “David had that unspoken connection with the school and suggested, ‘Let’s stop watering the grass.’”

“And Fr. Peter said, ‘Okay.’”

Hocker, who has won many state and national awards for his work, transformed the Cistercian campus over the last 10 years.

In accepting the award, Hocker spoke of the odds of his being accepted at Cistercian as a Third Former (22 applied for three spots), his love of Fr. Henry Marton (the same form master as Cunningham), and playing football under Coach Tom Hillary.

He spoke of Texas A&M and two semesters in Tuscany that “expanded my horizons and affirmed my passion.”

“My connection to Italy,” said Hocker, who met wife Gisela Borghi there, “informs and shapes my sense of design.

“I continue to be fascinated with piazzas — the spaces between — and creating functional and beautiful places for people.”

Hocker and Cunningham often work together on projects outside Cistercian, including current projects at the Dallas Museum of Art and Temple Emmanuel.

BOOK FAIR TURNS 50 Fr. Julius honored for contributions to library

Sleet and snow failed to dissuade a healthy crowd from attending the 50th Annual Cistercian Book Fair on Sunday, March 1.

After a special Mass, thousands of books were sold to benefit the Library.

The size of this year’s event dwarfed the school’s first book fair back in 1965, which was launched by Fr. Julius Leloczky, the school’s first librarian. Fr. Julius was present to accept a special tribute on the golden anniversary.

Entertainment included a Form III art exhibit, face painting, and a balloon artist.

Along with the many book donors and volunteers who helped make the event possible, special thanks go to the school’s maintenance staff for the safe sledding.



Fr. Bernard Marton running along the Danube with students from St. Imre’s Cistercian School.

RUNNING IN BUDAPEST Fr. Bernard completes virtual Cowtown Marathon

While weather in Fort Worth cancelled the Cowtown Marathon on March 1, Fr. Bernard Marton ran a “virtual” one in Budapest.

Marton, 73, didn’t want to break his streak of six consecutive Cowtown Ultra races and race director Heidi Swartz had sent his bib electronically days prior.

So, Fr. Bernard completed his seventh Cowtown Ultra accompanied by students from St. Imre’s Cistercian School, where he is teaching ESL.

2 The number of winners of the Jim & Lynn Moroney Award from the nineties: David Hocker '96 and Tim Parker '91. Time for a youth movement.

1 The number of runners in the 2015 Cowtown Marathon. Weather conditions cancelled the race. Only Fr. Bernard Marton competed, albeit “virtually” in Budapest.



Representatives of the 100-plus students participating in the Flannery O'Connor Colloquium posed with (in the center, l-r) Dr. Ralph C. Wood, Gary Nied, and Fr. Gregory Schweers.

CISTERCIAN PLAYS HOST Eleven schools participate in November colloquium, *Flannery O'Connor: A 50-Year Retrospective 2014*

Cistercian's English Department, led by Gary Nied, hosted over 100 students from eleven schools in November for the colloquium, *Flannery O'Connor: A 50-Year Retrospective*.

The unprecedented event for the English Department gave students the opportunity to deliver critical papers — and to hear their peers deliver them — on O'Connor's work at the 50th anniversary of her death.

"We can be a bit insular here," admitted Nied, reflecting on the event. "It was good for our guys to hear really smart kids from other schools discuss literature like O'Connor's."

"Of course, having girls in the classroom was a novelty as well," he added.

"Everyone, including our guys, elevated their game for the occasion."

A total of 43 student presentations (selected from a total of 153 submissions) took place in classrooms; time was afforded for questions. Some question-and-answer periods lasted 10 minutes.

Cistercian's own Fr. Gregory Schweers (see related story at right) spoke on, "Hoi Polloi, Pilgrims, and Peacocks: O'Connor and Criticism." Dr. Ralph C. Wood, a nationally known scholar of Flannery O'Connor, followed with the keynote address.

"Dr. Wood sat in on student presentations and contributed to Q&As," said Nied. "His remarks were specifically written for the occasion and encouraged the attendees to wrestle with some tough religious questions." One example: Are you an American first, or a Christian first?

Links to both addresses can be found at: flannery.cistercian.us



Dr. Ralph C. Wood delivered the keynote address entitled "Flannery O'Connor: Writer for our Age of Atrocity."

BACK IN THE SADDLE Haaser coaching again, this time Form III baseball

Since graduating the Class of 2014 last May, Bob Haaser has had a little more time on his hands.

So he has returned to one of his life's great passions: coaching; in his favorite sport: baseball.

The beneficiaries are Third Formers (Class of 2020).

"I love it," Haaser said. "Helping the boys with their game on spring days — it doesn't get better than this."

The sight of Haaser's figure in coaching attire on Cistercian's athletic fields brings back memories for a few.

For the Middle School baseball players, it's great coaching at work.

Haaser also is teaching Form IV History and the Genealogy elective.

PUBLISH OR PERISH British journal includes Fr. Gregory's work on Flannery O'Connor

Having spent the past year in England studying art history, Fr. Gregory Schweers learned of a receptive audience for his thoughts on Flannery O'Connor.

The Way, a quarterly publication of the British Jesuits, focuses on spiritual subjects raised by intercultural and interreligious dialogue as well as interactions between spirituality, politics and culture.

"I thought they might be interested in an authentic American writer of the South," said Fr. Gregory, "and they were."

His story, "Flannery O'Connor and the Problem of Baptism" was published in January, 2015.

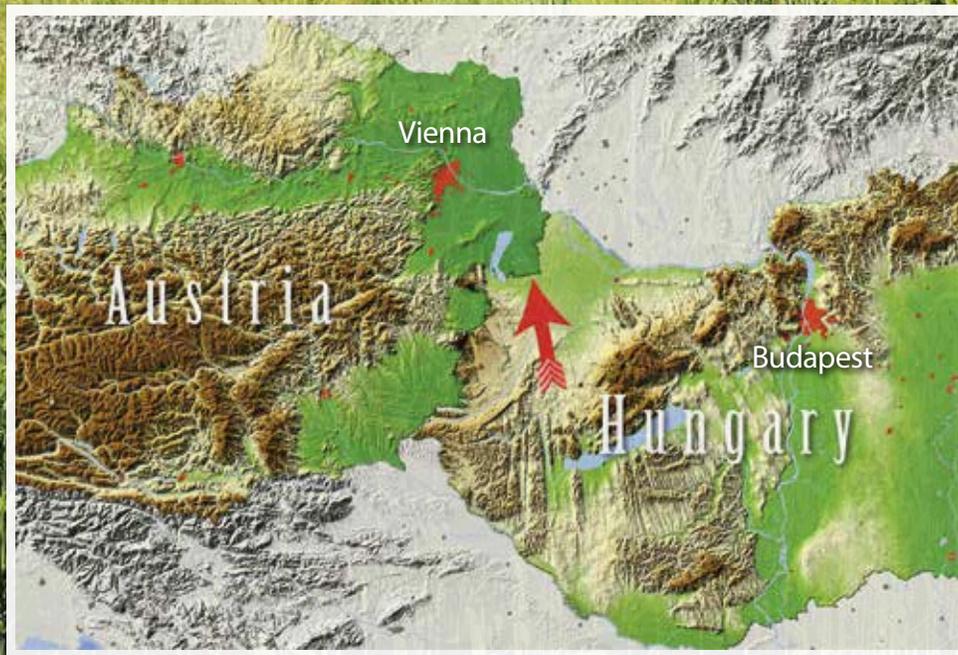
See <http://www.theway.org.uk/back/541Schweers.pdf> for a link to the story.



Fr. Gregory Schweers

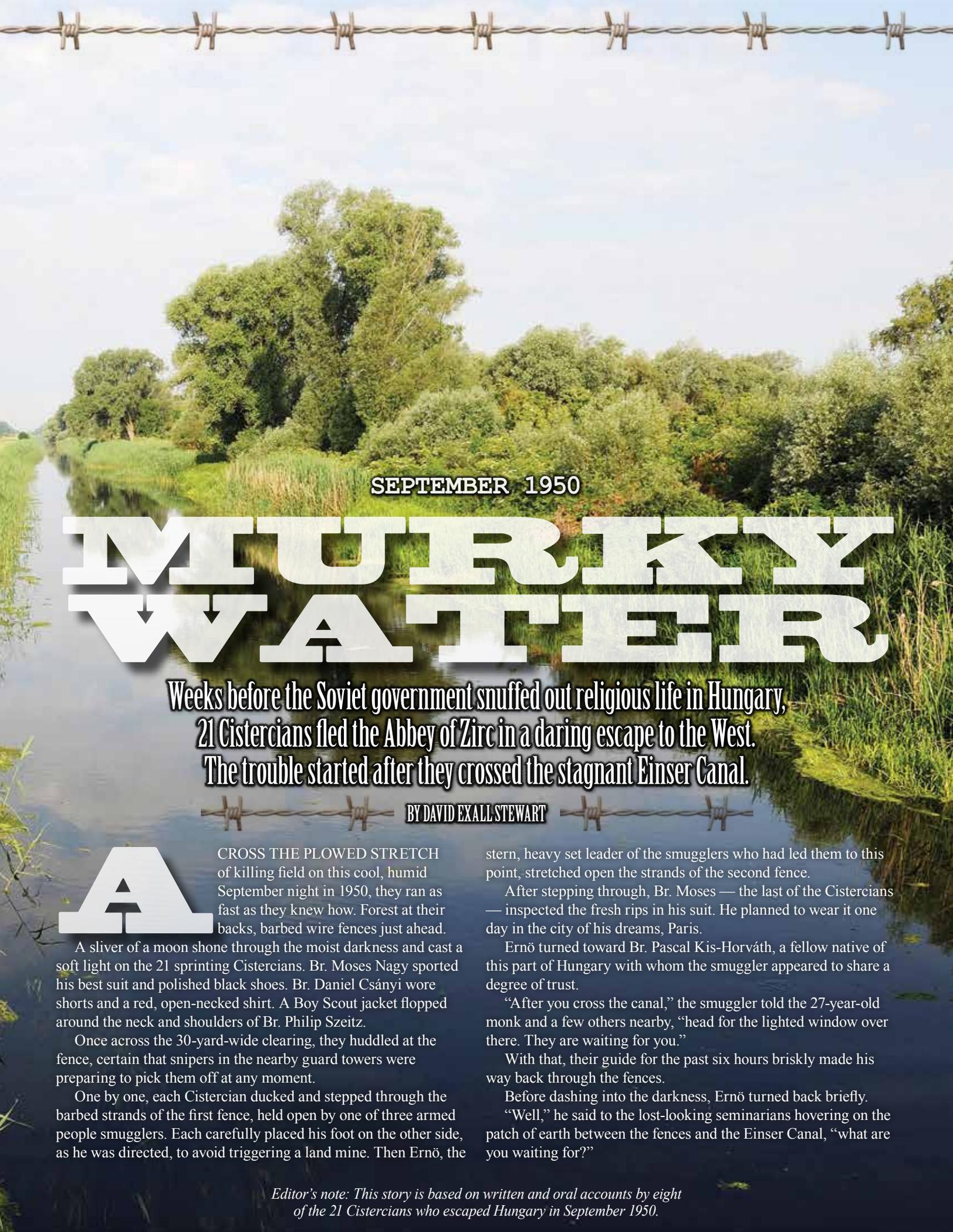
0 The number of academic colloquia featuring literary criticism held at Cistercian prior to the 50-year retrospective on Flannery O'Connor in November.

26 The number of years since Bob Haaser served as a coach. After being named form master of the Class of 1992 in 1984, he continued to coach for four more years.



Einser Canal on the Hungarian-Austrian border

The canal today as viewed from the Bridge at Andau, within 20 miles or so of where the Cistercians crossed in 1950. Note the remains of a Soviet guard tower. The red arrow on the relief map points to the escape area.



SEPTEMBER 1950

MURKY WATER

Weeks before the Soviet government snuffed out religious life in Hungary, 21 Cistercians fled the Abbey of Zirc in a daring escape to the West. The trouble started after they crossed the stagnant Einser Canal.

BY DAVID EXALL STEWART

A CROSS THE PLOWED STRETCH of killing field on this cool, humid September night in 1950, they ran as fast as they knew how. Forest at their backs, barbed wire fences just ahead.

A sliver of a moon shone through the moist darkness and cast a soft light on the 21 sprinting Cistercians. Br. Moses Nagy sported his best suit and polished black shoes. Br. Daniel Csányi wore shorts and a red, open-necked shirt. A Boy Scout jacket flopped around the neck and shoulders of Br. Philip Szeitz.

Once across the 30-yard-wide clearing, they huddled at the fence, certain that snipers in the nearby guard towers were preparing to pick them off at any moment.

One by one, each Cistercian ducked and stepped through the barbed strands of the first fence, held open by one of three armed people smugglers. Each carefully placed his foot on the other side, as he was directed, to avoid triggering a land mine. Then Ernő, the

stern, heavy set leader of the smugglers who had led them to this point, stretched open the strands of the second fence.

After stepping through, Br. Moses — the last of the Cistercians — inspected the fresh rips in his suit. He planned to wear it one day in the city of his dreams, Paris.

Ernő turned toward Br. Pascal Kis-Horváth, a fellow native of this part of Hungary with whom the smuggler appeared to share a degree of trust.

“After you cross the canal,” the smuggler told the 27-year-old monk and a few others nearby, “head for the lighted window over there. They are waiting for you.”

With that, their guide for the past six hours briskly made his way back through the fences.

Before dashing into the darkness, Ernő turned back briefly.

“Well,” he said to the lost-looking seminarians hovering on the patch of earth between the fences and the Einser Canal, “what are you waiting for?”

Editor's note: This story is based on written and oral accounts by eight of the 21 Cistercians who escaped Hungary in September 1950.



Wading across the canal — some clothed, some (like Br. Moses) carrying their clothes above their heads — the Cistercians emerged on the far bank in Austria, coated in murky, stagnant water. It was around 4 am.

The narrow waterway defines the western border of Hungary in this sparsely populated portion of Austria known primarily for its vineyards. But the centuries had washed waves of ethnicities, cultures, and languages back and forth over this stretch of Europe and blurred all but the arbitrary political boundary. (Most of this part of Austria, known as Burgenland had, in fact, belonged to Hungary prior to World War I.)

The Cistercian refugees were aware that Burgenland and Niederösterreich (the largest Austrian state to the north, and home to Vienna) belonged to something called the “Soviet zone.” But none fully appreciated the implications of this post-war Allied arrangement in Austria (which would end in 1955).

As the Cistercians emptied the water from their shoes, dried off, and dressed, the long journey caught up with the 19 seminarians and two priests. Having traveled for nearly 20 hours straight, all agreed to snooze in the nearby haystacks until dawn. Their Austrian adventure from here to Vienna’s friendly Allied zones would have to wait until first light.

“It hit me after we crossed the canal,” remembered Fr. Benedict Monostori years later, “that I had just left my country, and that we may never in our lives be able to return.”

Thoughts of the momentous nature of their trip must have crossed the minds of the other Cistercians as well.

As Fr. Benedict drifted to sleep, however, unsettling and persistent fears began to annoy the 31-year-old monk. He felt the mantle of leadership for this group now fell to him, despite having played no role in the planning of the escape.

Even more troubling, he acknowledged later, “I had no idea where we were going.”

Up until now, few in the group were concerned with who among them had organized the impressive breach of the Soviet’s formidable border, which Winston Churchill had recently christened, “the Iron Curtain.”

The plan to escape the Soviet’s suffocating grip on religious life in Hungary — and the crowded and deteriorating conditions within the Abbey of Zirc (pronounced zeertz) — had hurried from concept to execution in a matter of seven days.

Despite the short notice, the plan to reach the Austrian border had been meticulously conceived and executed.

Word of a possible escape had been spread from one monk to the next. Only a select few had been authorized to initiate discussions of it. Those who made the decision to escape had pledged not to impart word of it to anyone, including their parents.

Abbot Wendelin Endrédi, the abbot of Hungary’s once powerful Abbey of Zirc, had entrusted the lives of his treasured brothers to Br. Pascal Kis-Horváth, a 27-year-old native of western Hungary who had joined the abbey three years earlier. The abbot and the brother were first cousins once removed (Br. Pascal’s mother was the abbot’s cousin) and both grew up products of

working-class parents from the countryside near the border with Austria.

But they had taken divergent paths.

The abbot’s academic prowess had earned him a scholarship to a Benedictine gymnasium (grades 5-12) in Győr that propelled him to university studies, the priesthood, and a brilliant teaching career before being elected abbot.

Kis-Horvath lost his father as a young child and later contracted tuberculosis in his hip, leaving him with a severe limp for the remainder of his life. Unlike his academically blessed relative, Kis-Horvath possessed skills more suited to the farm than the classroom.

And, at age 25, he was finding those skills under-appreciated in his job as a porter in the Cistercian residence house in Budapest.

So when Kis-Horváth discerned a priestly vocation, the abbot eagerly worked to help make his dream come true (a task that included preparing him to pass Hungary’s difficult high school equivalency exam, despite a spotty high school education).

Now the abbot hoped Kis-Horváth’s skills with practical matters and people — as well as his knowledge of western Hungary — could save some of the abbey’s brothers from the oblivion of life under Soviet rule.

So the abbot sent Br. Pascal to his hometown of Petőháza (adjacent to the abbot’s hometown of Fertőszentmiklós) to scout out a reliable smuggler who might help the Cistercians navigate the dangerous border crossing into Austria, then travel to a seminary located in the American-occupied zone of Vienna, and eventually to Rome.

When the scope of the escape plans grew suddenly, Br. Pascal adapted — absorbing, organizing, planning, and directing the larger-than-expected numbers.

Br. Pascal managed the entire process without assistance. For obvious reasons, the abbot and other officials of the monastery did not want to know the specifics.

Breaking the group into pairs, Br. Pascal planned their train and bus schedules, armed them with directions (which instructed them not to interact with other Cistercians they might encounter, including the abbey’s many priests, who were to remain ignorant of these plans).

They would take a variety of routes to their rendezvous point in Bősárkány, located 5-6 miles from the border.

Br. Pascal carried the money to pay the smuggler (an enormous sum equal to approximately four times the monthly minimum wage of a Hungarian worker, per Cistercian). It was, according to some, nearly all the cash left in the abbey.

The Cistercians owed their safe passage through the Iron Curtain as much to the planning and leadership of Br. Pascal as to the skills of the people smuggler, Ernő.

As light began to fill the September sky on Wednesday, September 6, 1950, the 21 Cistercians awoke one by one and began to congregate — the stench of the canal clinging.

It seemed natural when Fr. Benedict began to discuss the group’s next moves, smoothly assuming command despite the uncertainties he entertained.



Br. Pascal carried the vast sum of money to pay the smuggler. It was, according to some, nearly all the cash left in the abbey.



Most of the seminarians were accustomed to the cadence of the 31-year-old. For the last several years, he had served as the prefect, or superior of the abbey's 40 or so brothers (those who had completed their novitiate).

Even the seven youngest of the group — those who had spent just one year in the monastery — had come to know Fr. Benedict. (Due to the growing oppression, Rome had provided dispensation to allow them to profess their vows in June, rather than the customary August.)

It quickly became clear to Br. Pascal that Fr. Benedict had somehow misinterpreted Ernő's words. He pondered his options.

Had the abbot sanctioned this transfer in leadership to take place at the border and simply failed to inform him? Could he dare question the authority of his superior?

He swallowed hard.

Instead of heading to Andau, the village to the north where a contact was waiting to direct them on their way to Vienna, the dirtied group began moving through the fields in a more southerly direction, toward Taden, a smaller village where Soviet authorities had spent the previous few days patrolling.

A LETTER FROM THE CISTERCIAN Order's *Casa Generalazia* (General House) in Rome lay opened on the abbot's desk at the Abbey of Zirc in August 1950. It contained a directive from Abbot General Matthaeus Quatember.

A particular monk, one Fr. Ányos Lékai, was needed immediately in Rome to prepare for a mission to Spain, according

to the abbot general. (Fr. Ányos was the younger brother of Fr. Louis Lékai, a Cistercian already living in America who would become a highly regarded history professor at UD.)

The letter gave Abbot Wendelin pause.

The once powerful Abbey of Zirc was staggering in the summer of 1950, a mortally wounded victim — like the rest of Hungary — of totalitarian Soviet rule that had grown more oppressive with each year following World War II.

The Soviet regime had begun by confiscating and nationalizing private property in 1945, not long after the Nazi surrender.

The Cistercians surrendered 40,000 acres of agricultural lands — gifted to them over the centuries by Hungarian monarchs — that had generated the funds to operate the abbey's five schools, many residence houses for monks, and its many parishes. Without the land, the order fell on hard times.

At the end of the 1947-48 school year, religious were banned from teaching in school, robbing the Cistercians of their teaching vocation.

Having failed to attract a popular majority of Hungarians in free elections in the years since 1945, Communist Party officials simply outlawed all other political parties in 1948 and arrested political opponents (including Cardinal József Mindszenty in December 1948).

With the opposition leaders imprisoned or in hiding, the government boldly proceeded to attack the last vestige of free thought in Hungary — religious life.

"The earnest words of the Savior have again interrupted the carnival's cacophony," wrote Abbot Wendelin in his February 1949 annual pastoral letter, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem and everything written by the prophets about the Son



The Abbey of Zirc

The church (left) and monastery have not changed in appearance much since the 19th century.

of Man will be fulfilled: he will be handed over into the hands of the Gentiles, he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon, and after they have scourged him, they will kill him, but on the third day he will rise” (Lk 18:31-34).

During morning prayers on a day in July 1950, nuns began to fill the front pews of the church at the Abbey of Zirc. The praying and chanting monks couldn't help but notice as the stream of nuns continued, eventually filling the building.

Nearly 500 nuns — more than a few crippled, infirm, and in wheel chairs — had been uprooted from their convents and transported by trucks to their new temporary home at Zirc, an abbey designed to house about 80 monks.

The monks withdrew to approximately one-fifth of the building area to provide sufficient room for the nuns. Even the abbey's elegantly wood-paneled library would be put into service to help accommodate the nuns.

Feeding the abbey's enlarged population became a daily struggle. Villagers dropped off supplies to help, but had to do so under the cover of darkness to avoid detection by the authorities. Monks worked in the fields where roles were switched: out here, monks with an agricultural background and less education took charge, while those with advanced degrees found themselves struggling to do as they were told.

The abbot general's letter had found Abbot Wendelin beleaguered and near exhaustion.

But he was still game.

Abbot Wendelin knew full well why Abbot General Quatember was interceding on behalf of Fr. Ányos.

The 33-year-old monk was one of several young priests from the Abbey of Zirc who had enthusiastically supported a reform movement, one that sought to return the Cistercians to their 12th century agricultural roots. (The movement mirrored a split in the 17th century in which the Trappists, or the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, broke off from the order.)

These several monks had been schooled in this movement during their studies in Rome, where they came under the tutelage of Quatember. The strict, minimalist lifestyle also attracted young men who — traumatized by the senseless killing and destruction of World War II — were already inclined to hold an almost apocalyptic world view.

In two young Hungarian Cistercians in particular — Fr. Piusz Halász and Fr. Ányos — these ideas took root.

When they returned to Hungary from Rome to be ordained, Abbot Wendelin was particularly impressed with the intellect and leadership qualities of Fr. Piusz, who he named prefect for the clerics (the nearly 40 brothers who had completed their novitiate and made temporary vows).

From this influential post, the charismatic priest began to share his reform-minded thoughts with the brothers in the Abbey of Zirc.



By 1945, Fr. Piusz even found a home for the movement in Borsodpuszta — a residence house for monks located 25 miles from Zirc on land that had been owned by the Cistercians before the property was nationalized. There, they established an alternative community — with the apparent approval of Abbot Wendelin — where Fr. Ányos served as sub prior.

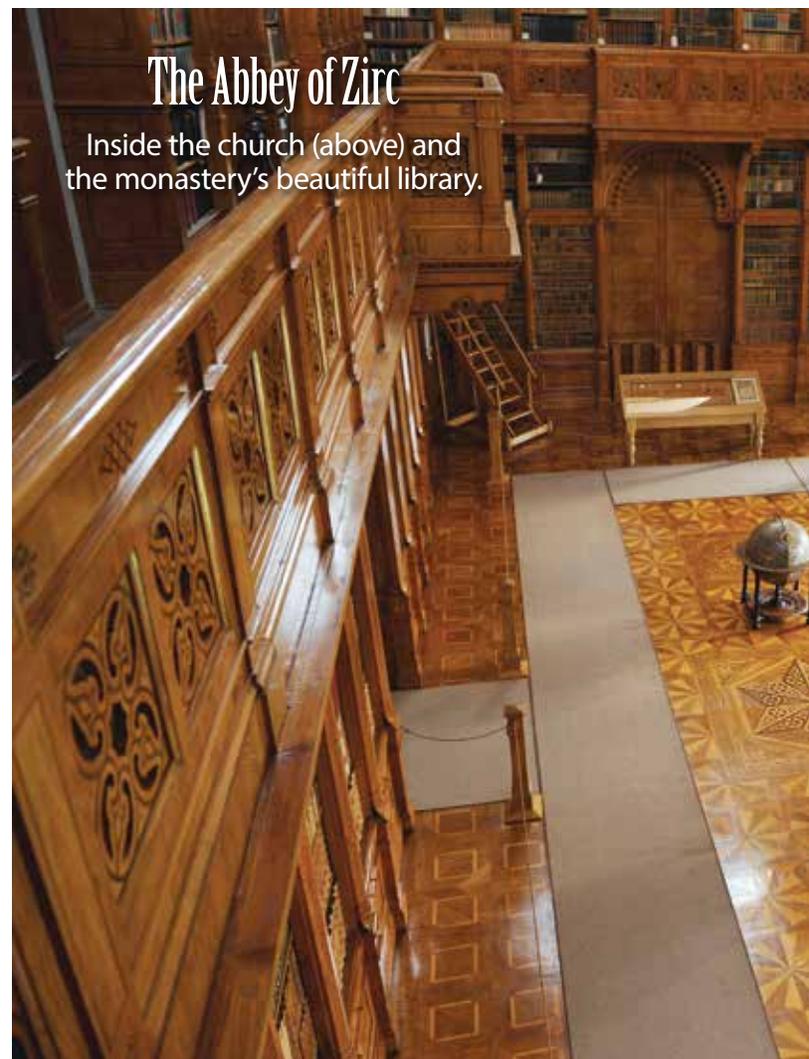
“It is perhaps even easier to love our enemies,” the abbot noted in his 1946 pastoral letter, perhaps in reference to the reformist monks, “than the spouse in the marriage and the brother in the order.

“This is because forgiving the enemy is a manifest, solemn and heroic act, whereas the daily endurance of the brother, superior or subject, is a silent martyrdom, seen and appreciated only by God.

“So I ask you,” he concluded, “before everything else, my dear brothers and sons, that the strengthening of brotherly love among us be the spiritual program for this year.”

But as traffic between Zirc and Borsodpuszta grew with young monks interested in giving reform a try, the abbot's patience wore thin.

In 1947, he replaced Fr. Piusz as prefect with Fr. Benedict.



The Abbey of Zirc

Inside the church (above) and the monastery's beautiful library.

By 1950, Fr. Ányos had decided to part ways with Fr. Piusz and Borsodpuszta in search of greener pastures outside Hungary. (The Soviets allowed Borsodpuszta to operate for a few more years than Zirc because of its insignificant size.)

This letter from Rome suggested that Fr. Ányos' former mentor, the abbot general, had agreed to lend his influence to make his wishes come true.

Now, the job fell to Abbot Wendelin. Fortunately, the abbot knew just the person to whom he should turn.

The abbot's cousin left the abbey on Tuesday, August 29, for western Hungary where he would procure 50 kilos of sugar to help feed the abbey's swollen ranks of nuns and monks.

Returning two days later with the sugar, Br. Pascal reported briefly back to the abbot on Thursday that his secret mission had also been accomplished: he had met with a man who could be depended on to lead Fr. Ányos out of the country.

"I noticed an odd feeling about the abbey," Fr. Pascal recalled of his return that Thursday. Odd, since as far as he knew, the dire circumstances had changed little. "The brothers seemed energized."

In the course of just a few days, the abbot's perspective on the effort to smuggle out the reform-minded Fr. Ányos had changed dramatically.

"We had a council meeting yesterday," the abbot began slowly in a meeting with Br. Pascal on Friday. "We have decided to give our young brothers a chance to leave also and go to Rome to pursue their studies and their vocations." (It is unclear where, beyond Rome, Abbot Wendelin envisioned the young monks

eventually settling. But the abbot had already begun to insist that the General House in Rome repay a debt to Zirc — dating back to 1938 — by providing Hungarian Cistercians safe refuge in a house that had been established by the order in Spring Bank, Wisconsin in the thirties.)

The dramatic change in plans unnerved Pascal.

"But I have arranged for just one traveler," he protested. "And how can I organize such a large trip so quickly?"

The abbot tried to calm Br. Pascal by authorizing him to approve all members of the escape. (The abbot did ask that two of the brightest intellects among the brothers, Br. Polykarp Zakar and Br. David Balás, be included so they might pursue advanced theological studies in Rome.)

"I did not sleep for three nights," Fr. Pascal remembered.

Meanwhile, Fr. Benedict met with the abbot to discuss his future once the abbey was closed by the Soviets. The abbot's council had decided that the ordained priests should remain in Hungary. The two discussed an assignment on the banks of Lake Balaton, not far from the area where Fr. Benedict was born.

Near the end of their conversation, the priest changed the subject.

"I have heard rumors," said Fr. Benedict, "that a group of seminarians are planning to escape. Does any father, or superior, plan to go with them?"

"No," answered the abbot.

"Should not someone go with them?"

"Who?" asked the abbot. "Would you volunteer for it?"

"If you think it right," said Fr. Benedict, "I will do it."

When Br. Pascal learned of this unexpected addition to the quickly expanding group (and one over whom Pascal held no veto), he objected directly to Fr. Benedict.

"Perhaps you organize it then," the brother suggested to the priest. "Otherwise, how will it look that I command a superior?"

"No, no," Fr. Benedict assured him, "you do it, and I will do everything as you say."

Days later, on the morning of September 5, the 20 seminarians, Fr. Ányos, and Fr. Benedict left the abbey in pairs, following the detailed plan and explicit instructions of Br. Pascal. While the border lay less than 70 miles west of Zirc, intentionally circuitous train and bus routes would take them all day to arrive in Bősárkány. One of the seminarians, a Br. Basil, would fall asleep near the railroad station and fail to wake in time to join the group on their swampy trek to the border.

"I felt bad," remembered Fr. Moses of his decision to leave Zirc, "like I was abandoning a sinking ship."

LEADING HESITANTLY toward the closest village, the 21 sleep-deprived Hungarians with mud-caked clothes appeared hapless and lost.

"We passed some peasants who were heading to work in the fields with their horses and carriages," remembered Fr. Elizeus Bán years later. "Some giggled at us and a few put their wrists together to show us that we would soon be handcuffed.

"We didn't believe them."

At the edge of the village, a small group was appointed to enter the village, and scout it out for their contact. But the 18 left behind began to move slowly along the path of their emissaries.





Wrong place, wrong time

At this bus stop near the church and rectory in Tadtén, Austria, the first of eight Cistercians were arrested on September 6, 1950. Their journey from Zirc to Tadtén is illustrated in the map (see inset).

“I didn’t understand why they didn’t stay outside the village,” reflected Fr. Moses, one of the scouts, in his memoirs. By the time the three knocked on the door to the rectory of the catholic church — their best guess of where their contact might reside — the 18 hung behind them by a mere 150 meters.

A housekeeper answered the door and called for the pastor.

The three stepped into the rectory and met the pastor, who initially appeared to welcome the company of the visiting Hungarians. But that didn’t last long.

When told of the size of the group, he started to shake and grow pale. He took a look outside at the large group loitering in the street and gasped.

“What should I do with you?” he demanded.

The pastor clearly had never been part of any escape plan.

“Half of you need to leave immediately,” the pastor insisted, thinking quickly. He provided the name of the pastor in Sankt Andrä am Zicksee, about three miles northwest of Tadtén, and a group of ten (Brs. Norbert Bárd, Daniel Csányi, Melchior Chladek, Stephen Harding Geröly, Aloysius Kimecz, Moses Nagy, Philip Szeitz, Berthold Szírotny, Alypius Tölgyessy, and Polykarp Zakar) left immediately.

The remaining 11 were divided into three groups and farmed out to the homes of trusted parishioners to freshen up.

A woman who spoke Hungarian welcomed Fr. Ányos, and Brs. Pascal, Tarján Petkó, and Albin Hegedüs at her home. She cleaned their clothes and cooked them a Hungarian favorite: noodles mixed with cottage cheese and bacon.

After a couple of hours, they returned to the rectory courtyard where they waited outside.

Inside, the pastor hoped this Hungarian nightmare of his might end quickly. He suggested to Fr. Benedict that they proceed in four groups and take the next bus out of town. He handed him some Austrian shillings to distribute for the fare to Vienna.

Outside in the rectory courtyard, Fr. Benedict then met with his charges.

Brs. Elizeus, Emmeram Biczo, and Farkas Katona were to enter the bus at the first stop, Fr. Ányos, Br. Pascal, and Br. Tarján at the second, and Br. Albin and Br. Xavier Haraszti at the third.

Fr. Benedict’s threesome, including the fluent German-speaker Br. David, would remain in the rectory to observe and ensure all safely boarded the bus for Vienna before embarking on the next bus.

The first bus stop in Tadtén lay just a few steps outside the rectory door, and directly across the street from the back of the small church. As the bus turned the corner on its way from Andau, the hearts of Elizeus, Emmeram, and Farkas began pumping faster.

“We tried to relax,” remembered Fr. Elizeus in his account for the *Black and White*, the alumni magazine of the Cistercian schools in Hungary.

As they stepped up and on to the bus, the three greeted the driver before turning to walk to the back of the bus. They missed seeing the two policemen sitting in the front row attired in gray uniforms.

“None of us knew much German,” Fr. Elizeus recalled. For an instant or two, as they sat down in the back of the bus, they must have felt relief: they were on their way.

“We had money, we knew the destination, we were waiting for the conductor to take our money.”

But when the bus did not start, they became aware of a discussion going on in the front of the bus, although they initially had no idea it concerned them. Until that is, the driver and some passengers began shouting at them.

“We did not understand what they wanted,” recalled the priest who now resides in Zirc. “We did not know that the tickets had to be purchased from the driver in Austria.

“A lady finally asked us in Hungarian if we came from Hungary. We smiled and nodded yes,” thinking this might help in some way.



“You should have paid the driver when you boarded,” she said. The two policemen could no longer ignore the presence of the Hungarians and proceeded to the back of the bus.

When the three failed to produce the proper identification, they were escorted from the bus and to Tadten’s city hall.

The long wait at the first stop worried Br. Pascal and he studied the bus as it approached.

“Something’s wrong,” he insisted. “Let’s go.”

Then they heard shouts from the bus that was pulling to a stop in front of them.

“Your companions have been taken to city hall,” they said, “you should follow them there.”

Br. Pascal was furious, scared, and inclined to make a run for it.

“We are in a free country,” Ányos counseled. “Don’t worry so much.”

“We can’t just turn ourselves in!” Pascal said in disbelief.

“I am responsible,” he added, a bit indignantly. “You are obliged to follow my direction.”

Tarján agreed.

“The Blessed Virgin will help us,” the priest said, trying to calm Pascal as they walked in the direction they had been pointed.

“The Blessed Virgin,” insisted the brother, “will not carry us to Vienna.”

Alarmed at the sequence of events, the housekeeper alerted the pastor and the three Hungarians, who were waiting in the rectory.

Meanwhile, Brs. Albin and Xavier, having watched the events unfold at the second stop, decided to follow the others. They did not want to be separated from them.

As the policemen marched Elizeus, Emmeram, and Farkas down Tadten’s sidewalks, a woman stopped them.

“Let them go,” she pleaded to the police. “What do you care about these young men?”

“Don’t worry,” one responded, trying to calm her, “we’ll just take them to the station.

“They can get ID cards there and go free.”

At the railway station in Sankt Andrä am

Zicksee (St. André on Lake Zick) in the early afternoon of September 6, five pairs of Hungarian refugees confidently arranged themselves so as to avoid arousing suspicion as they awaited their train to Vienna.

Since volunteering to halve the burden on the panicked pastor in Tadten earlier that morning, the ten had been welcomed compassionately and calmly by Fr. Johannes in this larger, lakeside village.

The pastor in Sankt Andrä and his housekeeper had housed the refugees together in the church where they napped while their clothes were washed; then the Austrians fed their guests a feast in the rectory (including ham and cheese omelettes, crusty bread, and apple juice topped off with freshly baked strudel).

As he sent them on their way, the pastor armed the Hungarians with shilling notes and explicit instructions for the various trains and streetcars required to reach the Pasmanaeum (the leading seminary) in Vienna.

But as their train approached, their sense of well-being vanished.

The large letters on the side of the train that became legible as it pulled into the Sankt Andrä station indicated this was a Hungarian

train (a remnant of the days prior to the 1920 Trianon Treaty when this part of Austria belonged to Hungary).

When a ticket collector jumped off the train, the red star shimmering above the polished black visor of his hat twisted the stomachs of the Hungarians into knots.

Had this been a mistake by Fr. Johannes? Was their desperate stab at freedom to end here on this train platform?

Employees of the Hungarian train line (like employees in all industries) worked for the state. To ignore Hungarians leaving the country illegally would put him in danger of being arrested. To allow Hungarians escaping the country on his train, in effect aiding and abetting an illegal activity, would be a higher crime.

Informants lurked everywhere.

Who knew who was watching?

“Spread out in the car as best as you can,” he winked to a few members of the group who could not disguise their terror. “Get off the train at the fifth stop, which is Neusiedl, and I will ask my Austrian colleague to make sure that you get on the right train and make it to Vienna. Good luck!”

“This man ignored the danger,” marveled a deeply grateful Daniel Csányi, “and chose to help a bunch of strangers.”

“INT,” Br. Pascal said pointedly to Fr. Ányos, shaking his head as the eight Hungarians sat

together in Tadten’s city hall, “now you can say the rosary.”

While Br. Pascal couldn’t help but suppose what might have been had the 21 followed Ernő’s directions, the other seven stubbornly clung to any signs of hope.

“The mayor of Tadten, a limping man of 50 or so years of age,” recalled Fr. Elizeus, “spoke Hungarian perfectly. He was very bothered by our case.” But he didn’t help them.

The mayor quickly left the matter to the police, who also wanted nothing to do with the Hungarians and transported them to Andau (where Ernő had directed they go immediately after crossing the border).

The eight spent the night at a convent.

Fr. Ányos said a mass. The Hungarian nuns provided the men with a festive supper, but shared little when asked to forecast their destinies.

While — as Br. Pascal pointed out to his brethren — nothing appears to have prevented the men from making a run for it (the nuns and even the police may have wished they would just disappear), the young seminarians led by Fr. Ányos refused to take matters into their own hands.

“*Amiamo la speranza*,” their leader liked to say. “Let us love the hope.” The sentiment frustrated the hands-on Br. Pascal who constantly sought to persuade the others of opportunities to escape.

The next morning, the nuns offered the men warm underwear and sweaters to take with them.

“We had counted on spending the winter in the warmth of Rome,” Fr. Elizeus rued.

The nuns’ gifts suggested they had a dimmer (and more frigid) view of the refugees’ future.



“The Blessed Virgin will help us,” the priest said.

“The Blessed Virgin,” insisted Br. Pascal,

“will not carry us to Vienna.”





The commotion in the night awakened Br. Daniel Csányi, one of the ten who had arrived at the Pazmanaem in Vienna from Sankt Andrä earlier in the evening of September 6. The muffled voices, including that of Fr. Benedict, quickly soothed him.

“I drifted back to sleep,” he remembered of that first night out from under the Soviet boot, “relieved that the remainder of our band had arrived safely.”

It was only at breakfast the next morning that the horrifying news spread.

“They are where?” asked the brothers in disbelief in the morning.

“In an Austrian jail,” Fr. Benedict repeated, as if in pain. Then, he shared the entire episode of the botched bus fare, the policemen, and the arrests.

He, Br. David, and Br. Arcadius had fled to Sankt Andrä to catch the train from there to Vienna before the authorities learned of their location.

Clearly spooked, Fr. Benedict had already arranged for one of the Hungarians at the Pazmanaem to lead the remainder of his charges far from the Soviet zone as quickly as possible, under the assumption that the Soviets may have learned about their whereabouts.

By mid-morning, the 13 refugees — led by their Hungarian guide from the Pazmanaem (who had an Austrian identification that allowed him to travel between the Allied occupation zones) — arrived at the rail station in Mönichkirchen, a ski resort in the Alps close to the British zone.

Not far from the station, at the bottom of a ravine, a creek served as the demarcation line between the Soviet and British zones.

At their leader’s signal, they rushed down the slope. Fr. Benedict slipped, landing on his bum, and slid the rest of the way, splashing into the creek.

“His less than flawless descent,” remarked Daniel Csányi in his memoirs, “caused considerable and poorly concealed mirth among us.”

At a tavern on the far side of the ravine in the British zone, their Austrian guide treated the refugees to a drink and waited with them until the bus for Graz arrived.

“Finally,” recalled Fr. Moses Nagy, “we were really free. We danced and sang that we had escaped hell.

“But,” he added, “we worried about the eight.”

A friendly Austrian policeman escorted the eight Hungarian prisoners on a 90-minute bus ride to Eisenstadt, the capital of Burgenland, where they were handed over to the Soviets.

Here, they were fingerprinted, photographed, and treated as any other prisoners. While still ostensibly under the care of the Austrians, they were now officially prisoners of the Soviets.

At the city jail, their accommodations consisted of two small cells separated by a larger room where the eight could remain together during the day under the occasional supervision of a guard.

The small cells offered just enough room for two rudimentary bunk beds and a bucket that served as the toilet.

Feasts like the one they had enjoyed with the nuns in Andau

became fond memories. Breakfast and dinner most often brought a small piece of bread and a little coffee that looked like tea; at lunch they received some soup and a vegetable or dough the size of a tennis ball.

“We didn’t get fat,” admitted Fr. Elizeus, who bunked with Farkas, Emmeram, and Xavier.

Occasionally they were taken outside to work. The guards quickly realized that only Br. Pascal had any experience with manual labor. That recognition earning him the honor of being handcuffed to and from the work sites.

At a hearing, they received important news.

“We cannot do anything,” explained one of two equally corpulent Austrian officials. “You are prisoners of the Soviets. For our part, you could go free; but it is not our decision.

“That is up to the Soviet city leader. He will ask the Hungarians. It is they who will decide your destiny.

“We should mention to you that the Soviets are aware that your 13 comrades have left the Soviet zone.”

That news gave the eight a little lift, and a sense of foreboding.

Everyone understood the Hungarian secret police, also known as the AVO (derived from the Hungarian, Állam Védelmi Osztag, or “State Defense Section”) would hold the eight accountable for the good fortunes of the 13.

The eight began to discuss what they would say to the AVO when eventually interrogated — what to confess and what to deny.

Fr. Ányos continued to say mass almost daily, taught Italian, and talked on a wide variety of subjects to lift the spirits of the others. He even told how the Cistercians in Rome were forced to wear robes over their habits, even during the heat of the Italian summer, perhaps stretching the truth to reduce its allure.

“So Rome is not heaven,” Fr. Elizeus reflected.

“No place on earth is heaven.”

THE LUCKY 13 HURRIED to board the early train for Innsbruck, having spent only about six hours total in Graz, nearly all of them sleeping at the Dominican house.

“Why Innsbruck?” several of the brothers asked their superior after they settled in for the all-day ride.

“We’re going to Stams,” said Fr. Benedict, looking out the window.

The brothers knew of this Cistercian abbey, but wondered why not travel to other Cistercian monasteries that weren’t located in far western Austria.

“I want to go as far away as we can from the Soviet-occupied zone,” he explained.

“Lilienfeld is in the Soviet zone,” he noted, “Schlierbach and Wilhering are not far from the Enns River, which is the demarcation line between the Soviet and US-occupied sectors.

“That’s just too close for comfort.”

The ride was a long one, making a number of stops, as it wound westward through the Alps.

Arriving in Innsbruck near midnight, the 13 had to wait another hour for the train to Stams.

It was after 2 am when they walked up to ring the bell at the



“This one,” said an officer,
kicking Br. Pascal hard in
the ankle, “he’s the stinking
monk they want. Watch him.
He’s dangerous.”



barbed wire

abbey's massive, but worn complex.

After a few minutes a middle-aged monk in a long gown greeted the group.

"I am Fr. Paulus," he said, appearing only mildly surprised that such a large group would come calling at this time of night. "Come in."

"His hollow cheeks and sunken eyes," recalled Daniel Csányi, "suggested he was a monk who fasted three days a week. Yet his smile was friendly and his voice warm."

"You have come to the right place," explained Fr. Paulus after learning of their travels and travails. "Our community is largely made up of refugees like you, monks driven out of their own homeland, Slovenia. (Years under Nazi influence had gutted the monastery of most of its Austrian monks; only two remained.)

"I am one of the refugees myself."

"I grew accustomed to the stench of the bucket," Fr. Elizeus recalled of the month the eight spent in the Eisenstadt jail. "I had always wanted to go to a strict monastery, and I think I could have lived in that jail forever, made a profession of the place."

Especially if it meant not having to return to Hungary in the company of the AVO.

"I propose we escape," Br. Pascal whispered, yet again, early one morning. In light of the growing pessimism regarding their fate, he had a willing audience for once. He explained that one of the bars on the window could be dislodged, making it possible to fit through.

"We'll jump down into the courtyard," he added, "and split into four or five directions. They won't be able to catch all of us."

Some were afraid that Tarján's weight would prevent him from squeezing through the bars; and the matter of landing safely from the second story concerned others.

Fr. Ányos suggested that the decision be put to a secret vote.

"We agreed it would be all or none; we wouldn't leave anyone alone," Fr. Elizeus recalled. "We prayed, and voted. The cowards won."

In the second week of October, cold winds were blowing as the eight were brought to a hearing before a Soviet official. At his side, a Hungarian stood.

The official spoke in friendly tones, but the Hungarian remained silent and very serious.

After the hearing, the eight sat for hours in a large room where soldiers and civilians hurried back and forth.

"Perhaps we will be freed!" a few thought out loud.

Not long after dark, they were ordered on to a covered truck. Two Soviet soldiers accompanied them, one armed with a machine gun, the other with a hand gun.

Within an hour, they arrived in Sopron, Hungary.

"That," recalled Fr. Pascal years later, "was when the real trouble started."

On the morning of Saturday, September 9, the 13 slept in until 8 am at the Abbey of Stams. The previous day's train ride through the Alps had been gray and rainy. But for the time being, the sun shone brightly, and the views from their windows took their breath away.

"Sparkling white snow," remembered Daniel Csányi, "covered the jagged crests of peaks etched against the deep blue sky. Dark evergreen forests rose up the mountainsides and large individual trees at the upper edge appeared to be the bravest soldiers of an army storming."

A knock on the door interrupted their sight-seeing.

Br. Josef Köll entered carrying a bundle of clothes gathered from the monks of the abbey: gifts from one set of refugees to another.

"We paraded around in our new garb," said Csányi, "some of us



Thirteen safe in Stams

The morning after arriving at Stams, Fr. Stefan Köll (center, with coat draped over his arm) posed with the lucky 13: Fr. Benedict Monostori (next to Fr. Stefan in a Cistercian habit) and (left to right) Brothers Daniel Csányi, Berthold Szirotny [partially hidden], Polykarp Zakar, Alypius Tölggyessy, Norbert Bárd, Melchior Chladek, Aloysius Kimecz, Moses Nagy, Arcadius Maróti, Stephen Harding Geröly, David Balás and Philip Szeitz.

The 21 escapees from Zirc

(in order of seniority in the order)

FR. BENEDICT MONOSTORI: Died in 2014 at 95 after long career teaching physics at UD.

FR. ÁNYOS LÉKAI: 7 years in prison; freed in '56. Left priesthood in Dallas, married twice, died in England.

FR. PASCAL KIS-HORVÁTH: 4 years in prison. Came to Dallas in fifties. Procurator and sub prior. Died in 2013.

FR. FARKAS KATONA: 4 years in prison; ordained and served in Győr and western Hungary. Now resides in Zirc.

NORBERT BÁRD: Studied in Rome; ordained; lived in Springbank before leaving the order and marrying.

FR. ALOYSIUS KIMECZ: Came to Dallas in the sixties; taught at prep school, form master '79 and '87; died 2010.

FR. MOSES NAGY: Dallas in the sixties; taught foreign languages at UD; returned to Hungary and died in 2007.

TARJÁN PETKÓ: 4 years in prison; left priesthood; contracted Multiple Sclerosis.

FR. DAVID BALÁS: Came to Dallas in the sixties; taught philosophy at UD for many years; died in 2014.

BERTHOLD SZIROTNY: Came to Springbank in the fifties; left the order; died young of cancer.

ALYPIUS TÖLGYESSY: left the order and came to America.

RICHARD SZEITZ: Came to Springbank and Dallas; left order, married; professor in the arts, lives in Minnesota.

FR. POLYKARP ZAKAR: remained in Rome; abbot general of the order; arch abbot of Zirc; died 2011.

EMMERAM BICZO: 4 years in prison; imprisoned again after '56; left priesthood.

XAVIER HARASZTI: 4 years in prison; left priesthood; practicing Catholic.

ALBIN HEGEDŰS: 4 years in prison; left priesthood; married; died after long illness.

BELA MARÓTI: Came to Springbank; left priesthood, married. Drug/alcohol rehabilitation expert in Wisconsin.

DANIEL CSÁNYI: Taught at prep school and UD. Left priesthood in 1975, married. Lives in South Bend, Indiana.

STEPHEN HARDING GERÖLY: left priesthood; married; psychiatrist in Munich, Germany.

FR. ELIZEUS BÁN: 4 years in prison; ordained secretly in Hungary; novice master at Zirc in '89; now retired at Zirc.

FR. MELCHIOR CHLADEK: Came to Dallas in fifties. Taught at prep school until 1977. Retired.

Arrested in Taden and imprisoned in Budapest.

Note: One of the original 22 fell asleep in Bősárkány and returned to Zirc.

with pants two sizes too large and held up around the waist with a tightly knotted string, others with shirt sleeves barely reaching to their elbow.”

The gifts reminded all of them just how ill-prepared they had been for their sudden journey to freedom; how lucky they were to have made it, and how grateful they were for the hospitality and generosity of the monks of Stams.

After breakfast, as clouds obscured the sun, the Hungarians gathered outside for a photo with their host Prior Fr. Stefan Köll, wonder and amazement pasted across their faces.

Over the next two months — awaiting Italian authorities to issue their visas — the 13 worked along side the other monks in the abbey’s large apple orchard.

They arrived in Rome on November 7.

In a basement in Sopron’s AVO headquarters, the eight found themselves standing facing stone walls starting around 9 pm, legs spread and hands behind their backs.

AVO officers entered the room and walked slowly around the monks, who could only feel their presence.

“This one,” said one as he kicked Br. Pascal hard in the ankles, “he’s the stinking monk they want. Watch him, he’s dangerous.”

At around 1 am, the eight were led up and out of the building into the courtyard where a transport Fr. Pascal called the “fairy tale bus” sat puttering. (Only those who believed in fairy tales could imagine that a ride on this vehicle might end happily.)

They entered in the back and were put in one of the six cells on either side of the center aisle.

They slept little, and spoke even less.

“It was dawn when we arrived in Budapest,” recalled Fr. Elizeus. “The bus went from prison to prison to drop us off. But it was only at the AVO headquarters that we were accepted.”

The Hungarian secret police knew everything. They knew Pascal led the escape. They knew Ernő had shepherded the Cistercians across the border from Bősárkány.

They had captured and killed Ernő as well as the border guard he had bribed to ensure that the guard towers at the specified location would be unoccupied on the morning of September 6. Ernő’s assistants, seminarians themselves, were imprisoned.

The Cistercians’ escape — an egregious breach of Hungary’s extensive border fortifications — had humiliated the Soviets. (According to Abbot General Polykarp Zakar, the escape would eventually serve as a case study for students in the Soviet secret police academy.)

Not surprisingly, the AVO officers in Budapest did not spare Br. Pascal as they “softened him up” for a confession and the eventual show trial against Abbot Wendelin, who would be arrested a few weeks later, on October 29.

The abbot received even more cruel treatment.

“My first torture took place in an elegant room,” Abbot Wendelin recalled in his memoirs of the six years he spent in the custody of the Hungarian secret police.

“They stripped me naked. Then facing a young officer I was forced to begin deep knee bends. Every time I bent down, I was forced to kiss his boots. This went on until, exhausted, I collapsed. Meanwhile I was supposed to answer questions.

“After I had passed out a few times, I was brought to a cell in the basement. I spent two weeks in a little prison cell that looked like a burial cave of 2 by 1.3 meters (7 ft by 5 ft). Above the bunk



(Above) 60 Andrassy Street in Budapest, headquarters of the Hungarian Secret Police, now the House of Terror Museum; (top right) interrogation room at 60 Andrassy Street; (bottom right) Br. Pascal, center, in Rome in 1956.

bed there was a leaking sewage line, constantly dripping on me. I was not allowed to lie down.

“I got no blanket. It was November. I was constantly cold. In these terrible days I was constantly praying to God to make me die so that I would not hurt anyone by what I might say.

“After two sleepless weeks,” the abbot wrote, “they took me into a dirty little room. They called it the ‘writing room.’ Here the prisoners had to write their biographies and confessions, admitting all the charges.

“I was very tired, I just fell on a bed stained by blood and puss. A male nurse entered with a syringe in his hand. He gave me two shots. In ten minutes I began to feel funny. In this altered state of mind, which I cannot describe, I was led to another hearing that lasted for the whole night. These were the most painful hours of my life.”

At the abbot’s show trial on June 28, 1951, Br. Pascal and Abbot Wendelin, now broken shadows of their true selves, met for one last time.

The abbot was sentenced to 14 years.

At a separate trial, Br. Pascal (and the six other seminarians) were sentenced to four years. Fr. Ányos received a sentence of seven years.

Near the start of the Hungarian Revolution in October 1956, Br. Pascal headed once again for the western border of Hungary, crossing into Austria not far from the spot where Ernő had led the 21 six years before.

Along with hundreds of thousands of other Hungarians, he passed through the village of Andau on his way to Italy. The people of this community became well known for welcoming the Hungarian refugees of 1956 at all hours of the night and day before putting them on busses to larger Austrian towns. (Their role was lionized in “The Bridge at Andau” by James Michener.)

Br. Pascal finally landed in Rome in November.

He was joined by a number of other young Cistercian brothers who had been formed underground during the harsh years of

oppression between 1950 and 1956.

Br. Pascal, now 33, undertook the final year of study required for ordination.

One of the lucky 13, Fr. Daniel Csányi, taught him Biblical Studies.

“Rome was pretty tough on him academically,” recalled Csányi, who left the priesthood in 1975. “He wouldn’t have survived the regular course that was taught completely in Latin.”

The former Hungarian farm boy was ordained in 1957, and eventually landed in Dallas. He would be the only one of the eight arrested in Taden on September 6, 1950, to live in Dallas. (Fr. Ányos briefly passed through the abbey in the late sixties just prior to his departure from the priesthood.)

In Texas, Fr. Pascal served as Abbot Anselm Nagy’s right-hand man, first as procurator, and then sub prior from 1976 to 1988.

Always personable, down to earth, and quick with a joke, Fr. Pascal might have taken some silent pride in having shaped the abbey in America.

The escape he master-minded had freed 13, including seven who came to Dallas (at least for a time): Frs. Aloysius, Benedict, Daniel, David, Melchior, Moses, and Philip.

Frs. Melchior, Daniel, and Aloysius played key roles in the founding years of the prep school.

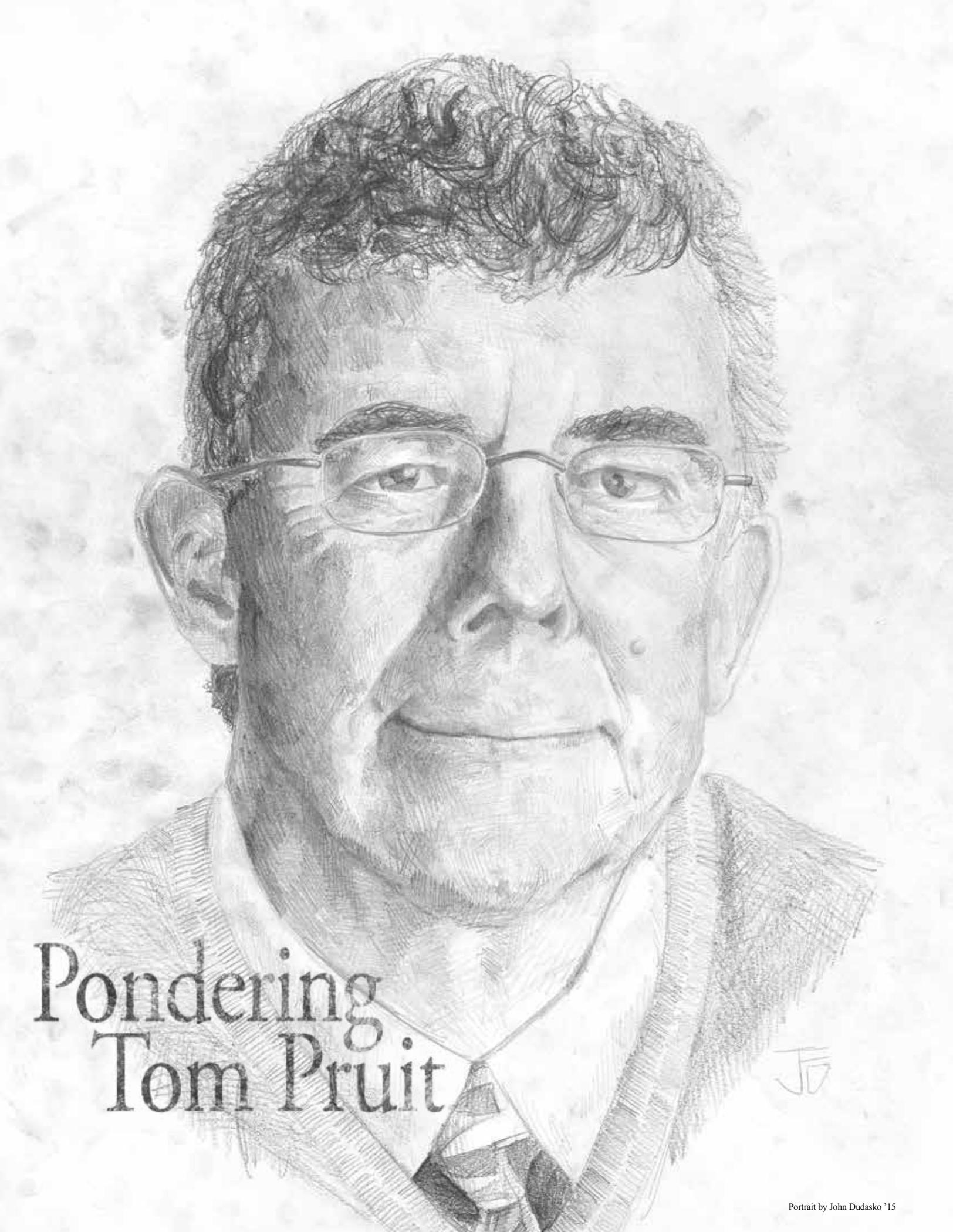
A seventh, Fr. Polykarp, became abbot general of the Cistercian Order, and then served as the abbot of Zirc when it reopened in 1989 after the fall of Soviet Communism.

Fr. Benedict would occasionally wonder what might have been had he led the group to Andau rather than Taden; but, few considered him at fault in any way.

Until his final few years, Br. Pascal rarely spoke of the terrors and trials of his incarceration.

Only when old age weakened his defenses did the horrors of his six years of torture and abuse pour forth, flashing back through his mind often while asleep and awake.

Reminding a new generation of the sacrifices made to preserve the traditions of the Abbey of Zirc.



Pondering
Tom Pruitt

JD

Holiest objects

The call finally came in the spring of 2007. At age 57, after 29 years at Cistercian, four years after his conversion to Catholicism, Tom Pruitt was asked to serve as the form master of the Class of 2015. “We were out of monks,” explained Pruitt matter-of-factly, “so I knew I had to be someone they were considering.”

With the full support of wife Joan, Pruitt was saying yes halfway through the request.

“It is such a unique position,” he added. “It is a real honor to be able to have a position like this, where you can get this involved with the boys, and between them and the parents.”

Very quickly, Pruitt decided to take an unprecedented step. He planned to visit each boy and his family in their home before the start of school.

With the help of his form moms, Michelle Collins and Linda Leach, he scheduled meetings in the midst of his standard summer workload that included running Cistercian’s summer school plus a set of classes he was attending.

“I wanted to learn about each boy,” said Pruitt, “to meet his parents, see his home, see where he would study. Did he have a TV in his room? A computer?”

“I wanted to hear about the objects in his room, trophies, pictures, the things that described him.”

His very first “house call” to the residence of Drew Pluemer ’15 was arranged as a friendly test for this experiment.

“I visited Drew’s room,” Pruitt explained. “We discussed his impressive mural, books, and Taekwondo medals everywhere — all the right stuff.”

But downstairs in the living room for the family interview section of the visit, Pruitt had the chance to see another side of the boy.

“With mom and dad on the couch flanking him,” Pruitt laughed, “Drew spent almost the entire time with his head buried in the cushions, his butt sticking straight up in the air.”

The adults largely ignored the elephant in the room, Hilary Pluemer smiling all the while, as details about school life and the form master system were discussed.

“It was a great sign,” commented Pluemer. “Dr. Pruitt had immediately made all of us feel so comfortable. Drew wasn’t hiding or being rude, he was just fidgety like he always is. It proved to us that Dr. Pruitt had already connected with Drew.”

The boy (and his butt) made an indelible impression on the form master.

So had Peter Leach, who performed a stand-up comedy routine as if he were the form master and Pruitt his class. (Leach departed Cistercian after Form IV.)

And Joshua Maymir ’15 who, after listening to an explanation of the form master system, began peppering the visitor with questions about the student handbook, school traditions, and other details that might trip him up.

Pruitt’s warmth, interest, and humor seemed to suit every situation. He was bringing to the Class of 2015 his absorbing brand of human interaction, one that students and faculty at Cistercian had come to appreciate since his arrival in November 1978.

“Tom has an inimitable ability to listen,” insisted Jackie Greenfield, a longtime colleague in Cistercian’s English department. “When he turns his attention to you, he turns off everything else.”

“C.S. Lewis put it this way,” Pruitt said. “Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.”

Serving the boys and families of the Class of 2015 would be far more than just a job for Tom Pruitt.

“Cradled en masse at Christmas time within the uneasy assurance of jagged stone,” Pruitt wrote in “Stone by Stone,” a poem describing an encounter with Steve Wilder ’95 his junior year in the newly constructed abbey church.

The teacher had seen the student’s program fall into the aisle, and so “gently kneaded a shoulder into recognition” (a Pruitt trademark). That’s when he saw the “ashen stubble above the shoulder,”

The sage, seer, and poet brings a passion for formation to the members of the Class of ’15. A passion he’s had for over 37 years.

By David Exall Stewart

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed every really done
For Heaven and the future’s sakes.

— Robert Frost
“Two Tramps in Mud-Time”

“Atticus was right.
One time he said
you never really know a man
until you stand in his shoes
and walk around in them.”

— Scout on the Radley porch
To Kill a Mockingbird

PRUIT THROUGH THE YEARS



1979



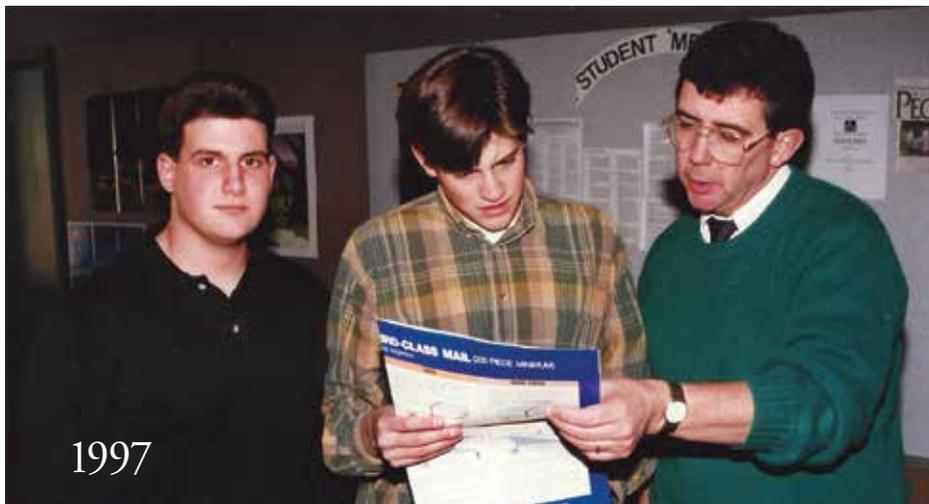
1990



1988



2003



1997

*Painfully caught in a pale effusive grin,
too delirious to be real.
The struggle with book and boy
and endless task exacts its terrifying price.
Above the shoulder looms the jagged stone,
doomed by its massive weight
To crush whatever falls within its path.*

“The look in his face was one of misery and fatigue (i.e., the ‘look’ of finals),” recalled Pruit, who was teaching Wilder and the juniors that year. “It struck me that all around him and me and all of us were these giant stones.”

The subtleties of the abbey church — celebrating only its second Christmas since opening in May 1992 — were still working their magic on the community.

“The poem came from that — the grinding down, yet, and here is always the dangerous part, the building back up into something more ‘human,’ more genuine, and honest and virtuous than before—ready to become the flour that becomes bread for the world. “A perilous adventure which doesn’t always ‘work.’”

*O awesome cradled Glory for whom a stone
Was rolled away, help us never to forget the burden
We impose, making this rock-ribbed sanctuary a place
Of danger — powerful to change grist to living bread or, left
Waterless, to be scattered as useless powder
by prevailing winds.*

“This poem and others,” he explained, “written long before I was even a remote possibility to serve as a form master — speak to some of my concerns, of a sense of the power, and the danger, of ‘formation.’”

In “Love and Regret,” Pruit mourned the departure of Jeff Gruber (’97, brother of Br. Francis Gruber ’00), who left Cistercian

after his junior year.

Pruit had come to appreciate his “ever-bouyant, lively face, the eyes and voice that dance with irrepressible, rippling wit ... But too restless for the metronome’s regulated beat.”

“He brought,” Pruit recalled, “something really valuable to class and school. The academic part wasn’t working. He didn’t spend a lot of time on it. He had so many things going on. You can’t blame the school.

“Still, it was hard for me. He rode my bus. How do you avoid that? What could we have done differently? How do you make that work?”

“The hoped-for adjustment in the spontaneous step,” Pruit concluded in “Love and Regret,” “the energy channeled into measured form, never reached sufficient mastery.”

“The process of formation” Pruit emphasized, “its perils and joys — is what we do here. What does it mean?”

“The big thing is to understand its importance. It is interesting to consider that over at the abbey, young men are formed into priests in seven years.

“Forming boys into men has to be more than a platitude. It’s what drew me, the reason I’m here.”

Dark and deep



flaming paper airplane gliding across the junior classroom caught Tom Pruit’s attention as he turned from the blackboard back toward the Class of 1980.

It was only one of many indignities hurled in the vicinity of the 27-year-old teacher in his first weeks at Cistercian in November 1978.

The incendiary projectile might have ignited a string of questions. Why was the Ph.D. candidate teaching this rowdy group of

high school students? Would these guys ever grow up? How did that paper airplane remain on fire as it flew? (Answer: glue.)

Pruit began teaching English at Cistercian on November 1, after the sudden exit just weeks before of Stephen Housewright, a legendary Cistercian teacher who, from his very first class in 1969, had calmly lifted the school's struggling English department and instilled a love of literature in nearly all of his students.

Housewright's quick, don't-look-back departure — he refused even to return for his books and papers — must have raised additional questions for Pruit.

Would his stint at Cistercian end as quickly as the flight of that piece of smoldering notebook paper?

Events had sped up for Pruit in the fall of 1978. In addition to accepting the job at Cistercian in October, he and wife Joan had welcomed into the world their first child, Carolina, and moved into a house in Grapevine.

"Our life in academia," said Joan Pruit, who met her future husband while studying for her doctorate in politics from UD, "came to a screeching halt (although her husband continued to write his dissertation on a selection of William Faulkner's novels).

"We had been in a bubble in graduate school" she added, "exchanging ideas and studying. With our first child on the way, our perspective completely changed.

"We were very focused on what Tom would do to support the family and allow me to stay home with the children."

Meanwhile, indignities had also been reigning down on the students and families who hoped to remain members of the Class of '80.

An ill-conceived growth plan had added a second section to the class in Form V, swelling its ranks to 35 students.

Social dissonance and academic misery ensued. Many of the new boys were unprepared for Cistercian's rigorous academics and unforgiving standards. And behavior issues — not uncommon in those days — grew to levels unsurpassed, according to most accounts, by those of any other Cistercian class.

Only 22 survived and received diplomas.

Even a strict disciplinarian like then-headmaster Fr. Denis Farkasfalvy sensed a mentality he compared to the Roman senate.

"As individuals they were nice," he said, "but as a group they behaved like a pack of dogs."

"We had a kind of an 'us vs. them' mentality," admitted Steve Rasch '80.

When headmaster Fr. Denis invited Pruit to return for a second year in the spring of 1979, the young English teacher hesitated.

"I thought about all the difficulty I had with that junior class," he remembered.

He also considered the tension under which the entire faculty appeared to be operating. The school had proven it could produce highly competent students; but pressure was mounting to do so in a profitable manner.

The growth plan that had soured on the Class of 1980 had also made working conditions unpleasant for teachers, inside and out of the classroom. But something made him stay.

"I decided," he said, "I wasn't going to let the Class of 1980 run me off."

"Tom, we've got to talk," confided Tom Hillary
in June of 1998, his 6'6" frame imposing gently over the 6' Pruit.

"When I decide to retire and leave Cistercian," explained the

coach, who had grown into a legend since being named head football coach and athletic director in the spring of 1984, "I know you're going to have to write one of your poems about me."

Hillary was referring to a tradition, begun by Pruit in the eighties, of paying tribute to departing faculty members with lines of poetry at the customary end-of-the-year faculty party.

It was Pruit's way of elevating the occasion and adding an element of fun (Abbot Peter Verhalen '73 calls him the *magister ludi*, master of play).

Pruit and Hillary had become fast friends through their love of sports and formation, each possessing a knack for seeing more in boys than simply academic or athletic potential.

A baseball and football player in his youth, Pruit had experienced the power of coaching, especially when playing for a former Chicago Cubs catcher in summer league baseball in Roswell, New Mexico.

He went on to play football, basketball, and baseball throughout high school at Collegiate Prep in Wichita, Kansas (where his parents moved, attracted by the school's libertarian philosophy). And in college at Sewanee, he played one year of baseball.

"I love watching coaches handle players, getting into their psyche," Pruit acknowledged.

"Sports is a microcosm of the game of life," he added. "Victory and defeat, the ups and downs, the teammates, it all can teach you so much about growing up and living. Sports have always been a big part of my life."

When Pruit decided in 1980 to stay at Cistercian, he did so to do more than just teach English. Sports, arts, and extra-curricular activities helped him dig deeper into the lives of students, to see beyond GPAs and SATs, and to find the good in each.

"It struck me as I walked across the Form IV/A threshold (now II/A)," remembered Pruit of a day early in the fall of his third year at Cistercian.

"Suddenly, I knew this is what I'm going to do. I had done some college teaching at Northlake, Mountain View, and SMU. There I felt more removed from the character of the students.

"But at the secondary level, character is formed. This is what I needed to do."

In Hillary, he had found a soulmate who — after years of searching — had arrived at the same conclusion. Time and again, the coach had proven adept at marrying the offensive system best suited to the talents of each year's roster.

But helping players grow as people gave him the greatest fulfillment. Many alumni recall a few words or even a nod from Hillary as turning points.

"Hillary was never a form master," Pruit reflected, "but a sort of super form master for many boys. He had a huge influence on the guys." And even for a teacher or two.

In 1999, Hillary had the chance to witness the impact of BraveArt (the three-day predecessor to today's coffeehouse and arts workshops) on the guys for several years.

"Leaning against the brick wall in the lunch room during lunch at BraveArt in 1999," Pruit recalled, "Hillary shook his head and told me, 'Pruit, you've done a good thing.'"

"Just a few words from him could make all the difference. It still makes me feel good."

It was true, of course, that Pruit would write a poem about the coach, should he retire.

Pruit enjoys exulting in the work of the faculty. During the year, he makes coffee and fetches ice for teachers. At Christmas and

year-end parties, he honors them with words that remind them of the importance of their work.

A poem about Hillary, well, it would have to be a masterpiece.

So when the coach introduced the subject of a poem in 1998, the English teacher listened carefully.

"I have a favor to ask about that poem you'll write about me," Hillary said. "You can't read it in front of the faculty.

"Instead, let's get in my pickup and drive out to Grapevine Lake. Just you and me. And there, overlooking the lake, you can read your poem."

Further up, further in

For over 20 years, Tom Pruitt's friendly gaze and hardy wave from the driver's seat of a Cistercian bus warmed the hearts of parents, students, and future students (including some in diapers).

Driving the bus served as one of the ways Pruitt helped to make ends meet for his family. It was one of a number of second jobs he took, which included teaching at UD and teaching prisoners in Seagoville.

But the bus, for which he left home at 6:30 am and from which he returned at 6 pm, served Pruitt much as the sleigh in Robert Frost's in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

While he had miles to go, Pruitt opened up to each student's home, where niceties were exchanged, details revealed, stories told.

Trevor Turner '02 delivered a gourmet cup of coffee to his bus driver each morning, compliments of his mother; Tracy Wood sent out his son Nelson Wood '98 with hot, freshly grilled venison sausage biscuits.

"I remember," said Pruitt, "Brian Madole '01, last on the bus his freshman year falling into a complete panic when he realized that he had to be with his date both Friday and Saturday nights.

"But what," he asked Pruitt, "will we possibly have to talk about on Saturday?"

And at least one tragedy played out.

"Katherine Sorenson (mother of Stephen Simpson) was dying of cancer. She'd open the door for her son and watch as he walked all the way to the bus.

"I saw her grow weaker by the day."

"Dr. Pruitt is the human face of the Cistercian curriculum," suggested Fr. Stephen Gregg '01 (a.k.a., Andrew Gregg). "I inherited my adoration for him from my brother, Jeremy."

Jeremy Gregg '97 developed a love for Pruitt through his English classes, and in his junior year, Pruitt's invention called BraveArt.

The football player, class cut-up, and poet served as the master of ceremonies for the event's first two years.

"I knew I was supposed to like this teacher when I arrived in First Form," said Fr. Stephen. "And I did."

"He was the teacher our class always wanted," he added. "I don't know why. Just an appealing man of character, humor, and patience.

"I blame him for a lot in my life. Sewanee, writing, teaching at Cistercian, studying literature at UD."

But as a Third Former, that influence had yet to play a major role in the life of the future priest.



A Tom Pruitt circa 1961 **B** circa 1967
C wedding Joan in '77 **D** with Anna
E John '04, David '06, and Daniel '11
in 1998 **F** Pruitt clan at John's Cistercian
graduation **G** Anna, DSG royalty, with
Fr. Paul **H** Class '15 outing in Form I
I Class '15 Form IV farewell ceremony.



"What are you going to do next year?" Pruitt asked 13-year-old Andrew Gregg at a varsity football game.

"Play football," answered Gregg, who clearly hoped to follow in his brother's large football cleats.

"Well, you know," Pruitt suggested off-handedly (perhaps eyeing more of a water-boy than a linebacker), "you don't have to do just what Jeremy does."

"It haunted me: so what should I do? Something of my own; I would have to think."

The advice hit home. The younger of the brothers Gregg set off on his own course, carving out his own sufficiently large swath through Cistercian, to college, and back again.

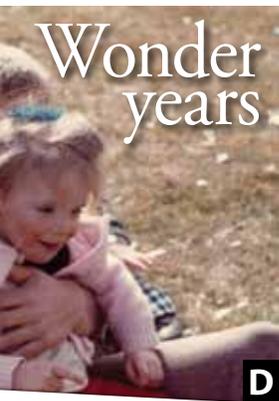
The stained glass of the All Saints Chapel in Sewanee turned sunlight into blue and red hues as Tom Pruitt sang Renaissance polyphonies as a member of the college choir between 1968 and 1972. The magic of many singing parts harmonizing into one beckoned the English major, who was raised a Deist. The Gothic elegance of the church and the cadence of the rites and liturgies of the Book of Common Prayer added to the allure.

God was calling.

"Sewanee was a good place for him," Joan Pruitt explained. "The traditions, manners, ceremony, the choir, the mountains high up and far above, the solemnity.

"Tom's not a mountain-top contemplative," she added, "but he likes time to think."

Wonder years



God’s curve balls,” said Joan Pruitt.

“We were in uncharted waters and didn’t know what we were doing. We just opened ourselves up to whatever God put in front of us.”

Not only has Anna helped grow the unconditional love within the Pruitt family, she also has managed to expand the hearts (and calendars) of Cistercian, Hockaday, and Ursuline students through the Down Syndrome Guild Dance.

Her dad started the event in 1997 to give Anna and other DFW-area individuals with Down syndrome a chance to experience the fun of a high school dance. Its popularity encouraged organizers to add a spring dance to its original date in the fall.

“Tom never brings this stuff to the fore,” marveled Peter Saliga, who served as Daniel Pruitt’s form master. “Nobody knows what he and his family suffers. He does not want to be a burden. He is heroic, extraordinary.”

“He looks for the good side of things,” explained John Pruitt, a Naval doctor in San Diego. “Down in the depths of Tom Pruitt, there’s a person who respects the good in every other person.

“He loves to serve, to walk in Christ’s shoes. That’s his big driver. He’d give you the shirt off his back if you needed it. He does that in so many ways. It’s crazy to think that one person can do all that. He’s the most selfless person I know.”

He was baptized an Anglican among the intricate stonework of Sewanee’s chapel in July, 1970.

Not long after marrying Joan Burch in Texas in 1977, the couple joined St. Francis of Assisi Episcopal Church in Dallas, where they would raise their seven children. Pruitt frequently served at the altar for Fr. Homer Rogers, who became an important influence on their lives.

Their faith would help anchor them as wave after wave of health issues struck their children.

“Let’s see,” said John Pruitt ’04, the elder son of the clan, “Mary, David [Pruitt ’06], and Daniel [Pruitt ’11] have cystic fibrosis. Anna has Down syndrome.

“And Carolina, Barbara, and I,” he smiled, “we have attitude problems.”

Cystic fibrosis (CF) is a genetic condition primarily affecting the lungs and breathing, but it also can harm the pancreas, liver, kidneys, and intestine. The severity of symptoms can vary from one person to the next. While several promising drug therapies are emerging for this chronic disease, there is as yet no cure.

Mary and David Pruitt’s symptoms have remained fairly manageable. David Pruitt, in fact, competed in cross country at an elite level for Cistercian (ranking just behind record-holders Robert Patrizi ’00 and David Newcomb ’10).

Younger brother Daniel Pruitt has suffered more severe symptoms that have landed him in the hospital on a number of occasions, always keeping everyone in the family on alert.

Anna, born in 1983 with Down syndrome, “was another of

Prism

Rain was falling as members of the Class of 2015 completed the last of their final exams in May 2011. The weather cancelled plans for the traditional year-end pool party. Instead, the Fourth Formers trudged into the Cistercian theater.

This would be the final class event for six members of the class; they were heading elsewhere for high school. In most Cistercian forms, such news rarely merits even a mention.

But Pruitt sympathized.

Having left his school in Roswell, New Mexico, after ninth grade to attend Collegiate Prep in Wichita, Kansas, he knew the feeling.

He’d also been a parent of three Cistercian students.

“I was surprised,” recalled Pruitt of a vivid experience at the 1996 commencement, just a few months before his oldest son, John, entered Cistercian, “to feel not only excitement but a kind of fear, almost dread, that what lay ahead for my happy, carefree young son was an experience both intense and difficult, which would change him, which would transform him in a way which lay out of my control.

“I have never regretted it,” he added, “but I have tried to recognize that ‘fear and trembling’ on the part of parents and students alike as a real force, as a genuine concern.”

“When we would meet with Dr. Pruitt about our son,” said Alicia McGlinchey, mother of Aidan ’15, “Kevin and I felt like he had spent as much time thinking about him as we had.

“Dr. Pruitt,” said Basma Wainerdi, mother of Christopher Wainerdi ’15, “has a way of knowing, feeling, and identifying with you. “He is united with you.”

Uniting, it seems, came to Pruitt’s mind during a meeting with Wainerdi in the fall of Form IV.

Class of 2015
The form
with the
master

Homecoming
2014



“I was complaining a little,” recalled Basma Wainerdi, mother of Chris Wainerdi ’15, “that, with all the work moms do at Cistercian, they have no occasions planned together with their sons until the baccalaureate lunch senior year.”

Her words resonated, especially with the inevitable departures looming at the end of the year.

Ideas for two events began to incubate, and were born the following semester: a dinner for the moms and boys near Valentine’s Day at the beginning of Lent, and a service project for the dads and boys in the spring after Easter.

At the first moms’ event hosted by the Merricks in Form IV, “each boy cooked the meals (at the homes of several families), served the moms, and gave us a rose and a card,” said McGlinchey.

A number of the boys performed pieces to honor their moms on piano, cello, and guitar. Others recited poems.

“You don’t see that side of the boys except in this kind of context,” said Wainerdi.

For the dads, Pruit worked with Charlie Dorsey, an experienced Boy Scout leader and father of Mark Dorsey ’15.

“Someone had cut a trail,” recalled Dorsey. “There were a couple of small stations of the cross laid out years before. Most couldn’t be found.”

“Dr. Pruit believed that making this a real Stations of the Cross trail would be a great way to complete a service project after the boys’ confirmation, and to leave a legacy to the community.”

The two occasions, which became annual events, helped the boys reinforce their relationships with their parents.

The year-end event in the theater, however, was between just the boys and their form master. And it was one of a kind.

“One by one,” remembered Phong Nguyen ’15, “the six guys leaving went on stage accompanied by a couple of their closest friends. Each guy said goodbye and told the class how much we changed him and how Dr. Pruit helped him become who he was.

“Then his closest friends recalled their favorite memories with him. Many tears were shed.”

“When Dr. Pruit started talking about me,” recalled Peter Collins, who was departing to attend Highland Park High School, “it hit me. He was, and still is, one of the most influential people in my life.

“He lets you know that you matter,” he added. “Dr. Pruit sees people differently. I wasn’t just the kid who pulled pranks. When he read his poem (which Collins has framed in his room), I was flat out crying.”

“If I hadn’t met Dr. Pruit, I would be a completely different person,” Collins insisted.

“I would not see and understand people the way I do now, how to care for people when they are going through troubled times, how to see the inner human being.”

“Marty got sick toward the end of 8th grade,” said Maria Grisham, mother of David Grisham ’15, of her husband’s pancreatic cancer.

“Really from that point to when he passed away [in October 2012],” she said, “Dr. Pruit was a tremendous support. He’d call, email, tell me how he saw David. Keep me informed on that end. It was a relief to know that that part of David’s life was being taken care of, that he had someone he could talk to, someone who could provide guidance.”

After the funeral, Pruit shared his feelings with all the form’s parents through an email.

“What a privilege,” he wrote, “to witness that lifting up of this inexplicable tragedy into the only place where it can make sense—the life-giving love, the sacrificial suffering of God the Father.

“Your sons made me, made us all, proud—from their dignified demeanor ... to their strong embrace of David both collectively in the church and individually at the graveside service.

“Some were moved to tears, others to a reflective silence; all left changed at least in some small way by the experience.

“And, to a man,” he emphasized, “I think all came away know-

ing how important it will be during the next days, weeks, months to support David.”

“To me,” said Maria Grisham, “it was significant that David wanted to go back to school very quickly after the funeral. He wanted to go back to his support system.

“When we were going through all this,” she added, “I was concerned that David would question his faith and God’s plan.”

“I expressed those concerns to Dr. Pruitt.”

“A number of guys had been asking questions about suffering, and questioning their faith,” Pruitt remembered. He decided it was time to share his thoughts and feelings on the subject, thoughts and feelings the form master had kept under wraps.

“Suffering,” he began, wasting no time in getting to the point, “doesn’t make any sense.”

“When I got married and we started having kids, I had never heard of cystic fibrosis or Down syndrome.

“I didn’t sign up for this,” I remember thinking,” he admitted. “But they are the cards we were dealt.”

“For my son, Daniel, to see what he has to go through,” he choked up. “What gets you through is your faith that God is good, and what, eventually, Daniel has awaiting him in heaven.

“The kid has incredible courage,” he said, “and in the end, it is his perspective and attitude, those gifts — hard gifts — that put him in a different class.

“In some sense Daniel has a great advantage over most of us because he faces every day the reality that death comes for us all.”

The form master’s words silenced the normally chatty class; they were seeing a side, inside, a man they thought they knew.

“Suffering,” Pruitt concluded, “is waiting out there for all of you. What are you going to do with it?”

“Dr. Pruitt,” said Maria Grisham, “showed the boys that in all of your earthly concerns there is a spiritual component. They can have a spiritual purpose, and even be an enriching experience.

“He helped David, and many of the boys, see suffering through the prism of spirituality.”

Passage

On Monday, April 10, 2000, the first day back from spring break, Coach Tom Hillary passed away from adult acute myeloid leukemia. His sudden death (he had appeared healthy to everyone as school broke for spring break just 10 days earlier), rocked everyone — students, parents, alumni, alumni parents, faculty, and former faculty.

At a student assembly called to help counsel the grieving, Pruitt read a poem he’d written about the coach called “Pillar.”

Cistercian needed to remember and celebrate what Tom Hillary had meant, why he had been so important.

Pruitt hoped his friend would forgive him for reading the poem in front of everyone. In the final lines, Pruitt wrote:

*By voice, eye, and touch he opens their hearts to goodness,
Helping them discover, in mud and sweat, victory and defeat,
That within themselves there is room enough to stretch,
To stand unafraid, and with dignity
to play the only game that counts.*

*The Ancients saw in myth so much we need to see:
The celestial firmament, the panoply of heaven,
Rests on pillars rooted at the edge of the world,
And in them heaven and earth forever join,
Giving us air and light and room to breathe.*

Through his poem, he lifted up one man as an example of commitment to formation, to the work of the school and its faculty.

“Tom marvels at details,” explained Saliga, “the tiny specs of beauty and goodness around him.”

He also invites others to partake — as faculty members depart, as students perform at a coffeehouse, as a couple dances at the Down Syndrome Guild Dance, and as students and sons depart.

It’s not poetry for poetry’s sake.

William Faulkner put it succinctly, according to Pruitt, in his remarks upon accepting the 1950 Nobel Prize for Literature:

It is [the poet’s] privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet’s voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.

At December’s Christmas party, Pruitt once again served as master of ceremonies and coordinated a number of remarks by Andre Bruce, T.J. Alcala ’09, Fr. Bernard [Marton], Fr. Gregory [Schweers], and Fr. Stephen.

“Tom,” said headmaster Fr. Paul McCormick at the end of the evening, “Thanks for being such a good form master to the faculty.”

Daniel Pruitt lay in a hospital bed for nearly a month in the fall of 2014, suffering from life-threatening complications from cystic fibrosis.

“Fr. Paul and I went one afternoon,” recalled Fr. Anthony Bigney, who serves as chaplain for the Class of 2015. “Tom, Joan, and Sally were there. I saw a father who was so worried. Yet he was proud of Daniel and his prognosis.

“He was there almost every day.”

The Cistercian mom’s rosary group was praying for Daniel as were the seniors at Cistercian.

“When Daniel was in the hospital,” said Dare Odeyingbo, “you would never know that Dr. Pruitt had that weighing on his heart.

“Seeing him talking with my classmates,” he said, “he’s always fully engaged, 100 percent interested.

“That’s something we can all learn from — to give the person in front of you your full attention because you never know what others are going through.”

On an early December afternoon, the famous Pruitt energy seemed to ebb slightly.

There was the anxiety over his son’s condition, plus the stress of the seniors’ final exams and deadlines for their college applications, then there were papers to grade, and speeches to plan for the upcoming faculty Christmas party.

Asked about the Class of 2015, he sighed.

“Sometimes I wonder about these guys,” he admitted.

“They whine constantly. They’re constantly talking to one another. Their clothes are sloppy and their classrooms are a mess.”

Then he thought for a moment.

“You know,” he beamed and laughed, “they’re a lot like me.”



The 200 free relay team of (l-r) Davis Benn '15, Daniel Hu '17, Galen Hu '16, and Will Odom '16 won silver, as did the 100 free and 200 medley relay teams.

SWIMMING

AquaHawks place second again at SPC, Jiang sets 2 more conference records

The AquaHawks made another big splash at SPC, where they have become a fixture in second place behind St. Mark's in the conference's swimming hierarchy.

With new coach Jeff Veazey now at the helm, Cistercian outdistanced Greenhill and St. John's, who tied for third place.

The Hawks' national-caliber swimmer **Alvin Jiang '17** set two new SPC records.

He swam the 100 butterfly in 49.46 seconds (which is likely to earn him All-American honors), breaking the old SPC record held by **Matt Roney '10** by two seconds.

He also finished the 200 individual medley with a time of 1:54.97.

He now holds SPC records in three of the eight individual event (last year he set the SPC record of 51.23 in the 100 backstroke).

Jiang also played a key role — along with teammates **Davis Benn '15**, **Galen Hu '16**, brother **Daniel Hu '17**, **Will Odom '16**, and **Nate Young '16** — in the second place finish of the relay team: the 200 yd. medley plus the 200 and 400 yd. freestyle relays.

Each participant earned All-SPC honors. **Timmy Skaras '15** earned silver and All-SPC honors in diving.

Virtually every member of the team swam at least one Personal Best at the meet.

SOCCER

Hawks end season on a high note with 2 SPC victories

Things looked bleak for the Hawks soccer team at the beginning of the season.

With only three returning starters, and so many new players, the team lost its first two scrimmages without scoring a single goal. Time and experience were what the team needed.

Freshman **Xavi Anderhub '18** was learning his role, and Junior **Peter Dorn '16** was making the transition from midfield to defense.

By the time the SPC counter matches started in January, the team had made great improvement.

After big wins over Trinity Valley, Oakridge, and Country Day, the Hawks were looking to guarantee themselves a playoff spot with a win over St. Mark's.

With an injury to starting forward



Connor Ryan '16 steering the ball upfield against Holland Hall in February.

Christopher Adesanya '16, Coach J.P. Walsh adjusted the line-up by moving midfielder **Tommy Nealon '17** up as a withdrawn forward.

The move required team captain and All-Conference midfielder **Kyle Rutledge '15** to play a more defensive role with **Max Talkington '16**.

The strategy worked, as Nealon scored both goals in the 2-1 victory over St. Mark's, earning Cistercian the fourth seed.

At SPC, the Hawks largely dominated the

BASKETBALL

Tough schedule helped toughen Hawks for SPC run

Playing the most difficult season in school history — including 8 public school teams — can be discouraging at times.

Single-digit losses to JP II, N. Garland, and Dunne hurt. Double-digit losses to Plano, Houston Christian, and Carrollton Ranchview sting.

"Those games," said coach Craig Sklar, "prepared us for the competition in the North Zone and at SPC." And for an ESD team Cistercian had not defeated since 2005.

Heading into the ESD game at ESD in January, the Hawks boasted a 4-1 SPC record, having defeated all four Tarrant County schools.

In a see-saw battle against the Eagles, Cistercian pulled out a gutsy 51-49 victory in which four players scored 9 or more points, led by **Landry Lilly '15** and **Thomas Williamson '16** with 11, **Cole Gimenez '17**

with 10, and **Connor Kulhanek '16** with 9.

"That win propelled us into the SPC tournament with the fourth seed," said Sklar. (New SPC rules allows only six teams from each division; no more D-2).

At SPC, Cistercian drew Kincaid at Kincaid.

Despite the home court advantage, the Hawks kept it close until late in the game, when the ball refused to fall, especially on free throws (shooting 5-17 as a team from the line for the game).

In the second round, ESD had their revenge, defeating your heroes, 48-39.

Overall, the Hawks clawed their way to a 16-15 season record against a very talented group of opponents.

Dare Odeyinbo '15 earned All-SPC honors (team-leading 6.3 rebounds/game).

Christopher Wainerdi '15, who led the team in scoring (11.5/game), Lilly (4.8

3 The number of SPC swimming records now held by Alvin Jiang '17: 100 yd. backstroke, 100 butterfly, and the 200 individual medley.

18 Number of SPC tournament wins during the 8-year tenure of Coach J.P. Walsh. During that stretch, the team has lost just six SPC tournament games.

first round game against John Cooper, but lost on a late free kick.

In the second round, forward **Mark Dorsey '15** found the net twice against Country Day for the 2-1 victory.

And in the third and final match the Hawks found themselves in a battle with St. Andrew's School from Austin.

The Hawks struck first as **Jordan Pemberton '17** crossed the ball to an open Dorsey who put away his third goal of the tournament.

St. Andrews tied it up with 5 minutes remaining, and the game seemed headed to overtime, until the Hawks earned a late free kick.

Pemberton struck the ball over a sea of defenders to Nealon, who calmly headed the ball past the goalkeeper for the game winner.

"It was an exciting finish to the season," said Walsh. "The boys gave me everything they had." The Hawks soccer team finished the season 11-5-2 with a +23 goal differential.



Thomas Williamson '16 in action against North Garland at the Plano Wildcat Classic tournament.

rebound/game), and Williamson (team leader in steals and assists) earned All Zone honors.

"Williamson took the reins as our point guard," Sklar said. "And **Cole Gimenez '17** grew into his role at the end of the season."

Many more battle-hardened veterans will return for the 2015-16 campaign.

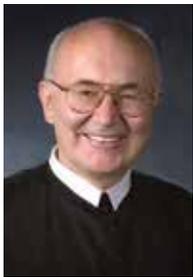
All-SPC football players

Matthew Merrick '15, Dare Odeyingbo '15, and Nick Skalak '15.

When was the last time you asked, What is heaven like?

Everyone at every age asks this question, but children and people nearing the end of their lives are the most insistent inquirers.

Children, because they have not sinned seriously, feel close to heaven and take for granted that God prepares a place for them where they will always be happy.



On Prayer
Fr. Roch Kereszty

Even if they are agnostic, most dying people getting close to the last stage of life would like to know more about the beyond.

Many may have never inquired about it after their childhood and can no longer take seriously their childish conceptions of heaven.

But the closer they are to the end, the more desperately they seek an answer. Take this example. One day an elegant motorcade surrounded the Paris home of the Catholic philosopher Jean Guitton.

Francois Mitterand, the terminally ill agnostic president of France, was paying a surprise visit to this old philosopher in his nineties to discuss what happens after death.

I don't know what Guitton said to Mitterand, but I hope in this column to explore the meaning of heaven as teased out of a few biblical images. 'Heaven' is, perhaps, the oldest symbol for the realm of god(s) in the history of religions. The infinite, all-encompassing, majestic image of the sky beautifully expresses divine transcendence, the lofty, unreachable dimensions of the Divine.

The God of the Bible, however, is a unique kind of heavenly god. Jesus taught us to pray "Our Father who art in heaven" and that tells us that he is infinitely above us but also infinitely close: he is our father. All that the Father does as well as the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit aim at preparing for us a place in heaven and make us, rebellious children as we are, ready to come home to our Father's house (Jn 14:1-3).

In the same Our Father, however, the first three petitions suggest an opposite movement: instead of begging God to take us to heaven, we ask that God's Kingdom, the heavenly Jerusalem resplendent with God's glory, arrive to this earth and transform it.

TOM MARTIN '70, 1951-2015

Thomas Allen Martin III '70 passed away peacefully at home surrounded by family on March 29. He was the older brother of **Joe Pat Martin '73** and **David Martin '74**.

As his class' valedictorian, Martin spoke at the school's first commencement, which was marked by tensions (Fr. Denis Farkasfalvy had been named headmaster only a year before, replacing founding headmaster Fr. Damian Szödéni).

As one of three members of the class who had studied Calculus under Fr. Denis, Martin spoke passionately of the young headmaster's talents. **Monte Atkinson '70**, the salutatorian, saluted the vision of Fr. Damian.

In his 35-year law career, he earned the nick-name, "the math lawyer." Tom sang tenor in the Schola Cantorum at St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church.

He is survived by his wife, Rose Ann, three children, and three grandchildren.

Then God's holiness will illumine all hearts, transfigure the entire material universe and rule every human will. Heaven, the realm of the angels, and the Earth, the habitat of human beings, will become one Kingdom where "God will be all in all."

We may wonder why in this new, spiritualized heaven and earth we have bodies? We don't need to eat and drink or procreate. What is our body good for? The scene of transfiguration and the risen body of Christ suggest an answer.

Jesus anticipates on the Mount of Transfiguration his risen state to which we hope to be conformed at the resurrection of the dead. Christ's risen body has been so transformed by the Holy Spirit that, instead of hiding his divine beauty and glory, his "spiritual body" now fully reveals his divine splendor and majesty. Even now, our earthly body reveals to some extent our soul, but obscurely and ambiguously.

A beautiful young face can easily hide a corrupt soul.

In heaven we hope to have a body perfectly expressive of our soul, a soul transfigured by the Holy Spirit, full of goodness and beauty.

A number of parables describe another, even more unique aspect of the kingdom: it is a wedding banquet and we are the invited guests who have been brought together from the roads and byways. It is the wedding feast of the King's Son (Mt 22:1-10, Lk 12:36, Rev 19:7,9).

Who the Bride is becomes manifest only after Christ's crucifixion and resurrection: washed clean from all filth and ugly stain on the cross, the spotless Church is sanctified by the Holy Spirit to become the Bride of Christ.

To the extent that we share in the divine love that unites Christ and the Church, we are incorporated into the Church and we love Christ and each other with the very love of Christ.

The reason there are many different dwelling places in heaven is that the inhabitants have a different capacity for love. Each of us will be filled, says St. Therese of Lisieux, but each of us can be filled only according to the kind and size of his soul's receptacle.

The more united we are with Christ, the more we become one with all the saved in heaven.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we then will praise and worship the Father "through Christ, with Christ and in Christ." At the same time we will also love and glorify the Son in union with his Father.

Although sharing in the life of the Holy Trinity is the center and source of all blessings in heaven, humankind's activity is not restricted to that. Jesus tells us that we will also reign with him: "I will give the victor the right, he says, to sit with me on my throne, as I myself have first won the victory and sit with my Father on his throne" (Rev 4:21).

In the paliggenesia, the new age of the Messiah, the apostles will sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Mt 19:28). I think this means that in some mysterious way, most likely by intercessory prayer, we will share with Christ in guiding history, helping especially those who were close to us in our earthly life. Our rule over the material universe will be perfected. We will not abuse our power since we will act with the power of God which is the power of love.

When I think of God's infinite mercy, I am filled with hope that many or all, including me, will be saved.

But when I think of what God has in mind for us — eternal ecstasy, straining all our energy to the point of being eternally outside of ourselves, fully one with Christ and fully one with all in heaven — I can only ask for mercy.

Community calendar

MAY

16 Commencement

Reunions Weekend

Friday, May 29 — Sunday, May 31

Friday **Golf tournament**

Saturday **Alumni tournaments
and picnic**

Sunday **Alumni mass & brunch**

CISTERCIAN PREPARATORY SCHOOL

3660 CISTERCIAN ROAD
IRVING, TEXAS 75039

Tom Pruitt had a hand in the words that follow

The early Eighties were good years to be a student at Cistercian. I know, because I was there.

My tenure at CPS was almost cut short. Geometry, Algebra II, Pre-Calculus and Calculus almost did me in.



Afterthoughts
Smokey Briggs '84

My first eight years of schooling did not prepare me for the brick wall of Pi and Cosine and derivative definitions I ran into in 1980.

I climbed the wall, but just barely. Mostly I memorized enough of what was pure gobbledygook to me to pass the test — just barely.

Being human, I gravitated to subjects that did not affirm my lack of intellectual acumen.

Lunch was a favorite. Football made me smile (mostly because you could do so many things on the field that otherwise carried a jail term).

A close third was language. No, not language like Latin or French. I was only marginally better at conjugating Latin verbs than I was at catching a sine wave.

Language as in what you are reading.

There may have been some genetics at work. Both of my parents earned doctorates in Linguistics. My father was a newspaperman, college professor and professional writer.

A healthy dose of Scot-Irish ancestry leaves me rarely at a loss for words.

As my father once said, “You popped into this world with your mouth wide open, and nothing ever changed.”

Numerous teachers have agreed with this assessment.

“Smokey talks at inappropriate times,” was a regular comment on grammar school report cards. And, here I am today.

My personal joke about my alma mater at the time was that it should have been named Cistercian Tech, as the heavy load of math and science kept me very busy with subjects that were mental torture.

Looking back, however, the joke really did not hold water.

Cistercian was a grand place to be if you aspired (or had no talent for anything else) to earn your daily bread with words.

Sharon Rando, Fr. Peter Verhalen, and Dr. Tom Pruitt made up the English Department for most of my tenure. A better group of tutors in things wordy I do not think you could find. All three sit at my

shoulder on a daily basis as I hunt and peck for words that might be worth a dollar to a few West Texans.

When I think of Tom Pruitt I think of a couple of things:

First, he was always kind — the kindest editor I have ever had.

Second, he was demanding — he introduced me to the “rewrite.” He was not the last editor to tell me to rewrite my work, but he was the first. I have never found a technique in the art/science of writing that did more for a piece than simply rewriting the thing.

Third, he, like many of the teachers at Cistercian in those years, he obviously loved his work.

He loved the English language, literature, and his students.

He really read the stuff 17-year-old boys wrote. (That takes love, or a big dose of masochism).

By far, my fondest academic memories of Cistercian were birthed in Dr. Pruitt’s classroom (where I was not the very worst student in the class of 1984, for at least an hour or so).

I won the Literary award for fiction my junior and senior year (probably because my classmates who won all the Book Awards were too busy dissecting the coefficient of friction and calculating Pi to the 73rd decimal to bother with making up stories).

Either way, Dr. Pruitt had a hand in that.

For 20 years I have made a living selling words to people.

Dr. Pruitt had a hand in that.

As I have watched Cistercian grow and progress through the past 30 years, I feared the school would evolve into what so many private prep schools are — a pretty place for dysfunctional families to warehouse two-dimensional kids — a hollowed out shadow of a place that was, with plenty of grand buildings and full-color alumni newsletters, but missing the beating academic heart she once possessed.

Plenty of private schools are just that — pretty places with grand endowments that serve up the educational equivalent of oatmeal on a daily basis. I’ve met some of their graduates, worked with and for them, and even hired (and fired) a few.

For the record, in my humble opinion, what made Cistercian great was the faculty.

Cistercian could have consisted of a cluster of tents and shacks along the banks of the Trinity River and it would have been a great school because of the faculty.

Faculty like Tom Pruitt.

I hope that never changes.