



THE ABBEY OF OUR LADY OF
NEW CLAIRVAUX
VINA, CALIFORNIA



GESTA MONASTICA

News from the Abbey of Our Lady of New Clairvaux



Father Paul Mark Schwan, OCSO
ABBOT

Welcome!

MISSION STATEMENT

Seeking God at this place of New Clairvaux, we are a community of Cistercian monks living the Rule of Saint Benedict. We witness God's love for the world according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ by a life of prayer, labor and sustainable stewardship of our resources in simplicity and openness to the signs of the times. Our monastery welcomes all people in a spirit of hospitality, and engages others in collaborative relationships.

FROM THE ABBOT'S DESK

Dear Friends,

We are on the threshold of spring, the word in old English is "lent". So it is we begin our age-old 40-day Christian pilgrimage into the spiritual desert where we journey with Christ to participate in the mystery of his passion, death, and resurrection. Yes, the desert is fraught with many challenges but Christ, who leads and accompanies us, never abandons us because it is a journey of and in faith. "Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen", we are told in the Letter to the Hebrews

(11:1). May these sacred days then lead you, in faith, to fill you with hope, confident that God is with us always.



(continued on Page 2)

(continued from Page 1)

In this issue we have featured reflections on the abbatial ministry of service, to be precise the ministry of “foot-washing”. This past January I completed a second six-year term



of service to my monastic community and the brothers chose me again to continue in this sacred ministry for another six years. It

is both humbling and demanding to be called forth by the brothers, acting in the fear of God, to serve each and every one of them.

This issue, most importantly, acknowledges your part in making our ministry of prayer, hospitality, and service to God’s people possible every day. For this you have our profound gratitude and prayers. May God grace you with all good things, above all with hope.

Thanks for reading,

Fr. Paul Mark



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Email: development@newclairvaux.org Telephone: (530) 839-9936

As we endeavor to be better stewards of our environmental and financial resources, we now offer the ability to opt-out of the printed *Gesta Monastica*, as we are also now publishing it electronically. If you no longer wish to receive the *Gesta Monastica* print edition, please let us know by email or telephone. You may join/remain on the email mailing list. However, we know many of you cherish the printed editions and respect your wish to receive future editions.

FROM THE MONASTERY CHRONICLES

Abbatial Election of Dom Paul Mark Schwan

On January 11, 2021, the monastic community of New Clairvaux Abbey re-elected Father Paul Mark as abbot for another six-year term. Our Father Immediate, Dom Elias Dietz of Gethsemani Abbey appointed and delegated Dom Mark Scott to preside over the election since he could not travel to Vina due to the pandemic. The Abbot General, Dom Eamon confirmed the election over the telephone and Father Paul Mark was installed as abbot of the Abbey of Our Lady of New Clairvaux.



Father Paul Mark is re-elected as abbot.



Abbot pops open a champagne to celebrate the occasion with the brothers.



The brothers prepare to perform their solemn duty to elect an abbot.



STEWARDSHIP RECOGNITION 2020

We are pleased to acknowledge and thank these special friends who have supported us with gifts during 2020. We are grateful to everyone who has been a part of this effort, and indeed for every gift of every size. In thanksgiving for your generosity, our monastic community will remember the intentions of all our benefactors in daily prayer.

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Photo above: Interior of medieval chapterhouse

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QUALITIES OF THE ABBOT

By FATHER PLACID

The two following articles were reflections delivered by Father Placid and Brother Peter Damien to the monks of New Clairvaux during a Chapter Talk at the invitation of the abbot. These reflections helped the monastic community prepare for the abbatial election held in January 2021.

About half of the Rule of Benedict says something regarding what qualities the abbot has to have: to be concerned, solicitous, discerning, even-tempered, cooperative with officials, and willing share the burden of the office, etc. I will group these into four areas based on Chapter 58 of the Rule: seeking God through listening, eager for the Divine Office (communal chanting of the Psalms throughout the day), Obedience, and Trials.

We see that Benedict wants the abbot to listen to the brothers by calling them to counsel. The abbot's interest is not just in hearing their input, but listening to how the Holy Spirit is working in the community's suggestions and advice. To speak humbly, and with quiet demeanor, shows how the Holy Spirit is at work in the brother speaking. In taking his decision, the abbot takes into account that while he listens to what the brothers say he is hearing the Holy Spirit.

There are several abbatial qualities that cluster around the Divine Office. The abbot is to ensure that the Offices are on time, well-attended, and respected. Like other monks,

the abbot, too must be prepared to read at the offices. In addition, he recites the gospel of the day



and makes sure the readings at Vigils are from Catholic and Orthodox fathers. The abbot's fair-mindedness is part of his being eager for the Office and having reverence for God and the brothers.

The abbot is still part of the community, so he still has to obey the Rule in every respect. It is by his behavior and example more than by his teaching that the abbot models the obedience of the Rule.

If the abbot really learns how to grow into the grace of the position, it is through trials. These trials are through the interpersonal clashes that can happen in community. The Latin word is *opprobrium*. This could be translated as opposition or contention. Being at the service of community means that the abbot has all the brothers' needs in mind and makes sure that they do not descend to snapping at each other out envy or jealousy.

There could be more qualities stated, but these are some of the more important ones to my mind that an abbot needs to have to lead a community all together into everlasting life. Just as new brothers needs testing during the novitiate before being received into the community, so a professed monk need to have an equivalent discernment period prior to being elected as abbot. This is simply living the life the way Benedict asks the monk to live with good zeal, discernment, humility and with skill at *lectio divina* or the prayerful reading of sacred scripture.

THE ABBOT HOLDS THE PLACE OF CHRIST

By BROTHER PETER DAMIEN

In his Rule, Saint Benedict spends two chapters in speaking about the abbot. Chapter 2 deals with the qualities of the abbot and Chapter 64 deals with the election of an abbot. These two chapters particularly show us a portrait of who the abbot is, or rather, what the abbot is for: he is called to the great responsibility of leading the community. In the context of the upcoming abbatial election, I would like to share with you a few personal reflections based on these two chapters of the Rule of Saint Benedict. The main theme for these reflections is: The Abbot holds the place of Christ.



I would like to begin with what I call the *Fiat* of the abbot-elect. As we know, according to our custom, on the day of the abbatial election, the community begins with the Mass of the Holy Spirit, and we hope everyone will be ready and have a clear mind, and vote. After voting usually the Father Immediate comes over to the

abbot-elect. I am not sure what exactly the Father Immediate may ask him, but I suppose he asks somehow like this: Do you accept to hold the place of Christ in this monastery? And like Saint Bernard, the world of Vina is waiting for him to say *Fiat*. It is the annunciation moment, like Mary saying *Fiat* to the Lord. Of course, we know the Angel Gabriel did not ask Mary if she would accept to be Theotokos. Mary was chosen, not elected. But both Mary and the new abbot are called by God, only different ways. I don't intend to make a comparison here. If the abbot-elect says his *Fiat* to his community, he begins his abbatial ministry - holding the place of Christ (RB 2.2).

The abbot holds the office of Christ. We know the abbot is given the authority to govern over the community entrusted to him. He runs the office with power, but he is first and foremost a spiritual father. Saint Benedict did not say the abbot replaces Christ, but holds the place of Christ. The abbot represents Christ to fulfill an important ministry with love and service for his brothers. In the Charter of Charity, the first elected abbot of the Church of Cîteaux, Alberic, who was described as "a learned man . . . , well versed in things divine and human, a lover of the Rule and of his brothers." The abbot

is called to participate in the divine ministry because he is a representative of Christ.

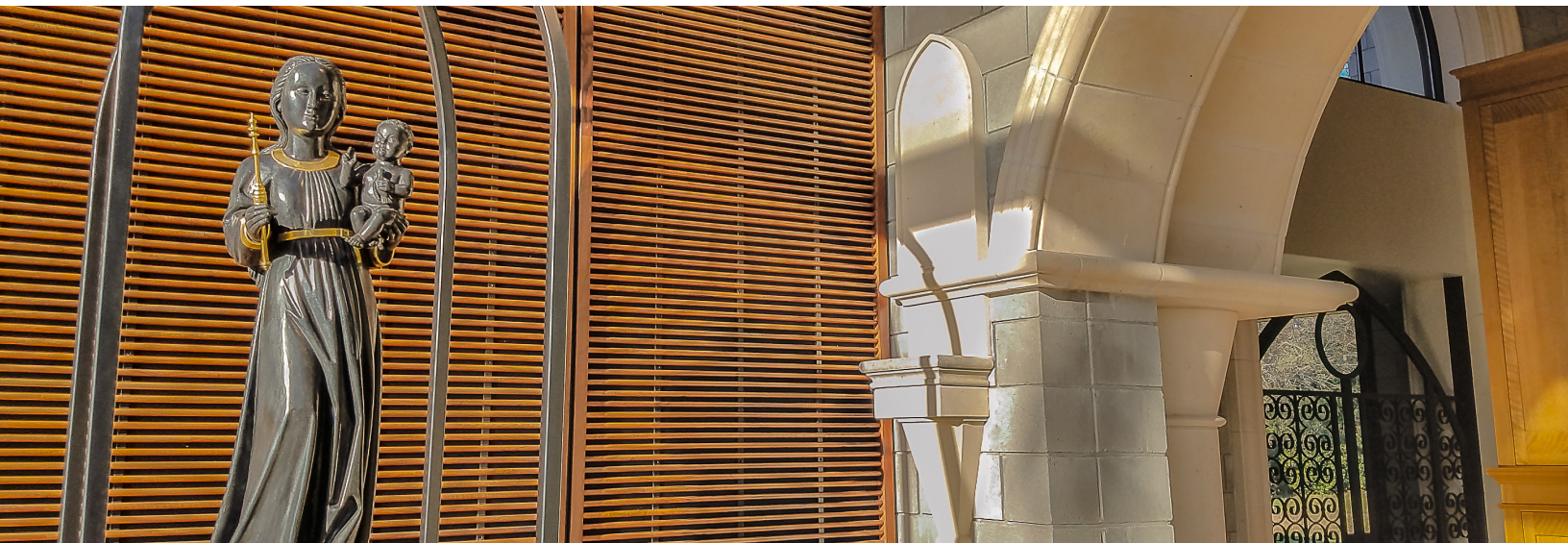
If we look at our Vina community in the past ten years, twenty years or even fifty years, we see how the life of our community has been moving so far. We have seen and acknowledged that many changes have been made in the course of time according to the needs of the community. However, the monastic way of life, the value of the spiritual life may never be changed perhaps, if the superior holds fast to the monastic tradition and fosters the gift of the Holy Spirit. But if it was the gift of the Holy Spirit through which the Vina community came to be, came to take root on this soil, then all the monks of Vina were and are responsible for that gift in building up the Vina community. But it is primarily the abbot, who takes the role of leadership, who takes the responsibility for the gift of the Holy Spirit to lead the community.

The upcoming abbatial election, perhaps, reminds us that our community first and foremost is a gift of the Holy Spirit, not just simply built on the good will of some of the brothers, but built on faith and monastic tradition in the heart of the Church. There, Christ is the center and the abbot is a representative of Christ.

Abbey of New Clairvaux

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