

## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



### Br. Cassian On His Call

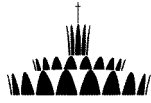
Lenten Witness Program  
Tuesday, February 27, 2007  
Saint Anselm Parish Center

I suppose it all started after that five-minute pause between the making of my soul and God's joyful surprise at another unique creation, as Fr. Ralph's poem goes. About nine months later, I emerged from the womb, and promptly peed upon every inch of the world around me. Shortly thereafter, I received the grace of God under the name of Christopher Mark Koenemann. I was (and still am) the son of Dennis and Dianne Koenemann, and soon to be the big brother to Elizabeth (Betsy) Ann Koenemann.

As for early indications of vocation, I remember coming home one 5<sup>th</sup> grade evening bursting at the seams to go to high school night. I badgered my very reluctant Dad into eating quickly so that we can go to hear the presentations. He thought I was absolutely out of my mind, but he finally acquiesced. I went directly to the presentation by St. Louis Priory School, my reason for being there, and by the end of Mr. McCabe's overview I KNEW where I was going to go. I informed my Dad --who barely even knew such schools existed-- right away that it was the case. He forced me to listen to Chaminade, SLUH, Kennedy, and some others, but it didn't do much to sway me. My parents decided to make the many necessary sacrifices to send me here. I was greatly aided by my mom's steadfast determination that her children would receive a thorough Catholic education. She was very conscientious of her responsibility to raise us as Catholics. My Dad was all too well informed of that responsibility too; he had been persuaded to convert to the faith from Missouri Lutheran after they married. I think my parents deserve a great deal of credit for everything in my life, especially a religious vocation.

During my time in the Junior School, I adored Brother Stephen, and asked him to be my Confirmation sponsor. He assured me many times that I was going to make it through Confirmation, but I was certain that I would not -- something deep inside me knew that either Fr. Timothy or the bishop would see right through me. I was terrified most of having to write a letter to Fr. Timothy, but somehow I made it through to become an "adult" Christian. My Mom tells me that I wrote an English story during this period with the twist ending that I was the monk giving advice to a student in the future, but I don't recall it. I certainly would never have expressed that notion to anyone, because prayer was an extremely private thing for me, which may seem strange in light of my thoroughly Catholic environment. For example, the only time we ever prayed as a family at home was before a meal when we had a guest or a formal holiday meal. The result was that my prayer life at home was sporadic and very private.

As for High School, I fell into the trap of becoming a sort of good guy in the cool group, and the drive for popularity eventually had pretty troubling effects on us all. Maintaining status eventually meant abandoning an authentic Christian life. It meant, tragically, that I chose conformity to the world over conformity to Christ. I was preppy, smart, quite



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY

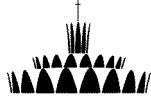


social, and a jock. For several years I lived life according to the norms of American society, trying to live the all-American life. My girlfriend of what would eventually be five years, through the later part of high school and college, was a smart, popular, lukewarm Episcopalian, similar to me in many ways. She set to the task of making me into the ‘perfect’ American boyfriend. I accepted the training rather willingly.

I made the decision going into college that I would no longer be as much of a socialite, or at least that I would be an even more studious one. I decided that it was time to grow up and focus on my future to an even greater extent. I was very fortunate to have some great college guy friends that were also of a little more studious and less social bent. Of the guys, there is one of special note for this topic. Ryan was a devout Fundamentalist Christian, and he had a little bit of a tough time adapting to Vanderbilt. The other guys on the floor didn’t really take too well to the religious guy, but I had certainly found someone with whom I could relate. One of the hall’s past times, outside of video games, was to start up a religious debate between Ryan and I. The usual process was that Ryan would get me on the ropes on some issue, but I would fight my way back, somehow, to the Catholic answer, stumping him for the time being. The debate would usually end, at least in my head, with something similar to: “But Chris why don’t you live your faith?” Ryan and I would continue to discuss our faiths and become closer friends throughout college. The same question would haunt me throughout.

By the end of college, it started to become more obvious that my girlfriend and I were in somewhat of a codependent relationship. My family and friends had started to drop hints that something may need to change. We (meaning She) had started to talk about marriage, and I had told her that I didn’t know whether she was the one. We fought bitterly sometimes, because each desperately wanted to convert the other to his or her philosophy on life. She wanted to be an Episcopalian materialist, giving a priority to societal life. I was convinced that she’d never be happy with our level of life, and I wanted my family to be Catholic. We were both suborn, and Senior year turned into a bit of a bear at times. I started to go back to Church more often though, and at some point this monk thing started to come up again. It started as the notion that I’d maybe try becoming a monk in late age, if something happened to her. I actually thought a few times that maybe I would be a young widower who joined the abbey, but I didn’t pay much credence to such thoughts. I even once had the suspicion earlier in college that taking a certain class would help me when I became a monk, but always I shrugged it off as a fantasy, considering that I thought that I would get married, probably to my girlfriend. The fighting with her became worse as Senior year came to a close though, and I made it quite clear that there was not to be a proposal forthcoming. We moved to separate cities and dated long distance for a few months after that, until she finally had the strength to end it.

I was crushed. I threw myself into my new job at PwC Consulting, which was by the way my first choice of employment since Freshman year. Even though it was my ideal job, providing challenging assignments in public organizations with great missions, the low level work made me feel very small and unsuccessful. I was traveling for work full time



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



while working long hours with people much older than myself, and so I never had the chance to meet any friends in DC. I was very alone and lonely, but I refused to let it show. I had never had a Friday or Saturday night without plans in my life, but that changed swiftly.

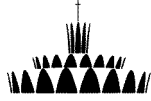
It was time for me to get back into learning about my religion. I started to read, with among the first books being Mere Christianity, the Screwtape Letters, a protestant book on grace that Ryan had sent me, and later the New Testament itself. It was certainly a coping mechanism, but it was also a necessary outgrowth of the freedom and solitude. As a little boy, I would very seldom read the Lives of the Saints when absolutely no one could find me, perhaps on a slow rainy day in the basement, and so this solitude was also the opportunity for that little boy to do so on a larger scale. I no longer had to answer to anyone for this pious side of me, and so I could explore it.

My first personal reading of the New Testament left me breathless. It was the first time in my life that I had had a deep personal encounter with Jesus. Jesus touched me more deeply than anything had in my life, and I was completely converted to the Love I felt.

Eventually, I made the decision to go to confession. By this point, I had been reading quite a bit, and I really desired to pick up the next great Christian book. On my way into confession, I looked around the bookstore, and finally chose “the most widely read Christian book outside of the Bible,” The Imitation of Christ. The priest assigned me the penance of reading a spiritual book for Lent, and while the Imitation challenged me quite a bit, indeed a great deal, I found it to be very uplifting. It rang true as a way to follow this Jesus whom I adored, and so I wanted to follow this Saint-making book with all my heart. I was also inspired by the Universal Call to Holiness bas relief on the back of the National Shrine to start back on the mission that even I could be a saint or Saint.

At some point, I took up the devotion of the rosary, which greatly affected me as well. Here was the long-desired component of meditation and contemplation that I had unknowingly wanted all my life. My rosary was a very large consolation to me at times, as I still felt very lonely both traveling for business and during my little time in DC. That said some St. Louis friends and Priory guys had come into town later that year. Most of my evenings were spent praying the rosary, except for the one night or so that I would go out. I would later learn how to sing my rosary, and soon that became my form. I found that singing it brought me much greater joy, concentration, and contemplative recollection. The tempo held my mind’s attention enough to overcome some distractions, but more importantly and the act of singing added a new level of dignity and affectivity to the prayer. Perhaps this last point can best be expressed by St. Augustine’s famous quote that “he who sings prays twice.”

Starting about this time and lasting for several years, God became just about all that I thought of outside of work, with the exception of a few weekly breaks for recreation and socializing. My interest in religion had effected a change in me, one so evident that my close friend at work in North Carolina started to ask me about Christianity. We spent our



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



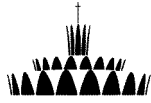
final few months on travel to North Carolina discussing God. One night while talking at dinner her face lit up, and she announced that it was the very first instant she had ever believed in God. Such a friendship apart from the rest of my life gave me the confidence to confide in her that I thought maybe I had a calling to be a monk at St. Louis Abbey.

It would take much more time, prayer, and thinking until I could share that inkling with people connected to the rest of my life, but I eventually informed my family and some of my close friends about my potential vocation. While everyone wanted to support me, they did so through questioning whether this pursuit was best. So, at best I received nonchalant disbelief; at worst sharp criticism and fear. (As an aside, it is important to note that the American church was experiencing the height of the priest pedophilia scandal, and so the news of someone wanting to become a priest wasn't taken too well.) My good friend Ryan was so shocked by the news that he wrote a personal 18-page refutation of Catholicism to save my soul. In fairness, I think it came as a response to a few emails that I had sent him trying to convert him to the Real Presence of Jesus that I had found in the Blessed Sacrament. I would take the next six to eight months assembling a point-by-point reply to Ryan's accusations. It would be an extremely profitable exercise for me, as it forced me to read apologetics.

A related story is that the fear of becoming a monk had started to grow in me. My response was to test whether the Catholic faith was true. Those apologetics finally answered my many questions of why to believe in the church. I was astounded at the level of truth that we had, indeed the fullness of it, with thousands of years of detailed thinking from the brightest of minds behind it. I became convinced that every Catholic sorely needed to learn apologetics, as we had all been taught what to believe in Catechism classes but not why to believe in the Church. For instance, did you know that it is illogical to believe the Bible to be inspired without believing in the authoritative teaching Church that proclaimed it as such? I also enjoyed learning about the ancient and biblical evidence for the sacraments.

The next hurdle to my vocation was that I had started to realize that as the only and eldest son of my family, perhaps I may be in a corban-type situation that would delay trying my vocation for some time, as I thought that such a change could make life very difficult, or in the worse case scenario near impossible, for my family. This very important question gave me pause, for several years. Each day of waiting seemed like an eternity, and time moved very slowly in view of an even longer timeframe of discernment. Yet, a potential religious vocation kept nagging me, even while I feared that I had missed my chance.

My work life continued to progress at a much slower pace than I would have liked too, but everyone assured me that I was doing better than anyone my age. Most days I was bored, and I felt like the whole world was passing me by. There were some shining moments though, and for those I was considered a rising star. My star didn't seem to be rising fast enough for me though. It also didn't help that the culture and environment at my new NASA client was rather dreary. My boss had previously been a clinical psychologist prior to joining our efforts in a sort of business psychology. He was very



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



open about how we were certainly working within a very depressing work environment, one of the worst he had seen. We each felt as if the entire world had passed us by several times over during that year and a half within the confines of those grey steel walls.

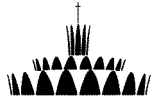
Another important development was that I had made the decision to meet my resolves each week as best as I could, “even if they meant I would have nothing to discuss at the following confession.” This resolution led to finding out just how hard and long the path to holiness really was, as I continually found (and continue to find) many difficult issues to overcome. A later study of the path to holiness, that is the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways, put me even more in my place, but also gave me hope that God could bring me along the path.

I had also been attending Philosophy classes at St. Anselm’s Abbey, a sister house of ours, on Saturdays. Br. Dunstan forced me to address the question of what is the meaning of life. I read and was greatly moved by Viktor Frankl’s book Man’s Search for Meaning. I was highly struck by the great Jewish psychologist’s comments on his and others’ responses to the concentration camps. This eminent psychologist highlighted that each man needs a schema of meaning that included a meaning for suffering in order to live life to its proper extent and dignity. Here is one quick quote:

“An active life serves the purpose of giving man the opportunity to realize values in creative work, while a passive life of enjoyment affords him the opportunity to obtain fulfillment in experiencing beauty, art, or nature. But there is also purpose in that life which is almost barren of both creation and enjoyment and which admits of but one possibility of behavior: namely, in man’s attitude to his existence, an existence restricted by external forces. A creative life and a life of enjoyment are banned to him. But not only creativeness and enjoyment are meaningful. If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete.

“The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity – even under the most difficult circumstances—to add a deeper meaning to his life....”

By what can be nothing less than Divine Inspiration, I next picked up the book I Believe in Love, a spiritual retreat based upon the writings of St. Therese of Lisieux. For those of you who don’t know her, St. Therese lived in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century France, entering a Carmelite convent at 16 and succumbing to death of Leukemia at 24. This prodigy of grace’s primary legacy was a spiritual autobiography that left behind a “new and very short” path to holiness based upon absolute confidence in God’s love through spiritual childhood and the offering up of every adverse situation as a powerful petition for the salvation of souls. Her writings, both simple and profound, are said to have prompted one book about her for every month since her death in 1897, and her devotees, now in the millions, have included notable as St. Pio of Pietrelcina and Blessed Mother Teresa.



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



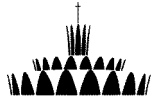
Anyway, I was awed to find the answers to all my deep questions within its pages. St. Therese's approach to the redemptive value of suffering was just the answer for which Dr. Frankl had highlighted the need. Her acceptance of her own fears and insignificance were just the answers that I needed to those topics as well. Her purity and selflessness highlighted for me what could be described as a mixture of vanity and vainglory in my piety, and she changed my life from the selfishness described above. I started to notice that maybe I loved others only to be loved, that I was perhaps sometimes helpful only to be praised, and that maybe I was sublimating a highly competitive will to glory under the socially acceptable mantle of religion. Her selfless disposition of offering ushered in an entirely new level of Christian peace and joy in my life, and so I want to explain, alas only quickly and in part, the key part of her teaching that touched me so.

She affected this transition by teaching me the inner dispositions necessary to live a life focused solely upon the Paschal Mystery and Gospel message. (Let me just say that I would have loved to lecture about this subject alone for the entire time, as I find it the most fascinating topic, but I was told that I would bore everyone unless I told a fun narrative. So, here's the briefest of overviews of it.) The key to understanding the redemptive meaning of suffering is St. Paul's Letter to the Colossians 1:24: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church." The Church, Christ's mystical Body, has herein always found a way to cooperate in Christ's perfect redemption of the world, through offering up our sufferings as a powerful prayer for others. Pope John Paul II said on this topic:

"In the Body of Christ, which is ceaselessly born of the Cross of the Redeemer, it is precisely suffering permeated by the spirit of Christ's sacrifice that is the irreplaceable mediator and author of the good things which are indispensable for the world's salvation. It is suffering, more than anything else, which clears the way for the grace which transforms human souls. Suffering, more than anything else, makes present in the history of humanity the force of the Redemption."  
(*Salvifici doloris*, 27)

St. Therese also comments upon this cooperation in Christ's passion by saying, "Jesus has for us a love so incomprehensible, so delicate, that He does not want to do anything without associating us with Him. He wants us to participate with Him in the work of saving souls. The Creator of the universe waits for prayers, for the immolation made by a poor insignificant soul, to save other souls which, like that soul, were bought at the price of all His blood."

God has come to set us free not only from sin and death but from suffering, at least in part. Now, suffering for it to be such must still be painful, but such pain may be soothed through the knowledge that it is producing more good. Think of it this way: what parents wouldn't gladly suffer their child's illness on his behalf? Any would do so, no matter how painful it was. Well, it is that love and soothing that transformed the seemingly meaninglessness of St. Therese's tremendous suffering and death into the most meaningful and joyful experience of her life. She knew it was helping and saving souls!



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY

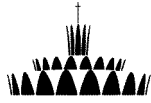


While St. Therese just emptied her daily crosses into the treasury of the Church without preference for their use, confident that they would be used to save sinners from damnation, I have found myself too weak to do just that at all times. Sometimes when I am sorely tested at work, when everything is going against me, I ask Jesus to use that specific cross to free some poor child trapped in a life of child labor. The concrete visual of seeing some 10-year old carrying bricks without any possibility of earning his way out or getting an education not only brings things into context for me but also stirs me to bear my situation for him. Knowing that my sufferings can help him allows me to brave my own with a new spirit. Keeping that poor child in mind contextualizes and transforms the pain as an opportunity to help him in a far greater way than normally possible. I am no longer dissatisfied with my day when I view it in this way. There are countless examples of inner and exterior suffering to turn into meaning in this way, and I encourage you to offer up temptations, for example to something as small as an extra desert to something as large as wanting to set someone right. Offer up disappointments and setbacks, or not having enough time, or being unable to help others as much as you would wish. In short, offer up, with God's grace, whatever hurts, whatever lacks meaning, confident that cross's petition will do more good than bad behavior or frustration. Thomas a Kempis notes that the better prepared we are to meet suffering, the better we will do so, and there seems to be no better preparation than uniting to Christ's Passion.

In the mornings I would awake, roll over to my knees, and make a morning offering of all of the day's sufferings. I lived by Colossians 1:24 in the sufficient trials and evils of each day, without looking for anything extra to offer up, aside from some small fast perhaps. I found that I was weak though, and I offered my daily trials poorly. They can only be offered with God's help, God's grace, and my failures highlighted how weak and unloving I was on my own. I think Origen has a great quote on the subject:

“Thus there is nothing the one who loves affectionately with perfection does not endure. But we do not endure many things; so it is certain because of this that we do not have loving affection that endures all things. And if we do not bear some things patiently, it is because we lack loving affection, which is patient in all things. Then too, we often fall in the struggle we have with the devil; undoubtedly it is because that loving affection that never fails is not in us.” (Commentary on the Songs of Songs in Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, and Selected Words, p. 230).

Seeing this weakness caused me to mourn my inability to love people enough to do so better. I mourned my weakness too, but also offered it. There I learned to offer up everything. It was very cathartic, as I could give everything difficult over to God. It allowed me to let go and let God. While I accepted consolations graciously, I saw them as a sign of just how weak I was, because it meant that I was too weak to bear additional hardships for others, but I started to accept my weakness much more appropriately. In imitation of Saint Therese, I asked God to reduce my level of consolation and comfort, provided he helped me to bear it, and this at least highlighted for me the temptation to spiritual gluttony. I began to understand the Paschal mystery more, seeing more clearly



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



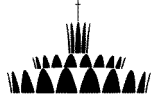
Jesus's immense love for me in His passion. This love drew me to love God more for who He is than what he could give me.

I continued to read several books by or on St. Therese. My favorites were The Story of A Soul and The Complete Doctrine of St. Therese. I had more than just books to teach me her lessons on spiritual childhood though, for at this time I had been teaching 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade Sunday school. There I had the perfect school of my own from which to learn spiritual childhood, and it took deep root within my soul. Slowly my approach to everything in life changed as I grew more accustomed to a much more selfless, little, hidden existence. I cannot highlight just how different my life became. I was dedicated to being a little servant of God, confident in God's love and care for me. It is hard to describe the gifts of this new disposition. I can only offer two passages that hint at this new-found meaning: "Whoever wants to save his own life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it." And "He who abides in love, abides in God, and God abides in him."

My mission was to work very hard at offering all the small opportunities that came into my life to serve my Lord. Everything had meaning for me, as I could transform through an offering any dissatisfaction or lack of meaning into something meaningful, and I focused solely on loving my neighbor and God. I was quite happy, despite the trials. I usually offered whatever bothered me for poor sinners, atheists, my family, the children stuck in child labor, or some other petition as appropriate. Each step in the process led to a greater realization of just how small of a child of God I was, as it led to the realization that while my love was growing greatly, it remained (and still remains) but very, very small and fragile.

It took the better part of a year for those teachings to even start to set in, but another of St. Therese's lessons took quite a bit longer. She, like many other Saints had referred to her nothingness or worthlessness --others would say wretchedness. While I certainly experienced these feelings often, I couldn't yet understand them. I did many meditations upon this topic, wanting to crack the meaning of the proverb "Can nothingness boast of its nothingness? This would be the height of vanity!" from the fascinating and key Chapter 40 from the Imitation, but still its foundation eluded me. I would continue to meditate on the topic of nothingness and worthlessness most every day, as I really desired to understand what the saints were saying about it. I wanted badly to escape the "good person" trap of taking pride in my achievements and seeing myself as superior.

My work situation changed drastically shortly after I had grown accustomed to the hidden life. Our client and project manager requested that I join a different project and soon thereafter replace its lead, a forty-year-old principal consultant, reversing our roles. I did not want it to happen, but eventually it did. So, I found myself in charge of the floundering aspect of a soon-to-implement project, with its old lead underneath me, and only a group of secretaries to turn it around. I prayed HARD. St. Augustine's dictum: "Pray as though everything depended on God, and work as though everything depended on you" became my motto. I became highly devoted to the Holy Spirit almost overnight,



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



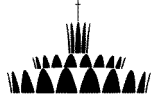
and “Come O Holy Spirit” was unceasingly the prayer in my head before every meeting, call, email, lunch outing, you name it. I was amazed by the results! The project was a smashing success by the end, and we won a Delivery Excellence award. More importantly, I had learned that unworthy though I was I could, if ordered, lead people with kindness and respect, even in stressful situations.

Well, to make a long story short, it happened again! This time I was to travel every week to Huntsville, AL as the Agency-level lead responsible for the long-neglected people aspects of a Payroll and HR system change that affected 20,000 people across the US. When I say this aspect of the project was long-neglected, I mean I had 9 months to do 2 years worth of multiple people’s work. I again had plenty need of prayer, as this project was unwanted medicine that would be fiercely opposed by all NASA management, and it was my job, here as before, to bear their fury and somehow turn them around. Apart from the opposition inherent in the job, I also had fierce envy from another firm to endure.

I was a very unwelcome person in Huntsville from the start, as I was the only IBMer within their stronghold of business. I didn’t have to worry about many lunch or dinner invitations getting in my way, as their people were told to stay mostly clear of me. Being an outcast-hermit of sorts was wonderful though, as I had no distractions from prayer. I was subject at times to daily defaming by their managers and partners. They wanted to rid IBM from Huntsville, and the way to do so was to steal my job. It was hard enough leading the troubled aspect of the effort for which I was responsible on my own, without cohorts, but it was an entirely new level of trial to endure direct insults, accusations, and a constant badgering of my client about how I was unworthy for the work. It was truly an insult to them, and their PhDs, not only that IBM was doing the job, but that someone so young was doing it, to acclaim nonetheless. I knew though that my teams throughout the country legitimately needed me. The project would have most surely failed if it had changed hands at that point, and so I had to tough it all out. I also saw these trials as my long-sought purgation and opportunity to offer up a great deal for souls.

Well, the surprise of all surprises was that after some tremendously harrowing months at work and some of the best months of prayer at the Adoration chapel and hotel, my time as a leader-hermit ended in another smashing success, thanks to the work of the Holy Spirit. Many were startled at the outcome, but few as much as I was. The result was that at age 26, I was made an extremely young level-4 consultant, which was an experienced position beyond my years and education. I was very worried that I had been raised too high too quickly, but I couldn’t silence any of my NASA-IBM colleagues’ support. I tried very hard to tell them that I wasn’t really that experienced. Truth be told, I really didn’t do much that was special. I simply thought about things from other people’s perspectives, and persuaded others to do the same when they didn’t want to do so. It all seemed much like common sense and virtuous action put into a plan.

After the project, I returned to DC and joined an Aquinas book club at St. Anselm’s Abbey. We decided, mostly on my suggestion, to explore the topic of grace as I knew



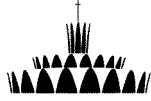
## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



that I had more to learn in this area. We started with St. Augustine's On Grace and Free Will, and later moved to St. Thomas's treatise on grace in the Summa Theologica. There I finally learned conclusively the foundation for our nothingness. While I had already learned that God's grace is responsible for all the good in our lives, I finally made the connection, thanks be to God, that thus I will always be an open-handed beggar, a sinner, a nothing, yet also a child of God with many natural gifts. This last point about our natural gifts, such as of reason, is important, for nothingness is a similar but different term from the erroneous Protestant view that man is depraved. Accepting their nothingness, thus giving all the glory to God's unmerited grace, is what allows the Saints to understand themselves as the least, despite their many amazing graces and gifts. Because of their understanding of grace, they were able to see that every sinner was holier than them, for if he had their graces then he'd be holier than them. You can find a good and short treatise on this topic online in the book The Spiritual Life under the section of Remedies Against Pride, at <http://www.catholic-pages.com/dir/spirituality.asp>. While I find this topic fascinating, I can't get off the narrative anymore.

The final two short parts of the narrative occur back in DC, primarily around St. Matthew's Cathedral. I started to attend their young adults group, and there met some fantastic friends. After a few weeks together at Theology on Tap, they asked me to submit my name for an officer position, and I soon became the Communications Officer for the SMYA ministry. We started small with just a table full of people coming to the Sunday dinner each week. In summary, we would grow from 20 to 120+, but these numbers don't compare to the growth in friendships with each other and God that occurred. I can't describe the joy that I had in my life over those months, as I was surrounded by incredibly loving friends and a great, very meaningful ministry with other young adults. We certainly had our trials though, because Monsignor and the heavily dissenting Faith Formation Director were not too keen on what we were doing, but it was well worth the troubles.

I even developed a crush. I had met her a year previously at a friend's potluck dinner at which we shared probably the most wonderful conversation. When she showed up at St. Matt's a year later, I could recall everything about her. That was the first hint of the crush. However, I really started to notice it when I found myself praying for "the return of the superstar of grace –um, for the sake of the other young adults that could benefit from her presence." I started to think again about the topic of marriage. The crush helped to remind me that marriage was a perfectly desirable option. (There were also plenty of wonderful women around the young adults group, some who even tricked me into dates from time to time.) This one woman, however, made it even easier to see the beauty of marriage. Her crazy mane of curly hair, funny New Jersey accent, perfect, genuine, focused attention on others, and even her faults were absolutely endearing. That said I sensed that the best way to love her and everyone else was as a monk, even if I couldn't see that path opening up any time soon. I was greatly aided in this discernment by studying John Paul II's monumental Theology of the Body, which is a must study for anyone to live the Christian marriage ethics. The study and the crush were things that brought a great deal of healing to me. Someone, perhaps it was Fr. Abbot, once noted



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



that every young priest or seminarian finds someone for whom he would be happy to give his life, and that experience highlights how he wants to give his life to God. This crush did so for me, at least in a small way.

Well, everything in life seemed to be very good: my soul seemed to be in an improving state, I had an abounding amount of loving friends, the ministry was flourishing, my new job assignment was going well, my book club was providing learning opportunities, my family was even getting by relatively well, and my financial state was on its way up, when Abbot Thomas showed up in Washington, D.C. for a house visit to St. Anselm's Abbey. I shared with him all of my discernment, and he helped to alleviate the corban impediment. Suddenly the way was clear, and I could pursue the deep longing of my heart. Well, I acted as quickly as I could.

Providentially the feast of St. Benedict was approaching the next work day after my boss's vacation, and on that day I took a several deep breaths and called my dear friend and mentor to state my desire to try religious life. She was very supportive, as she had priests in her family, and quickly set off to get the approval for a leave of absence from my partner. We had it within the hour! I couldn't believe how smoothly it had gone, and I was on cloud 9 as I arrived that evening for a long-planned dinner at L'Arche, a house where the mentally disabled and their caretakers, some of which were my friends, lived together. Ironically enough, I would first break the news to my friends at L'Arche, including my crush. The whole house was very enthusiastic, as almost all of the workers were very devout Catholics. They translated the news into Spanish for one of the core members, Johnny. Despite his mental disability, Johnny had converted to the Church many years beforehand after attending Mass. They told me that he mostly spent his time in prayer and work, obviously catching my attention on this great feast of Saint Benedict. He almost immediately started to pray for me, and continued to do so sporadically throughout dinner. It was touching that his intent and joy was to pray for me. His prayers and my friends' advice to update my parents that night gave me the courage to do so, and that went better than I could have ever imagined. My family has been true gems in their support, although it does require a large amount of faith and offering from them too. I consider these events to be nothing less than miracles from Our Holy Father Saint Benedict, and I hang a painting of blocks, a product of Johnny's labora, in my room to remind me of the great blessings that led to and occurred on St. Benedict's feast day, July 11, 2005.