



ST. THOMAS AQUINAS CATHOLIC CHURCH  
AUGUSTINIAN FATHERS

185 St. Thomas Drive  
Ojai, California 93023

January, 1996

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

The changing of the year is a great time for historians and futurists. Newspapers, magazines and talk shows all have their choices of the most significant events of 1995. Not just seers and psychics but journalists, stock brokers and weather persons have predictions for what to expect in 1996.

We probably all have different lists of highlights of the year past and a variety of visions for the one to come. Our stories are unique and no two experiences of the same time quite the same.

Underlying the flux, though, is the timeless, unchanging providence of God. As one year changes to another, we can look back with gratitude for his presence and forward with trust in his care.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Fr. Pat".



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March, 1996

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

At the winter meeting of the California Augustinians this past January a doctor gave a talk on healthy living as one ages. (Some in the province are getting older.) The good doctor had advice on a variety of "do's" and "don'ts", ending his lecture with an observation on the benefits of fasting. Fasting as in fancy diet programs? No, a little bread and lots of water works just fine.

That a little old fashioned mortification may be good for one's health is not a new idea. Lent, in fact, is a regular shape up program for body and soul, individual and community.

The three traditional exercises of Lent are prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Fasting pertains not just to food but to anything where a little cutting down would be helpful. That might be TV or gossip or it could even be work. With less time and resources spend on self, there should be more available for others. We can give money to the poor but we could also give more attention to children or time to elderly parents. More time and attention given to God is what we mean by prayer.

Lent is time spent with Jesus dying of the cross waiting for Easter and the resurrection. It is time in the wilderness journeying as the chosen people to the Promised Land. These are days to be more intent on God, more concerned about others, less burdened oneself.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "K. Pat.".



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April, 1996

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

God at times seems a bit of a show-off. How else explain the billion points of light on a clear Winter night or the dazzling colors of an Autumn New England landscape or a desert in Spring bloom.

The Resurrection Cross over the altar through Eastertime is meant to capture for us some of the sheer exuberance of God's creative, redeeming power. Only God could and would turn the most feared, shameful symbol of death into a glorious pledge of eternal life.

St. Paul calls death the final sting of evil. At Easter we celebrate God's total, triumphant overthrow of death and all that is death dealing. To the extent that we experience in ourselves God's liberating power we become what St. Augustine called "Easter People", not just singing Alleluia in church but exhibiting in our lives God's joyful goodness greater than our own proclivity to sin and sadness.

May you share in the freedom won at such a cost!

In Christ,

*K. Pat*



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May, 1996

Dear members of St. Thomas Parish,

As many of you know, I have just returned from Philadelphia and the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Augustinians in the United States. The Augustinians are not the only thing in Philadelphia that is venerable and time-tested. I watched in Philadelphia as a pepsi ordered in a diner was mixed at the counter from syrup.

What struck me most this visit to Philadelphia, though, was the lack of shame over the most blatant signs of religion. People, for example, bless each other right in public. While I was getting a car at the airport a man at the next window sneezed. With no sign of embarrassment the clerk blessed him. So there is a religious nut in Pennsylvania. Not so simple. Next day I was getting a haircut in Upper Darby. A stray hair wafted to the nasal passages only to be noisily ejected. The young barber, who up to then I thought might be a mute, said distinctly and loud enough for all to hear: "God bless you." None of the customers seemed surprised and nobody walked out affronted. Evidence of religion, in fact, seems to be approved. As I was departing the city, a rosary in my pocket set off the airport metal detector. The guard took this as proof enough I was a man of peace and didn't search my bag.

We who live in more advanced regions of the country may be disconcerted by such open religiousness. We have come to accept as fact that religion is a private affair, to be given expression, if at all, only in the church of one's choice on Sunday.

Exposure to spontaneous and open evidence of belief, though, is a reminder how prevalent and deep seated faith still is for the majority of Americans. Efforts to meet the challenges facing us as a society, it would seem, should draw on the wisdom religion offers and must respond to emotions it generates.

In Christ,



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July, 1996

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

As predictable as the swallows returning to Capistrano for St. Joseph's Day, the Augustinians came back again this June to Ojai for their annual retreat. A week apart to refresh the spirit and renew commitment is one of the perks of Religious Life. A facility like Villanova in a setting like Ojai is for the California Province a special blessing.

As always, experiencing the group together is itself cause for reflection. We are, not surprisingly, getting older and effected accordingly. Two members (Pete Marron and John Blethen) are in Extensive Care Centers. Two others (Jim Clifford and Bill Ryan) were excused to be with ailing parents and another (Walt Vogel) for the death of a sister. Recreation at break time is not quite as strenuous as it used to be and discussion at table a bit more inclined to recall members who have died. But there is evidence of continuity and hope for the future. Two new members (Tom Verber and Mike Hartkay) were absent taking ministry programs and two others (John Brennen and Miguel Figueroa) are on hand to enter formation. In general, there is vitality and optimism.

As one would expect, the focus of the week was on following Jesus as laid out in the Gospels and, for us, specified in the Rule of St. Augustine. The closing presentation was a particularly effective treatment on devotion to Mary derived from a tribute to his mother Monica by St. Augustine. Throughout the sessions there were numerous citations and examples from the great saints and doctors of the Church. What struck home to me, though, were reflections on fellow Augustinians: a high school teacher paralyzed from the neck down in a sledding accident during the Novitiate 26 years ago who still goes daily to class and gives totally from his limitedness to the students and his community; a young preacher and youth minister whose commitment to the gospel and own happiness in vows was so contagious that a troop of others followed him into the priesthood or religious life; a priest who, having left, returned to an exemplary death surrounded by the prayers of his brothers. These were not extraordinary figures from other times and places. They are ordinary people I knew and sometimes lived and worked with who gave extraordinarily of themselves.

Everybody is not so lucky as to have days apart and spiritual direction provided for them. We all need though, and if we try hard enough can usually find, models to follow and time to reflect.

In Christ,



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September, 1996

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

The recent trip to Peru was my third visit to the American Augustinian mission there. Besides that mission in the northern diocese of Chulucanas, the Italian Augustinians have a mission high in the Southern Andes in the diocese of Chuquibambilla, the Spanish Augustinians have a mission in the jungle on the Amazon in the diocese of Iquitos and there is a Peruvian Province located in and around the capital of Lima.

As we all learned, the marks of the Church - one, holy, Catholic, apostolic - are present wherever there is Church. Those marks struck me forcibly during my week in Chulucanas.

The visit this time was occasioned by the ordination of an Augustinian of the Chicago Province as CoAdjutor Bishop to Bishop John McNabb, the bishop who was here in Ojai ordaining Fr. Jim just a year ago. The ordination ceremony in Chulucanas would have done any cathedral in the States proud. It was the Roman liturgy celebrated exactly and expertly with a local flavor. Drums accompanied some of the music but the congregation also rendered a beautiful Salve Regina in Gregorian Chant.

Missionaries tend to be special people, more faith-filled, more generous, less taken up with the unimportant. Some of the founders of the mission who have died are already locally looked on as saints. The new bishop is widely accepted because he is universally seen as a holy man. The deep faith, the generosity and hospitality of the lay people, some of them desperately poor, is equally striking.

If the American Augustinians have assumed responsibility for the mission, the work is shared by probably a dozen religious communities, represented by as many nationalities, and funded by a number of ecclesiastical agencies. The Church is one international network where resources flow from those who have to those who need.

If the effort is worldwide, it is also centuries old. The Papal Nuntio and a dozen other bishops present were a reminder that the new bishop is a successor to the apostles, ordained to proclaim in a place none of them dreamed of the same good news Peter and Paul and the others preached to the passing Roman Empire.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Fr. Jim".



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December, 1996

Dear members of St. Thomas Parish,

First impressions are very important. If we are interviewing for a job, going on a first date or meeting the in-laws, we take great pains to create just the right effect. Do the clothes show us as a person of taste? Does the conversation reveal our intelligence, wit and wide ranging interests? Are we behaving with the right balance of confidence and deference?

We might presume God would take the same care about his first appearance among us. Will those present be the right kind of people? Will the surroundings be sufficiently awesome? Will his human form convey clearly who he is, the lord and creator of the universe?

What could he be thinking, then, to show up in an abandoned shed as the new born child of two nobodies? There is nothing more helpless, more vulnerable than an infant. And this one had only a teenage mother and her tradesman husband to protect and provide for him.

St. Paul describes the manner of Jesus' entrance as God "emptying" Himself of his divinity and glory. God appears without power, totally dependent. He will force nothing on us, asking only to be loved.

In a world increasingly given to violence and domination, Jesus shows us a non-violent alternative. We will appear most clearly as his disciples when we, too, have set aside the ways of power and force.

In Christ,