

## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



### **From Surf Punk to Monk** by Father Augustine Wetta, OSB

*[Father Augustine wrote this article for Youth Magazine, now defunct, and it was published by them. The readership (teenagers) and therefore the style, are somewhat different from most readers of this publication, but perhaps Father Augustine's immediacy and honesty will appeal to readers of all ages, even if they are not thinking about becoming monks. Some of his thoughts have probably gone through the minds of all who are now monks; others may be peculiar to him. Ed]*

*The mind cries out, explains, demonstrates, protests; but inside me a voice rises and shouts,  
"be quiet mind; let us hear the heart!"*

– Nikos Kazantzakis, Report to Greco

### **GALVESTON, TEXAS, 1990**

#### **March 20**

What will I do with my life? I want to *BE* something! I have all this energy and don't know what to do with it. I hope I find my place sooner or later . . . I've prayed for it, I've searched for it, but I can't find what I'm looking for. I have this feeling and I don't know what to do with it. Sometimes I try to channel it into my studies, but as soon as I sit down with a book, I lose it.

### **ROME, ITALY, 1992**

#### **April 28**

Today I met some Benedictine monks. I was very impressed. I remember this girl just stared at them as they walked down the street. The policemen on their motorcycles looked downright silly next to them.

I still sometimes feel that I would like to become a priest. I would love to belong to the Church in that way. I would love to wear those robes! They say Vespers at 7:15. Perhaps I'll go . . .

#### **May 19**

I just got a job in a monastery! I can't believe it.

It's such a quiet place. I must remember to be quiet. That will be difficult for me – a good thing, though . . . I think. I wonder if I'll like it. This is such a foreign experience for me. I'm not used to it, but I'm sure I'll be able to cope.

#### **May 20**

The monks keep asking me what brought me here; well, I just don't know. Perhaps it was God . . .



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These guys are cool, but I could never be a monk. And yet, living and praying and talking with them makes me so happy . . . If I were this happy all the time, who knows how my life might turn out?

### May 21

The monks wear a long black tunic with a hood and a piece of black cloth hanging down the front and back. I still can't figure out how they go to the bathroom...

### May 23

Dude, I could dig being a monk. I think I could dig being a priest, too. It's just that I like girls way too much. I mean it.

### June 14

You know, I've changed a lot over the last few years, but something has happened to me here in this monastery that has changed me in a profound way. Right now I'm not too sure what it is, but I feel as if a seed has been planted somewhere inside – somewhere in my soul. It grows every day like something living. It's not just confidence that I have gained. It is something greater. I think I am beginning to feel what some people call "inner peace." The funny thing is that it hasn't exactly made me happy. Whatever the case, I think I am beginning to learn who I really am. It disturbs me though because as I learn about myself, I am more aware of what I don't know...the more peace I find within myself, the more I am aware of the parts of me that are not peaceful. I am learning not just about myself, but about God and what he meant by creating me. I have more confidence and peace than ever before in my life – but at the same time, I am more confused and unsettled than ever before.

## SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI, 1995

### April 11

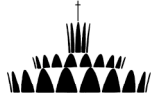
Is the monastic life really for me? I have a girlfriend! Things get so complicated. I was at peace no more than three weeks ago. Now what? Why, if I am to be a monk, would God send me a woman I could care about?

A Benedictine! To spend my life in search of God! To wear the black habit! To celebrate the Eucharist, hear confessions, preach sermons! To vow my life into bonds that free my soul! To live each day in prayer, close to the heart of our Savior, close to his holy presence in the Blessed Sacrament!

Am I to be a priest? Please, God, be more specific in your directions. This is a crucial moment here. Make your move, God.

### April 16

I am still in love with my girlfriend . . . but more confident that the monastery is my calling. As much as I really do care for her, I still see the priesthood as the answer to my question of what to do with the rest of my life.



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### April 27

I have such an awesome decision before me. I have come extremely close to entering this monastery . . . but I just can't make that final leap. If I knew it was what God wanted, I would certainly trust Him to work things out. But I'm just not sure . . .

### June 15

I'm sitting in my room wondering what I just did with my life. I walked into the monastery this morning, found the abbot, and asked him if I could join his community. I'm tired of messing around.

Very well. I'm leaving for the monastery. I'm taking a risk. I'm going for it – all out! Look, I want to do the right thing. Christ will not abandon me if I seek him honestly. I will not be a Macbeth. I'll do it – for better or for worse.

On second thought, I like my life the way it is. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. I am really happy – or at least I have been. But all of a sudden, I feel so sad.

No, I have chosen to begin. I have chosen to stop making circles of my life and to begin the search. There comes a point when you have to move from fun to joy. That's what I'm doing now. I'll miss my girlfriend. I will miss dance-clubs and parties and flirty, wide-eyed girls, but there is a chance that something infinitely bigger and more beautiful is waiting for me.

Now I have to empty my heart. Now I have to put my trust – *all* my trust in Jesus Christ. If I seek him, he will not abandon me. Am I strong enough for this? No. Is He? Yes. He will not give me a burden I cannot carry. I can't say I know where my future lies, but I know it's time to grow up.

The celibacy part is going to be tough. Really tough. And obedience ain't gonna be no piece of cake either.

### June 19

My first night in the monastery. Will this be my home for the rest of my life? Oh my God.

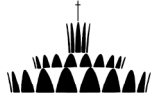
I'm scared again. I'm depressed. Can I be bound into this monotonous cycle of living? PRAY-EAT-WORK-PRAY-EAT-WORK-PRAY-EAT-WORK . . . I'm scared. I'm depressed. I'm tired, too. And I want a girlfriend.

### June 28

I hope I have the strength to do this. Lord, give me the strength.

### June 29

Last night I had a dream. I don't remember the details of it, but I know that in it, I met, or spoke with or discussed St. Augustine and decided to name myself after him. When I woke up, I pulled out his autobiography and read the following passage: "So my two wills, one old, the other new, one carnal, the other spiritual, were in conflict with one another, and their discord robbed my soul of all concentration . . . I was split between them." This is exactly what I've been going through. But St. Augustine gave up everything in the end. Will I?



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### August 28

My first day in the habit. People call me “Brother.” The title feels strange. Like I don’t deserve it. The habit feels strange. Like I don’t fit it. I don’t know whether or not I’ll stay here more than a year, but I’ll try. I am not so happy as I am at peace. Does that make sense?

### SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI, 1996

#### January 7

Tomorrow I begin my novitiate. Does it scare me? It does. But no matter what path I choose it will have pain. Deep, agonizing pain. If I have a girlfriend, it might be jealousy, if I have a wife, it might be boredom or fear for my children. If I am celibate, it may be loneliness. Whichever path I choose, pain is an inevitable consequence. Because I am human. I can’t spend my life running away from suffering.

But even God felt pain. Jesus felt pain and loneliness and rejection. Just like me. “He who wishes to follow me must drink from the same cup as I.”

I asked for it, didn’t I? “Yep,” says Jesus, “Yep, you did.” The cup of bitterness. The cup of loneliness. The cup of emptiness.

#### January 11

I’ve made it through the first three days of novitiate. So far, so good. Only 363 more days to go (It’s Leap Year!) For once in my life, I have no say in what happens to me. I am no longer in control. For one year, I will shut up, keep my head down, and listen . . .

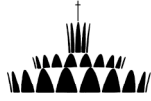
#### March 20

From the very last window  
at the back of the cloister  
I, a new monk,  
can hear the highway hum.

Two hundred cars a minute  
packed with busy people  
grind past at unimaginable speeds.

Where are they all running,  
and from whom?  
What is so important  
to so many people  
that they must get there  
so quickly?

Beyond that line of trees  
is the World



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of which the Wise Man  
warned me.

I am tied to it  
forever, and yet  
it is leaving me  
behind

in a monastery  
behind a row of trees.

### May 29

I dreamt about surfing last night. Surfing and having a girlfriend. I can't figure out which I miss more. Still, I suspect I'll stick around when my novitiate is up. I am beginning to really love the silence.

### June 12

What has happened over the last month? Nothing. Everything. I have never been so busy and so bored all at once. Nor have I ever felt so jumbled up and at peace. I'm sure that I am hard to live with.

### July 4

Sometimes I pray that I am not called to be a monk. At moments like this I ask, "Why me? Did I not have enough pain in my life that I had to go and add celibacy to my list of struggles?" I'll tell you what: nothing short of God Himself will keep me in this monastery.

Fortunately, I think God Himself *is* keeping me in this monastery. You can consider my presence here as proof of His existence.

### July 13

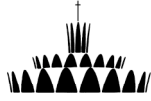
Perhaps I will become a monk after all . . .

### August 6

Perhaps I should be more open to following the Holy Spirit instead of trying to squeeze my feet into the sandals of a saint. Take it easy, Augustine. Do what you're told and follow the will of God as you feel it in your heart. You're no saint, so just work with what you've got. Amen.

### August 8

Lately, my doubts have grown more serious. I told Mom and Dad I wasn't going to stay. There are other things I would like to do. Go off to L.A. Be a real writer.



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### August 15

Who would have thought that I would wind up in a monastery! Where will I be a year from now? Is ambition really such a bad thing? Even after 14 months in a cloister, I still want so many worldly things. My thoughts are all questions these days . . .

### August 21

How many days have I wasted away in sin? This monastery seems to have brought out the worst in me. But then, that's sort of the point, isn't it? To flush out the demons so I can meet them head-on.

My most recent demons:

Demon #1: Whining – “Why are they picking on me?”

Demon #2: Shifting the Blame – “He shouldn't have said it that way...”

Demon #3: Tepidity – “I just do what I'm told.”

Demon #4: Self-Deception – “But this is prayer for *me*...”

Something occurred to me today. I'm a lot like the House of Israel: God singles me out, gives me this special purpose, reveals himself to me, teaches me the laws for my own sake . . . and I respond by deliberately and repeatedly turning away from him. Again and again I do it. Again and again, He welcomes me back. Will I never learn?

### August 24

I have been here over a year and I am still not used to waking up at five a.m. I need something to end this torturous indecision. Faith, perhaps. But since I obviously don't have enough of that, I'll ask for a miracle instead.

### August 26

Still no miracle.

### August 28 The Feast of St. Augustine

I had a dream this morning while I was meditating. I dreamt that I was standing in the middle of a small room. I was surrounded by vicious, snarling monsters – anthropomorphic and grotesque. They approached me on every side, poised to devour me. But instead of defending myself, I lifted my hands to heaven. And the monsters were whisked away.

Weird.

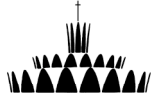
### September 12

A few weeks ago, I was assigned to clean the boys' bathroom in the basement of the gymnasium. Needless to say, the place is a disgusting mess. But I figured out a way to keep the kids in line. I wrote this song and posted it on the bathroom walls:

The Basement Bathroom Song

(sung to the tune of “My Favorite Things” from *The Sound of Music*)

The toilet, the mirror, the sink and wash basin  
are cleaned by a novice whose name once was Jason.  
Now his name's changed and his duties are new.  
To give him a hand here are things you can do:



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Keep the lid up!  
Wipe the sink off!  
(Use a paper towel)  
Dispose of your trash in the can by the door  
and then it won't look so foul.

He scrubs down the toilet and sink. Then Augustine  
scours the faucets to keep 'em from rustin',  
He keeps the towels stocked so your hands will be dry.  
Gosh, isn't Gus just a super swell guy!  
Keep the school nice!  
Keep the halls neat!  
(Keep the bathrooms clean!)  
You can do your part and Gus will do his  
while singing in the latrine!

Miraculously, the bathrooms in the basement of the gymnasium have remained unusually clean – proof to me that poetry not only has a civilizing effect on people, but that it can have practical applications as well! If only more janitors were poets . . . and the other way around.

### **October 1, The Feast of St. Therese of Lisieux**

Over the last week, I have received three roses: a red rose, a white rose, and today, a yellow rose. What can they mean?

I have made my decision. I will join the monastery.

### **October 8**

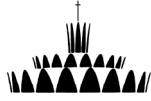
Today, the novices had a talk with Patrick Barry, the abbot of Ampleforth. He warned us against constantly “looking over the wall.” “The modern world is such a world of options,” he said, “that we find it almost impossible to commit to anything. But doesn't it all boil down to trust? Isn't that the most fundamental thing expected of us? Some day, you will think of changing your mind, but will trust Him instead.

“Stick to the facts. Forget your imaginings about the future. Picture yourself the blind man before the Pharisees: ‘All I know is that I was blind, and now I see.’ Stop arguing with God and trust him.”

### **October 21**

A beautiful day. The air is so cool and clean. Our trees are starting to blush. It will be winter, then Christmas, and then I will vow my life to God. The die is cast. I trust Him. I will live for him.

I feel good. It's not the kind of good you feel when you tell a funny joke. It's not the kind of good you feel on a first date. It's not the kind of good you feel when you hit a home run, or catch a clean wave, or ace a test. It's the kind of good that sort of wells up slowly from within so that you hardly realize how good you're feeling. Like how Elijah found God not in a thunderstorm or earthquake, but in a gentle breeze.



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### **October 29**

We had a “motivational speaker” in our church two nights ago. He asked, “Is there anyone here who is truly happy? Is there anyone here who just cannot imagine being happier? Of course not.” I was a little embarrassed because I had almost raised my hand. I am truly happy. I can’t imagine being any happier. As far as I can tell, I am doing God’s will. What more could I want?

### **November 15**

What have I learned from my novitiate? That suffering is the key to real joy. Strange as it may seem, I could not find peace of mind or heart until I learned (as Saint Benedict had commanded in the Rule) to “accept humiliations joyfully.” In them, I have participated in Christ’s passion.

This story is over. The end of my novitiate. The end of my beginning. As my Latin prof used to say, “Now there’s a story with a happy middle.”