

## Monastic Scribe VI: July 9, 2021

### SUCCISA VIRESKIT

If there is anyone who can translate the above title, no less pronounce it, and knows whose motto it is, deserves to receive a plenary indulgence. But I won't keep you in suspense. The two words translate, "Cut down, it will be green again." It is the motto of the Abbey of Monte Cassino in Italy which Saint Benedict (480 – 547) founded around 520. It has been destroyed three times but each time became green again through rebuilding. We are heirs of Saint Benedict whose feast day we celebrate this year on Sunday, July 11th. I write in his honor.

Monasticism has been found to exist in most religious traditions. Sometimes a particular monastery dies out, or is suppressed for lack of numbers, financial reasons, or, as under Henry VIII, because monasteries were a threat to the new Anglican separation from Rome.

Monasticism always endures but individual monasteries may cease to be. Right now monasteries face a time of crisis in Europe and the United States. Vocations are rare and many communities have mostly elders, or a few monks at best. I know of at least six Benedictine monasteries in the United States which have closed in the past twenty years. There are also some Cistercian monasteries that have folded. What is the future of monasticism?

In Benedict's mind (RB 58) a newcomer to a monastery is to be tested to see "whether he (she) truly seeks God." This is shown in devotion to the Liturgy of the Hours, to obedience, and to ability to deal with difficulties. So the heart of a monastery is an intense search for an intimate relationship with God. The lifestyle has been expressed in many different ways and there are some contradictory impulses in monasticism. For instance, there is demanded from monks a separation from the world ("Fuga mundi"), but also strong hospitality that has been shown in schools, hospitals, retreat centers, agricultural assistance, as well as varied spiritual supports to people. There is not one work proper to a monastery so there have been many expressions of monastic life. Occasional reforms to get back to basics and, at the same time, read the signs of the times, have also been necessary recurrences in the lives of monasteries.

## **Monastic Scribe VI: July 9, 2021**

Benedictine monasteries flourished in Europe in the Middle Ages. Then Saint Francis in the thirteenth century gathered his friars to preach and beg in the newer urban areas. Saint Dominic did the same. In the sixteenth century Saint Ignatius furthered the move from monasticism by calling his members to get away from community living and communal prayer. Many variations of religious life have followed.

The Church, both in Europe and the United States, is shrinking in size and numbers and this is reflected in the number of candidates to the monastic and religious life. What kind of reform is needed today? What forms of adaptation would best serve God and God's people? Is it just a matter of steadying the course and outlasting the crises? Or is change needed?

I invite you, as members of God's People, to share your thoughts specifically on the place of a monastery in the church of our times. Those of you acquainted with Glastonbury Abbey, are especially asked to consider what you see as our monastery's place in the world around us. Drop me a line at [joycet@glastonburyabbey.org](mailto:joycet@glastonburyabbey.org) Please don't just tell me how wonderful we are, or how awful we are either! Be specific and don't be afraid to speak the truth. Our concern, in Saint Benedict's words, is "that in all things God may be glorified."

**Fr. Timothy Joyce, OSB, STL**

Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.