

A STUDY GUIDE FOR

BROTHER JOSEPH
AND THE GROTTO

BY

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A WORD FROM THE FILMMAKER

We constructed “Brother Joseph and the Grotto” along the lines of a fairy tale for several reasons. First, Brother Joseph’s life had hallmarks of classic fairy tales (e.g. long journey, forested locales, name change, superhuman feat). Second, Brother Joseph hailed from the land of fairy tales and even chose to build such miniatures as “Hansel and Gretel Visit the Castle of the Fairies” in Ave Maria Grotto. Third, the fairy-tale structure seemed like a creative approach fitting for such a creative man.

However, our use of the term “fairy tale” in no way is meant to suggest that Brother Joseph’s life was illusory. On the contrary, “Brother Joseph and the Grotto” is a *true* fairy tale. We invite audiences to consider and argue their own parallels when it comes to Brother Joseph and fairy tales.

As we produced the documentary, we relied on a number of primary sources. These included: 1) a newly discovered scrapbook of postcards Brother Joseph collected from family and fellow monks; 2) a manuscript about Brother Joseph compiled in 1974 by the monks at Saint Bernard Abbey (that manuscript is a treasure of information about Brother Joseph from men who knew him – and who were keen to preserve the significance of his life); and 3) about 10 pages of autobiographical notes Brother Joseph wrote in 1957. Incidentally, Brother Joseph began his story this way: “About three days before Pope Pius IX died I was born near the Castle Trausnitz in Landshut, Bavaria.” Sounds like the beginning of a fairy tale to me ...

In fact, Brother Joseph’s notes are fairly humdrum – a fact made all the more evident given his devotion to Saint Thérèse of Lisieux and her flowery prose. Clearly, his gift was not the written or even spoken word; even his report cards reveal excellent marks in nearly everything ... save composition. His gifts lay elsewhere.

Where are yours? Toward what end do you put them?

We hope that this guide will help you, individually and in groups, consider the power of a single life and the impact it can have across time and space.

Peace.

**CLIFF VAUGHN, WRITER-DIRECTOR
“BROTHER JOSEPH AND THE GROTTA”**

THE STORY OF BROTHER JOSEPH

Michael Zoettl was born in Bavaria (now a state in southeast Germany) on January 24, 1878. He was the oldest of three children born to Michael and Maria Zoettl. When young Michael was eight, his mother died; shortly thereafter, his father remarried. His stepmother, Magdalena, was very strict, according to Michael's recollections, and she wanted him to become a priest. When a monk named Gammelbert Brunner visited Michael's village on a "recruiting trip" for monks to go to America, Magdalena appeared to have seen an opportunity for Michael to study for the priesthood.

In 1892, when Michael was 14, he left Bavaria forever. He, along with a small group of other boys and young men, accompanied Brunner to Cullman, Alabama, where Saint Bernard Abbey had just begun. Michael enrolled in school at the abbey and worked hard to help build the new religious community. Part of the building involved quarrying stone on the grounds of the abbey – a process that created a giant hole of a quarry.

Within a few years of Michael arriving in Cullman, he was told by Abbot Benedict Menges that he could not become a priest. The news had to do with an apparent physical deformity with Michael's back – a curved spine. In the custom of the day, such physical infirmity was considered a type of "distraction" that forbade one from becoming a priest. However, Michael was invited to stay at the abbey and become a brother (as opposed to a father/priest). As part of the monastic process, Michael was given a new name: Joseph. He was also sent to various parishes to help. These assignments included sojourns in Tusculum, Alabama; Dayton, Tennessee; and Stonega, Virginia – the last of which he particularly disliked.

About the year 1905, in between these parish assignments, Brother Joseph built a small grotto on the grounds of Saint Bernard Abbey. The new abbot, Bernard Menges, blessed the grotto and told Brother Joseph that one day they would have a larger grotto. Years would pass before that became a reality, however, because Brother Joseph was assigned to work in the abbey's new powerhouse in 1911. The assignment included shoveling coal, monitoring gauges, stoking fires and generally being responsible for generating the abbey's power.

In 1918, Brother Joseph found a book that seems to have influenced him greatly: *The Story of a Soul* by Thérèse of Lisieux. Thérèse described in the book a theology of the "little way" – that is, doing even simple or menial tasks in complete devotion to God. It was also about this time that Brother Joseph began building miniature buildings out of concrete and trinkets. He put them beside his original little grotto, and the collection became known as "Little Jerusalem." The buildings attracted visitors, however, and Abbot Bernard asked Brother Joseph to stop building, which he did. He turned his creative attention, however, to building tiny, decorative grottoes. He built more than 5,000.

It wasn't until 1932 that Abbot Bernard finally asked Brother Joseph to build the larger grotto he had mentioned some 25 years earlier. In the middle of the Great Depression, a 54-year-old Brother Joseph thus began his magnum opus: Ave Maria Grotto, located in the quarry on the abbey grounds. It opened to the public in 1934, and Brother Joseph spent the rest of his life building new miniatures for placement around the new grotto. Among the miniatures of buildings from world and biblical history are the Alamo, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, Noah's Ark, Castle Trausnitz, Saint Peter's Basilica and Saint Martin's Church.

Brother Joseph built his last miniature, the Basilica of Lourdes in 1958, when he was 80. He died on October 15, 1961, and was buried in the abbey cemetery.

CHARACTERS IN THE DOCUMENTARY & IN BROTHER JOSEPH'S LIFE

MICHAEL ZOETTL, SR. ~ Brother Joseph's father was a brewer's apprentice, and when an elderly Brother Joseph wrote about 10 pages of notes on his own life, he remembered his father fondly. The father also wrote many tender postcards to his son for decades.

FATHER GAMMELBERT BRUNNER ~ He was from a well-to-do family in Bavaria but had chosen to become an "American missionary," as some called him. Abbey history also records that he used family money to help establish Saint Bernard Abbey. He was 41 years old when he took Michael and the others to Alabama.

ABBOT AMBROSE REGER ~ A young Ambrose actually left Bavaria with Father Gammelbert and Michael. However, he was not allowed to leave the country because of documentation issues. He eventually arrived at Saint Bernard Abbey several months after the others. His life kept intersecting with Brother Joseph's at critical times.

ABBOT BENEDICT MENGES ~ He was the first abbot at Saint Bernard Abbey. He died in 1904.

ABBOT BERNARD MENGES ~ He was the nephew of Abbot Benedict, and he was abbot for 29 years. His tenure encompassed Brother Joseph's original little grotto, powerhouse assignment, building the "house grottoes," and beginning work on Ave Maria Grotto. He died in 1933, in the middle of grotto construction, at which point Ambrose Reger was elected abbot. Ave Maria Grotto was formally dedicated to Abbot Bernard Menges.

SAINT THERESE OF LISIEUX ~ She died in 1897 at the age of 24. Her autobiography was published a year after her death, and Brother Joseph first read it about 20 years later. She was canonized in 1925. Brother Joseph built a shrine to Saint Thérèse in the grotto park, and he also built a miniature of the Carmel of Lisieux, where she lived. He died with her book at his side.

FATHER LAWRENCE O'LEARY ~ Brother Joseph mentions that Father Lawrence took a keen interest in his little buildings and began escorting visitors to the abbey out to the original grotto to see the collection known as "Little Jerusalem."

FATHER DOMINIC DOWNS ~ He asked Brother Joseph to build the "house grottoes" as ornamentation for little statues he had acquired in his capacity at a monastery shop. He lived to be 94, appears in a number of archival photos standing with tour groups to the grotto, and is still kindly remembered by monks at Saint Bernard Abbey.

FATHER LAMBERT GATTMAN ~ He became director of Ave Maria Grotto and was known as an indefatigable champion of Brother Joseph's work. An asthmatic condition gave his speech a distinct cadence, which is preserved in a video interview from 1981.

FATHER ALOYSIUS PLAISANCE ~ He was also a promoter of Ave Maria Grotto and a larger-than-life character. Abbey photos capture Father Aloysius on ice skates, riding a motorcycle and conversing with Gov. George Wallace.

MONROE SEARS ~ He was not a monk but a Cullman resident whose love for Ave Maria Grotto translated into a lifelong dedication to the grotto park.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Saint Bernard Abbey

www.saintbernardabbey.com

Ave Maria Grotto

www.avemariagrotto.com

“Brother Joseph and the Grotto”

www.brotherjosephmovie.com

Thérèse of Lisieux

www.therese-de-lisieux.catholique.fr

EX PARVIS MAGNA
GREAT THINGS FROM SMALL BEGINNINGS

INTRODUCTION

Story is about principles, not rules. A rule says, “You must do it this way.” A principle says, “This works... and has through all remembered time.” The difference is crucial. Your work needn’t be modeled after the “well-made” play; rather, it must be well made within the principles that shape our art. Anxious, inexperienced writers obey rules. Rebellious, unschooled writers break rules. Artists master the form. Story is about eternal, universal forms, not formulas. – Robert McKee, Storyⁱ

Brother Joseph and the Grotto is the story of a life. It is a non-fiction fairy tale. Think about your life. After watching this documentary you may feel like your life can’t compare to Brother Joseph’s. Ever watch the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life* and think, “I’ve never done anything as noble and significant as the life of George Bailey”?

Many of us are challenged when we compare ourselves to Jesus as well. When asked, “What would Jesus do?” we may respond, “Well, I’m not Jesus. I’m just human.” In the hard knocks of life, the temptation may be great to say that, but don’t discount your own life. We hope this study will aid you in “mining” or discerning your life, talents and gifts.

If you believe that God is your creator, then don’t minimize or marginalize that creation. We believe the scriptures that teach we are made in God’s image. George F. Will has said, “It is extraordinary how extraordinary the ordinary person is.”ⁱⁱ Remember: *Ex parvis magna*, which means, *Great things from small beginnings*.

Do you have a favorite story in the Bible? Why is it your favorite?

How does it compare and contrast to Brother Joseph’s story?

Now, let’s discuss your life.

Do you consider your life a fairy tale, drama, comedy, reality show and/or something else?

Who is the author of the story of your life? Would you prefer to write more of your own story?

Who is the protagonist in your story? Who are the antagonists? How?

Do you wish your story—past or present chapters—were different? How so?

There are many movies that include a fantasy of scripting or re-scripting one’s story: *It’s a Wonderful Life*, *The Family Man*, *Click*, *Heaven Can Wait*, and others. Imagine being able to actually script or have more control over your story, your life. Would you, if you could? What would be some of the benefits and consequences?

What did you notice were major turning points in Brother Joseph’s life? How did he respond?

As singer Bob Seger articulates in his “Turn the Page,” we all have many chapters in our lives. Some we welcomed when turning the page; others we grieved. Recall and describe a monumental “page turning” in your life. You might want to write about it.

When Brother Joseph was a young boy or even a young man, he could not have foreseen the paths his earthly life would take. How do you want your story end? Why? What chapters, events or plots do you wish to develop in your story? Explain further.

If you are reading this or taking part in this discussion, then your story continues.

CHAPTER 1: THE JOURNEY HOME

The simplest questions are the most profound. Where were you born? Where is your home? Where are you going? What are you doing? – Richard Bachⁱⁱⁱ

Michael Zoettl, at age 14, left all that he knew: the land of his birth, friends, village and all family. He would never see his land or people again. If we stop the story there, it seems tragic, and perhaps it is. Nevertheless, he travelled to Cullman, Alabama. There he changed his name and became Brother Joseph. He found his purpose, and he found his home.

On August 14, 1923, Joseph became a naturalized U.S. citizen. He lived a good life of 83 years, became famous, and was deeply loved and cared for by his brothers. He was buried at the abbey.

What do you think makes a “home”? People, place or time?

PEOPLE OF OUR HOME

The value of marriage is not that adults produce children but that children produce adults.
– Peter De Vries^{iv}

Children begin by loving their parents; as they grow older they judge them; sometimes they forgive them. – Oscar Wilde^v

Do you relate to these quotes? How? How might Brother Joseph respond to them?

Think about the influence other people have on our ideas of home. Who are the most important people in your life? How do they affect, or perhaps define, your “home”?

What are some examples of loving one’s parents? Judging one’s parents? Forgiving one’s parents?

How does loving, judging and forgiving affect our behavior toward our parents and others?

What exactly is childhood? What is adulthood? Is adulthood possible without children?

What are some formal and informal moments of transition from childhood to adulthood?

What are some moments from Brother Joseph’s story when he moved from childhood to adulthood?

Regarding notions of family, are you able to relate your life experiences to Brother Joseph’s in any way? Why or why not? Has this played a role in your faith?

What are some scriptures or stories from the Bible that come to your mind regarding family?

Let's consider a few teachings of Jesus. Read the following scriptures that challenge many of our contemporary and age-old traditions regarding family. For the sake of brevity, we've included only some very poignant scriptures. We believe and encourage that all scripture should be read in context, community and discernment.

The Boy Jesus in the Temple, from Luke Chapter 7:

⁴¹ Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴² And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³ When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴ Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." ⁴⁹ He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹ Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

Jesus Sets Children against Parents, from Matthew Chapter 10:

³⁵ For I have come to set man against his father and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; ³⁶ and one's foes will be members of one's own household³⁷ Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸ and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Jesus Requires "Hating" the People of Our Home, from Luke Chapter 14:

²⁶ "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.

The Last Words of Jesus, from John Chapter 19:

²⁵ And that is what the soldiers did. Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." ²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

Are you able to relate to these scriptures? Why or why not? What rationales do you draw from these scriptures?

Do these scriptures affect your experience of the documentary about Brother Joseph's life? How so?

Now let's consider close friends. The Apostle Paul called them our spiritual siblings. After age 14, Brother Joseph never lived with any blood relatives. Who were the members of his home? Were they any more or less a part of his "family"? Explain.

Who are your close friends? Childhood friends? Casual acquaintances? Co-workers? What are some attributes of close friends? Are you closer to a family member or non-family member? Do you have friends you consider a part of your family or home? Do you consider them your "brothers" and "sisters"? Explain.

PLACE OF OUR HOME

Let's revisit Richard Bach's quote: "The simplest questions are the most profound. Where were you born? Where is your home? Where are you going? What are you doing?"

Notice that of the four simple, profound questions, three ask "Where?" Think about the influence of place on our idea of home.

Where is your home? What makes a "place" home? Has the place of your home changed as you have aged? Explain.

How important is the "place" of your home?

What are a few of your most powerful memories of home?

Some might find it difficult to understand how, in moving from Germany to Alabama, Brother Joseph found his home. Abraham, however, would understand. Read the call of Abraham from Genesis Chapter 12, which is one of the most pivotal moments in history: "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you.'" (Genesis 12:1)

Consider these comments by Sandee Brawarsky about Abraham's call:

According to instructions, Abraham goes out from his land and his father's house, not certain where he is headed, but ready to be led by a God known only to him. At some point he stops leaving and begins the long process of arriving, which will engage him for the rest of his days. Although he is seventy-five years old, it is this point in his life that modern observers might define as his coming-of-age; his sense of self is transformed. In fact, when he is called by God, he is living in the city of Haran, which can be translated as "route," "journey," or "crossroads." Indeed, the moment is the crossroads of Abraham's life, as he begins a journey like no other.

Commentators on the text have read God's brief charge to Abraham, "Lech lecha," in various ways, with different emphases and meanings- as "Go," "Go forth," "Get thee out," "Go for yourself (for your own benefit)," "Go by yourself," "Go your own way," "Go-you-forth." The Zohar, the thirteenth-century Jewish mystical text, interprets the text as "Go to your self, know your self, fulfill your self." Abraham must understand his own soul in order to move ahead; it's a sacred journey inward as well as to the promised land. As biblical scholar E. A. Speiser has written: "It was the start of an epic voyage in search of spiritual truth, a quest that was to constitute the central theme of all biblical history."^{vi}

Compare the story of Abraham to the story of Brother Joseph. What are the similarities and differences? How important is one's physical journey to the inward journey? To Abraham? To Brother Joseph? To you or others you may know personally?

TIME OF OUR HOME

Have you ever heard the phrase, "You can't go home, again"?

You Can't Go Home Again is a book by Thomas Wolfe that was published in 1940 after his death. It is the story of George Webber, a struggling author who writes a book that makes frequent and not so favorable references to his home town of Libya Hill. The people of Libya Hill do not appreciate the portrayal of their town.

Wolfe characteristically explored how American society changed after World War I and before World War II. The book is a commentary on the stock market crash, "prosperity" and, most importantly for our purposes, the cruel passing of time that wouldn't allow the main character, Webber, to go home, again. It is interesting that during the same time period when the book is set, Brother Joseph was finally given permission to build the Grotto.

Think about the influence time has on our idea of home.

When you say where you are from, or where your "home" is, do you say where you currently reside, where you were born, or somewhere else? Does the question imply some investment of time in a place?

Arguably, in saying "You can't go home again," Wolfe referred to a time and not a place. Think about some times in your life that were so powerful you just wanted to stop time then and there and stay put. If not too personal, please share. What are some common elements to those times? In hindsight, do you wish to return to those moments?

In contrast, for many, our deepest pain may stem from the experiences with people of our home. Does this statement resonate with you?

How did time affect Brother Joseph's idea of home?

Can you imagine any wounds or pain Brother Joseph may have suffered in his childhood home? His mother's death? His father's re-marriage? Leaving his childhood home at an early age?

Do you relate to any of these? How so?

Read the story of the reconciliation meeting of Jacob and Esau in Genesis Chapter 32. This story is much more powerful if you read the history of these two famously estranged brothers from Genesis Chapter 25 through Chapter 32. In the end, with the passage of time, the home of the Hebrew people was named. Consider parts of the following essay by Walter Brueggemann on reconciliation:

During the day, he is able to manage and take initiative. But at night, as for all of us, Jacob turns out to be vulnerable, and things rush powerfully beyond his control. His night is peopled by

those uninvited and unwelcome in his life. But they are the very ones with whom he has to come to terms, if he is to go home peaceably...

Important things happen that night. Jacob does not overcome all of his dread, for such nighttime work is not easily transformative. He is, however, free now to meet his brother. The meeting turns out better than he anticipated: The brother he meets is more kindly disposed than the brother he had conjured. And Jacob can remember the night long enough to assert the odd mix of identities: "For truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God- since you have received me with such favor" (33:10; on "face," see 32:21).

Of course, our life of faith is like that. Biblical faith offers no God who is not embedded in the fabric of human transactions. Thus estranged brotherliness leads to estrangement from God. Reconciled brotherliness, moreover, leads to reconciliation with God.

This narrative haunts us because we are tempted to remain daytime people, knowing and in control. The story bears witness that the crucial transformations in our identity and our faith happen at night, when we are vulnerable recipients. In the darkness comes the "sibling God" who is adversary/advocate, in order to redefine us and leave us blessed and wounded, the only triumph possible in the face of God and brother.^{vii}

Who was Brother Joseph's "Esau"? His "Jacob"?

Who is your "Esau"? Who is your "Jacob"?

What is the effect of time on these relationships? Does time heal all wounds?

Do you think Brother Joseph ever reconciled any wounds he may have suffered in life? How so?

Do you have any experience with your family or home, in childhood or adulthood, changing against your will?

Do you feel that some pain, some wounds were actually positive forces in your life in any way? If so, explain.

What effect has time had on such experiences and your perspective on them?

Consider this line from the documentary: "Then they buried the body of Brother Joseph – far, far away from the land of his birth, but so very near to the birth of *his time*." Discuss the significance of this fact as it relates to our concept of home including the people, place and time of home.

CHAPTER 2: ACCIDENTS

Michael was accident-prone and the victim of other unfortunate events: falling into the River Isar and almost drowning; the death of his mother; contracting the flu; dropping out of school; leaving his childhood home and family; and injuring his back in the belfry.

Was Brother Joseph lucky or unlucky? How did these “accidents” and “unfortunate events” affect his life? Did Brother Joseph enjoy any “happy accidents” that had a positive effect?

Do you consider yourself lucky or unlucky? What are some of the formative accidents in your life? Explain the effect of such accidents.

Time and Chance, from Ecclesiastes Chapter 9:

¹¹ Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all. ¹² For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them.

Do you believe that “time and chance” happen to all?

Let’s expand our idea of “accidents” to all things that happen beyond one’s control. For Brother Joseph, this included: his birth; his family of origin; place of his birth; birth of Gammelbert Brunner and others; Brother Joseph’s meeting Gammelbert and others; the quality of health care at the time; sea travel; the mission field of the United States; U.S. immigration policy at the time; and the settling of Cullman, Alabama.

Looking at Brother Joseph’s life, how did these “accidents” or events beyond his control influence his life’s course? Can you think of other accidents or things beyond Brother Joseph’s control that affected his destiny?

We all have a natural desire to control our lives. Accidents often illuminate the fact that our control is limited. We like to think our lives are our own – that our lives are the result of our own effort and will. There is no doubt that our will and effort matter, but often our lives are blessed or cursed by people, things and events beyond our control.

What do you think influenced Brother Joseph’s life more: “accidents” or his individual will and effort?

What most affects your destiny?

Does your will to have things the way you want or think they should be ever cause frustration? What is the source of the frustration? Is the source of frustration more the way things are, or your expectations of what should be?

One of Garth Brooks’ greatest hits was “Unanswered Prayers,” and it includes the following lyrics:

*Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers
Remember when you're talkin' to the man upstairs*

*That just because he doesn't answer doesn't mean he don't care
Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers*

What might have been some unanswered prayers of Brother Joseph?

What are some of your unanswered prayers? Do you ever thank God for them? Have you learned any lessons from such experiences?

Does looking at Brother Joseph's life in hindsight change how we might characterize his accidents as "bad" or "good"?

Might the forces beyond our control be "grace"?

How involved was God in the events and happenings of Brother Joseph's life?

How involved is God in your life, including the "accidents"?

Jesus Tells His Disciples Not to Worry, from Luke Chapter 12:

²⁸ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! ²⁹ And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. ³⁰ For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. ³¹ Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

³² "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³ Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Does reading this scripture in context affect your view of "time and chance," or accidents? Explain.

CHAPTER 3: *ORA ET LABORA* (PRAYER AND WORK)

These effects were rich and varied: theology, philosophy, art, architecture, music, science, history – all were reshaped by the contributions of the monks. – *The Rule of Saint Benedict*^{viii}

Saint Bernard Abbey is a monastery of Catholic Benedictine monks who, through prayer and work, strive to seek the love of God and neighbor.

In the 1840's monks from Metten Abbey in Germany, a monastery founded c. 700 A.D., came to America to plant the Benedictine monastic life in the United States and to minister to the growing German-speaking immigrant population. St. Vincent's Abbey in Latrobe, Pennsylvania became the first foundation, and in the 1870's monks from St. Vincent's were sent to Alabama to serve the needs of German Catholics here. In 1891 those monks gathered to establish St. Bernard Abbey in Cullman, Alabama. One year later, 1892, a school was opened at the new Abbey.

At overlapping intervals from 1892 to 1979 the monks operated a high school, junior college, four-year college, and seminary. The present St. Bernard Prep School, opened in 1981, is the recipient of this Catholic educational heritage.

In 1934 the Ave Maria Grotto, a religious devotional creation of Brother Joseph Zoetle, O.S.B., was dedicated in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary on the Abbey grounds. This garden walk through Brother Joseph's miniature replicas of famous Old Testament and Christian buildings has welcomed visitors every day since. Most famous among the miniatures are the buildings of ancient Jerusalem, thus the creation's popular name "Little Jerusalem".

In 1981 the monks opened the St. Bernard Abbey Conference and Hospitality Center. This center welcomes religious retreat and pilgrim groups as well as Abbey guests, school groups, and others. The center provides a beautiful campus setting, meeting space, lodging, and meals for an exceptional spiritual or meeting experience. . . .

*The monks of St. Bernard Abbey are called Benedictines. There are approximately 8,000 Benedictine monks in the Catholic Church throughout the world, and they take the name from St. Benedict who was born in Nursia, Italy c. 480 A.D. St. Benedict wrote a rule or guide for his monastic community (Montecassino Abbey) following the Gospel. Benedictines still look to that rule for their monastic life style and spirituality which have stood the test of time for over 1,500 years. St. Benedict's rule provides the structure for a monk's life of "prayer and work" in a community of brothers governed by an Abbot (from the Aramaic word abba, meaning father).
– "A History of St. Bernard Abbey"^{ix}*

When the Southern Documentary Fund interviewed Cliff Vaughn, writer-director of *Brother Joseph and the Grotto*, and asked which aspect of the film had the biggest impact on him, he responded:

Brother Joseph worked in the powerhouse at the abbey, and we got to shoot some re-enactments down in the powerhouse where he shoveled coal. Cast and crew really took to those scenes.

Thematically, those scenes represent one of the most important parts of Brother Joseph's story: The man known for creating Ave Maria Grotto had shoveling coal as his main work responsibility.

That task, while menial and demanding, nevertheless gave him segments of “idle time,” which led to a schedule and environment in which he could create the miniature structures.

So his ordinariness led to extraordinariness. Let me put it another way and use the Latin phrase Brother Joseph’s fellow monks applied to his life: Ex Parvis Magna. That is, great things grow from small beginnings.

Ora et labora (prayer and work) are an integral part of Benedictine life at St. Bernard Abbey, and they were integral to the life of Brother Joseph.

Why is there such an emphasis on prayer and work?

How did prayer and work affect Brother Joseph’s life and creation of Ave Maria Grotto?

A Warning against Idleness, from II Thessalonians Chapter 3:

⁶Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸and we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. ⁹This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate.

Consider *ora et labora* as a source of spirituality.

Is prayer idleness? Is meditation idleness? Why or why not?

A Zen proverb states: “Before Enlightenment chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment chop wood, carry water.” How does this compare to *ora et labora*?

When do you most feel contented? When do you most feel at peace? When do you most feel the presence of God? Where are you? What are you doing? Who is present? How would Brother Joseph answer these questions?

Consider *ora et labora* as a balm for worry.

Worry is an emotional preoccupation with negativity. It is an irrational attempt to change circumstances by thought. As an emotion, worry is experienced as anxiety or agitated concern about personal issues such as one’s relationships, health, job, etc., and/or broader issues such as politics, religion, environment and social interests. Most people experience worry as short-lived periods without harmful consequences; or worry may even achieve some short-term positive effects. Excessive worry, however, is the main component of a generalized anxiety disorder. Either way, most people do not regard worry fondly.

“I got the blues thinking of the future, so I left off and made some marmalade. It’s amazing how it cheers one up to shred oranges and scrub the floor.” – D.H. Lawrence^x

How may *ora et labora* be a balm for our worries?

Take an inventory of your own worries. In the last 30 days, what subjects have caused you the most worry and preoccupied your thoughts?

When do you worry? What time of day do you worry? What are you doing when you worry? Who is present?

What seems to ease your worry? What effect does prayer have on your worry? What effect does physical activity have on your worry?

Consider *ora et labora* as a source of creativity.

In the popular television series *Mad Men* there is an interesting scene in which the main character, who is an advertising executive and creative genius, gives advice on creativity to a protégé: “Just think about it ... deeply. Then, forget it and an idea will jump up in your face.” Compare this advice to *ora et labora* and the earlier quote about making marmalade.

Do you believe prayer and work inspired Brother Joseph in his creations? How so?

When are you most creative? At home? At work? What activity inspires you the most in your creative endeavors? Do prayer and/or work contribute to your creativity?

If you haven't visited Ave Maria Grotto, we encourage you to do so. Based on the documentary, what are your favorite miniature creations of Brother Joseph? Why?

Why do you think Brother Joseph was inspired to create your favorites?

CHAPTER 4: THE LITTLE BOOK

One day in 1918 Brother Joseph discovered a book, *Story of a Soul*, seemingly “by accident.” It was by Thérèse of Lisieux, in France. She, too, had desperately wanted to serve God. And she had. She had died at a young age, but not before writing the story of her own soul. Brother Joseph understood Thérèse, known as the “Little Flower.” He cherished her book. He read it over and over and over. He prayed for Thérèse to help him.

The Little Way for Every Day is a daily meditation book taken from Saint Thérèse’s poems and letters, along with excerpts from the evidence for her canonization.^{xi} There is a thought for every day of the year. To illustrate the beauty and power of Saint Thérèse’s writings, consider the following thoughts on some significant days of Brother Joseph’s life, as recorded in *The Little Way for Every Day*:

- On the day of Brother Joseph’s birth, January 24, 1878: “Yes, all my hopes will be fulfilled. The Lord will work wonders in me that will surpass even my great desires.”
- On the day of the dedication mass for Ave Maria Grotto, May 17, 1934: “I have never given to the good God anything but love; He will return that love. After my death I will let fall a shower of roses.” (Incidentally, May 17 is the same day that Thérèse was canonized in 1925.)
- On the day of Brother Joseph’s death, October 15, 1961: “A long time ago I offered myself to the Infant Jesus, to be His little plaything. I asked him to use me, not as a costly toy that children can only look at, and dare not touch, but as a little ball of no worth, which He could throw on the ground, kick about, leave in a corner, or press tightly to His heart.”

How do these thoughts speak to you? What messages do you hear or images do you see?

Can you imagine the effect such thoughts would have had on Brother Joseph? Explain.

Why do you think Brother Joseph found the little book so comforting, inspiring and life-giving?

On July 22, 2013, Pope Francis shocked the world.

As he boarded a plane in Rome to travel to Rio de Janeiro for World Youth Day, he did something that would change forever the way people view the papacy: He carried his own bag. Photos of the incident went viral. And mystery was born: What was in that bag?

A week later, on Monday, July 29, when Pope Francis held a press conference on the plane returning to Rome, the black bag was still of such interest that he was asked about it by a reporter, who said that there were many theories circulating about it. Pope Francis responded:

I carried it because I’ve always done so: when I travel, I carry it. What is inside? There is my razor, there is the Breviary, there is the agenda, there is a book to read – I took one on Saint Teresina to whom I am devoted. I have always carried the bag when I travel: it’s normal.^{xii}

Most of us have a “little book.” It may be a book or a movie or a song. It is the single most important source of inspiration in one’s life. It provides answers. It gives meaning. It encourages. It gives heart. It makes us better people.

In addition to the Bible, what is your “little book”? When did you find it? ? When did you come to appreciate its meaning in your life? How does it speak to and inspire you? Describe how you apply its lessons to your life. Does it apply to all aspects of your life or just some?

The Word Became Flesh, from the Gospel of John 1:

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Does this passage relate at all to the “little books” of our lives? Explain.

Do you wish to share your “little book” of inspiration? With whom?

What effect, if any, does others’ acceptance or rejection of your “little book” have on you? Does it enhance, diminish or make no difference to your affection for your “little book”?

CHAPTER 5: IT IS TIME

And then, one day, Abbot Bernard went up to Brother Joseph and said, “Bruder Josef, Es ist Zeit.” “Brother Joseph, it is time.” It was time. Time for Brother Joseph to make another grotto, a rather large grotto. – The Storyteller in Brother Joseph and the Grotto

A turning point in the documentary, and in Brother Joseph’s life, occurs in this moment.

It was 1932 when Brother Joseph was told he could begin work on what we know as Ave Maria Grotto. He was 54 years old. Life expectancy was shorter in those days. For some of us, 54 is a time when we start slowing down. We start thinking of retirement, empty nests and “taking it easy.” Brother Joseph was just starting his magnum opus.

History gives us some fascinating stories of others’ great works ... and timing. In 1796, at the age of 26, Ludwig van Beethoven started going deaf. In 1811, Beethoven performed for the last time in public on the piano because his deafness was so debilitating. But, Beethoven was not finished. He later wrote his 9th Symphony, arguably his greatest work with choral complements. It was first performed in 1824 when Beethoven was 54.

The great writer John Milton went blind at the age of 46 in 1654. He became impoverished but was not finished creating. He began dictating his greatest work, *Paradise Lost*, which he completed in 1664 when he was 56.

In a similar vein, it is often said, “Timing is everything.” Do you think that people make great times, or do the times make great people? For example, how would history view Franklin Delano Roosevelt or Winston Churchill if they had lived in different times?

Think of Brother Joseph’s time of life (1878-1961) and the time during which he built Ave Maria Grotto (1932-1958). Brother Joseph witnessed the coming of electricity, World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the Atomic Age, the Korean Conflict and the beginning of the struggle for civil rights. How was Brother Joseph’s work influenced by the events of these times?

What external events have influenced your life and work?

In the film *Saving Private Ryan*, an older James Ryan, who lived to be an elderly man because of others’ sacrifices when he was younger, wonders if he has “lived a good life.” Do you ever ask the same question? Do you think Brother Joseph ever wondered? Why or why not?

The following has been said regarding the life of a monk:

Since his primary goal was union with God, the material results of his work were less important to the monk than the growth in virtue that accompanied them. Undistracted by desire for visible success and fear of failure, the monk was able to concentrate all his energies upon the task at hand. He was freed from the enticements and terrors of the world and its values and from the tyranny of his own passions by his desire for God. Refusing to be the slave of the material universe, he became its master. As a result, he moved in serenity. A leisure of spirit marked all he did with the sign of freedom and peace.^{xiii}

Brother Joseph eventually built roughly 125 miniatures for placement around the large grotto; he also made thousands of “house grottoes” (some of which are now housed in the Ave Maria Grotto gift shop). In addition to being called a “patient genius” and a “silent apostle,” he is also categorized as a folk artist (other terms would be visionary artist or outsider artist).

Ave Maria Grotto was nominated for the National Register of Historic Places in 1983 and was subsequently listed on the register. The application form made one of the best and most comprehensive cases yet for Brother Joseph’s status as a folk artist.^{xiv}

The application outlines some of the characteristics of a folk art environment (e.g. they are typically outside, satisfy an artist’s personal vision, disregard traditional forms).

What do you think was Brother Joseph’s goal in creating miniatures? Building the grottoes?

Do you think Brother Joseph intended to create a wonder for the world, a major tourist attraction?

Do you think Brother Joseph wanted fame? Do you think he enjoyed fame?

Was Ave Maria Grotto his magnum opus?

Purpose and Meaning, as Illuminated by I Peter Chapter 4:

⁷ The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. ⁸ Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. ⁹ Be hospitable to one another without complaining. ¹⁰ Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. ¹¹ Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

In your opinion, did Brother Joseph remain true to this teaching of I Peter while creating Ave Maria Grotto?

Purpose and Meaning, as Illuminated by Ecclesiastes Chapter 8:

¹⁴ There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. ¹⁵ So I commend enjoyment, for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat, and drink, and enjoy themselves, for this will go with them in their toil through the days of life that God gives them under the sun.

¹⁶ When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how one’s eyes see sleep neither day nor night, ¹⁷ then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out.

Compare, contrast or reconcile the teaching of Ecclesiastes with the teaching of I Peter.

Purpose and Meaning ,as Illuminated by Emily Dickinson from *Part Five: The Single Hound (1924)*:

*To be alive is power,
Existence in itself,
Without a further function,
Omnipotence enough.^{xv}*

Compare, contrast or reconcile this poem with the above teachings and the life of Brother Joseph.

What is the purpose of your life? What are your goals? Have you created a “bucket list”?

How do you wish to be remembered?

How does your faith influence such questions?

What will be your magnum opus?

When is your “time”? What about now?

Almost anything you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it.
– Mohandas Gandhi^{xvi}

THE END ... OR, RATHER, THE BEGINNING

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ⁱ Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (Harper Collins, 1997), p.3;

ⁱⁱ *Touchstones: Daily Meditations* (Hazelden Educational Materials, second edition 1991), 17 April entry; copyright 1986, 1991 Hazelden Foundation.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Touchstones: Daily Meditations*, 27 November entry.

^{iv} *Touchstones: Daily Meditations*, 1 February entry.

^v *Touchstones: Daily Meditations*, 11 April entry.

^{vi} Sandee Brawarsky, “Hearing God’s Call,” *Talking About Genesis: A Resource Guide* (Doubleday, 1996), pp. 80-82; copyright Public Affairs Television, Inc., 1996.

^{vii} Walter Brueggemann “The Struggle Toward Reconciliation,” *Talking About Genesis: A Resource Guide*, pp. 132-134.

^{viii} *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, translation, with introduction and notes by Anthony C. Meisel and M. L. del Mastro (Image Books/Doubleday, 1975), p. 9; copyright Anthony C. Meisel and M. L. del Mastro, 1975.

^{ix} “A History of Saint Bernard Abbey,” www.stbernardabbey.com, 2013

^x D.H. Lawrence, quoted in *Touchstones: Daily Mediations*, 8 August entry.

^{xi} Francis Broome, *The Little Way for Every Day* (Paulist Press, 2006).

^{xii} “Francis’ Press Conference on Return Flight from Brazil- Part 1,” www.zenit.org, August 1, 2013; <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/francis-press-conference-on-return-flight-from-brazil-part-1> (accessed 13 September 2013).

^{xiii} *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, p. 10.

^{xiv} “National Register of Historic Places Inventory – Nomination Form,” <http://pdfhost.focus.nps.gov/docs/NRHP/Text/84000610.pdf>, Ave Maria Grotto, 1983

^{xv} *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston, Little, Brown, and Company, 1924; Bartleby.com, June 2000. www.bartleby.com/113/, 25 September 2013), pp. 266-267; copyright Bartleby.com, Inc., 2000.

^{xvi} *Touchstones: Daily Mediations*, 3 June entry.

All biblical references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition, 1993.