



## SING VS A SONG

Our Christmas manuscript illumination is brimming over with joy! There are musicians and dancers and, I swear, a smiling ox! Isn't that as it should be? This is a time of joy! It's Christmas time after all. Maybe things are not so simple though. Maybe we are looking at the crèche scenes, Christmas trees and lights, and wondering about things being joyful when the world is so full of terrible sorrows, our friends suffering hard and searing losses of loved ones and sufferings in our own lives.

A big part of our daily lives here are spent praying the Divine Office. Seven times a day we gather and pray the psalms for the world and those we personally know who need prayers. Thankfully God knows all about each one with every detail! At the end of Lauds (Morning Prayer) and Vespers (Evening Prayer) we stand to sing a Gospel Canticle. These aren't new additions. St. Benedict mentions the Gospel Canticles in his rule written before his death in 547 and by then it was already a long tradition! But it is only now in a very powerful way – seeing the world as it is – that made me

realize that God is not surprised, daunted or despondent. God knew before He created us what a mess we would make of things and He had a plan in mind.

And so every morning at Lauds while the day is barely dawning we gather the world into our hearts knowing God has perfect knowledge of all the suffering, darkness, hatred, fear and grief that touch so many lives of His children. And we pray the canticle of Zachary, the father of St. John the Baptist. After months of being mute and pondering the mysterious conception of his and Elizabeth's son in their old age he recognized that God was beginning to fulfill His promises. The Holy Spirit used Zachary as a prophet as he said, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us ... that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us ... He has remembered his holy covenant, the oath which he swore ... to grant us ... that we might serve him without fear ... To give knowledge of salvation to his people ... through the tender mercy of our God, when the dawn shall break upon us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Lk 1:68–79).

It is a proclamation of God's saving us! Raising a horn of salvation! The sound of victory over the battle field! God has sworn an oath! He will deliver us from these evils, these pains and suffering and guide our feet into the way of peace! But our enemies might say, "What victory?" We might say, "What victory?"

An enemy to all of us is – believing but living as if God did not exist: living a kind of atheistic life – Catholic or not – as if all the answers were here, as if eternal happiness was meant to be now, as if there were no God. The gods that tell us everlasting happiness is found in ease, enjoyment, power, and plain and simple selfdom. These are the enemies that suck true life from our souls. These are the gods our culture puts forth as our entitlement, our right to happiness to whatever makes one happy to the point that altruism and self-sacrifice is looked on with disdain. But in the end they are empty idols made by men. They have no power to save. Down deep inside us we recognize the immortal seed that God has planted in our souls that can't be satisfied with these things and isn't. We know that. Archbishop Chaput wrote, "The virtue that Christians call hope is not a warm feeling, or a sunny mood, or a habit of optimism. Optimism, as the great Catholic novelist Georges Bernanos

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once wrote, has nothing to do with hope. Optimism is often foolish and naïve – a preference to see good where the evidence is undeniably bad. In fact, Bernanos called optimism a ‘sly form of selfishness, a method of isolating oneself from the unhappiness of others.’”

In 2007 Saint John Paul II wrote about Zachary’s canticle, “... [I]t is a prophetic interpretation of history, the discovery of the intimate, profound meaning of all human events that are guided by the hidden but active hand of the Lord which clasps the more feeble and hesitant hands of men and women.”

“With Christ, therefore, appears the light that enlightens every creature (cf. Jn 1:9) and makes life flourish, as John the Evangelist was to say, combining the two realities: “In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (Jn 1:4).

St. Bede the Venerable (died 735) wrote in a homily commenting on the Canticle of Zachary, saying: “The Lord ... has visited us as a doctor visits the sick, because to heal the deep-rooted sickness of our pride, he gave us the new example of his humility; he redeemed his people, for at the price of his blood he set us free when we had become servants of sin and slaves of the ancient enemy.... Christ found us lying ‘in darkness and in the shadow of death’, that is, oppressed by the long-lasting blindness of sin and ignorance .... He brought to us the true light of his knowledge, and banishing the darkness of error, he has shown us the sure way to the heavenly homeland. He has directed the steps of our actions to make us walk on the path of truth, which he has pointed out to us, and to enable us to enter the home of eternal peace, which he has promised us.”

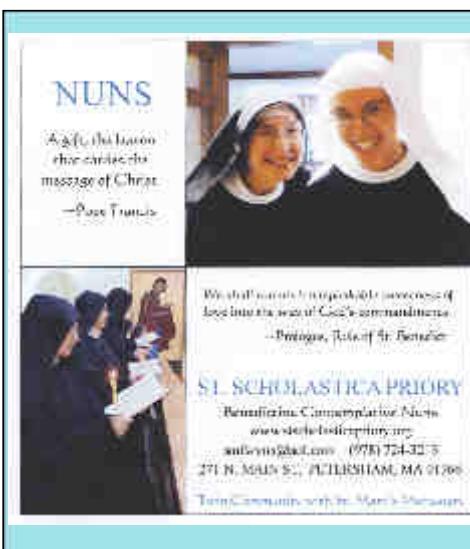
At the end of each day at Vespers we sing another Gospel Canticle – that of Mary, called The Magnificat. After Elizabeth, her cousin, recognized the mystery in Mary’s womb and greeted her with the words, “Who am I that the Mother of My Lord should come to me” (Lk 1:43)? Mary cried out, “My soul magnifies the Lord ... God my Savior ... [H]is mercy is on those who fear him ... He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones ... He has filled the hungry with good things ... He has helped his servant ... in remembrance of his mercy” (Lk 1:46-58).

Mary carries the Savior in her womb as she proclaimed the canticle. She heralded this song as a work accomplished by our God while Jesus was still growing within her. And that message is what Zachary had prophesied: God saves us, He has poured mercy on us and saved us from our enemies.

This God of mercy who shows us His love in the face of Jesus as a newborn babe is the same God who told Moses, “I have seen ... I have heard ... I know the suffering of my people” (cf. Ex 3). God speaks this to each one of us. In “his tender compassion” there is nothing that escapes God’s fatherly attention in every detail of our lives on earth. Jesus Himself says later that when we secretly give to others, when we pray, when we fast: in other words for all that we do for God and the good of others, “your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Mt 6:6). This doing “secretly” includes trusting, holding onto hope through what God has permitted in our lives. Trusting with that firm hope, felt or not, or as Archbishop Chaput writes, “Hope is a very different creature. It’s a choice; a self-imposed discipline to trust in God while judging ourselves and the world with unblinkered, unsentimental clarity. In effect, it’s a form of

self-mastery inspired and reinforced by God’s grace. ‘The highest form of hope,’ Georges Bernanos said, ‘is despair, overcome.’”

Every week on Thursday we sing Psalm 136 at Vespers. It begins, “By the rivers of Babylon there we sat and wept, remembering Sion ... On the poplars that grew there we hung up our harps.” It is a psalm that speaks of being conquered by the enemy, sitting helpless in their grip and then their adding to the pain with a mocking command: now “Sing to us one of Sion’s songs.” Isn’t this the message of the Prince of Darkness, the one that God had already warned Cain of in the Book of Genesis, “And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you... (Gen 4:7)” or the message Satan gave to Jesus, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” It seems to me that we as believers now are called on to sing the songs of Sion, to proclaim our trust in God with our lives, our prayers, even more now in a world that mocks belief in anything beyond itself. Despite all the manifestations of evil, darkness and despair, are we buffoons? No! We need to face and see the reality of what surrounds us – with all its beauty, life, sin and death, but with eyes set to the promise, the oath that was sworn to our ancestors in the Old Testament. Our prayer of the Divine Office, your prayer; living our faith with hope is so necessary in our present time. That we keep our eyes on the fullness of life and encourage others not to despair, not to be overwhelmed but to have peace, have joy because NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS HERE – it is witnessed and held for us like treasure in heaven. God grant that every day faithful Christian living will be like these joyful figures who can, even here, dance and sing because, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined” (Is 9:1). No matter what we may feel we are in His light. See you at His crib! Merry Christmas!



Have you ever wondered if God is calling you to religious life but you don't know how to discern?

St. Scholastica Priory is hosting two Monastic Experience Weekends in 2015  
February 13-15  
October 9-11  
Please see [sspriory.org](http://sspriory.org) for details

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# HAPPENINGS

As the last issue of *Benedictine Bulletin* was devoted to the life, death and funeral of Sr. Mary Herbert, this summary of community news begins back in April when we introduced the monastic custom of having a common supper with reading in the refectory, which we already do at the main midday meal.



On May 7, Mother Mary Elizabeth and Father Gregory attended the Northeast Superiors Meeting, held at St. Joseph's Abbey, Spencer, Mass. Three days later, Father Benedict

from St. Anselm Abbey, N.H., who was to be the co-visitor for our visitation, arrived - a month early! It was our error: we had given him the wrong dates. May 15 saw the first voice clinic for our two communities, conducted by Brandon Vennink. He is an expert voice teacher, clear, knowledgeable and very helpful to both choirs and individuals. His wife Ray Yu is also a gifted musician, and was at the time the Director of Music at St. Paul's Cathedral in Worcester. In mid-June they returned for another clinic and brought their family and her children's choir. Near the end of the month we planted the vegetable garden: tomatoes, cucumbers, cantaloupe and peppers, as well as many herbs. Beans and peas, grown from seed, were planted later by Sr. Mary Paula.

We had our annual retreat from May 31-June 6, with conferences given by Abbot Gregory Polman, OSB of Conception Abbey in Missouri. His talks were

superb: an interweaving of Scripture and the Rule of St. Benedict, all seen in the light of the Paschal Mystery and how

God uses everything in our lives to bring us to himself, including our failures and sufferings.



From June 10-14 our triennial visitation was held, conducted this time by Abbot Bruno Marin, OSB, Abbot President of our Subiaco-Cassinese Congregation. Sr. Ancilla Armijo, OSB of St. Walburga Abbey, Colo. was co-visitor. Our visitations now coincide with those of our brothers. A few days later, the monks and nuns went to the Petersham Town Hall for our friend Cedric Liquer's one-man play "Window Half Open: The Story of Blessed Maria Gabriella of Unity." Also in mid-June our 17-year-old water filter system was replaced. We are blessed

with abundant well water, but its high level of iron and manganese turns the water orange. Mother traveled to Christ in the Desert, N.M. on June 20 for a meeting and a celebration of their 50th anniversary of founding. The next day we received word that Mrs. Marjorie Meade, Sr. Gemma's mother, had passed away. Sr. Gemma was with her at the time.



Abbot Anselm arrived from Pluscarden Abbey for a visit in mid-July. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, the community had a tour of Hunt's Farm, a family-owned operation where we buy the milk we use to make cheese.



On July 30, Sr. Mary Herbert went to her eternal reward with Sr. Gemma and Sr. Christine at her bedside.

We held a Monastic Experience Weekend from August 8-10, with two young women attending. And on August 20, our postulant Marlene Gomez was clothed as a novice and given the name Sr. Maria Isabel; St. Elizabeth, mother of St. John the Baptist is her patron saint.



Bishop McManus came for his annual visit on September 9 and we hosted the meal with the monks in our refectory. After dinner, Br. Matthew left for the airport for his return flight to Pluscarden Abbey. From September 19-25, Mother and Father Gregory attended the Provincial Chapter meeting, held this year at Kornelimünster, Germany to coincide with the 1,200 anniversary of their foundation.



Another Monastic Experience Weekend was held from October 10-12. Later in the month, we altered our horarium, beginning Vigils now at 5:55 AM in order to transfer the second long reading from None to the early office.

Here in Petersham we've had a brilliant fall, with the scarlet and orange of the maples spectacular and long-lasting. The gardens are put to rest for the winter as we approach the season of Advent and the coming celebration of the Birth of Christ.



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Dear Friends,

Here we are again in Advent. A time of watching, preparing, longing. Even our secular culture has that mystery about it. All the traditions of trees, ornaments, lights, gifts, baking and getting together. All of these are good things! But we often get lost in them and forget what this time of year is all about. This can even happen here in the monastery! We will be trying to keep our hearts centered as Mary did despite all the things she had to do in those last days of her pregnancy - listening, sensitive to the stir and movement within her. What better way to be ready to celebrate Christmas is there than to ask Jesus to come and be born in our lives ever more deeply?

Our gift to you  
is a novena  
of Masses in  
Christmastide

Christmas  
2014

With Christmas and new calendar year nearly upon us we remember YOU. Our hearts overflow with thanks for your prayers and support. You have been with us as we have said our earthly goodbyes to many including our dear Sr Mary Herbert. I can almost hear her saying, "And to think this is the very same Jesus who was born in the crib, held in Mary's arms and died on the Cross ~ coming to me." He has come to us, for us! He has shown us the way! And He will be faithful to His promises! Oh come, oh come our Emmanuel!

Merry Christmas from all of us!