

# Assumption

## ABBHEY NEWSLETTER

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### Your Own Story

Every family has stories; some of them draw members together, some push members apart. My version of how the cake toppled at Paul and Sandra's wedding will be different from Paul's version of the very same story. We all know how an incident is remembered differently by various individuals, somewhat like the blind men and the elephant: they encounter the same animal, but when asked what the elephant is like, the answer depends entirely upon who responds, on what part of the animal each man touched. "The elephant is like a fat snake" says the one who felt the trunk. "Oh no," says another. "The elephant is like a fan" because he had touched the ear. "Not at all," says the third. "The elephant is like a tree trunk" because he had reached for one of the animal's legs. "The elephant is like a wall," says the fourth because he had placed his hand on the animal's side. "You are all wrong," said the fifth. "The elephant is like a rope," because he had grabbed the animal's tail. None of the blind men were wrong; it's just that each of them was right according to his limited experience.

And everyone's experience is limited. No single individual can encounter all of life. The



Brother Symeon Rubbelke in the Abbey cemetery.

universe is too vast. But because stories are how we make sense of the world, then exactly how we tell our stories is how we come to see things. According to Lori Gottlieb, an American writer and psychotherapist, the way we remember and narrate our stories is ultimately the way we become; it's what we are telling ourselves about ourselves. If we nourish grievances, for instance, we become resentful. If we look back with pleasure and thankfulness we are likely to be grateful by habit. "Only you can write your stories," Gottlieb says. "The story I tell is absolutely true . . . from my point of view. What we tell is a story about ourselves, and there's always another version of that story." (See Lori Gottlieb on YouTube.) Being a therapist, she looks to broaden and deepen a client's stories, because if we don't like the way

we are, changing our personal stories can change our lives. This can happen on an individual as well as a collective level: a people "own" stories. The Old Testament is a collection of stories owned, told and retold by the Hebrew people. The New Testament is owned by Christians.

A poignant example of a story recalled by different people can be seen in a pair of films directed and co-produced by Clint Eastwood. His "Flags of Our Fathers" and "Letters from Iwo Jima" are both about the battle of Iwo Jima, but one is told from the American point of view and the other is from the Japanese perspective. In the American version—"Flags of Our Fathers"—the Marines, after immense sacrifice and heroic action, take the island and raise the American flag on Mount Suribachi, as shown in

the iconic photograph captured by Joe Rosenthal of the Associated Press. In the Japanese version of the battle—“Letters from Iwo Jima”—the island is overrun due to Japanese soldiers suffering from poor nutrition, unsanitary conditions and having to follow despotic orders in the line of duty. The two films serve as bookends for discussion about Iwo Jima. Neither story is complete without the other. With some seventy-five years behind us, we have, perhaps, gained perspective and sympathy so that we can understand World War II as a far more complex story than one about good guys against bad guys.

Sometimes the story does not seem complete because the individual telling it does not have eyes for what is right in front of him. When Maximilian zu Wied-Neuwied, a German prince, traveled through what is now North Dakota in 1832, he encountered the Mandan and Hidatsa Native Americans. He responded to them quite like other white explorers before him, assuming that males ran the show, that Mandan and Hidatsa societies were patriarchal as European societies were, and that women had very little say, that women *should* have very little say. However, the Mandan and the Hidatsa—as we know now from anthropological studies—had a matriarchal society: a form of social organization in which descent and relationships are reckoned through the female line and not the male line, which made enormous sense, given that so many Native men died while hunting dangerous bison or while defending their



villages in time of war. Prince Maximilian simply assumed that the people he reported about were like every society he had known: the father or the chief was head of the family and descent was traced through him, that women were only a complement to men, and subservient.

It may not be enough to remind ourselves that Maximilian’s viewpoint was incomplete. As human beings, we all have to listen and learn. We look upon our existence in the world as one big story to tell, and it is: it’s a huge story to tell, much bigger than any one story can contain, bigger than any origin story is able to convey, bigger than any scientific theory can formulate. We have made stories: the creation account in Genesis, the “Big Bang” theory, Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, to name a few. To suggest that any of these stand alone as *the only* truth would be a failure to listen and to learn. They are stories—extremely valuable as such—and each tells an aspect of the whole.

Going back to Iwo Jima, if any of us had been there during those days of battle, we’d come away asking, “What happened?” The need to tell a story is a need to make sense of what would otherwise remain senseless chaos.

But too often, we allow others to tell the story for us. At times, when life is overwhelming, it can be easier to let someone else explain what has happened; we allow ourselves to believe in the sensational because difficult aspects of life seem to require big, overblown reasons. The result can be dangerous: for instance, accepting a conspiracy theory that lines up good guys against bad guys even while disseminating libel, fanning hatred, all of it based upon lies. We are fearful and angry because we believe stories that are unsubstantiated, and, in many cases, baseless. (About this phenomenon see the lead article by Adrienne LaFrance in the June 2020 issue of *The Atlantic* magazine.) If I’m not careful about the stories I listen to and begin to own, I stand a good chance of becoming an angry, vengeful individual.

There are stories we should listen to and stories we should not; stories based upon facts that can be checked and cross-checked, and stories based upon rumor and lies. If I am not careful, I can accept a story based entirely upon nothing more than smoke, and in this age of political polarization, smoke is a bad way to go, especially when each political side thinks that the other side is misled.

The following is a true story. Back in 1918, during the anti-German hysteria of World War I, a man was reported to the authorities for anti-American activity. His neighbors knew him as the “Hun” because he spoke German, and therefore must be an alien from Germany. They reported that he had

burned an American flag: a huge disgrace. They announced that he also belonged to a secret pro-German party, along with several local German-speaking farmers who were also aliens. They met in the secret of the night, to plot against the American government. The Hun's neighbors said that if the authorities did not go after him, they would be forced to take matters into their own hands. The Hun's name was Frederick. He was summoned by the United States Marshal to appear in court and explain himself. The summons stated that he was suspected of being "not entirely in sympathy with the United States in its present war situation."

Frederick did appear before the Marshal, and explained that he was an American, born in Gilman, IL, where his father had also been born. True, he did speak German. His wife had been born in Germany. It was she who burned a flag, not him. But it was not the American flag she burned; it was a Princeton University banner that their son was using as a blanket on his bed. Frederick's wife had found evidence of bed bugs and burned all the bedding, including the banner.

Frederick's story was not enough. He had to swear allegiance to the American flag. Still, the Marshal was not impressed because Frederick and his wife spoke German. Therefore he was not entirely exonerated. As a result, Frederick lost his job as a teacher and was forced to move his family to another state and start all over again. (This

happened to Brother Frederick Schuchard who became a lay brother at Assumption Abbey after his wife died in 1947.)

No doubt Frederick's neighbors thought that they were being responsible by reporting un-American activities. The Marshal probably thought he was serving the law by discrimination based upon language. Americans were frightened of Germans in 1918. Germans were frightened of Americans. But sometimes we tell stories to bring people down. None of us is perfect; we say and do nasty things to each other, and we spread rumors because it feels good to do so. When I pass along scandal about someone else, it makes me feel better about myself because the focus is upon someone else's wrongdoing. The reason gossip is so harmful is because it is usually based upon lies, or facts that have been scrambled, and if gossip is the way in which I make sense of the world, then my world is based upon lies—a house built upon sand—and furthermore, how I see things is tainted with ill will. The way we remember and narrate our stories is ultimately the way we become. I become a liar telling lies, and a fool who believes in lies.

According to Hector Macdonald in his book *Truth: How the Many Sides to Every Story Shape Our Reality*, there are three different types of communicators: **advocates** select competing truths that create a reasonably accurate impression of reality in order to achieve a constructive goal; **misinformers** innocently propagate competing truths that unintentionally distort reality; **mis-**

**leaders** deliberately deploy competing truths, or part of the truth, to create an impression of reality that they know is not true.

Americans are free. We can say whatever we like. And so we can either tell the truth—insofar as we know it—to engage people and inspire good action, or we can deploy our version of the truth so that people are deliberately misled. "Truth comes in many forms, and experienced communicators can exploit its variability to shape our impression of reality," says Macdonald. In our country, politicians seem to do well based upon how effectively they can spin the truth, such that it creates a false impression: it's not a lie, exactly, but it's not the truth. What is left out allows for gross misinterpretation. The politician can't be called a liar, but he allows people to be misled by a partial truth, or a truth taken out of context. There is even a word for this activity; it's called *paltering*. We see it all the time on news channels when a politician does not actually answer the question. Instead, he responds with a fact: a statement that often deliberately misleads the listener. As for instance in 1998, when Jim Lehrer asked President Bill Clinton on the "PBS News Hour" if there was an improper relationship between himself and Monica Lewinsky. The President answered, "there is not a sexual relationship" which was technically true because he used the present tense in his answer. But his statement was entirely misleading. Jim Lehrer and most viewers inferred from the President's response that he

had never had a sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky. The truth, as they were later to find out, was that yes he had an improper sexual relationship with Lewinsky, but that relationship was over by January 21, 1998, when Bill Clinton was interviewed.

Paltering is so common today that there are websites devoted to fact-checking: Politifact, FactCheck, Snopes, and perhaps a half dozen more. The risks of paltering are, of course, that no one believes you anymore when the deception is discovered. They see you as a cheat and they don't want to do business with you and they don't trust you anymore. Politicians, however, are immune—even rewarded—if they say what constituents want to hear, whether it's true or not.

Such things are important because stories are how we make sense of the world. How we tell stories is how we come to see things. The way we remember and narrate our stories is ultimately the way we become. If our stories are partial truths that amount to lies, information designed to deceive, we can quickly come to believe that all of life is a game of deception.

Envy, greed, anger, or resentment: these are a sort of lie, too, that can quickly engulf a person: the story he tells about others poisons his own life.

The job of a therapist is often to listen to a client's story and—given an integrated body of observations and theories on personality development, motivation and behavior—assess the total conscious and un-

conscious mental life. How true are the stories that a client tells himself?

Cognitive therapy is based on the concept that the way we think about things affects how we feel. A therapist will want to stop the negative story the client has created for himself and help him to come up with a new way of thinking. "Is everyone around you really full of anger?" or "Are you really the worst person in the world?" A good therapist aims for a more truthful story. True humility is somewhere between ego enlargement and ego disparagement: who are you *really and truly*? Urging the client to reframe his story might be a challenge because thinking oneself the worst person in the world means, of course, that things are hopeless, and therefore the client doesn't have to change or interact with people. He can stay miserable. (A narcissistic personality is less likely to seek therapy since, in an ego-enlarged mind, everyone else needs the therapy, not him. But if his personal stories are all about how bad they are, and how innocent he is, he certainly needs to reframe those stories.)

Therapy is important because how we tell our story can also be how we pray. We carry inner dialogue with us to prayer, our autopilot that can be a hindrance to growth. "Why me? Poor me!" Or perhaps it's "I can't pray. God doesn't listen to me."

Prayer should be a refuge against the pest that the inner voice can be. Formula prayers can save us, acting as a barrier against too much of ourselves. To say the "Hail Mary" or the

Jesus Prayer over and over frees us from any sort of negative inner dialogue and replaces too much mental activity and anxiety with reassurance and calm. Soon, we are more attentive to the formula prayer—to God—than we are to ourselves and this is how, outside of therapy, we can reprogram the brain. We become aware that we cannot hide anything from God and we would not want to. Our complete selves are exposed to God's healing action.

This is the calm that takes place during Benedictine *lectio divina* when a short passage of Scripture is read slowly, or over and over again, until it becomes a fulcrum for prayerful attention. And, under the influence of the age-old Scriptures, a personal story can begin to parallel the story of Israel, not that the parallel would, in any way, take away the unique and singular personal story:

All humankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators: some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation; and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again, for that library where every book shall lie open to one another.

— John Donne, Meditation xvii: *No Man Is an Island*.

With the help of God's grace, through exposure to prayer and *lectio divina*, we can be transformed by what we tell ourselves every day. Our stories will be absolutely true and filled with the genuine humility that saints have, stories that reflect trust. □

## Brother Stephen Professes Vows



Br. Elias Thiempont

Brother Stephen Johnson with the Holy Rule in his hands. His parents are in the background on either side of him.

On Saturday, July 11, 2020, on the feast of St. Benedict, Patriarch of Western Monasticism, Stephen Johnson of Fargo, ND, pronounced simple vows for three years in the presence of Abbot Daniel Maloney and the Abbey community. In an unusual move, Abbot Daniel allowed Stephen to keep his baptismal name, rather than bestowing a new religious name upon him, as is customary. However, his patron was changed from St. Stephen of Hungary to St. Stephen the protomartyr. Brother Stephen's parents, Mark and Loriann, and his two youngest siblings, were present for the ceremony.

Br. Stephen was born in Baton Rouge, LA, in 1996, but grew up in Fargo where he attended Bennett Elementary, Discovery Middle School, Davies High School, and NDSU. He graduated from NDSU *summa cum laude* with a major

## From the Archives:



Assumption Abbey archives

Bishop Vincent Wehrle at Elbowoods in 1915 in a touring car. One of the first things he did as Bishop of Bismarck was to give Fort Berthold over to the missionary care his Benedictine monks in 1910. The Abbey has maintained a presence on Fort Berthold, up to this day, with Father Basil Atwell serving the mission of Sacred Heart in White Shield.

in Botany and minors in German, Chemistry and Statistics.

The third child in a family of six children, Br. Stephen's two older sisters are twins, and both are in surgical residencies. His immediate younger sister is doing an internship in civil engineering and attending NDSU. His younger brother and youngest sister are in middle and elementary school in Fargo. His father, Mark, teaches history and political science at Minnesota State Community and Technical College and his mother Loriann is a physical therapist with Mobility Plus.

Br. Stephen was prepared for monastic life because he was praying the divine office on his own, before entering. At that time, he was working for

Aldevron in Fargo. "I expected that monastic life would involve extensive periods of being alone, in silence" Br. Stephen says, "like in a retreat setting. But in actuality, monks spend a lot of time with one another socially." He entered the community on January 10, 2019, and has spent six months as a candidate, and one year and a day as a novice.

Br. Stephen considered visiting a Trappist abbey at one time, but realized, after coming to Assumption Abbey, that he wanted to join the community. One of the things that impressed him was the natural environment of the prairies. "The beautiful landscape of our abbey allows me to witness creation in the happening, and working in the garden is, in a certain sense, to be a co-creator with God."

Anyone who knows Br. Stephen has experienced his kindness and consideration, virtues he considers central to Christian life. And he looks forward to giving of himself generously as a Benedictine monk. "The first great commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul and mind. All types of people are expected to do this, with all types of vocations," Br. Stephen says. "I see religious life in a Benedictine monastery as the context in which I've been called to live that commandment. Nothing can be a more worthwhile thing to do then to live out the commandments of God. His callings, and particularly the callings to sacrifice and responsibility, are the path to a joyful and fulfilled life." □



## Development Office

Br. Michael Taffe, O.S.B.

A tremendous "Thank You" to generous donors who made the resurfacing project possible on the north, northeast and east side of the Abbey, which included the main entryway, the east parking lot, the area around the Pottery building and the north parking lot. This



Photo by Br. John Pat Arnett

was an expensive undertaking, but so necessary. And now that it's finished, the new pavement is like driving on silk! No more ruts, cracks or potholes in the asphalt. The rain drains away

without leaving pools of water to splash through. Everyone is happy: the delivery trucks that roll in almost every day to drop off groceries and supplies for the kitchen and elsewhere, the cooks who park their vehicles there while working, the parishioners who prefer to enter the church from the north door, the monks who walk there, and the many visitors who drive in to see the Visitors' Center and the gift shop. We are deeply grateful for your kindness and pray that God blesses you! □



Photo by Br. John Pat Arnett

**Please include the names of my loved ones in your 2020 November month of Masses for the faithful departed:**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Please return your names using the enclosed envelope and we will write them into our Book of the Living.*

Your loved ones will be remembered in our prayers throughout the month of November.

**Thank you for your petition and prayers.**

Questions should be directed to Br. Michael Taffe, OSB, by calling

(701) 974-3315 or michael@assumptionabbey.com

# CHRONICLE

June 24: After 2<sup>nd</sup> Vespers of the Nativity of John the Baptist, the presider, cantors and server return to a sacristy filled with smoke. A live coal was inadvertently chucked into the waste basket. Thank goodness for small favors: if Vespers had been any longer there may have been flames! ❖

July 10: Brs. Placid and Jacob are out spraying weeds in the pastures. They argue about who should drive the pickup; whomever it was, a tire is punctured and Jacob must walk to the Abbey in the rain, returning with another vehicle to fetch Placid. Age before beauty! ❖

July 12: We are eating garden produce: rhubarb, peas, beans, carrots, corn. A *bashtan* (German-Russian) or a *bustan* (Arabic) is a garden away from home where crops are planted that can survive without too much care, such as melons, potatoes, pumpkins and corn. Sometimes our garden—a whole block away from the Abbey—can seem like such a place, especially when hauling boxes of big zucchini to the kitchen. ❖

August 4: The Benedictine Sisters, who have moved from Richardton into Dickinson, have donated their bell back to the Abbey. This cast-iron bell was the first used by our community and donated to the Sisters sometime between 1916 and 1920 when the Sisters were in Elbowoods. They brought it with them to Garrison, then to Minot, then to Richardton. Brother Jacob took the skid steer over to the monastery to bring it home again. ❖

August 14: On the vigil of the Assumption, our biggest feast day, lightning strikes the west bell tower at about 1:00 in the morning, knocking out elevator service, the church sound system, and setting off the fire alarm. Almost no one gets out of bed. (We are supposed to leave the building at once and assemble in the cafeteria until we count heads and discover the source of the fire.) Brothers Jacob, Alban and John go to the church. They smell smoke, and so they climb the towers but they discover no fire. We have been “touched” by the heavens on our feast day! ❖

August 18: Sometimes things seem to conspire against one’s better efforts. Our sound system in the church has been out since the lightning strike, and workers have arrived to repair the roof of the east nave aisle. Their intense banging, and our un-amplified efforts, make for a very difficult time understanding what is being read at Morning Prayer. At least it is not being read in another language! □

## From the Library

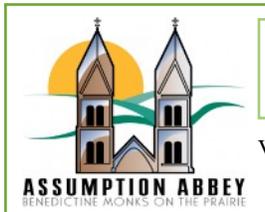
By Br. Michael Taffe



A fairly short book that I would recommend is: *Even Though I Walk: One Woman’s Journey of Prayer in the Shadow of Death* (Liturgical Press 2019) by Madga Heras and Ignasi Fossas, OSB. Magda was a renowned cardiologist in Spain and Fr. Ignasi was the prior of the Benedictine monastery of Montserrat in

Spain. In 2012 Magda was diagnosed with a tumor on one of her lungs. Besides the medical tests and treatments that she had to undergo, she also wanted to explore her spirituality and religious side, especially through prayer. Though a practicing Catholic, she wanted to deepen her faith. She had known Fr. Ignasi slightly before this and asked him to accompany her and lead her on this journey. The book consists of their emails, social media posts to each other, and other notes. The one down-side of this book is that we do not know what they talked about when they were actually with each other; but that is okay! Fr. Ignasi gave her some places to start, but it turned out that much of her desire was addressed by the psalms. For example, early in the book Madga was on a trip with her husband to a beautiful spot and Fr. Ignasi suggested she pray Psalm 19 as a prayer of thanksgiving for God’s creation. So, this book is a wonderful reminder of how the psalms can be foundational for us in all of the experiences of our lives.

In the prologue of the book, Gabriel Magalhães writes that the book gives us three important conclusions. First, that in our life of faith, there is a point in which we have to say “yes” even though we may not have all of the facts. Second, as we approach death, we want to keep all of our humanity intact in spite of what the world may throw at us. Third, as we enter a process of dying, we should embrace all of the love we can. Magda Heras truly exhibited all three steps through her experience with cancer. A truly lovely book. □



# Newsletter

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for friends of Assumption Abbey.

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P.O. Box A  
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Blessed John Eynon was a Benedictine monk who was acting as the pastor of the parish of St. Giles in Reading, England, during the time of the dissolution of monasteries under the rule of Henry VIII. When John Eynon refused to surrender the parish to the king's authorities, he was accused of high treason and was executed soon thereafter, on November 15, 1539, at the gates of Reading Abbey, along with Hugh Faringdon, the abbot, and another Reading Benedictine priest named John Rugg. They were hanged, drawn and quartered. On May 13, 1895, they were beatified by Pope Leo XIII. St. Giles' Church is now a Church of England parish, but John Eynon is commemorated there by a carved wooden plaque. He is pictured in a stained glass window in St. James' Roman Catholic Church next door that occupies part of the ruins of Reading Abbey. □

## Benedictine Saints

October 15 is the feast day of Bruno of Querfurt, a Benedictine, bishop and martyr, the "Apostle to the Prussians" as St. Boniface was the "Apostle to the Germans." He was born in 974 of the noble family of Querfurt, now Saxony-Anhalt, and was a relative of Otto III, the Holy Roman Emperor, who made Bruno his court chaplain when he was only twenty-one. While in Rome for Otto's coronation, Bruno decided to enter a Benedictine monastery near Ravenna where he was trained by St. Romuald, the founder of the Camaldolese Benedictines. In 1003, Pope Sylvester II appointed Bruno an archbishop and sent him to

evangelize the pagan peoples of Eastern Europe which placed him in a controversy between the pope and the patriarchate of Constantinople. After diplomatic controversy in Prague, he was sent to Kiev to make Christian converts among the Pechenegs, a Turkish people living in modern-day Romania and Ukraine. In 1008, Bruno and eighteen companions set out to found a mission among the Prussians. For his efforts they beheaded him and hanged most of his companions. Duke Boleslaus the Brave bought the bodies of these martyrs and brought them to Poland where they were buried in Przemysł. Bruno is venerated in both the Eastern and Western Church.



An illumination from the Litleyngton Missal, 1383-84.