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## ABBOT PHILIP TO RETIRE



The Right Reverend Philip J. Lawrence, OSB, the Abbot of the Monastery of Christ in the Desert has announced that he will retire on December 12, 2018, the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. We dedicate this newsletter to Abbot Philip and his accomplishments. A new abbot will be elected on the same day. As friends of ours who have supported our mission in so many ways, we ask you to join us in prayer for our community:

*Lord God, You are our Eternal Shepherd and Guide.  
In your mercy grant this Monastery a shepherd who  
will walk in Your ways and whose watchful care will  
bring us Your blessings. Amen.*

## SOLEMNLY PROFESSED AND ALONE

Named Prior on October 24, 1976, the new superior of the Monastery soon had to face the fact that he was the only solemnly professed monk and ordained member in the fledgling community, along with two novices. He was faced with building up a monastic community in a remote desert location. In the next 42 years, Abbot Philip would attract men from around the world to build a community dedicated to praying for the world while, as monks, seeking the face of God — to be holy so their prayers would be heard by the Lord.



The Abbot's Reflections

When I was named Prior, I believed that perhaps the community would have a future . . . but perhaps not. We were just a tiny monastery and so the only way forward was to find more vocations and to find men who could actually persevere in our way of life. We also chose at that time to return fully to the Rule of Saint Benedict as the structure of our life.

Brother Christian Leisy arrived toward the end of May of 1977, just one week before I was ordained a priest. He has stayed all of these years and has held just about every job and assignment in the

community. I often tell others: "The best ideas of monastic life have come from Brother Christian." Personally, I don't think about things much whereas Brother Christian has a gift of thinking and of seeing what will bring life to the community. It is surely Divine Providence that I always have trusted the monastic ideas of Brother Christian.

After many years I realized that a community works better with a certain number of members. Our founder, Dom Aelred Wall, had originally wanted a community of eight monks. Our numbers in the early years went up and down. When we joined the Subiaco Congregation in late 1983, we had seven finally professed monks, some simply professed and some novices. By 1988 when the final vote was taken on us, we were only three monks left! But we were accepted.

In the Subiaco Congregation we were told that we should have at least 25 monks in the community in order to live the kind of life that we had chosen. We laughed! Never did we believe that we would be so large.

Since 1988 we have grown -- even if in an up and down pattern. I am no longer "alone" and we have more and more solemnly professed monks. We have everything that any monastery could ask for: a strong monastic life, lots of vocations and financial stability. Our ongoing challenge is to be faithful to the Lord.

What matters is that a monk has his heart set on the Lord, that he spends his life seeking God and uses his time praying for our world and for the many challenges to faith that are so common in our world at present.

*If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do its builders labor; if the Lord does not watch over the city, in vain does the watchman keep vigil. In vain is your earlier rising, your going later to rest, you who toil for the bread you eat: when he pours gifts on his beloved while they slumber. Psalm 126/127*





## AN INNOVATIVE, INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY OF MONKS WAS FORGED OVER THE YEARS

We are the most international monastic community in the world, consisting of 63 monks from 16 countries at present. We were formed by a prophetic decision of the Abbot made in 1991 when Christ in the Desert began accepting monastic vocations from countries other than the U.S. Since then our transnational community has grown in renown and is seen as a witness for all people that men and women are able to live in peace when gathered around our Lord, Jesus Christ.

### The Abbot's Reflections

As I think of our international community, I can honestly say that the impetus for the international community also came from Brother Christian. He is the one who asked me to invite a retreat master from Africa. He is the one who asked me to send our Newsletter to the Vietnamese houses. It was from these contacts that our first monks from other countries arrived. At first there were three, then more came. The first international monks were from South Africa, then Italy and Argentina, then Vietnam and then from lots of countries.

We never set out to be international, and there is no assurance that we shall always remain so. Our goal was simply to give the opportunity of monastic life to those who knocked at our door, no matter from where they came.

On the other hand, our community now gives witness without even saying a word. When guests

and visitors come to pray in our Church, they immediately are aware that we are brothers of many colors. As guests and visitors come to know us, they find that we are from many countries. But often it is the first impression that remains with them: this is a community that accepts men from all over the world, and they seem to be living together in peace. We are a witness that people from various cultures, ethnic groups, countries and regions, can actually live together in relative peace and form a true community.

Some see this international aspect as a prophetic decision on the part of the abbot, but honestly, I never gave any profound thought at all to this aspect. Instead, I was asked by an abbot from Africa to receive African brothers and later by an abbot from Vietnam to receive some Vietnamese brothers. If that is a prophetic decision, it is only because the Lord put those two abbots on my path, and I responded to their request.

After a few years, during one of our once-every-three-years evaluations, called a Canonical Visitation, the Visitor told us that we must begin to have food from other countries as well. To this day we have rice served at breakfast, the main meal and the light meal. We also have beans at the main meal and the light meal. When brothers from other countries cook, the food of that day may have some of the spices and ingredients to which they are accustomed.



Monastery of La Soledad, Guanajuato, Mexico



Monastery Santa Marís y Todos los Santos, Veracruz Mexico



Holy Cross Benedictine Monastery, Chicago, IL



Monastery of Thien Tam, Kerns, Texas

## OUR FOUR FOUNDATIONS

The Abbot and his community, between the years 1984 and 2008, founded or adopted and nurtured four other monasteries. Two in Mexico which remain dependent upon Christ in the Desert, and the other two are now independent. On the left are pictures of the interiors of their four churches, where each of these four communities seek God in contemplative and liturgical prayer for the world.

### The Abbot's Reflections

Just as we never set out to be an international community, neither did we set out to found other monasteries. When our founder, Dom Aelred Wall, died in Mexico, the property where he had been living as a hermit came to the Monastery of Christ in the Desert. I did my best to give that property away to any other community. Instead, eventually, we sent a monk to watch over it. A foundation happened to us! That was in 1987. The Monastery is called La Soledad.

Santa Maria y Todos los Santos was founded about ten years later. That community was founded with the idea that Christ in the Desert would only be necessary to give canonical help. Instead, in time, Christ in the Desert assumed complete responsibility.

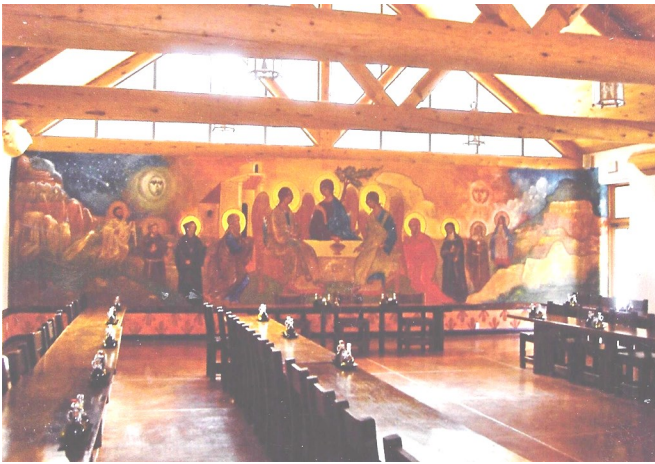
Then we had a request from some men we knew in Chicago, who had begun monastic life under a French community and now wanted to become Benedictine. We agreed to help them. We adopted the Monastery of the Holy Cross to help them with their goal of becoming Benedictines and our Father Bernard Cranor spent some years with them.

In 2008 we founded the Monastery of Thien Tam in Texas -- to be a center of prayer and spirituality for Vietnamese Catholics but also for everyone in the Diocese of Dallas.



## “WE NEED A BIGGER MONASTERY!”

By 1989 it became clear that the size of the community required additional buildings. Plans were drawn up, funds were raised, and construction undertaken to build a new kitchen and refectory for meals and a new cloister providing living quarters for 24 monks. The cloister was constructed with straw bales for superior insulation. Also constructed or remodeled in the last forty years have been the gift shop, the visitors' lobby, the Guest-master's office, an ample-sized laundry, two classrooms, three offices, a library holding 15,000 volumes, and a Chapter Room where monks meet daily for prayer, work assignments, and listening to the Abbot's daily homily on the Rule.



The Abbot's Reflections

Constructing a monastery is a real challenge, especially when our founder, Dom Aelred Wall, was completely committed to having everything truly beautiful. We all worked in the planning of the present monastery, and that was a sign of grace.

We had been told that we should be at least 25 monks to live the kind of life that we wanted. We never believed that we would ever get that big, so we built a new monastery for 24! We kept our eight old cells, so that meant that we could expand there if needed. Later we remodeled our old barns as a monastery for the Sisters of Our Lady of the Desert. When they relocated in 2007, we immediately moved in because we were out of room. Then later we added some more cells there and



even then built another building with more cells. So now, scattered a bit, we can house 64 monks.

Had anyone told me that the monastery that we began to build in 1995 would have a cost of about \$10,000,000.00, I would have quit right then! We did not have that kind of money. Yet God sent us friends to help us pay for it. We have no debt.

That means, of course, that our Church is now too small and that our refectory is getting crowded. The community is not consolidated in cloisters nearby. This is one of the reasons that I gave for advancing the electing of the new abbot. Decisions about more construction should be made by the community with a new abbot beginning, not with an old abbot ending!

Our monastery has managed to maintain the beauty that Dom Aelred Wall loved so much. Some who have not been here in decades have assumed that the monastery was now more utilitarian and less beautiful. When they have actually visited, they have been pleasantly surprised at the incredible beauty of our location and architecture.



## VISITATION REPORT FROM THE SUBIACO-CASSINESE CONGREGATION'S PRESIDENT:

“KIND AND MERCIFUL IS YOUR ABBOT”

“We cannot list all that has been achieved by Abbot Philip and his community, . . . but generous help provided to other monasteries and mercy towards human weakness stand out.” High praise indeed from Abbot President Guillermo, OSB.



He made these comments because our Abbot has reached out to a large number of monasteries around the world needing help and guidance. Over the years we have aided communities in New York, Ghana, Uganda, Togo, Burkina Faso, Mexico and South Africa. We are at present helping two young communities, one in Chiapas, Mexico, and the other in Cartago, Costa Rica.. Over the years, Abbot Philip also welcomed to Christ in the Desert those needing a special opportunity to find their monastic vocation. This has made our Monastery famously welcoming and rightly so!

### The Abbot's Reflections

What can look like virtue is often just a weakness in me. I find it almost impossible not to help when someone asks. Some of this reaction comes from when we were a young and vulnerable community and no one seemed interested in helping. So my heart goes out to other communities or groups trying to get started.

My heart also goes out to those who are seeking a vocation within the Catholic Church but are not

sure what vocation is theirs. To me it has always been clear that our community should help others find their vocation, even if it is not to our community. So the first reality of mercy is always mercy to the individuals who are seeking God.

Financially, our community is stable. We have a good income from our Guest House and our Gift Shop, even though that income is not able to pay all of our costs. We have been sending out three appeal letters every year for many years now. We also send out some letters to special benefactors. With our earned income and the gifts of our benefactors, we are able to continue our life here. We're not wealthy, but always have enough.

If you give money generously you will always have money; this has been a guiding principle in my life throughout all of the years that I have served as superior of the community. We cannot give money away foolishly, because that would be to misuse Gods' gifts. But when a serious need comes up from a religious community seeking our help, we always try to do what we can. We have given some very large gifts but generally we are not able to give large gifts. One time we gave away most of our own savings so that another community could survive.

An abbot cannot give away large amounts of money without the consent of his Council or of the chapter of solemnly professed monks. The Council and the solemnly professed monks have always approved any such gifts. This means the community gives such gifts, not the abbot.

Whenever we have given gifts, we have always received even more in return. When I was a young superior, the Prior of our motherhouse told me that I should be Benedictine and not Franciscan! He was encouraging that we have some kind of savings account rather than just trusting in the Lord. He was right, and so in time we have always kept some savings, even though we might give it away if there were a great need.





## OUR LADY OF THE DESERT MONASTERY FINDS THEIR FIRST HOME AT CHRIST IN THE DESERT

Our Lady of the Desert began in 1990 on a piece of property outside of Medanales, New Mexico. Very soon they moved to a property in the area of Santa Cruz, new Mexico, they moved to the Monastery of Christ in the Desert in 1997. The monks had remodeled the old farm buildings for the sisters. Later the sister constructed a new wing on the monastery. In 2007 the sisters moved to Gobernador, New Mexico, with their postal address at Blanco, New Mexico. There are now 11 nuns in their community.

### The Abbot's Reflection

For some years, there were women who wanted to found a monastic community in relationship to Christ in the Desert. That finally took shape in 1990, when the Monastery of Our Lady of the Desert was founded.

In time it was clear that the community needed the helping hand of a woman religious who was already formed and who could give a clear direction to the community. Sister Julianne Allen, a Sister of Saint Mary of Namur, came to help out with the permission of her superiors. Eventually Sister Julianne became Mother Julianne and the first Prioress of the new community. The Abbey of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, from Jamberoo, Australia, adopted the small monastery and was incredibly generous in helping

in initial formation. Without Mother Julianne and without Jamberoo, this small community would have been impossible.

Sister Benedicta Serna in time became the second Prioress. Now Sister Hilda Curuchich Tuyuc is the third Prioress. Their community is international just as is ours. We are about two and a half hours apart in driving distance. We still have good interchanges with them. They were a delightful presence in their 10 years living here on our property. Now occasionally we are able to get together as communities to celebrate some particular occasion.

I have remained very much involved in their lives over the years. Now, it is a time of peace and general growth and deepening of their monastic life. The way forward seems clear and the community will be seeking independent status very soon. It took our community of Christ in the Desert some 20 years to become an independent monastery. It is fairly normal that a community takes 20 to 30 years to achieve independence.

God will show a way forward to keep the relationships between our houses, just as God has always provided us with everything that is necessary. What makes all of this happen is the prayers that are offered up for us and for all of these monastic communities related to us. So I end with an enormous sense of gratitude for all who pray for us.



The Community of Our Lady of the Desert



HIS LONG-SERVING PRIOR  
AND “RIGHT HAND MAN”

A Reflection by Fr. Christian Leisy, OSB

I arrived at Christ in the Desert in May of 1977. Abbot, at that time Prior, Philip, was thirty-three years old, and I was twenty-four. Shortly after my arrival Prior Philip, who had already been a deacon for several years, was ordained a priest by the Archbishop of Santa Fe in the monastery chapel on Friday, May 27<sup>th</sup>. Prior Philip’s parents and many other well-wishers were on hand. On Pentecost Sunday, May 29<sup>th</sup>, the first Mass of the newly-ordained Prior took place.

Anticipating a larger crowd than at the ordination, the First, or Thanksgiving, Mass was held outdoors, under the box elder trees, where the founders of Christ in the Desert first “pitched camp,” literally, near the Chama River on our property in the summer of 1964. The ordination of Prior Philip in 1977 was certainly a milestone in the community’s life. The many who came to celebrate with us confirmed the importance of what was taking place that year.

Calling to mind all that has transpired in the past

forty-one years since 1977, such as the major shift of our lighting and heating systems from kerosene, gas and wood, to solar-power, makes me chuckle at all the “agony and ecstasy” involved in the evolution. The climate of the Chama Canyon where we live seems to have shifted some over the decades too, from heavy winter snowfalls and cold, to less so today. I always maintain that the climate of our canyon has effects on people, and some have found the winters a bit too long and cold. I used to speculate on the advantage of moving the monastery to a warmer climate! That idea no longer comes. Adequate buildings and diet should not prevent even the faint of heart from persevering in the climate if it is truly their vocation to be a monk of Christ in the Desert.

Despite the coming and going of many men to our way of life, as well as deaths, over these past many decades, there has been a general increase in membership and stability in the community. This has been in large part through the personal perseverance and trust in Divine Providence that Abbot Philip has exhibited over the years. In addition, his clear emphasis on living the monastic life fairly closely to the precepts of the Rule of Saint Benedict has been a personal hallmark of Abbot Philip and the community in general. With regular teaching, especially his almost daily reflections on the chapters of the Rule of Saint Benedict, Abbot Philip has helped shape the community into a truly joyful and international “band of brothers.” We are far from perfect, but always striving to follow in the footsteps of Saint Benedict and other monastic predecessors. Abbot Philip had been a great asset in that process.

I am now sixty-five, living and working in Rome at present, but looking forward to being able to take up our life in the desert again when my service to the Subiaco Cassinese Congregation has ended. And I know that Abbot Philip eagerly anticipates a well-deserved “break” from “steering the ship” to being a passenger on board once again, enjoying the journey ahead.