

From the Womb of Vatican II

- brother John

IN THE FALL OF 1963 ABBOT LEO SET OUT FOR THE HOLY Land, accompanied by three of the monks of Weston Priory. He wrote in the 1963 Autumn Bulletin, "As a symbol of our 'coming of age' we are sending out this year for the first time a small contingent of three young monks to the mother Abbey in Jerusalem with its dependency in Tabgha at the shore of the Sea of Galilee. This may be said to be a sign of life and confirmation of the belief that the founding of Weston was also a means of reviving the Abbey in the Holy Land."

Abbot Leo's excitement echoed the spirit of the Weston Community at the beginning of the Second Vatican Council. In September of that same year, English Benedictine Bede Griffiths, founder of an ashram in India and author of the monastic classics, *The Golden String*, and *Christ in India*, led the annual retreat for the brothers. He wore the saffron robes of a *Sannyassi* (ascetic monk) and adopted the Sanskrit name *Dayananda* (bliss of compassion).

In the four day retreat, from September 9 to 12, Bede spoke to the brothers of "the special graces for pioneering foundations." He described powerfully his own experiences in India and affirmed the direction of monastic renewal at the Priory. Bede opened new spiritual horizons for the Weston Community. In daily conferences, he drew from Teilhard de Chardin, reflected on creation and nature, and creatively assessed monastic practices and commitment. His vision of Christian monastic life embraced East and West, Hindu and Christian.

Culminating this extraordinary retreat, Bede celebrated the Syriac Rite Eucharist in English with the brothers. This was the first experience of Eucharist in the vernacular for the Weston Community. For the Benedictine Monks of Weston Priory, this retreat was an immersion into the spirit of Vatican Council II just beginning in Rome.

By 1964, the Second Vatican Council was in full swing at mid-term. It had begun with the revolutionary document calling for the renewal of the Liturgy, the communal prayer of the Church. The brothers took to heart the call for renewal sent out to the whole Church. As Abbot



brother Leo and brother John, 1977



Stone Chapel under construction, 1964

Leo had stated in the Bulletin article, the Community had "come of age." Spurred by the spirit of the Council, the brothers enthusiastically set out to forge their identity as a monastic community in the present age. In the retreat conference on monastic vocation Bede pointed out, "Saint Benedict did not propose any form of Angelism¹: Benedict provided prudently for body and soul, calling for cooperation with the creative work of God in labor . . . not an exploitation of nature." Strengthened by many such insights and the workings of the Vatican Council, the brothers undertook the creative work of their own monastic renewal.

Concrete steps for renewal began with the sharing of responsibilities. A committee was created for practically every brother, covering all areas of Community life: Liturgy, studies, kitchen, garden, farm, forestry, crafts, finances, maintenance, and grounds—more than enough responsibilities to go around. Previously all these tasks were carried by the Prior.

To facilitate communication, weekly meetings were scheduled at which every brother had a voice. In the monastic office, the prayer of Prime was the first to undergo change. Previously it included a "Chapter of Faults" and a conference by the Prior. Now, after the reading of a chapter of the Rule, all brothers were encouraged to offer their reflections.

The proposed re-construction of the oratory or chapel offered a unique training ground for living a renewed monastic life. The oratory is the heart of the monastery buildings. There the brothers gather several times each day in their communal search for God in prayer. It is also there that guests and visitors share most intimately in the life and hospitality of the monastic community. The architect's plans for the oratory had been drawn up the year preceding the Council. The Council document on the Renewal of the Liturgy raised new and engaging questions as the community moved toward construction.

Brothers engaged in emotional and enlightening discussions as they

¹ Angelism denies the fullness of the human as body and spirit. It is an ideology that denigrates or minimizes the body in respect to the soul and divorces the spiritual from the material in creation.

integrated the insights and spirit of the Council into the reconstruction and renewal of the oratory. Changes in the plans often occurred in the very process of construction. At the same time brothers labored together gathering stone, hand hewn beams, and bricks from nearby for the building. Community involvement in the project exercised communication and communion among all the brothers. It reached into the heart of monastic commitment—*conversatio morum*—conversation and sharing in all that really matters. It was observed by some that the Community made decisions by consensus—in reality the community was living consensually! The Council teaching on fidelity to the spiritual tradition and responding to the signs of the times took on flesh and blood, stone and mortar. It was neither remote nor abstract.

The first Canonical Visitation of the Priory after the close of the Second Vatican Council took place in 1966. Abbot Primate Beno Gut served as Visitor. He later became the Cardinal Prefect for the Vatican Congregation for Worship or Liturgy. His report on the Visitation confirmed the hopes of the community that emerged from the Second Vatican Council: “We feel that your beautiful chapel is a miniature rustic gem, worthy of the House of the Lord . . .”

The Abbot Primate’s report further described his perception of the community following the close of the Council and the renewal of the oratory, “Perhaps the most outstanding characteristic of the members of the community, in our opinion, is the manifest charity toward all and the love of the brethren. After all, the rule of Christ is the rule of love. The equality of the brethren enhances this love . . . To report on this visitation is at the same time an easy task and at the same time a difficult one. It is easy because we find little or nothing to condemn or correct in the life of the monks; it is difficult because Visitors are expected to find faults and discrepancies, to offer solutions and corrections. Yet we are happy to say that we are much pleased with this visitation and extremely gratified that we find little to criticize. We asked the Father Prior if there was something he thought should be stressed in this Visitation. His only response was: ‘tell the monks to continue being brothers’.”

In the Visitation Report or Recessus of 1966 Abbot Primate Beno Gut confirmed Abbot Leo’s observation that with the Council of Vatican II the Weston Community had “come of age.” As with the Catholic Church throughout the world, the Weston Priory embarked on the path of renewal and a new vision of the Church and monastic life. ■



Abbot Leo, 1972

Lomeo-Bulaty Photo



Weston Priory, 2011

Watch

- *brother Augustine*

Watch carefully, in the fading
light of a winter evening
for the mystery of life —
the air around us
filling with the first snow.

Gift of Hope

- *brother Columba*

Gift of hope
our patient waiting,
from inner silence
gently embracing
brother/sister/guest
now and not yet. Amen.