

Imaginative Beginnings

- brother Michael

I AM ALWAYS ENCOURAGED WHEN WE READ IN THE ACTS OF the Apostles that the early Christian communities were known as “followers of the Way.” (Acts 9:2) The New Jerusalem Bible has an excellent description and history of “the Way.” It reminds us that “the term is used by extension for the community itself.” Our experience being in community is an adventure of constant change, challenge and movement.

This summer I was offering hospitality to a group of music students from Dartmouth College. I assured the students that we were very happy to have them with us. As I responded to their questions I heard myself saying, “We were founded in 1953 by Abbot Leo. We moved into an abandoned farmhouse and used the barn as our oratory.” Later I marveled at how much I felt I was at brother Leo’s side when he first walked into the dilapidated chaos that we now call home.

I enjoy calling our brother Leo “Abbot Leo.” This man, who died of cancer two years before I came to community, had a colorful life. He went from Gerleve to Rome in the 1920’s to study theology. He traveled from Germany to America in the 1930’s when Hitler came into power. Then he sailed to Israel in the 1940’s to become Abbot of Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem. From there, in the 1950’s, he set out for Vermont to found the Weston Priory. When his hopes to renew the monastic life of the Dormition Abbey Community and to become Patriarch of Jerusalem were dashed in the 1960’s, he returned to Vermont to become a brother in our community. Here in Weston brother Leo assumed the humble task of doing the community laundry. During this time he wrote an essay entitled “The Abbot is Dead.” Certain-



Abbot Leo’s Abbatial Blessing,
Rome, 1953



Farmhouse and barn, around 1952

ly as the retired abbot he was not a prisoner of expectations but was enjoying his imaginative beginnings.

In his senior years brother Leo immensely enjoyed cutting lawns and walking barefoot on the grass in the early morning. Perhaps this is a dimension of growth that we all share: that the simple activities of life become as fresh and luminous as the dawn’s light. He entered graciously into the challenge of brotherhood. To obtain a much fuller picture of brother Leo you may read brother John’s book, “A Benedictine Legacy of Peace: The Life of Abbot Leo A. Rudloff.”

Each of us in some respect can relate our personal wanderings to brother Leo’s journey. Before coming to community I had my own youthful visions, disappointments and struggles. I lived eight months in Pakistan, teaching English in a minor seminary after receiving my Bachelor of Science in Applied Mathematics at the University of Calgary. Pakistan was an awakening! Its innumerable minarets announcing the Muslim call to prayer five times a day, was coupled with a grinding inhumane poverty that could not diminish the simplicity of faith within the tiny Catholic communities. There was one thing I hoped for when I came back: I wanted to integrate all that I had heard, seen and felt in that foreign land. Becoming a brother and all the learning that goes along with this calling has met my hope. To live faithfully in our suffering world is a work of patience, perseverance and creativity.

Cannot all of us tell a similar story of childhood, becoming an adult, making choices and learning from experience? Isn’t it marvelous that we have been given the gift of life in which we are able to make new beginnings?

Abbot Leo became known as brother Leo. He took the risk of remaining faithful to a vision of community that was different from a model of strictures and definitions. Yet he knew that he had not finished this journey of freedom. He said prayerfully before his physical death, “You may say that I have died, but never call me dead.” All of us are still on the way of becoming brother or sister to each other as we search for God. As followers of the Way our journey of heart brings us all together to life everlasting. ■