

Article 6

Back in Michigan

The value of a retreat is always measured by what is brought back to “the world” after the retreat is over. Quite honestly, there are retreats that I don’t even remember and there are other retreats that I can still remember decades later. Not only do I remember them, but the words and stories of the retreat director still affect the way I think and act.

I physically left the Abbey of the Genesee on Friday, September 16. But now a week later, I am still noticing the time and thinking of what the monks are doing, especially when I stop to pray. I think of the measured pace of chanting of the Psalms and the constant change of lighting throughout the prayer.

The brothers each have a light at each of their stalls and there are lights over the altar, the ambo, the chair and the stalls of the guests. These lights are turned on only when they are needed, so there is a constant, subtle shifting of light throughout each service. Often all the lights are turned off at the end of a service, except for two spotlights. One shines on the crucifix suspended between the altar and the guests; the other shines on an icon of the Blessed Virgin. Neither is bright, rather they gently illuminate both images. At the end of most services, the Angelus bell is rung and the prayer is prayed silently. At the end, all the monks bow to the tabernacle and leave. At that point the lights on the side walls are turned on so that all can safely find their way out.

Another recollection that stands out in my memory is the abbey bell. There is no bell tower, but the bell is placed on the hill near the church and is clearly heard for miles. It rings at 2:25 am for the start of prayer and again at the end when the Angelus is rung about 3:30 am. It calls the monks to prayer before each service and often is rung as the service begins. It signals the end of work periods late in the morning and again late in the afternoon. It calls the monks to meals as well. The bell was rung about 12 times each day, sometimes for prayer but at other times as well, probably as a signal for something. During one of the conferences when I heard the bell ringing for something other than prayer, I asked Fr. Jerome. He explained when and why it is rung. He finished with the comment that most men answer to a belle; but the monks answer to a different bell. (Obviously, I am not the only one who enjoys a pun.)

Because the abbey is miles away from towns and the whole area is very rural, it is very quiet and the air is unpolluted. Except of course for bread baking days (Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday); on those days, if the wind is blowing right the air is filled with the scent of baking bread especially around sunrise. But another, less pleasant scent comes from what I suspect is a pig farm a few miles away. Some times as I walked up to the abbey church, the smell was very obvious because the breeze was out of the west where the farm must have been located. The other institution that must have been within a few miles of the abbey was a race track. One evening as I walked up to the abbey for night prayer, I

could make out the voice that seemed to announce a stock car race and I could hear the roar of engines too.

Most of all I think of the quiet, the peace, the measured and prayer filled life of the abbey. The books I read there led me to begin a file on things that I would like to work on when I return to St. Mary Magdalen. The other thing I would like to do is to try to create an “abbey within”; a quiet place inside where I can go to experience quiet and peace, a place to meet the Lord.

On the way back I took the time to stop at Niagara Falls. I had the chance to fly over the falls four years ago in a small plane, but this was the first time I had the chance to stop and spend some time gawking at them. As I walked along the Canadian side, I could not help but think that this was truly a Pentecost moment as I listened to people speaking in a wide variety of languages. They were all pointing and talking about the Falls in their native tongues. I could not help but think we were all saying the same things about the mighty, awesome power of the Falls. Over and over verses and phrases from the Psalms which proclaim the might and power of God came to mind. And I heard echoes of the monks chanting those Psalms in my head.





Since I have returned, I have begun getting ready for the next phase of my sabbatical which will take me overseas. I have bought a new suitcase to replace the one I bought 25 years ago. Over the years it has been better traveled than me since I often lent it out to others to use in their travels. But the wheels have finally broken and over-packing has strained and broken the dividers. Even my patchwork repairs have given out. So I now have a new suitcase to see me through the next six weeks overseas and hopefully for the next 25 years as well. I have also bought a few new clothes and tried to figure out what to pack for a lengthy trip.

One suitcase that needs to be packed I will leave behind for the next month. It will have a new Bible I have bought for the trip. This will be the fifth time I have taken a group to the Holy Land. Each time I have taken a different Bible along. Each Bible was chosen for different reasons. Sometimes it was the size or the translation or who gave the Bible. I remember the first time I took a group; I had a small pocket size edition of the Bible. It was 1988 (I was only 37 and had great eyesight.) This time, I got a Bible with large print...another clear indicator of my growing older. This special suitcase will also have my vestments for the Liturgies of the pilgrimage, other books that I will need and special handouts for those who will be a part of the pilgrimage. The booklet will have a prayer to open the day and another to close it; Stations of the Cross for us to pray as we walk the Way of the Cross in Jerusalem; Scripture

references for all that we will visit throughout the pilgrimage and hymns to use during the Liturgies in the Holy Land, Assisi and Rome.

While I was working on the materials to include in the booklet on Thursday morning there was a knock on the door. When I opened it there was a well-dressed couple standing there, one holding a Bible and the other a brief case. They were Jehovah Witnesses. I asked them if they knew where they were (they didn't). So I explained that they were at the rectory of St. Mary Magdalen Parish and I was the pastor. We spoke for a while and both seemed well versed in what they believed. Finally, the gentleman offered me a small pamphlet on how to read the Bible. In exchange, I gave him a book on the beliefs of the Catholic Church. It was another experience that gets filed under "life is never dull".

During these last few days, I have also spent some extra time with my sister and made it possible for her to spend some extra time with her dog, Tiffany. The old girl is now about 15 and a half years old. She is going blind and deaf and has only a few teeth left. But she can still make it from the rectory to my office at the far end of the building; often times with those short little Pomeranian legs going into overdrive. And despite her apparent deafness, she is still able to hear the word "Treat" very clearly and chow down a piece of beef jerky or a special treat.

MaryAnna seems to be doing ok, but there have been some respiratory problems that have caused some concern. So while I am gone there are a few tests that will be done, to make sure that there is nothing more serious happening.

One of the things I did to prepare for this next phase of my sabbatical was to trade in my cell phone for a different model that I will be able to use overseas. Strangely enough, I could have gotten the same phone several months ago when a previous phone needed to be replaced because the lens was cracked. I had discussed my upcoming trip overseas and was told something entirely different from what I was told when I went to Verizon to make those arrangements! I am sure that has never happened to any of my readers!

In any case, I resisted the suggested upgrade to a smart phone (I told them I was not smart enough to use it). So now I have another phone, another cord and another set of overseas plugs to carry to Europe. But my sister will still be able to call me and so will the nursing home and the parish office. All of that is different from the last time I went overseas!

This is the last article from this phase of the sabbatical. The first two months are now over and there are ten weeks left. The next articles will come from Europe and the Holy Land.

Know that even as I prepare to go, you are never far from my thoughts or prayer. I know the staff and Fr. Jim are all taking good care of things in my absence. And for his reading pleasure, I left a pamphlet for Fr. Jim on the rectory kitchen table...