

# The Servant



*Celebrating the sacrifice of  
thanksgiving...*

at Saint Mary's Seminary  
chapel

#269

*Autumn / Winter 2023*

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### *Where there's a will*

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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.*

## Lead on to the House of God

*I pour out my soul when I think on these things, how I went with the multitude and led them into the house of God. — Psalm 42:4*

Remembering Mary Magdalene on the occasion of three of our brothers' life profession reveals, in fact, some connections, some commonalities. Mary had an intense love for the Lord Jesus. We've all heard the song from *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, but I disagree with it, because Mary did indeed know how to love Jesus.



*The late Ruth Attaway as an aged Mary Magdalene in Owen Dodson's play, The Confession Stone*

I went on line to see if I could get some clarity about this woman and the misconceptions we hear about her. The Internet provides both. One site said she was twenty-seven when she married Jesus, and had her first child at age thirty — Tamar. At 34 she gave birth to her second child, whom they named Jesus, and her third child was named Joseph — the all-important Grail child. Mary was a Gnostic and Jesus respected her right to choose her own religion. She died in 60 AD in Southern France. One website suggests that the Roman Catholic Church suppressed the true story because it was too threatening.

Well, I'm of the view that she wasn't a prostitute, she didn't marry Jesus, and she didn't write the Fourth Gospel. What *do* we know about this maligned woman? It is written that she was freed from seven demons. What were these? Mental illness? Physical illness? Sexual sin? Mary was restored to health by Jesus, but we know nothing else about what her old

life looked like. We know the story of Mary at the Tomb on Easter Day. Even after she was told the body was not there, she did not give up. Mary has been often misunderstood but she can teach us how to love Jesus completely. Somehow Mary could not give up. She didn't expect to see Jesus, but this persistent woman could not pull herself away either.

So what can we brothers — what can we, out in the world — learn in these troubled times; times that some believe to be the end times?

Mary showed perseverance. Perseverance — a personal note if I may — none of you and I as well, would not be here if I had not persevered in realizing the call I felt. I mean no ego here and I think all of you know that I am humbled every time we line up for a group photo. All of you, in whatever stage you are, have persevered to reach that point. Those who are making life profession have persevered for more than seven years! But you are not finished because now we expect you

to be even more devoted, and serve as a living example for the rest of the community. Life — which I like to call “solemn” — profession is serious business. “For the balance of my natural life” gives one pause; and it ought to. The love of Christ urges us on; the love of Christ urged Mary on until she was able to tell the disciples — “I have seen the Lord!”

Perhaps you have wondered why I chose that verse from Psalm 42 at the start of this reflection. In these troubled times in our land, all of us, especially those who are making life vows, need to heed those words, “and led them into the house of God.” Key among our ministries is just that — to lead people into the house of God. Our mission in these days is to welcome those whom we meet and those who ask, “Does the Episcopal Church have religious brothers and sisters?” Our answer is, Yes! And here we are!

This is a great opportunity to evangelize. Mary did exactly that (and I exercise some of my own interpretation) when she said, “I have seen the Lord.” No doubt the disciples asked her questions and those around them were also pulled into the scene and wondered.

One of my favorite books is *The Jesus Prayer* by Bishop Arthur Vogel. In my work at the Episcopal Church Center in New York, I had the honor of knowing him. Those who have been in the community have often sung the version of the Jesus Prayer responsively, a gift to us from Sister Helen Joyce. Bishop Vogel suggests this form of the Prayer, “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, set me free to serve!”



*The Minister General*

Our service, your service and mine, is a gift from the God whom we serve. When Mary met Jesus she proclaimed in Hebrew, “Rabbouni,” which means *teacher*. Jesus told her to go to the brothers and tell them he was going to the Father. That was the command! We here today also receive that command, that *mandatum*. Some of you are accredited teachers in the literal sense, but bringing people to God does not require a degree. Love in what you show and bring to this broken and confused world is the highest accreditation.

My brothers, taking on the Rule for the rest of your lives, are charged to do more, to serve more. Life Profession is not the end — it is the beginning. As you go from this Convocation, you leave changed, and as you go, I give you a gift, a Puerto Rican prayer, given myself and David, “Dios aprieta, pero no ahorca” — “God squeezes, but he never chokes.”

RTB



## Community Notes

*Annual Convocation 2023*

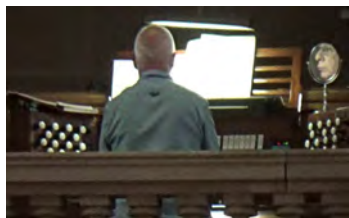


The Brotherhood met for Annual Convocation 2023 on July 17-22 at Saint Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore, Maryland. This vast facility amply provided space and accommodation for our assembled brothers; Saint Mary's is the first and largest seminary of the Roman Catholic Church in the USA, so there was no question that there would be enough room for us! The seminary offers year-round facilities for retreat groups up to about 30 in number, and the Brotherhood had held its Winter Convocation 2023 in January there. But Annual Convocation requires more space than does the winter gathering, and Saint Mary's offers much of the seminary accommodations for larger groups in the summer when there are no students present. Having enjoyed the facilities for Province 3 retreats as well as for Winter Convocation earlier this year, this was the perfect time to enjoy the whole complex — and so we did!



The Chapel at Saint Mary's Seminary is vast and provides permanent seating in the choir for hundreds — evidence of former days for the seminary. The facilities are excellent in every respect, the food ample and delicious, and the guestrooms provided everything that could be wanted for our retreat and convocation. The staff there was very pleasant and able to provide whatever we needed. Saint Mary's Seminary and University was an excellent choice for the Brotherhood's Annual Convocation 2023, and it won't be our last visit there!

Advance arrangements were made by our Administrator and Sacristan, Eric Shelley (Southwestern Virginia), who has developed a fine working relationship with the seminary's retreat staff. An early site visit was provided by James Teets and Tobias Stanislas Haller (both in Maryland), from which we gathered



*Richard John at the organ console,  
in profile in his rearview mirror*

information and ideas about how our daily liturgies would be arranged there, and that proved most helpful when everyone began to arrive on July 17th. There are three sacristies which serve the main chapel, including a vesting sacristy with at least eight vesting stations! Music for the Daily Offices and the Masses was overseen by Nathanael Deward Rahm (Chicago), our Director of Convocation Music and

Liturgy, who also organized the rota of daily organists — the large chapel organ was put to very good use by our scheduled daily organists: Nathanael Deward, Richard John Lorino (Central Florida), Enoch John Valentine (Rhode Island) and Tommy Mandri (Southeast Florida).

Each Annual Convocation begins with The Gathering Service, a welcoming event intended to center each participant in the surroundings and to bring the members together for the week. The Gathering Service recalls our many and various ministries throughout the church since our last time together, and it calls upon each of us to reflect upon our religious vows and our Rule, within Christian history. It is a rite of memory, wherein our Minister General Richard Thomas Biernacki (New Jersey) invites each person present to, “Remember that you are incorporate in the Body of Christ, and that you are sealed as Christ’s own for ever!” Indeed a moving way to begin our convocation, especially after traveling across the country for a day or longer in order to be here!

Each day of our time together centered on prayer and celebration — the Daily Office and the Holy Eucharist. Throughout the week each member will serve as an Officiant or a Reader or as one of the participants in the daily Eucharist. Each morning includes a house meeting following Morning Prayer, where everyone hears the details of that day’s activities. There is a printed schedule, of course, provided by Director of Convocation Liturgy and Music Nathanael Deward, but there are always details to be added or discussed for each day together. Then it’s off to take up the daily schedule, which began at Morning Prayer with “Lord, open our lips!”

Our first full day together was Tuesday, July 18th, and that morning and afternoon started the week’s retreat program, presented by Director of Education Thomas Bushnell (Long Island) in the format of Breakout Groups organized into the six regional Provinces of the Brotherhood. The brothers used a set of prompting questions to reflect on the meaning of the Sabbath — the theme for the week.

That evening was set aside for the renewal of annual vows by Richard Edward Helmer (California), Tommy, and Christopher Robert Werth (Maryland), which takes the form of a meeting with the Minister General, and for each his Minister Provincial — an expression of religious obedience in itself — while the other



members enjoyed some catching-up time. Complines closes this and every evening when we are together.

Each day's centerpiece is the Holy Eucharist and our celebrants for this convocation were Tobias Stanislas, Ælred Bernard Dean (Indianapolis), Mark Andrew Jones (Southeast Florida), David Luke Henton (Rio Grande) and Richard Edward; our deacons were Edward Munro (Maryland), Virgilio Fortuna (Massachusetts) and Gordon John Stanley (Chicago); acolytes were James, Joseph Basil Gauss (Chicago), Francis Jonathan Bullock (Indianapolis), Eric, and Scott Michael Pomerenk (Colorado); Ronald Augustine Fox (Chicago) was thurifer at all of our liturgies. Excellent preaching was always present, of course, this summer provided by Ronald Augustine, Thomas, Scott Michael, David Benedict Hedges (Arizona) and of course our Founder and Minister General, Richard Thomas, at the Saturday convocation liturgy. (Texts of some of these sermons appear in this issue.)



Wednesday's retreat program was organized by our resident film buff, Scott Michael (at left), presenting a screening of Leo McCarey's 1937 *Make Way for Tomorrow*, a reflection on the passage of time and generational dysfunction. Later in the afternoon, Scott Michael convened a discussion on the film in relation to our retreat theme.

Later that day the Ministers Provincial met, exploring issues facing them in working with the community's provincial structure, and their responsibilities. Following Evening Prayer all of the six Provinces held individual annual meetings, planning events for the coming year and discussing events from the year now past. Province West used this opportunity to elect its new Minister Provincial — David Benedict — after giving heartfelt thanks for the ministry of William Henry Benefield (West Texas), who now stepped down as MP in order to take up the ministry of Director of Education, beginning from this convocation forward for the next three years.

Thursday began as usual, with breakfast in the refectory (below), Morning Prayer in chapel, and the daily house meeting, followed immediately by Annual Chapter, where the Minister General, the six Ministers Provincial and each of the other officials of the community reported to the gathered body of the members.





Part of Chapter (seen above with members unable to attend joining via Zoom) included honoring those who have attained their 25th anniversary under vows. The Minister General honored William David Everett (Massachusetts) in absentia, and presented Thomas (at left) with a Silver Jubilee plate commemorating this wonderful event; health considerations prevented William David from attending this Convocation, and the plate will come his way via his MP.

Another presentation also took place — the very first of its kind — when Richard Thomas announced the Silver Jubilee of our Episcopal Visitor Rodney R Michel. Bishop Rodney was hospitalized at the time of the convocation, and his 25th Anniversary Silver Plate was delivered by James and Tobias Stanislas, who visit him regularly, once he was home from rehab after hip surgery (right). Bishop Rodney is the fourth Episcopal Visitor to the Brotherhood — and the longest-serving in that position to date. The previous Bishops Visitor were: Horace WB Donegan, 1969-1972; Paul Moore Jr, 1972-1989; Walter Decoster Dennis, 1989-1998, to whom Bishop Rodney succeeded in 1998. God bless them, and we thank them, *every one!*



Chapter took two actions as part of its annual business. The first was giving thanks to Virgilio for his service as the Chapter's representative to the Nidecker Continuing Education Fund. He is also the Minister Provincial of Province 1, and demands upon his time are such that he needed to let one responsibility pass on to another brother. So, with due thanks to Virgilio from all at the Chapter Meeting, Jason Peter Seta (Pennsylvania) was elected, for a three-year term, beginning immediately.

Ronald Augustine proposed an amendment to the Customary section "Of the Habit," which would have permitted the optional wearing of a "[white/brown] capuce or shoulder cape over the tunic and scapular." After some debate, a substitute motion was adopted, stopping short of amending the Customary, but noting Chapter's approval for allowing brothers in profession the option of wearing a



white shoulder cape over the habit. This ended the 2023 Chapter Meeting, and everyone proceeded to the chapel for Noonday Prayer.

Following lunch and the Eucharist in commemoration of historic social reformers Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Amelia Bloomer, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Ross Tubman, Thursday afternoon was occupied with a meeting of the Benevolent Trust Board.

After Evening Prayer the Brotherhood's Council met, taking up needful matters including consent to the election of David Benedict as Minister Provincial of Province West; approval of postulant Clayton D Johnson (Pennsylvania) for reception as a novice; and endorsing Jason Peter in the process for discernment for Holy Orders in his diocese.

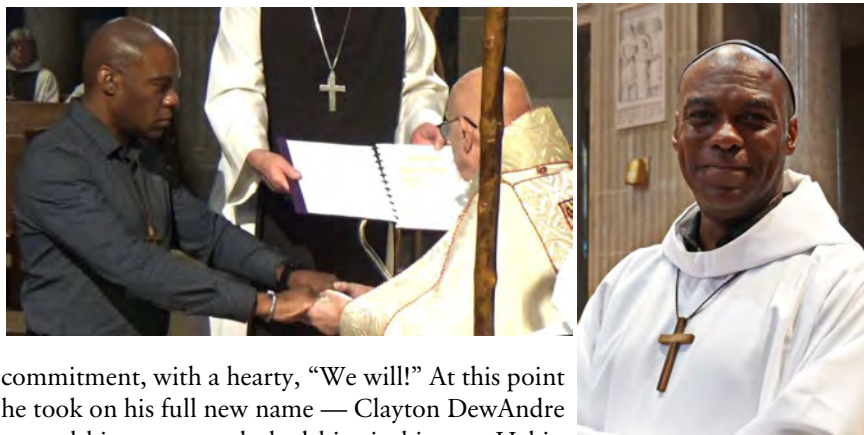
Much of Friday, following Morning Prayer, was taken up in preparation of liturgical events of the final two days of Annual Convocation, beginning with rehearsals for the rites of Reception of Clayton and the Commissioning of David Benedict as our newest Minister Provincial, which would take place at Evening Prayer that same day. (Commissioning of William Henry as Director of Education was delayed till a future gathering, as William Henry was traveling on business and could not attend this convocation.) Those involved rehearsed the Rite of Life Profession of Vows (Scott Michael, Angel Gabriel Roque (Rio Grande) and David Benedict), set for the main Convocation Holy Eucharist on Saturday morning. Master of Ceremony James took all of the participants through their parts of these liturgies in order, with the participation of Minister General Richard Thomas and his Chaplain, John Henry Ernestine (Newark).

Noonday Prayer followed, then lunch and that day's Eucharist. After a short break, Nathanael Deward assembled the Schola participants for a rehearsal of their part in the Saturday liturgy, which would include an anthem by Tallis and Tobias Stanislas' new hymn, "I Vow to You My Savior" as the Offertory.



Evening Prayer included a meditative prelude as Richard Edward (left) performed Brahms' *Intermezzo in A major* Op 118 No 2. The Office featured the Reception into the Novitiate and the Commissioning of the new Minister Provincial. The Minister General was

Officiant, assisted by Chaplain John Henry and MC James. Following the Canticle, Candidate Clayton D Johnson was presented by his Sponsors, Director of Education Thomas (standing in for Director of Postulants and Novices Tobias Stanislas, who was responsible for videotaping this service) and Clayton's Mentor, Ælred Bernard. Once presented to the Minister General, Clayton stated his desire to become a novice, and responded positively to questions posed by the Minister General, after which the entire community showed its support for Clayton in his



commitment, with a hearty, “We will!” At this point he took on his full new name — Clayton DewAndre — and his sponsors clothed him in his new Habit. After a final blessing with incense, the Minister General presented him to the community, which greeted him joyfully! (He appears above making his novice promise of obedience, and clothed in his new habit.)

Next came the Commissioning of David Benedict as Minister Provincial of Province West. Following the Minister General’s introduction of the process which brought this brother to this moment, he responded to questions regarding his desire to fulfill this ministry, after which Richard Thomas pronounced his appointment to this office: “My brother, we are bound together in love and service. May you be obedient, careful, and ready always to serve the servants of God, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.” The new Minister Provincial was then presented to the community, which responded with their full support of David Benedict’s new ministry among us: “Bear this yoke of responsibility, upheld by our prayers and our love!”

Following Evening Prayer, convocation photographs were taken, this year on the steps of the Seminary’s choir, followed by some well-earned relaxation before and following Compline!

Saturday, the final day of Annual Convocation 2023, began with Morning Prayer as usual, then immediately followed by the customary house meeting. Then came the preparations for the Holy Eucharist, scheduled for 10:30 am. This final liturgy of the Brotherhood’s annual gathering is the traditional spot where professions of vows take place, at the culmination of a week of deep prayer, teaching, reuniting, and thanksgiving to God. The public profession of vows makes each person present a witness to the solemn promises made at this time, but the significance of those vows goes much deeper: Each brother makes his promises directly to God at that time, and he does so with the confidence that each person witnessing his promises will aid and support him in fulfilling each vow in the future, whether that be for the next year, in the case of first profession of annual vows, or *forever*, as stated at life profession.



This year, three men requested to make life profession of vows in the Brotherhood, and their Ministers Provincial, Council, and a majority of those already life professed have supported their requests. Those brothers are (left, at their presentation), Scott Michael, Angel Gabriel and David Benedict. At the Litany during the liturgy, the three candidates come forward and, as a symbol of the permanence of the

vows which they are each about to make, they lie prostrate in the middle of the assembly (right) and are covered with the funeral pall, symbolizing their death to their previous lives. MC James and Sacristan Eric presided over this, assisted by Bo Alexander Armstrong (East Tennessee), Francis Jonathan, and Larry Walter Reich (East Tennessee) — the three brothers who have most recently made their own life professions. When Deacon Gordon John concluded singing the Litany, the Celebrant (Richard Edward) sang the final collect and the palls were lifted and the three Candidates rose to make their vows.



*David Benedict receives the life profession ring.*



*The Minister General (right), assisted by James, receives Angel Gabriel's life profession.*



*Scott Michael signs the Instrument of Life Profession.*

The Rite begins with the Minister General's opening statement to the assembly, stating the intention of the vowed life and the holy significance of what is about to happen in the lives of the three candidates. The candidates are then presented by the Ministers Provincial and, following their assurances that these persons are ready and able to take up this responsibility, each kneels before the Minister

General and makes his life profession of vows. Each then signs a copy of the text of the vows he has just made, and then the Minister General blesses the gold rings and places one upon the third finger of the right hand of each. The rite concludes with the Minister General presenting the three brothers to the assembly, with a hearty round of applause, and the Holy Eucharist continues with the Offertory.



*Richard John at the Mission Service (photo J Carch)*

Annual Convocation 2023 began with the welcoming provided in The Gathering Service and concluded with The Mission Service, as it always does, when the Minister General leads us in giving thanks for this fruitful and prayerful time together, and sends us out again to do the many ministries which our individual vocations focus us with, supported by our vows, our promises, and the loving prayers of each of our brothers. Each member comes humbly before the Minister General with heartfelt thanksgiving, and he responds to each one in this way: “May the Holy Spirit guide and strengthen you, that in all things you may serve and glorify God.” The comforting words of the 23rd Psalm are then chanted, after which the Minister General gives the Dismissal: “Servants of the servants of God, go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit!” to which all respond: “Thanks be to God, to whom alone be glory!” And all then depart with the words of the Brotherhood’s “anthem,” — “Ye watchers and ye holy ones!” *Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!*



### *Province 2*

While spending the summer months in upstate New York, away from the heat and humidity of Central Florida, Richard John Lorino goes to church at Saint John’s in Monticello. On Sunday morning, July 2nd, he was present for the first visitation of the new Bishop Coadjutor of the Diocese of New York, Matthew Heyd, who is visiting all of the outer parishes of the large diocese, and, as Richard John reports, “doing a wonderful job of keeping these folks





connected and feeling included.” A neighboring parish from the rural cluster had closed recently, and this has hit worshipers in the area hard; Bishop Matthew’s presence helped them feel a bit safer. “The people there loved him because he listened to their concerns and responded with clarity and a beautiful sense of pastoral caring,” said Richard John. “He is a genuinely kind man. I gave him the greetings of all Gregorian Friars and assured him of our prayers as he begins his episcopate. He very kindly gave me his permission to officiate and preach while I am here on Sundays, as they do not yet have a priest. I think he will be good for this diocese!”

We couldn’t agree more heartily, and we thank you for sharing our good wishes! (Photo, Darlene Benzenberg)

### *Province 3*

Novice Clayton DewAndre Johnson (Pennsylvania) helped serve as part of a gun buy-back program at Saint Luke’s Germantown in Philadelphia in late July. The event was a



success and they were able to remove 118 guns and what appeared to be a rocket launcher from the streets. He was delighted to be a part of this important project, which started prayerfully from the group that meets for the midweek Holy Eucharist and Bible Study (photo at right). The group’s prayers and discussions led them to discerning this event as a way to put prayer and concern into action.



⊕ On Saturday, September 16th, the Brothers of Province 3 traveled to Washington DC to participate in the ordination and consecration of Carrie Schofield-Broadbent as Bishop Coadjutor of the

Diocese of Maryland. BSG had the largest representation of the several religious communities present for the event’s procession. (Above, the brothers in process, and at the right at the reception after the liturgy.)



### *Province 5*

Ronald Augustine Fox (Chicago) has learned that he has met all requirements for the Certificate in Trauma and Spiritual Care from the Graduate School of Theology at the University of Redlands in Redlands CA. From September 2022 through September 2023 he successfully completed the four required courses: Dynamics of Trauma; Collective Trauma and Collective Memory; God, Suffering, and Pastoral Care; and Trauma Care Resiliency. Each course built upon the last, establishing first a theoretical understanding of trauma, both personal and collective, before diving into different theological approaches to suffering and ways of providing trauma-informed care and encouraging resiliency. Participants engaged in small-group reflection, developed caring rituals, applied concepts in acts of service, and envisioned ways to bring aspects of caring activism into their work. He also recently completed a short course, “The Liturgy of the Hours,” from the Liturgical Institute of the University of Saint Mary of the Lake in Mundelein IL. Congratulations!

### *Province West*

Richard Edward Helmer (California) was on sabbatical over the summer, spending time as a chaplain at Camp Mokule‘ia on the north shore of Oahu, on retreat at the New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur, California, and with family in the Midwest and Ozarks. While with the Camaldoli, Richard Edward met Father Zacchaeus, who remembered the Brotherhood’s retreats with the Camaldoli community in New Hampshire in the 1980s. In addition to resting and poetry writing, Richard Edward honed his photography skills with small subjects: primarily flowers and insects (above right). He is now back as Rector of Church of Our Saviour, Mill Valley, California, and setting about to help lead the parish into a renewal of its children and youth programs. He continues his service for the fourth year as Secretary of the Convention of the Diocese of California, which is preparing to elect their ninth bishop before year’s end.



⊕ James Patrick Hall (Colorado) reports that Rocky Mountain Refuge, offering end of life care to unsheltered people in the Denver area, has temporarily suspended operations. The last resident for the time being is gone, the doors are locked, papers filed away, and the rooms have been cleaned. All is in waiting and preparation for a new beginning. As painful as this suspension is, James Patrick and other staff, including Scott Michael, recognize the good that has been done. Since the work began, twenty-one people have died in comfort and companionship. Each one has been properly medicated, cared for, and spent their last days with our wonderful caregivers and volunteers — far better than struggling alone on the street. Of those served, three chose discharge from hospice and our program. One was discharged by hospice because he was no longer dying, recovered to such an extent that he was healthy enough to leave. The ministry had





*An empty bed at Rocky Mountain Refuge*

a profound impact on these lives and they've had an impact on all who participated and supported the work.

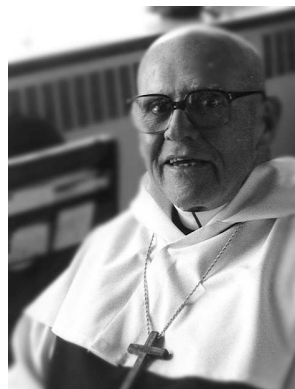
The Rocky Mountain Refuge Board is working on new funding and operating models for the future. They have not given up. The need is there and is only growing, a gap in care for Colorado's most vulnerable people. Conversations have started nationally concerning respite care for people experiencing homelessness. Now there are several respite programs in cities nationwide. The RMR board intend to keep evangelizing about the topic of end of life care in the same way, and look forward to the time that specialized shelters like the Refuge are all around the nation — and reopened in Colorado.

*Convocation vignette*

## **A Goosepimple Moment!**

On the Saturday morning of Annual Convocation, amid the activity of preparing for the Holy Eucharist, I noticed a gentleman in clerical dress enter the chapel and take a seat assigned to visitors at that liturgy. I didn't recognize him, and everyone else was very busy, so when I found a free moment, I went down into the choir and approached him. I introduced myself, and he responded immediately with his name — the Rev Timothy Carr — and that he was from Rockville, Maryland, and was present in support of Angel Gabriel Roque, who was one of the candidates for life profession of vows that morning. "Rockville, Maryland" immediately rang bells for me, and I responded, "Brother John Nidecker, one of the early brothers of our order, was from Christ Church Rockville," to which he said: "I'm the rector of Christ Church!"

Seldom in my life have I felt such goosepimples on my neck and up and down my back! Could our dear Brother John be here in this chapel with us, today, now? I then explained that John was a long-time member of Christ Church, one of our earliest Gregorian friars; that the second Chapter meeting of our order was held there in 1978 and that I and other members of the Brotherhood had stayed at the rectory. John was very active during those years, though he died in June, 1988 — 35 years ago. Just then the



*John in 1983*

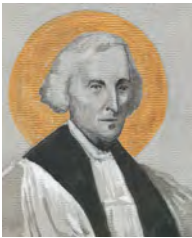
Minister General came into the chapel and I was delighted to introduce him to the rector of Christ Church Rockville, which was as much a joy for Richard Thomas as it was for me!

Tim was very kind and listened to my rambling reflections, though he was unaware of John Nidecker or the Brotherhood's history at his parish; he is involved with youth ministry at his parish and he met Angel Gabriel earlier this year at the Episcopal Youth Event at the nearby University of Maryland. And so we welcomed him warmly, and I really knew that his presence in that chapel on that day was a reminder that our beloved Brother John, and all of our dear brothers who now pray for us in heaven, were also there with us that day, as they always are! *Goosepimples* really can't describe the blessed sense of presence that I felt that day!

*James Teets*

## *A Convocation Sermon on William White Called, Comforted, and Sent*

For some, including me, order is a huge attraction to the Episcopal Church — we have bishops and dioceses and a Book of Common Prayer, structures that hold folks accountable.



Today we honor William White, who valued order, but did not worship authority or hierarchy. Instead, Bishop White believed that lay voices had to be involved in governing the church — this belief shapes how the Episcopal Church operates to this day.

White was also flexible in a way that would be controversial to many Episcopalians even today. The church was in a sticky situation, regarding ordinations. Being ordained a priest in the Church of England required vowing allegiance to the king — a problem for people in the newly independent United States.

The church in America couldn't ordain more priests on its own because in our tradition you need a bishop to do an ordination, and there weren't any. To have a priest be ordained a bishop by the Church of England meant running into the same problem about allegiance to the king.

Eventually, we found a way forward, with the help of non-juring Scottish bishops, when Samuel Seabury was consecrated in 1784. Before that, White suggested ordinations without bishops as a temporary, emergency act.

For White, things like church order and structure were meant to enable “the worship of God and instruction and reformation of the people.” Giving up those



things, just for the sake of adhering to traditional practice around bishops, is, to use his phrase, “sacrificing the substance to the ceremony.”

Essentially, White’s position seemed to be that bishops and church order are meant to serve the Gospel. When trying to keep that order in place means you have to let proclamation of the Gospel waver — you’re doing the opposite of what God intends. Many Anglicans then and now would challenge White’s willingness to set aside bishops, even if it was just temporary.

While his plan didn’t pan out, I think it’s significant that someone who suggested this became a bishop himself and is commemorated on our calendar. It shows that flexibility and order can go together more than we sometimes suspect.

Another thing I’d highlight about Bishop White is that concern for order only matters if it is matched with care about people. White seemed to have this in spades. For example, he was the president of the Philadelphia Society for the Alleviation of Miseries of Public Prisons, and he also stayed in Philadelphia during a yellow fever outbreak to continue ministering to the sick and poor.

White was the first bishop of Pennsylvania. He served at churches in Pennsylvania and was also the chaplain of the Continental Congress and U.S. Senate. When elected bishop, he had to travel back to England; he and Samuel Provoost were consecrated in 1787. Bishop White was a chief architect of the Constitution of the Episcopal Church and served as Presiding Bishop at the first General Convention. In his long life he mentored many church greats, and steered the American Church through its first decades of independent life — a hearty task given the Episcopal Church’s ties to England after the Revolution.

I have often wondered how those early church-formers experienced their call. The transition from the Church of England to the Episcopal Church must have been scary. We often talk about the church reinventing itself today, but the church in the U.S. in the late 1700s really had to reinvent its whole identity. I imagine many thought the church would die or at least flee from the United States. To have been so bold as to totally reinvent the structure of the church took vision, courage and faith.

Bishop White could have easily told God what Jeremiah did in our Old Testament lesson today. Jeremiah says, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” Bishop White was only forty years old when he became Bishop — one could argue he was only a boy, too. But when God calls people to ministries, God does so with gusto. God tells Jeremiah, “... you shall go tell to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.” God’s instructions are firm and a bit scary. But God also affirms Jeremiah: “I am with you to deliver you,” says the LORD.

Bishop White must have heard God’s affirmation in order to do all that he did. But God’s challenge and comfort is not just for prophets and leaders. God’s challenge and comfort is for each of us, too. Though we may not have such grandiose calls, God has called on each person here as religious brothers in BSG. Our reminder today is that God does challenge us to go where God sends, but God also comforts us with the assurance that God is with us and delivers us.

*Ronald Augustine Fox*

## *A Convocation Sermon on Macrina*

### **Listening to the end**



Macrina of Caesarea is also known as Macrina the Younger: she was named after her grandmother, also a saint; if I had a nickel for every saint named Macrina I’d have a dime. Macrina was from a famous family, most of whom — over generations — were celebrated theologians, teachers, and servants of God, many of them eventually canonized as saints. The most well-known are Macrina and her younger brothers Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa.

Macrina was a religious, living a consecrated life of asceticism, devoted to prayer and study. She was honored in Caesarea as a teacher, a healer, and the founder of a convent in which all the women, regardless of class origin, lived as equals.

Most of what we know about Macrina comes from her brother Gregory, the Bishop of Nyssa, who wrote a short biography of his sister, and a slightly longer book called, “Dialogue on the Soul and the Resurrection.” That dialogue occurred shortly after the death of Basil; Gregory writes:

Basil, great among the saints, had departed from this life to God; and the impulse to mourn him was shared by all the churches. But his sister the Teacher was still living, and so I journeyed to her, yearning for an interchange of sympathy over the loss of [our] brother. My soul was right sorrow-stricken by this grievous blow, and I sought for one who could feel it equally, to mingle my tears with. But when we were in each other’s presence the sight of the Teacher awakened all my pain; for she too was lying in a state of prostration even unto death.”

Imagine seeking out your sibling to commiserate over the death of another sibling only to find that she is dying too!

As their conversation begins, Gregory reveals that he is experiencing what so many of us have experienced: that it can be hard to hold on to our theology — our faith and hope in the Resurrection — in the face of the death of someone we love.

Macrina briefly indulges him in his grief — his notion that Basil is dead and gone forever; but then she moves to correct him — and not always gently! She assures him that the soul persists after the body’s decomposition; that it is what connects us to God’s love, and that all beings good or evil will someday be “assimilated to the Divine Nature.” Basil — and anyone we love — are never truly gone from us.



The Dialogue is modeled after those in Greek philosophy; but something that strikes me about it is its depiction of their thoughtful discourse and relationship as siblings. In his “Life of Macrina” Gregory writes condescendingly of her gender even as he praises her wisdom. She does not have his education or authority as a priest, and yet in the Dialogue he recognizes and always defers to her autodidactic knowledge and God-given wisdom, and calls her “the Teacher.”

“The Life of Macrina” might just as well be titled “The Life *and Death* of Macrina,” for nearly half of the book deals — very movingly — with her final days and hours and the days after her death. Gregory is tasked with preparing Macrina’s body for burial, with the help of the women in her convent. When the sisters burst into wailing and tears, it is Gregory who reminds them of Macrina’s teaching on the soul and the Resurrection. He has learned and can now teach the Teacher’s lesson.

“I sought wisdom openly in my prayer,” says our reading from Sirach. “Before the temple I asked for her... I inclined my ear a little and received her, and I found for myself much instruction. I made progress in her; To [her] who gives wisdom I will give glory.”

It occurs to me that Gregory could have taken Macrina’s theology and presented it as his own. It was the 4th century; Macrina was a woman and a layperson, and as Shakespeare’s Rosalind would put it, “It is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue.” But he gave glory to the human from whom he heard this wisdom, and the God who gave it to her. What we read in the Dialogue is a brother who listens carefully and thoughtfully to his sibling, and learns from her wisdom. “Here are my mother and my siblings.”

My brothers, there is wisdom all around us, wisdom God has given to our siblings in the world. Part of our work as brothers is to listen and learn. When I made my first profession of vows six years ago, I was told that while I had completed my formal formation in this community, as a friar and as a Christian my formation would never be finished. And now I find myself at the side of dying people, listening to their wisdom, listening to their hopes and fears.

I know you are doing the same in your communities: listening to your fellow parishioners, your co-workers, people living on the streets in your cities, people

living and dying wherever you are. This is what brothers do. May we never stop listening, learning, and passing on what we have learned.

*Scott Michael Pomerenk*

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## *A Convocation homily*

### God is one who knocks

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I will acknowledge that it is fairly clear that the lectionary readings for today, for the ancient feast of Stanton, Tubman, Truth, and Bloomer, were chosen for a pretty clear reason. We have the unlikely hero who saves the day, killing Abimelech during his reign of terror — a woman — the last person, one would expect. She throws down a millstone and Abimelech's priority is to get out his sexism in his last dying breath. It is one of the ironies of scripture, of course, that this is what he is remembered for. "Oh, he's the guy who was killed by the woman with the millstone." We know this from an episode in the David and Bathsheba story, where it is mentioned as an example.

And it is clear, I think, that the gospel reading was chosen again because of its pre-echoes, perhaps, of Martin Luther King Jr's comment that "the arc of the universe may be long but it bends toward justice." Those who ask for justice eventually do get it. And as we think of these women who fought both sexism and racism in their lives, we can see that as a reason the lectionary planners chose these readings.

But there's a problem with this gospel reading, and it's often found in your printed Bible where you'll find a caption that says something like "Perseverance in prayer." This is an example of one of those captions — it seemed obvious to the people who put captions down. But you will notice, if you look carefully, that Jesus does not refer to this as being about prayer. And while there is perseverance, it is like many parables or such sayings of Jesus, in that he does not so clearly say who is who in the story. And if we think we can figure out who is who in the story, in simple terms, we may get in trouble.

What I'm about to give you is a reading of this gospel, that is not the normal reading. It is not because I disagree with the normal reading or I think it's wrong,





but I think there are other readings that we may miss, that may give us something. And the reason I want another reading is because there's a dangerous way to take this gospel: that if you don't get what you ask for, maybe you just haven't asked rightly, or you're not praying hard enough, or you haven't been persistent enough, or you don't have enough need, or whatever it is. That's not good theology. But there's another way to read this text.



I'll start with a little story. A boy is on a camping trip with his family. And one day he wanders off into the woods. When the adults are not looking, off goes the boy for a hike, perhaps to find a good set of stones to throw into the lake, or a stick for the marshmallow roast, or whatever it is. But off with purpose he treads. And after an hour or so, he realizes that he doesn't have a clue how to get back. And he runs around and around and he hollers and he hollers to no avail.

Meanwhile, in the camp, the adults noticed very quickly that the boy was gone. From one minute to the next. "Where's Peter?" — or Alex or whatever his name is. And they start to look. And finally, one of the men, after hours of searching in the forest, comes across the boy. Delighted, the boy runs up to his father and receives a hug and says, "Daddy daddy, I found you!" And back they go to the camp.

The boy was lost long before the boy knew he was lost. And he thought he was hunting for the adults and safety, when he finally found out that he was lost. But all he was doing was turning in circles. Meanwhile, the adults who knew quickly that the boy was lost had conducted a diligent search. They found the boy and brought him home.

But in these two perspectives lies the difference between humanity and God: that perhaps we should see God as the person in this gospel reading who doesn't seem to have baked enough bread for the possibility of a need for hospitality. And who comes to us perhaps with a test in mind, and says, "I need bread. Can you allow me some bread?" And we, snug in our complacency say, "Go away, God. You should provide bread for yourself. After all, you're God." It isn't our job, we think, to do that kind of work. It's God's job to do God's work and leave us alone at least while we're sleeping. But God is persistent. And knocks and knocks, and pounds and pounds. And eventually, with grace, grudgingly, we get up. We drag an old loaf of bread out and say, "Here."

God is one who knocks and the door inevitably opens. God is one who seeks. And what God seeks for is, inevitably, found. That is the reading I want to leave with you. The reason the arc of the universe bends towards justice is not because God is masterminding the whole story, but because God is looking for us in the woods.

When we think it's taking an awfully long time, it's because we've hidden ourselves very well while thinking we're on a spiritual quest — as that boy wanders in his circles in the forest, getting absolutely nowhere.

He's close enough to the campsite, and he thinks he's hunting for the parents. And he's just getting himself more and more lost. And meanwhile the parents find the boy, acting in a perfectly normal way: seeing his absence, and finding him with an expeditious search.

I get this kind of reversal of the story from a lot of feminist theology. So I am thinking about our heroes of the day: Stanton, in particular, who likes to read the Bible with a wink in her eye, and a little bit of a joke now and then. I recommend you to get a copy (you can find it online) of the Woman's Bible that she put together. It's basically all of the bits of the Bible that mention women, or almost all of them, with a little bit of commentary, most of which is by her. Oh, she was castigated for it. And some of it involves a lot of tendentious, 19th-century biblical scholarship. She's trying to sort of channel modern biblical criticism as she's understood it, and it's a little dated in parts. But her points, which are often quite humorously told, is that we've often misread things, to serve our interests — and not those of God.

**S**o let the God who seeks, find.  
To the one who knocks,  
let the door be opened.

What does she say about Abimelech? Of course, I looked it up. Of course, she prints the story. But her comment is thin. She hasn't got anything funny to say about it. She simply remarks on it. Describes a little bit of background for Abimelech, and maybe nods at the irony that he did not get his wish of failing to be remembered for being killed by a woman.

In our own lives it is not our task to hunt for God. But like a boy lost in the woods, we can hardly help but try. It isn't bad to do so. But it's also good to call out as the boy does. That's what actually helped. It's our acknowledgment of our dependence upon God that gets the boy found, that gets our story moving, that gets justice found. It's when we see ourselves as the doers and shakers of things, the makers of justice, the propellers of the world forward on its arc, that we can get caught up in trouble.

So let the God who seeks, find. To the one who knocks, let the door be opened.

*Thomas Bushnell*



*A poem*

## in between

in between now and then  
there is a small gap  
a little space, if you will  
where memory and story  
unite

in between once and ever  
a breath can exist  
wind in lungs, fierce  
with the rush of life  
ready

in between one and another  
is a paper-thin wall  
making us two, distinct  
just enough room between  
for love

*Thomas Bushnell*

