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Casamari Abbey Church

CASAMARI MARTYRS

On April 17 Pope Francis beatified six Cistercian monks of the monastery of Casamari in Italy. Like our brothers of Atlas, Algeria, beatified in 2018, these new beati are ranked as martyrs. But unlike our Atlas brothers, who died in 1996 and who were personally known to many in our Order, the Casamari monks were martyred over 200 years ago. We were not even aware of their names or their story!

It happened like this. During the French Revolution all our monasteries in France were seized, many destroyed, and numerous religious killed. In 1798 French forces conquered the Kingdom of Naples in Italy. But here, a counter-revolution by peasants almost immediately saw the monarchy restored and the revolutionary troops fleeing northward.

The passage through central Italy of armed, disorganized stragglers, hostile to Christianity, resulted in such violence that early in 1799 many monks and nuns of the area took refuge elsewhere – among them the abbot and some brothers of Casamari. However, some monks stayed behind, including the prior, Fr Simeon.

One evening – the exact date is not known, but between May 13 and 16 – a group of about 15 soldiers appeared at Casamari. They were welcomed by the monks and fed; but they also wanted money and valuables. Faced with their violence in desecrating the church furnishings and the ciborium containing the Eucharistic species, the monks tried to recover and put the consecrated particles in safekeeping, but were barbarously attacked and killed.

As soon as possible, the six were buried by the other brothers in the monastery cemetery. Many graces were granted through their intercession until, in 1854, the abbot of the time, in order to preserve the peace of the monastery, ordered them, in the name of obedience, to stop granting graces! A few years later this prohibition was lifted, the graces multiplied and the mortal remains were placed in the abbey church.

The fame of martyrdom grew and spread, until in 2013 the canonical process for beatification began. Now we honor the memory of these monks, four French, one Italian, and one Czech. Bl Simeon, Bl Domenico, Bl Maturino, Bl Albertino, Bl Modesto, and Bl Zosimo, pray for us!



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Abbot Armand-Jean de Rancé, 1626-1700

The US Trappist Region has begun an exciting new project: a series of video conferences, given by some of the major English-speaking Cistercian scholars. Fr Lawrence of Gethsemani, a skilled cameraman and editor, along with our own Sr Grace, are the production team. In 2019 they made a trip to Newfoundland, where David Bell lectured on Armand-Jean de Rancé, the great Trappist reformer. These are now available on youtube: search for Schola Cisterciensis. More to come!

A new travel series, “John McGivern’s Main Streets,” airing in the upper Midwest, will open with a segment on Dubuque – including our candy business. It will air on KFXA, Fox 28 at 930 AM on Sunday, January 30, 2022. A week later, it will go on youtube. See <main-streets.tv> for link and details.



Bill Witt

The year 2021 has been Building Projects Year for us. No huge projects – at least, nothing requiring groundbreaking. But lots and lots of medium projects. Which of course are taking much longer than anticipated – at least, longer than we hoped. Remember in our last newsletter we promised to regale you with exciting pictures of our new office spaces? Well, we are moved in to the new spaces, but unpacking and sorting and re-arranging has a ways to go.

One of the reasons the unpacking is taking so long is actually a beautiful blessing. The tallest building in Dubuque – 9 stories high! – is the Roshek building, a full block long and half a block wide. Built in 1932, it’s in the National Register of Historic Places, and for 40 years was the home of the largest department store in Iowa. Since then it has been an office building, and this year, a medi-

cal supply company using one floor moved up to two higher floors – and left their furniture behind to get new stuff. So all their lovely office furniture was made available to anyone willing to disassemble and remove it.

Crews of sisters spent two days there, and our handy man made some additional trips, and as a result much of our renovated office space has fairly new, matching furniture (very un-monastic; our normal practice is slow accumulation of Random Objects). (OK, we’re also keeping office furniture that was donated to us 20 years ago, still in great shape.) It is taking a while to assemble things and see what fits and what works. So the exciting pictures of offices will have to wait.

And as we go to press we are also in the midst of a NEW project – replacing the 40-year old carpets in our dormitory. The sisters in one part of the dorm move into what empty rooms can be found in another part of the dorm while their part has old carpet stripped and the new stuff put down. This is proceeding apace and we have reason to expect the whole process of stripping, re-carpeting (in some places, putting down new tiling), will be done in about three weeks. Or maybe four weeks...

It seems that in our last newsletter we spoke too soon about having two functioning caramel wrappers. For most of the time since then we have had very serious problems with both machines, at times so bad that we had to stop processing the candy because we were discarding as much as we were wrapping. Sr Rebecca, our abbess, is the Machine Guru, along with our handyman, Dale Mueller, and they have spent untold hours trying to fix the machines. It has been a discouraging process, especially as the machines had both just been in Machine Hospital, and it has been very difficult to figure out what is causing the problems. Thanks to multiple tweaks our regular machine is again functioning reasonably well. So we are holding our breath and hoping to make it through our busy season without further demands on our abbess's time.



Bill Witt



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We don't have much by way of Pandemic News. To no one's surprise, our Order's General Chapter has again been postponed, until September of 2022. In the Middle Ages the General Chapter (which only the abbots attended, no abbesses) was held annually. It was, and is, an occasion for the superiors to provide one another with mutual support, to help deal with any difficult situations, and above all to renew and refresh the Order's dedication to Christ and its fidelity to the Gospel and the Rule of St Benedict. And then, returning home, to share the work of the Holy Spirit with their own communities.

Back then all our monasteries were in Europe, and the abbots simply had to travel to another spot in Europe – normally, the mother monastery, Cîteaux. But travel then was by horseback, in often difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions. In the centuries since the first General Chapters in the 1120's, occasionally Chapters were not held, sometimes for a number of years – the time of the French Revolution comes to mind (see sidebar on Casamari).

Now our Order extends to all continents, and abbesses as well as abbots attend the General Chapter – and it is held only every three years. With a 5-year gap between our last Chapter in 2017 and the next, please God in 2022, and with travel between monaster-



The Senior Wing crowd: one inhabitant, Sr Joan, flanked by her infirmarians.

ies for Visitations and other forms of mutual aid suspended, we have been limping along as best we could. The U.S. Region of Trappist superiors has held Zoom meetings, and this August they were finally able to meet in person at our monastery of Gethsemani, in Kentucky. And guess what? Being together, seeing each other in person, worshipping together, had a wonderful effect, and we hear it was an especially fruitful meeting, with spiritual bonds renewed, difficulties addressed, and much wisdom shared.

For some decades now the US Trappist Region has held a 2-week seminar every year for the junior professed sisters and brothers. The seminars are hosted in one of our monasteries, and the purpose is three-fold. First, the juniorate is the primary time for serious study, to ground our new members in the truths of the faith, in the Cistercian monastic heritage, and in the Word of God, so they have a solid foundation for the years of prayer and service which lie ahead. Second, they are able to experience other monasteries of the Order, which broadens their horizons. And finally, it's a great occasion for spiritual sharing and mutual support among the young professed of our Region. The experience deepens their love of their vocation, and builds an affection and understanding of our Order beyond the confines of their own monastery.



Latest addition to the Senior Wing: puppy Sammy

Our Sr Harriet, who made profession in February 2020, and Sr Madeleine, professed this past April, have yet to attend a seminar in another monastery. First, the seminar planned for spring 2020 was simply cancelled. As it was clear that we could not be sure of having a gathering in 2021, preparations began for a zoom seminar. It had to be conducted in real time across four time zones, attempting to respect all the monasteries' daily prayer schedules, and other scheduled events such as each community's annual retreat, some solemn professions – oy veh.



Bill Witt

But Sr Pamela of Wrentham, the seminar organizer, pulled it off beautifully. On five consecutive mornings in June Fr Daniel of our monastery in Oregon gave a class on early monasticism, and the juniors "met" again in the afternoon with Sr Pamela for a discussion. Like the rest of the world, we are not quite sure what will happen in 2022, but Sr Pamela has several different options in the pipeline, depending on the state of the pandemic.

"Depending on the state of the pandemic" – after a year and a half of it, we seem to have adjusted to living with a greater degree of uncertainty. Do you remember the spring of 2020? We were all thrown off balance by this unexpected, even frightening taste of the fragility of our plans, weren't we? In retrospect, we see what an extraordinary blessing the previous decades of stability were.

Many of us hoped that this time of crisis might draw people closer to God, or at least to pondering the ultimate questions of life. In the monastery, we even

thought there might be a little upsurge of vocations, as has happened in the past when people were more than usually forced to consider what really matters. Well, we did see a small uptick in enquiries, but it didn't last. And while Zoom and live-streaming have done great service in keeping people connected, the downside seems to be "adjustment" to the convenience of virtual meetings – and even to virtual "participation" in worship, rather than real reception of the sacraments.

But the Holy Spirit of Jesus is not limited by our fragility. And there's a rumor going around that God is actually quite creative! But God's ways are not our ways, and figuring out our part in God's plan is more difficult in times of change and uncertainty. But we can be certain that our part includes trust in the Lord, hope for the future, and immense gratitude for all God's blessings. May they be abundant in your life!

The Sisters of Mississippi Abbey



Bill Witt

Removing plastic covers from caramel cooled overnight

