



ST. THOMAS AQUINAS CATHOLIC CHURCH
AUGUSTINIAN FATHERS

185 St. Thomas Drive
Ojai, California 93023

January, 1997

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

Time may seem like a Merry-go-Round rotating endlessly. Or it may seem like a Roller Coaster hurtling ahead through peaks and troughs.

So we have some measurements that are cyclic. Besides the calendar year beginning in January, we have a Church year beginning with the first Sunday of Advent, a school year starting sometime in September and many of us operate on a fiscal year commencing in June or July. All of the above have their own markers that come around again and again.

Other designations mark linear spans. We are an infant, a child, a youth, an adult, a Senior Citizen in a sequence that is unchanging and irreversible. We can't really skip a phase, hold on to a phase or repeat one as hard as we may try.

The best way to see time, though, seems to be as if every moment is a unique gift in and for itself. With a world waiting to be saved, Jesus spent most of his life in obscurity mending broken plows and benches. After a few years of public activity, he died in disgrace with the kingdom he proclaimed nowhere in sight.

Was his time as a man well spent? Was his life a success story? Certainly not as the world sees. What God saw, though, was his own eternal love reflected fully moment by moment in time. It was enough to save the world.

In Christ,

Mr. Galt



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February, 1997

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

For some time now The Ojai Valley Religious Council has discussed prejudice and violence. A focus of the discussions has been youth gang activity and race related tensions in the schools.

There have been two actions taken as a result of those deliberations: the Council has backed an effort to make a visit to the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance available to all middle school students in the valley and the Council sponsored round-table talks among the students themselves to elicit their views and recommendations.

The student sessions were two and both at Aquinas Center. Although attendance was somewhat disappointing, the talk was open and informative. On one point all agreed: bias and prejudice begin at home. Kids act out at school and elsewhere attitudes they pick up at a very early age.

Realizing that and hoping to make the trip to the Tolerance Museum more effective, the Council through the churches and synagogue, is encouraging parents and adults to go as well and is offering to assist in any follow-up program in the schools. As part of the effort I went with several ministers to the museum myself this past month.

When we see the exhibits of the Holocaust or watch TV reruns of the Los Angeles race riots or follow in the papers the current genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia, the horror seems an alien madness. What breaks out from time to time in virulent fury, though, is a germ that is widespread and deadly even if dormant.

There are behaviors we hold to be wrong and there are policies we oppose but when we look down on groups or kinds of people, when we disparage them in speech, when we treat them with less respect and consideration than those like ourselves, we help create a climate of intolerance that fosters hatred and violence.

It's a blow to our ego but God loves all of us equally.

In Christ,




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April, 1997

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

I knew an old pastor (not in this Archdiocese) who would from time to time include in the Prayers of the Faithful at Mass a petition that the chancery copy machine break down. Questioned why, he would contend that foolishness could be contained except for the terrible power technology had given it to multiply.

That baleful view of duplication comes to mind looking at the double image of Dolly, the first mammal to be cloned. If two, why not a flock? a multitude? Will we one day be watching as five Michael Jordans compete against five Shaquille O'Neals? Would the precision of "Riverdance" be just as fascinating if the chorus line were one dancer in ninety positions? Another Mother Teresa might be helpful but is it uncharitable to wonder if one Madonna is not quite sufficient?

For all the skill and research it might involve, copying is actually a very unGodlike activity. In nature nothing is ever repeated. Of the billions of stars or leaves or grains of sand, no two are exactly alike. It is in us as persons, though, that uniqueness is most wonderful. Each is an image of God in an inimitable reflection.

God seems to glory in diversity. We should probably be wary of copies, afraid of clones.

In Christ



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May, 1997

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

I am working on this on the Feast of Our Mother of Good Counsel so guess what the topic of the May letter will be.

Italy is dotted with small, out-of-the-way churches that have fallen into disuse. That is true today but so ingrained is the Italian urge to build churches that it has been true for centuries. It is nothing strange then that back in the mid-15th century in the out-of-the-way little village of Genazzano there was such a chapel, already dedicated to St. Mary, Our Mother of Good Counsel, officially committed to the Augustinians but actually little used. It should be no surprise, either, that it was a woman of the town who spearheaded an effort to restore the building to its pristine condition and function. In the midst of the rebuilding, an image appeared, more primitive in style than the current structure, of the Madonna and Child, our present picture of Our Mother of Good Counsel. Miracle stories, traditions and legends account for the apparition but one thing is certain - Mary had found her home among the Augustinians and intended to stay.

And stay she has. Most modern popes, including John Paul II have come to pay respects. No Augustinian Chapter or meeting takes place in Rome but that there is the 25 or so mile trek out to Genazzano. No Augustinian is likely to travel in Italy without a visit to her sanctuary.

If the story of the image is less than spectacular, the title is a bit homey, too. Wisdom and understanding pertain to principles and ideas. Counsel is the gift of knowing what to do here and now in particular circumstances.

What the feast and the devotion remind us is that, like all mothers, Mary wants to be with her children and involved in their lives. Like all mothers she has good advice to offer and we will be happier and holier if we seek it, listen and follow.

In Christ,



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June, 1997

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

According to a report from the United States Catholic Conference, of the 500 or so men to be ordained priests in the United States this year, our own Bill Olivas, at 76, is the oldest. Oldest chronologically, that is. In enthusiasm and a youthful spirit the man is obviously still a kid.

Other information from the same report: five men began their road to priesthood in another church; a number have studied for the priesthood after careers in other fields (none as unusual, though, as Bill's life as a professional wrestler); the class includes Caucasians, Hispanics, Asians and African Americans; some, like Bill, have been married and a few have children and grand children.

Although the circumstances and the backgrounds may be varied, it is the same grace at work in all. The call to ministry may come early or late, the response may be immediate or delayed, the path may be short and direct or long and winding. Bill's journey to the priesthood began in a solid Hispanic Catholic family, stayed with him fighting in a World War, took him several times around the globe, persisted through at least two careers and a marriage.

An astute athlete philosopher once remarked "It's not over till its over." As we see Bill's vocation just coming into its fullness at such a venerable age, one can't help but wonder what God may still have in mind for each of us.

In Christ,



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July, 1997

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

I have been to Philadelphia again. Last year it was to join some 300 Augustinians commemorating the Order's 200 years in the United States. This time it was just 6 of us marking 45 years of priesthood. The former occasion was a bigger affair but this time, too, there was much to remember and much to celebrate.

In the Confessions, St. Augustine has a beautiful passage on the joys of friendship: "...to talk and laugh and do kindnesses to each other; to read pleasant books together; to make jokes together and then talk seriously together; sometimes to disagree, but without any ill feeling, just as one may disagree with oneself, and to find that these very rare disagreements made our general agreement all the sweeter; to be sometimes teaching and sometimes learning; to long impatiently for the absent and to welcome them with joy when they returned to us. These and similar expressions of feeling ... were like fuel to set our minds ablaze and to make but one out of many." St. Augustine wrote those lines in his middle years reflecting on the experiences of his youth. They apply, I think, even more appropriately to the friendships of a lifetime.

The ordination class has been getting together every 5 years. Each reunion resumes like a conversation briefly interrupted. 5 years inevitably alter the hair lines, the waist lines and most lines but it is always surprising how little each one has really changed.

Much time is spent remembering. Each reunion more people, places and ways are only in memory and the recalling becomes more and more important.

Not all is nostalgia, though. People who used to help each other prep for tests or new assignments share easily the pitfalls of getting old and going into limited service.

It is a group who accept themselves and appreciate each other, who appreciate what life has offered and accept what it has not, who see the total as very good and are filled with gratitude to God for his goodness. As St. Augustine knew so well, friends are one of life's greatest blessings, especially life long friends.

In Christ,



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September 1997

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

This past month on my week away I didn't venture far by jet age standards but did make a jaunt into what is in many ways another world. Just a few hours south lies not just another country but another economy and a different culture. Out of sight of the tourist attractions and away from the commercial high rises along the main streets there are areas of Tijuana that are as poverty ridden and undeveloped as any parts of the Third World.

For some years now this world so close to home and yet so foreign has been ministered to by the California Augustinians. Our first effort was to provide a haven for those recently across the border and trying to adjust to life in a new society. Villa Nueva, a 400 unit low income housing development was opened in 1968 and we continue to offer, besides safe and comfortable housing, many religious, educational and social services. In 1981 the opportunity presented itself to provide similar services to another group in need and we became co-sponsors of Villa Merced, a 100 unit residence for the elderly and disabled. In the meantime we took responsibility for the funding and administration of an orphanage in La Gloria, a poor suburb south of Tijuana. Ministry across the border has expanded into housing there also and so far we have been responsible for constructing 63 simple homes in Pedragosa, one of the poorest sections of the city. We also sponsor a couple of clinics where medicines are dispensed and doctors and nurses are periodically on hand.

These various works are grouped together under the title "Border Ministries" and are currently under the direction of Fr. Steve Ochoa but they could just as well be titled "Fr. Blethen Ministries." In each instance it was Fr. John's zeal and missionary spirit that spearheaded the effort. It is a perfect example of the strength religious orders can bring to a work: one person initiates the venture, the order provides backing and a continuing commitment. Because of illness, Fr. Blethen himself doesn't have the full-time, hands-on kind of presence he used to but what a legacy!

In Christ,

Fr. Pat



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November, 1997

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

In 1977 Mother Theresa spoke informally at the Augustinian General Chapter in Rome. Some of her remarks to the Augustinians gathered there from around the world bear recalling and repeating.

"You have the wonderful opportunity in the world today to give Jesus to the People of God, for you and I have been chosen for the greatest things and to demonstrate that we have been created for the greatest things and that we have the Creator of this greatness, as St. Augustine says."

"The conviction that we belong to Jesus and that nothing will separate us from the love of Christ, this is our vocation."

"People must be able to see Jesus in you, and you are the only ones through whom and in whom they can see the living Christ."

"The young people in the world today need more and more to see; they don't want so much to hear. Your children or whomever you are teaching must be able to see Jesus in you. But they won't be able to see Jesus unless you are Jesus, living His life in your life. This is holiness: to let His life be our life. Our life must be a life of adoration, a life of union with God. Our work is only the fruit of our union with Him, our love for Him in action. Whatever your work is, it doesn't make any difference. The "difference" is made from how much love and how much joy of Jesus is brought into the hearts of the people."

"The beautiful work entrusted to you and for which you have given your life must be done with great love and with great pains because in the great darkness of today we must give the light of Jesus in the lives of the young people. They are hungry for God more today than ever before. They need your hands to serve them, but they need your hearts to love them. You belong to Jesus and the love of Jesus towards you should be shared."

While these thoughts were expressed that day to an assembly of Augustinians, they apply as well to all who would follow Jesus and serve him. Mother Theresa's life, recently ended, confirmed most eloquently her message.

In Christ,



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December, 1997

Dear Members of St. Thomas Parish,

What's happening in Church and what's happening in the world are not always connected but I don't know of any time when the two routines and spirits are so out of sync as during the month of December. According to the Church calendar, the first weeks of the month are Advent, a time of waiting and anticipation. For her, the Christmas Season begins December 25 and continues to the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, January 11.

In the secular world, the Christmas Season gets off and running just after Halloween, is moving at fever pitch by the first of December and peters out exhausted December 25, Christmas Day. By then most people are broke from Christmas shopping, bloated with Christmas goodies, sick of Christmas Carols, tired of Christmas parties, no longer aware of Christmas decorations. The modern Grinch hasn't so much stolen Christmas as misplaced and misshaped it.

The spirit of Advent is quiet and unhurried. In God's own good time the angel was sent to Mary asking her consent for the Word to become Flesh in her womb. In awe, she experienced the miracle grow unhurried within her.

Waiting makes us impatient and quiet makes us nervous. Rushing becomes a habit and we distract ourselves with countless sounds, sights and experiences. In our hectic, busy lives Advent is a much needed interlude. Even as the sleigh bells jingle, Santa Clauses clone, cash registers ring, we should try to keep some sense of composure. Some suggestions: with a family prayer use the Advent Wreath as a daily time of recollection; get hold of and use a book of Advent meditations; keep the Sundays of Advent days of rest, recreation and reflection on the readings; put up cribs, trees and other decorations with the intention that they be enjoyed during Christmas Time rather than as a means to get into the spirit way ahead of time; schedule Christmas parties and get-togethers between December 25 and January 11 rather than during Advent. Most important of all, make Mary your guide and companion as we await and prepare once again for the coming of her son.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Fr. Pat". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name "Fr. Pat".