

# The Servant



#255

*Spring 2020*

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### *Where there's a will*

You can assist and further the ministries of the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory by remembering the community in your will. If you choose to do so, the following form of wording is appropriate:

*I hereby give, devise, and bequeath to The Brotherhood of Saint Gregory, Inc., a New York State not-for-profit corporation and its successors for ever \$\_\_\_\_\_ and / or \_\_\_\_\_ percent of my estate to be used in such a manner as determined by its Directors.*



*Members of the Brotherhood at Winter Convocation 2020*

## Challenge in the New

*"In the midst of new dimensions."*

This verse is the title of one of the hymns in the Methodist Music Supplement "The Faith We Sing." It occurred to me that we are, in this world of ours, in the midst of just that: new dimensions. Being OCD, I find many of these new things unsettling. I am a doer, I am on the go, and I usually can cope with change. This is true of many of my brothers: Bishop Paul Moore called us the "flexible friars." So I have a model on which to base my life. I believe we can deal with these new dimensions successfully when we hold on to God and remember that God is the director of this great choir on earth.

But now, for something on a more personal note:

Some of you are aware that I have been dealing with cancer over the last two years and, thanks be to God and the great skills of the team at Memorial Sloan Kettering, I am well. Things continue to challenge and another new dimension has shown its face. While on vacation recently in Puerto Rico, I was at the pool side when it began to rain. Getting up to move to drier ground, I slipped on the wet tile and fell on my hip. The short story is that I have a hairline fracture from hip to



*Richard John receives his new profession cross from Richard Thomas, as James assists.*

femur. I am on crutches, and can't leave the house; receiving therapy three times a week for four to six weeks... It goes on. I cannot drive; I cannot play the organ — new dimensions, each a challenge! So much of my spirituality is based on letting God lead the way. God led the way fifty years ago and the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory added a new dimension to the church. When we are suddenly faced with a new dimension — a new rose-bloom we did not choose or expect — we have to give it to God. So, as I face this new challenge, my OCD says one thing and God says another. My OCD says, "I don't like or appreciate the things that temporarily change my life and routine," and God continues to poke and prod and say, "All will be well."

In the midst of new dimensions, in the face of changing ways, who will lead the pilgrim peoples, wandering in their separate ways. The answer is simple — faith that no matter the changes — God is, indeed, in charge.

RTB



*Richard Thomas blesses the new crosses  
as Ronald Augustine and James assist.*

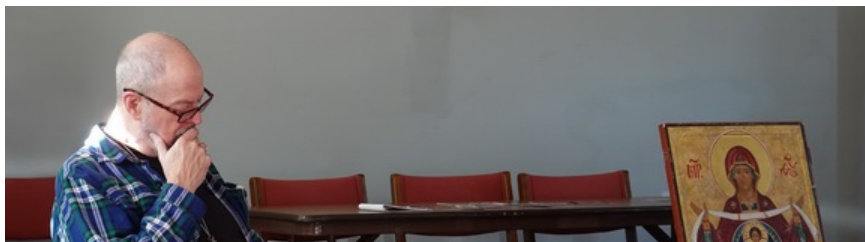
## *Here and there with the Brothers* **Community Notes**

### *Winter Convocation 2020*

Winter Convocation took place in the last week of January at the location we've enjoyed for the past twenty years — Mount Alvernia Retreat Center in New York's Wappingers Falls.

The very first prayer session of the convocation included a unique event: Evening Prayer including the blessing and presentation of the new design of the Brotherhood profession cross (seen on the front cover of this issue). Christopher Stephen Jenks (Diocese of Rhode Island) was the officiant of this office, while the Minister General, Richard Thomas Biernacki (New Jersey) presided at the Blessing of New Crosses, assisted by James Teets (Maryland) and Ronald Augustine Fox (Chicago). The previous version of the profession cross had been blessed and distributed to all professed brothers during Annual Convocation 2012, but that design proved not to be durable enough to withstand the level of wear necessary for this major symbol of Gregorian commitment, so Tobias Stanislas Haller (Maryland) was put to work by the Council to design and test a replacement. This was accomplished with the able assistance of James Patrick Hall (Colorado) over the previous year, during which the new design proved to be sufficiently sturdy and resilient.

This past January, each professed brother present came forward and received his new cross, at the hands of the Minister General. About half of the community were present for this liturgy, and the crosses for those who were



*David Luke leads a reflection on praying with icons.*

absent were presented to their Ministers Provincial, who were charged with sending each one to its final recipient. Evening Prayer is always a joyous prayer office, but this event made the opening of Winter Convocation 2020 even more special to those who could be present.

The community retreat program for this convocation was delivered by Tobias Stanislas and David Luke Henton (Rio Grande), around the theme of icons and iconography, from their creation to their use as a focus for prayer and meditation. Tobias Stanislas, the Brotherhood's Director of Postulants and Novices — a well-known iconographer in his own right — delivered the first two retreat sessions, the first titled "Theography: The Icon as Image of God," during which he delved into the history of the different schools of religious painting over the centuries from early Christian times. The second workshop, "Seeing the Saints," gave all present the opportunity to develop their own icons, from images of personal saints they brought with them or from images made available to the group. In the process, Tobias Stanislas produced a striking portrait of Louie Clay Crew, Episcopalian educator and founder of the Integrity movement who had died just two months earlier. Many holy works were created during this session on a sunny Wednesday morning, often surprising even those who brought them to life!



*Tobias Stanislas speaks on iconography.*



*Brothers create their own icons.*

The final retreat session was led by David Luke on Thursday morning, titled "Praying with Icons," as he spoke from his heart about the various ways he has used icons in his own spiritual development and prayer life over the decades, calling those holy images



to live again to assist with visions of our Lord and Creator. David Luke, the Brotherhood's Director of Education — currently attending seminary toward ordination to the priesthood — has used icons to aid in sharing his journey with his fellow travelers over the years, as well as with students and instructors.

The Brotherhood's Council met briefly on Wednesday afternoon in order to discuss the process for bringing forward candidates for the role of the community's director of education — given David Luke's recent seminary commitment, he will not stand for re-election when his current term of office expires this coming summer. Further additions to the community's job descriptions were also discussed and added to the relevant positions.

The Daily Office and the Holy Eucharist provided our regular prayer and worship context. We were fortunate to have two priest brothers on hand for this convocation — Tobias Stanislas and Richard Edward Helmer (California) — and each served as Celebrant twice. We were short on deacons for this gathering, especially as Gordon John Stanley (Chicago) had been pressed into service as our sacristan for the week, so Edward Munro (Maryland) fulfilled the role of deacon for all four liturgies. (We thankfully note that postulant Thomas Burnham of Southwest Florida served helpfully as assistant sacristan under Gordon John's leadership.) We had a fine variety of preachers for our days together, as Christopher Stephen Jenks (Rhode Island), Thomas Bushnell (Long Island), and Richard Edward ably exercised that ministry; their sermons appear later in this issue. James, Joseph Basil Gauss (Chicago) and Eric Shelley (Southwest Virginia) served as acolytes and Ronald Augustine as thurifer for the week. Most of those present were called upon to officiate or to act as lector at the Daily Office and to provide other assistance at the liturgies.

Nathanael Deward Rahm (Chicago), our Director of Convocation Liturgy and Music, organized the daily music schedule and, Nathanael Deward, Richard John Lorino (Central Florida), William Henry Benefield (West Texas) and Tommy Mandri (Southeast Florida) took to the organ console to serve on each day of our time together.



*The Community at worship*



*Jason Peter Seta and Christopher Robert Werth are received into the novitiate, supported by their sponsors and brothers.*

Winter Convocation 2020 began with a unique liturgy during Evening Prayer and the final office of Evening Prayer included an equally joyous liturgy: Reception into the Novitiate and Commissioning of an Official. Christopher Robert Werth (Maryland) and Jason Peter Seta (Pennsylvania) were received into the novitiate, and we rejoice with them as they begin this new stage in their vocation as Gregorian Friars! And we give thanks to God for the willingness of Joseph Basil to succeed Thomas as Secretary of the Brotherhood. And of course we give Thomas our heartfelt thanks for sharing his talents with the community in this responsibility from 2013 to 2019.



*Richard Thomas commissions Joseph Basil in his new position as Secretary.*

Every opportunity for our brothers to gather is important to all of us and, while attendance at Winter Convocations is difficult or even impossible for some, depending on their work schedules, it is always a time of good cheer and catching up, regularly punctuated with laughter and even a few tears of remembrance. We give thanks for these opportunities for common prayer and refreshment throughout the year as they serve as our needed “times apart,” when we can restore our souls and return home to our many ministries refreshed, reinvigorated and anxious for our next gathering. To God alone the glory!

#### *Province 1*

Christopher Stephen Jenks has been inducted as a 2019 awardee into the National Disability Mentoring Coalition (NDMC) in recognition of his work at Br. Bernard Fessenden House in Yonkers, New York. The NDMC aims to raise awareness about the importance and impact of mentoring in the lives of people with disabilities and to increase the number and quality of disability mentoring programs around the country.

The Brotherhood has always been proud of Christopher Stephen’s ministry at Fessenden House — a recovery program begun by Richard John Lorino in 1992, named in honor of our brother who died in 1993, and which has also been served by William Francis Jones and by Patrick Ignatius Dickson up until his death in 2005 — we are extremely proud of Christopher Stephen, of Richard John and of all Gregorian Friars who have ministered at Fessenden House over the years. Christopher Stephen’s statement upon notification of his reception of this honor says something important about who he is and we share it with you:

Mentoring is always mutual. It is not and cannot be a one-sided proposition. I firmly believe that I received far more from the men at Fessenden House than I gave them. I am called “Brother” for a reason. I am not here to push or pull anybody toward a destination. I am here to accompany them on our mutual journey together.

It is a great joy to see our brother recognized in this way for his long and important ministry — your brothers extend heartfelt congratulations!



*The Rev Nicholas Hull (with his young son) chats with Edward, Tobias Stanislas, and James at the reception at One Starling B&B.*

Gregorian Friars from Province 3 traveled to Southwestern Virginia to visit Peter Budde and his wife Betty, at their new home and parish on March 6-8. The travelers included Minister Provincial Edward Munro, James Teets and Tobias Stanislas Haller, from the Diocese of Maryland, and Eric Shelley, also from Southwestern Virginia. Housed in a local B&B, just down the street from Peter's parish — Christ Episcopal Church, Martinsville — the visiting brothers were received by Peter and Betty, who had prepared a fine dinner for them on Friday evening, followed by prayer and catching up. They enjoyed gathering for the Daily Office and reflection time on Saturday morning, as they discussed the Provincial Lenten Ember-tide exercise, and Peter and Betty made them feel right at home by organizing an opportunity to meet the parish rector and members of their church at a reception held at the B&B. Edward opened the gathering with a presentation on the Brotherhood's history and view of religious life, followed by a lively question-and-answer period. The brothers visited the parish church earlier that day to meet with the rector, the Rev Nicholas Hull, and to have a preview of the Sunday morning liturgy there. They spent Saturday evening relaxing at Peter and Betty's lovely home.

Sunday morning was focused on church: The Rev Nicholas Hull asked the brothers to take leading roles in the liturgy at Christ Church, and Tobias Stanislas served as celebrant, while Edward exercised his ministry as deacon and James served as acolyte, while the rector delivered the lively sermon. Peter and Betty are regular members of the parish choir, though the choir had that Sunday off as their organist had been called out of town, so they sat with Eric among the congregation. Everyone enjoyed the brothers' presence, and as many of the parishioners had attended the reception the previous day, friendships were cemented there! Following the Holy Eucharist, Peter and Betty escorted the visitors to a lovely local restaurant for lunch, where the time together ended, to be continued as soon as possible in the future!

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*(l to r) James, Eric, Tobias Stanislas, Peter, and Edward*



#### Province 4

In late February Angel Gabriel Roque traveled to the Diocese of Atlanta's Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing, representing the Diocese of Southeast Florida in a pilot program called "The Justice Pilgrimage." One task was to create a program to start the conversation about racism and healing in the diocese. Angel Gabriel created a half-day racial healing retreat that was very well-received and attended. Five delegates — one each from Alabama, Mississippi, Atlanta and Southwest Florida, including Angel Gabriel from Southeast Florida, began with a discussion of *Stamped from the Beginning* by Dr Ibram X Kendi. This investigates the origin and development of racist ideas, and how they influenced US and world history. Discussion continued on how racism affects ministry, and how it affects people differently because of their backgrounds. The conversation was uplifting, difficult, and at times a bit painful.

□ One of the annual outreach grants extended by the Brotherhood in support of local ministries is for Mark Andrew Jones' "Holy Grill" feeding program sponsored by his parish, Saint Nicholas, Pompano Beach, Florida. Recently Mark Andrew provided an update on this wonderful blessing provided to those in need:

For nearly two years we've been going back and forth with the City of Pompano Beach on our request for a permit to install a 8'x20' Walk-In Refrigerator and Freezer, so we have more food storage capacity and the ability to vary our menus more when serving hot breakfast and dinner meals from the Holy Grill to the homeless and working poor. We've now served over 40,000 hot, spirit-lifting meals since starting this ministry in September 2016. And now we finally got the permit for the Walk-In! We are moving forward with the project. Thanks be to God! Some of you may know that early last year we expanded our ministry to include a mobile food bank, which we've dubbed Holy Provisions. We receive and deliver food each week, but one Thursday a month we rent a 26' Refrigerator Truck and distribute 20,000 pounds of food from South Dade to North Palm Beach Counties, supplying over 40 different feeding programs, benefitting families with children, seniors, veterans, and people with disabilities. A donor has become quite excited about our mobile food bank ministry and has offered to buy us our own 26' Refrigerator Truck. We are in negotiations for a 2013 Freightliner with only 118,892 miles on it. Please pray that Our Lord blesses this effort with a big "10-4 Good Buddy!"

□ Some time ago, Bishop Brian Cole of East Tennessee saw the gift of our late brother Ron Fender — a reproduction of the Brotherhood's icon of Saint Gregory the Great — on display in the narthex of Saint Paul's Church in downtown



*Bishop Cole and Larry Walter  
with the icon of Gregory*

Chattanooga, and expressed his interest in obtaining a copy. During his most recent visit to Saint Paul's in February, Bishop Brian's request was granted through the generosity of our Larry Walter Reich.

#### *Province 7*

A joint Lenten Retreat for Province 7 and 8 had to be cancelled in response to the coronavirus pandemic, but Province 7 brothers quickly planned an impromptu quiet Lenten retreat in Cloudcroft, NM at Saint Brigid's Rest, the home of David Luke Henton. Both Minister Provincial William Henry Benefield and James Patrick Hall were unable to travel due to work and coronavirus quarantine conflicts. Postulant Stephen Poindexter did travel as planned, and he and David Luke participated in sung Morning Prayer, Lenten meditation, and luncheon on March 11th at Saint John's in Alamogordo, where David Luke is in field placement as a seminarian. They continued to enjoy a four-day period of praying and eating together and exploring southern New Mexico and the Mexican border town of Palomas, Chihuahua by car and on foot. Their Province 7 and 8 brothers were especially remembered in prayer throughout.

☐ We are pleased to announce that David Luke has been admitted to candidacy for ordination to the transitional diaconate and priesthood. We will keep you posted on his continued progress.

#### *Province 8*

David Benedict Hedges traveled to Spokane to lead the Diocesan Clergy Retreat, February 10-13, at the invitation of Bishop Gretchen Rehberg. He spoke about the Brotherhood's way of life: vows, prayer, communication, and gathering, and how we use these holy habits to build and keep community at great distances. Participants were invited to discuss how these practices can function within the life of a diocese or a congregation to grow and nurture community in those contexts. The clergy shared their reflections from their own experience.



*David Benedict (rear row, left) and Bishop Rehberg (third row back, right) with Spokane diocesan clergy*

## The Love of Wisdom

*Feast of Saint Thomas Aquinas*

*Wisdom of Solomon 7:7-14 • Matthew 13:47-52*

The Western tradition of philosophy did not start with Socrates, but it might as well have. He was so unlike what had come before, that while he owed his predecessors a debt, he was radi-

cally new. Socrates coined the word “philosophy” because at his time there were self-proclaimed wise men (“sophist” just means wise person) who ran around Greece selling their services as a debater or a proclaimer of truths. One was Gorgias who claimed to be able to

answer any question. If you are familiar with cable TV news or Facebook, you know exactly the phenomenon and why it so irked Socrates — for they claimed to be wise and were not. And that demeans wisdom.

To pretend to have the truth, when you do not even know what the truth is, is not just to be a liar; it is to demean truth itself. You can’t just say “you’re an idiot.” Saying “you’re a poser” doesn’t work. You can see that today. (Let the reader understand!) So Socrates went around asking questions. Exposing, if you will, the foolishness of the self-proclaimed wise people.

Now, if you go around saying that you’re against the wise people, then people might misunderstand and think you’re against wisdom or think that wisdom is something bad to have. So Socrates said that he was not himself wise but that he was a *philosopher* — a lover of wisdom: one who pursues wisdom in the erotic sense. Somebody who is captivated, entranced, infatuated with wisdom, chasing it down wherever it goes, desperate for even the smallest glimpse of the beloved: that is Socrates’ image.

So he believed that philosophy was done in conversation, in discussion, and he didn’t write anything down. This was also radically new because his predecessors had certainly written things down. And his student Plato wrote it down. But Plato wrote dialogues — he was going to write what it was like to be in conversation with Socrates.

Aristotle also is reputed to have written the most beautiful philosophical dialogues, none of which have survived. All we have of Aristotle is lecture notes written probably by his students and maybe with some editing by him after the fact. That’s what survived. But still that sense of inquiry — of seeking after knowledge — rather than the pretense of having arrived and found it — this is what motivated Socrates.



*Thomas preaches as Edward, Tobias Stanislas, and James listen attentively.*

But moving forward hundreds of years, it had almost been forgotten. Socrates was still revered, but Greeks had moved on in their philosophic schools and came back to the old habit of a learned teacher who claims to know the right way to live and who teaches it to his students. And when Paul says that “the Hebrews demand signs and the Greeks demand wisdom,” that’s what he’s talking about. He’s not talking about the lover of wisdom like Socrates. He’s talking about what is essentially another sophist, another claimant to know the right way to live. The Stoics, the Epicureans, the others of his day, the Cynics: all are schools of philosophy with a learned “wise teacher,” and Paul says, “I bring you neither that kind of wisdom nor signs — impressive stunts — I bring you Christ crucified.” Seemingly a fool, seemingly powerless, an offense to both: that is what Paul proclaims.

What Socrates loved, what Socrates sought, Solomon prayed for: Solomon, of course, the wise king — the only one. Wisdom is a common theme in Hebrew Scriptures and Jewish Greek Scriptures, like the one we read today. But nobody is said to be wise except Solomon — the only wise one. All of the rest of the wisdom literature says either “be like Solomon” or more often “pursue wisdom, seek wisdom, leave everything to find wisdom.” These are words that would have perhaps brought a smile to Socrates if he had ever heard them.

It is that pursuit and love, and dogged persistence, that we hear in the reading today. Desire wisdom; seek it above power, above prosperity, above stability, above your kingdom, above your family, above everything. Seek wisdom and, with it, you will find all things. Most crucially, you will find God.

So it is no surprise that this book, this so-called Wisdom of Solomon (a very late book, first century BC, written probably in Egypt) — it is no surprise that this became beloved of Christians, even Christians who did not think it was canonical. We’re really careful to treasure it, because it so clearly calls out for what Christ brings. The wisdom that Socrates pursued, loved, desired, panted after; the wisdom that Solomon prayed for and, according to the tradition, received: this wisdom is the Word made flesh. The Hagia Sophia — the Holy Wisdom Church — in Constantinople is really Christ Church Cathedral.

Holy Wisdom is Christ. It is Logos. It is Word. The wisdom that is so desperately sought after by both pagan and Christian philosophers, is said by the tradition of Christian philosophy, ultimately known to be Christ. And so we come to Thomas Aquinas, who made it his life’s project to fuse Aristotelian philosophy with Christian faith. This philosophy was new at the time: brand new to Europe, just brought by the Arabs except for a couple of books. It was the exciting new learning. Aquinas was captivated by Aristotle’s brilliance, and sought to integrate it with his Augustinian Christianity.

Tragic perhaps that Aquinas suffered the horrible fate he has. One of the worst indignities to be done to Aquinas was that a volume of his theology was placed on the altar next to the Gospels at the Council of Trent “for reference.” This was intended as an honor and a respect. But Aquinas did not want to be a sophist, a wise man. He was a lover of wisdom, in an academic setting where

his works are *conflicts*. They are academic fights that haven't stopped since. They are controversies in which students would write him questions in which they would dig wherever he had a joint in his thinking that needed to be poked at with a knife. Some smart-ass student would show up and stick the paring knife in and say, "Can you answer me this" — because that's how you did it.

And then he and the Franciscans and Bonaventure and others and their successors would continue this controversy. This was the way teaching happened in the Middle Ages. It was not a crowd of students sitting around imbibing learned wisdom. It was constant disputation. It was constant argument and refining and rethinking. Everything was always up for grabs.

What an indignity for Aquinas to have become the church's court philosopher. It'll ruin your reputation! Nothing can be more horrible. To this day, it is difficult to study Thomas Aquinas when certain Roman Catholic theologians are in the room, because it is very important to them that whatever interpretation you give Aquinas be consistent with current Roman Catholic theology. Imagine that! You can't read Aquinas for what he said. Whatever he said has to be contorted so that it fits with the current teaching of the church. Nobody else gets that treatment. So you can't hear him and you get bad at reading.

The greatest embarrassment is that Aquinas didn't believe in the Immaculate Conception of Mary, with the result that when the Dominicans published



(l to r) Thomas, mentor to newly noviced Christopher Robert, and Richard Thomas

the text, they stopped. They published that section of the *Summa Theologiae* in which he very clearly says that this is not the correct doctrine, and then they write three pages of why it was okay to think that before 1854 Aquinas had what is now recognized as the heretical view. They are so embarrassed by it! Imagine all the other things Aquinas said that later genera-

tions of theologians have come to regard as wrong. That's okay. But not if you're the court philosopher. He'd have been horrified.

For Aquinas, the wisdom that he sought, that he desperately hungered after, was Christ. His reputation for sanctity, surely earned, demonstrated that in his own life. His private Eucharistic prayers, his private prayers of devotion to the Word made flesh, Wisdom in bread, became the hymns we continue to sing today. They are authentically his poetry. They are a loving devotion.

You can find them in the hymnal; you sing them at Benediction; you sing them at the Eucharist. Those hymns are the hymns of a lover seeking his beloved, panting after it with hunger and thirst. And like Solomon, finding it.

Thomas Bushnell



## A Convocation Sermon

### house and home

*I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle.*

On Sunday, March 8, 1981, when I lived in Boston, I woke up early, as is my custom, and made a dash to the corner store to pick up *The New York Times*. While picking up the paper, I noticed a photo on the front page showing the inside of a burnt-out church and thought, in a kind of distracted way, “How sad. I wonder what church that was?” When I got home, I put the paper on the kitchen table and started fixing breakfast before running off to choir rehearsal and church. One of my roommates came in, looked at the paper, and said, “Hey Chris. Isn’t this where you went to school?”

“What?”

“Didn’t you go to Saint Luke’s School when you were a kid?” I looked at the photo and caption, and I felt like I had been gut-punched. The burnt-out church was the Church of Saint Luke-in-the-Fields, or, as I had known it, Saint Luke’s Chapel of Trinity Parish. The devastation of the fire had been so complete that I hadn’t recognized it from the photo.



*From the files of Donald Gerardi*



*From Trinity Church archives*

Saint Luke’s was one of the places that formed me — made me who I am today. I attended Saint Luke’s School for ten years beginning in 1963, and from first grade on attended chapel every morning. I sometimes joke that I started praying the Daily Office when I was six, but it isn’t really a joke. Every school day began with Morning Prayer, and every Thursday we also attended mass — a very old-fashioned mass where only the celebrant received communion.

At the age of nine I was accepted into the choir of men and boys and received my first professional music training — also a formative experience for me. Frankly, I didn’t like Saint Luke’s School that much. Although I received an excellent education and I made some friends who I remain in contact with to this day, I was frequently bullied. Some of my classmates were very mean to me on my first day of school, and they were equally mean to me when we graduated 8th grade. But I felt very differently about the chapel. It was a place I frequently went for strength, for comfort, and for a sense of belonging, not so much with my classmates, but with the clergy and religious who staffed it.



*Christopher Stephen preaching this sermon*

It was also one of the buildings that sparked my interest in architectural history. It had been built in 1822, but almost immediately started undergoing a series of protracted enlargements and alterations. There was the Federal-style nave with a memorial to Catherine Ritter,

the founder of the original parish; the Gothic Revival choir room and hall; the neo-Byzantine sanctuary with its neo-Gothic high altar; the stained glass, which ranged in quality from tasteful to garish; the numerous shrines, statues, and paintings; and the boxy choir enclosure, where I spent so much of my time. There was Latin inscription, found in many early Christian gathering places in and around Rome, emblazoned across its entablature, DEO OPTIMO MAXIMO ET CHRISTO LIBERATORI. *To the most excellent great God, and to Christ the Liberator.* (Liberation Theology was going strong in 2nd century Rome.) Somehow it all worked together, holding me in a warm embrace. And now nearly all of it was destroyed.

Today's lesson from 2 Samuel has God say, "I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle." This got me to thinking.

The Old Testament is of two minds when it comes to the Temple of Jerusalem. One strain of thought regards it as an exceptionally good development, and it's often associated with the Davidic Monarchy. "We're like the nations around us now, with a king, a capital, and a temple." The other strain, reflected in the first part of today's reading, is much more ambivalent about the monarchy and the building of the Temple. "I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle." This tension runs through the Old Testament from 1 Samuel through the Maccabees, and it is even anachronistically written into sections of the Torah. It is still a living issue in the New Testament. "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." (Mark 13:2) It's that kind of talk that got Jesus crucified.

So much of my life as a religious — and as a Christian generally — has been about learning detachment. How do we handle the people, places, and things that God places in our lives? People in recovery will recognize this phrase. We are told to avoid the people, places, and things that might lead to a relapse with our addictive substance or behavior. To use an older turn-of-phrase, we are encouraged to avoid "the near occasion of sin." However, this is often misinterpreted. These things are not bad in and of themselves, but their misuse is. For example, I love old buildings. I find them fascinating. I got my masters degree to study them, and I worked in the field professionally for several years before going to Fessenden House. I am working again in that field in

Providence as we attempt to get the Cathedral of Saint John into shape and reopened as a center for diocesan life and mission, which is a worthy goal. But it is very easy to get our priorities skewed.

*I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day.*

Last week Tobias published a short blog post entitled “Sickness Unto Death.” In it, he states that the



*Cathedral of Saint John, Providence RI*

institutional aspects of the faith have little or nothing to do with its core values. While it is true that one cannot be “a solitary Christian” there is no need to identify the locus of the community of faith with a parish — especially when that parish, and its leadership, adopt policies or practice behaviors so inimical to Christ and his teachings.

This puts into words something that I have thought for many years. Institutional structures are not bad in themselves. Any time a group of human beings gets together, there will be “institutional structures” of some sort. The question then becomes, are these institutional structures serving us, or are we serving them? Institutions can be good servants, but they make horrible masters.

Right now, I work in an institutional structure called the Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island. We are fortunate in that we have a bishop who seems to have his priorities in the right place. He is intellectually curious, pastoral in his presence and manner, administratively competent, and flexible in his approach to problems. He exercises authority, but he is not an authoritarian. He has the ability to hold fast to the basics of the faith while being accommodating in their application. Many in the diocese are asking, “Why do we need a cathedral? What are we going to do with it?” These are good questions, and a definitive answer has not yet been devised. But, as the bishop says, we have it. We can’t sell it. We can’t tear it down. So, we need to figure out what we are going to do with it.

But one thing I know. Some day not one stone will be left upon another. It may happen today; it may happen hundreds, even thousands of years from now. Most likely it will happen sometime between those two extremes. But it will, undoubtedly, happen.

*I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day.*

When we ascribe salvific value to someone or something that does not, in fact, possess it, we are engaging in idolatry.

We do this with people. Look at all the various leaders who have turned religion of any sort, not just Christianity, into personality cults. This kind of idolatry leads all too easily to the horrors of Jonestown. But it happens in less dramatic ways as well. How many of us have been involved in relationships,

romantic or otherwise, that have been filled with manipulations, emotional blackmail, or other behavior that dishonors the Image of God in the other or in ourselves? How many of us have been abusive? How many of us have tolerated the abuse of others? I confess that I have engaged in all these behaviors.



*Christopher Stephen, mentor to new novice  
Jason Peter (r) and the Minister General*

We do this with places. Think of all the pilgrimage sites in both Christianity and other religions. While we should approach such places, such as those in the Holy Land, with reverence, they are important for what God did there, not for the places themselves. Yet they are filled with hucksters and con-men, those out to make an easy buck off of the gullible and the fearful. Many of these places have become the dens of thieves, and this is nothing new.

And then there are the “things.” We might think first of the trappings of worship and devotion: icons, reliquaries, sacred vessels, and the like, but our idolatry goes way beyond this. We ally with things like power, prestige, and wealth, with dreadful results. Right now, in Rhode Island, we are trying to address the church’s role in the slave trade, both as part of the Church of England and later as part of the Protestant Episcopal Church. Many of our early members made their fortunes in the slave trade — the construction of our cathedral made possible by their wealth. Early clergy and later bishops preached a biblical justification for slavery, including the first bishop of the Episcopal Church, Samuel Seabury. Some held slaves and engaged in the slave trade. It is a dark heritage, and many in the diocese are disturbed that these issues are being brought up. Yet we cannot escape that history. The current wealth of the diocese is based on holding African people in bondage over several centuries.

*I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle.*

When I read this passage, I couldn’t help but think of Peter’s remark at the Transfiguration: “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” (Matthew 17:4) We even try to contain the Divine in that tent and tabernacle. But, of course, we cannot contain God; God contains us. Everything is impermanent. Everything is passing away except God’s own Self. And on that Day, that Great Day, all that is temporal will fall away. There will no longer be Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, or any of the other myriad distinctions that we make to separate ourselves from one another. Even our identity as religious will no longer be relevant, since, as is often said, “even a cincture cannot pass through the eye of the needle.” But we will be one in Christ Jesus.

*I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle.*

*Christopher Stephen Jenks*

## A Convocation Sermon

# What's in your Basket?

*A brother must endeavor to witness to our Redeemer's love with quietness, patience, humility, charity, courage and prayer, knowing that it is not he who shall finally bring the light, but only that he shall become a messenger for the One who is the light. — from the Rule of the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory*

Mark delivers to us this day Jesus' enigmatic teaching about light, baskets, beds, and lamp stands, and shining light on secrets. The picture that comes to my mind first and foremost is of the bushel basket. And not just any bushel basket. I mean that familiar bushel basket that each of us carries around everywhere we go to gather things from God's good garden. And I don't mean fruits and vegetables. I mean favors, recognition, accolades, and a sense of self-worth. And when that basket is empty, we are tempted out of our frustration to fling it over our own heads in shame, over someone else's head in blame, or simply over the light of Christ itself, so we can sit and brood in our own darkness for a time, however short or long.



*Richard Edward preaching this sermon*

And it's a basket woven, of course, not with leaves of sturdy vegetation, but our favorite pet vices — those patterns of life that are so familiar to us, so second nature, we mistake them for our baseline purpose; we assume them to be as indispensable to our life as the air we breathe or the water we drink or the food we eat. Some of us might call the material that makes up our bushel baskets “ego” or “pride” or “self-will” or even “sin.”

So ponder with me for a moment, my beloved brothers:

What makes up your bushel basket? What is it? It's probably a little different for each of us.

Mine is made mainly of perfectionism. You know this about me. And all the beautiful things I collect in my basket as a consequence. You know what I mean. A well-written text. A neatly crafted resolution. A perfected calendar. A well-curated website. A carefully crafted sermon. Some likes or even loves for a Facebook post. A Daily Office App. Yeah, that's the big bushel basket I mean. It's handy for many reasons.

But Jesus warns me and us again today, it can also pose a great danger.

It was twenty-two years ago this month as a master's student in piano at Northwestern University that my bushel basket of perfection was snuffing the light and life out of me. My brilliant teacher saw through me long before I could see through myself. “You're not saying much in studio class,” she observed one day, as we discussed my mountain of frustration at my technical inadequacies, “I see it,” she continued, “You're thinking ‘I'm not worthy.’”



Which of course was exactly what I was thinking. My perfectionism had taken over completely, ruining my body with tension just when the performance nerves hit. Murdering my peace of mind in the practice room as I worked phrases mercilessly over and over again hour by hour, day by day. My bushel basket of perfectionism, after seven years of pursuing a rash dream, was so tightly constructed, no light was getting out, and really no light was getting in for that matter. And I was hiding in shame underneath it, and slowly suffocating, it seemed, at the same time. It was time to leave, if I was going to breathe again and live. And so I left. And then I entered ministry. The only trouble was I didn't realize at the time that I had put down one bushel basket only to pick up another.

I've spent a lot of time the past few months in the midst of a bit of a public confessional. So why stop now? Early last year, for all my pride with math and handling numbers, I mistakenly gave my parish vestry an estimate rather than an actual pledge number for 2019. It was, you might say, the classical definition of a "clerical error." And so we ended up creating a budget with a nasty-sized hidden deficit. I didn't realize what I had done until September when I was reviewing the numbers again to get ready for 2020, and you could almost feel the earth quake — even though it was California and all — when my stomach hit the floor. One of our parish leaders, bless her, took the lead and embodied another verse out of today's Gospel by helping me shine a light on what had been hidden. The vestry soon had a full explanation in a three page, single-spaced memo with no holds barred and no shadows left for me to hide in.

A whole lot of unexpected things shook loose in that administrative earthquake. A hell of a lot of pride. And a lot of carefully tied fronds in my bushel basket of perfectionism. But at the end of the day, as the vestry rallied around, so did the parish, and thanks to the generosity of many and, as we say in this community, "by the grace of God and none other," we spooled up the financial shortfall before year's end. We had multiple checks and new accountability in place to make a mistake like this almost impossible going forward.

So I have to count my lucky stars that I am serving where I am serving. Yet even more importantly in all the conversations I had through those difficult weeks, I had learned that the concern of the people I so loved and served was not about my mistakes, let alone whether or not I was perfect. Nope, not at all.

Their concern was whether or not I was *present*.

Truth be told, like all those years ago at Northwestern, I was still spending a lot of time hiding the light of Christ under my bushel basket of perfectionism. No one doubts I work hard. But do I work at the things that really bring life? No one doubts I mean well and love lots. But do I allow time for others to love me back? Do I show up enough, imperfections and all, for that love to take root and grow into something life-giving for the community? The temptation, I realized to my horror, was to do exactly what I did all those years ago at Northwestern: try to be perfect, clam up with my errors, pull that basket over me, and then suffocate to the point of needing to leave.

But the problem was far more complicated this time. I'm older. I have bills to pay and children to feed. And I'm under vows. Vows of marriage. Vows of ordination. Vows of profession. And I realized before very long that — so long as the choice was mine to make — the only place to run would be into a dark abyss that would leave a world of broken hearts in my wake. The truth was, as I told parish leaders a few days ago during my annual review, I could stay and work on my edges, or leave and take my edges with me to work on them somewhere else.

I don't know about you, but a life of prayer and plain old time has an odd effect on my bushel basket. Like those old-fashioned woven baskets, mine tends to dry out with age, use, and time. As the fronds contract, gaps start to appear. Gaps that let in — or let out — the light of grace. Maybe the fact that our bushel baskets wear thin with age is an odd kind of blessing, an ironic kind of grace: Grace that grabs hold and still won't let me go.

To realize that for fourteen years I had been serving a community that, for all of its managerial prowess, hard-won accomplishments, and standards of excellence — it is, at the end of the day, a beloved community. A community that, in fact, did not expect me to be perfect. They expected me, as parish leadership reminded me in one of the hardest conversations I have ever had in seventeen years of pastoral ministry — they expected me simply to be vulnerable enough to be present.

All our business about a Rule and vows, and formation, and pastoral ministry in all its rich variety, and grappling with the inner life, and tangling with things spiritual, and yes, coming to terms with each of our unique bushel baskets — our favorite pet sins that, but for grace, might consume us.

You see, had I been more present, I would have long ago let other eyes in the room as I crunched the numbers. I would have piped up sooner and said, "I might be able to do this by myself, but I really shouldn't," or at least "Hey, I think these numbers are right, but can you check them for me?"

Sure, perfecting church governance stuff is fun. Like it was fun the other day to type up a humorous email inviting questions on parliamentary procedure from the diocese, where I am the newly minted secretary of diocesan convention. The first question I got back was from my predecessor, who humorously pointed out to me that my formal title is not "Secretary of Convention" but, by the constitution and canons, it is "Secretary of *the* Convention" — a

point that we avowed canonical nerds would most appreciate, and it gave my bushel basket of perfectionism a little whirl in good fun. But that kind of care with language is only intended to serve a greater purpose. To make something else possible. To be of service to a far bigger cause.

Bushel baskets are meant to serve only by carrying things, not hide the light. As if to prove the point, just yesterday I decided to skip lunch and take a nap after wearing myself down trying to perfect my first attempt at writing an icon. Instead I ended up on two emergency pastoral calls, showing up at least virtually for two beloved families of the parish. I caught myself sorely tempted to stumble over my own feet in a race for the bushel basket of perfection and apologize for being away on retreat. As though I were somehow responsible for the scheduling of Winter Convocation and unplanned family emergencies!

They didn't care about my overdeveloped sense of responsibility, of course. What mattered is that I called them back right away and could say a prayer with them, even from 2,500 miles away. I could tell them I missed them and looked forward to seeing them when I return. That I would be there when it came time for a burial or the inevitable conversation about what happens when the shock of today wears off enough to start thinking about tomorrow again. It wasn't perfect. There's no precise prayer in the Prayer Book for what they needed. And I didn't have a day-and-a-half to wordsmith one. But that was the point. In a moment of grief, they needed light from a trusted presence. They needed a pastor pointing to the light of Christ. And I needed to grieve with them and see that light with them — not exhaust myself by dancing around yet again with my bushel basket of perfectionism.

And the care of presence took only a few minutes. And it was enough. And I felt refreshed — much more so, in fact — than I might have done by simply taking a nap.

This, I was reminded, was what this life of being a brother and a pastor is all about. Maybe that's what Jesus means in part to us in this enigmatic teaching today. All our business about a Rule and vows, and formation, and pastoral ministry in all its rich variety, and grappling with the inner life, and tangling with things spiritual, and yes, coming to terms with each of our unique bushel baskets — our favorite pet sins that, but for grace, might consume us.

This is about learning truly to pray, truly to give ourselves over, and to learn to set our baskets down long enough to let the light shine. Because we need that light to bring us to life. We need that light to offer to one another. And a world deeply troubled by its own darkness needs that light to see by. And our beloved Savior calls us to put that light on a lamp stand — if indeed we truly want to be part of the gracious redemption that God is offering.

*Richard Edward Helmer*

