



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Homily given at the Mass of Renewal of Vows August 17, 2002

As we come to our renewal of vows this year, we as a community, and as individual members of that community, face many difficulties. We could be more single-minded and intense in our dedication to the Lord, more focused and ardent in our prayer, more generous in our service of our people, more observant in the stricter aspects of our life. Since about a year ago, three have departed from our novitiate, two have departed from temporary vows, although, thanks be to God, one and now two have persevered in the novitiate, two have persevered in temporary vows. There has been illness within the community, and painful distress and disturbance. There continue to be different tendencies among us with respect to liturgical matters; with respect to how we can best respond to the growing needs of the local church while not only remaining faithful to, but growing in faithfulness to, our charism as Benedictine monks; with respect to the degree to which we should be withdrawn from and the degree to which we should be involved with the world surrounding us, locally, nationally, internationally. We have all suffered from the scandals within the church, and from the effects of the aggressive, relentless, and in countless ways unfair media coverage, and each of us undoubtedly lives with a certain fear of being falsely accused, and perhaps also with a fear, strictly speaking irrational but very powerful, that we cannot now make the slightest mistake in any matter without something terrible happening to us. We live in the shadow of the horrible events of September 11, and of the distressingly altered world political conditions which have followed upon them. The U.S. economy is in a state of significant weakness and uncertainty, and if this situation does not improve soon, we ourselves will begin to face some fairly large financial challenges. This is not even to mention all the sufferings and difficulties we have had to bear and to face in our School, in our Parish, nor to mention the personal sufferings and difficulties each of us has had to carry this past year: sorrows in our families, sorrows among our friends, perhaps frustration and hardship in our work, for some, a certain degree of loneliness in the community, for each one, the increasing challenges which progress in age and in life bring.

For all this, I have naught for your comfort, as the spiritual writer said, naught, that is, except the comfort of the message of faith, the faith as it was preached to us during these days of retreat, and comfort in the root sense of the word, that is, strengthening. Let us ask, then, what or who is behind all these evils which have afflicted us and are afflicting us? We heard from Ephesians: "It is not against human enemies that we have to struggle, but against the principalities and the ruling forces who are masters of the darkness in this world, the spirits of evil in the heavens." (6:12) These difficulties and evils are indeed beyond our power to meet, but in this very fact lies the great blessing: for in the face of this we are forced to turn away from trying to depend on ourselves, and -- thanks be to God -- have no choice but to depend on God. "Thanks be to God who has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" (Romans 7:25) And: "In the world you will have troubles, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33) Is this victory victory as the world understands it? No, no, not because it is not true victory, but because it is victory far more triumphant, far more decisive, far more complete, far more sublime,



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than anything the world, or we, can imagine or conceive. For “in all things,” -- yes, even the evil things -- “in all things God works for good for them who love the Lord, who are called according to his purpose.” Romans 8:28) “For I am convinced of this, that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things yet to come, neither height, nor depth, nor any created thing, can come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38 - 39)

But if all this is so, if our true enemy is the Evil One, and our true King, for whom we are doing battle, is Jesus Christ, and the victory into which we are being caught up is a victory such as this, then “we must put on the full armor of God, or we shall not be able to resist on the evil day, we shall not be able to stand our ground, and overcome the devil’s tactics.” (Ephesians 6:13) Let us put on that full armor of God, then, “with truth a belt round our waist, and uprightness a breastplate, wearing for shoes on our feet the eagerness to spread the gospel of peace and always carrying the shield of faith so that we can use it to quench the burning arrows of the Evil One. Let us take salvation as our helmet and the sword of the Spirit, that is, the word of God. Let us pray in the Spirit at all times.” (Ephesians 6:14 - 18) And we who have been called to be sons of Saint Benedict, let us tighten our grip on our special weapons, our vows of stability, *conversatio morum*, and obedience, let us perhaps especially in this coming year do battle with the weapon of the vow of stability, stability, which comes into its own in the time of trial, the determination, by the grace of God, to continue to seek God in this monastic community, with these brothers, in this place, with these people of the School, the Parish, the Abbey Family, with these works of priestcraft and schoolcraft, of study and service, let us continue to seek God here, with and in these friends whom God has given us, with redoubled effort, not shamefully casting our weapons aside and fleeing.

You heard the reward promised by the Lord in the gospel (Matthew 19:29) to the one who has left everything and is, by the Lord’s grace, victorious: already in this life, a hundredfold, and, in the age to come, eternal life, and the inheritance prepared for the one who has given up home, brothers and sisters, father and mother, wife and children, all, for the Lord’s sake: the inheritance prepared: the Lord himself.