

Cowley

SOCIETY OF SAINT JOHN THE EVANGELIST

Volume 45 • Number 1

Fall 2018



IN THIS ISSUE Pilgrimage

In the **Monastic Wisdom for Everyday Living** reflection, Br. Geoffrey Tristram traces the practice of **pilgrimage** back to the origins of our faith and deep into the inner realms of our hearts.

The Rt. Rev. Frank T. Griswold shares an **update on the community** in his annual Bishop Visitor's Report.

What happens when you visit the "center of the world"? Br. David Vryhof shares reflections on the recent SSJE **pilgrimage to the Holy Land**.

Thin places can open new windows in our prayer; Br. Keith Nelson reflects on how the sacred also awaits us in spots closer to home.

Might you be an angel? Br. Jim Woodrum calls for angels to help spread the word about **SSJE's new vocations website: catchthelife.org**.

Letter from the Superior | Letter from the FSJ | Spotlight on Community Life

To update your address with us, remove your name from our physical mailing list, or sign up for our electronic mailing list, please call (617) 876-3037 x55, or email friends@ssje.org.

To follow the latest news from the Brothers, visit www.SSJE.org.

We would welcome hearing what you think of this issue of Cowley magazine. Visit www.SSJE.org/cowleymagazine to share comments, ask questions, suggest future article topics, or read past issues!



Cover photo:

Br. Jonathan Maury in Saint Anselm's Chapel, Canterbury Cathedral.



Letter from the Superior

James Koester, SSJE

Dear Members of the Fellowship of Saint John and other Friends,

This spring, as we once again read our way through the book of Exodus at Morning Prayer, I couldn't help but reflect on how the story of God's people in Exodus has been imprinted, not only in our hearts and minds, but also on the soles of our feet. Like the ancient people of Israel, we are a people on the move. We may not cover much distance in our lives, at least physically, but as God's pilgrim people, we are always on the move, slowly but surely making our way through the wilderness of this life, to the land of promise in the next. This pilgrim journey of ours is marked not so much by miles traveled, but by hearts melted. As Ezekiel reminds us: *A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.*

If this journey from stony hearts to hearts of flesh is the story of God's people throughout time, then it is our community's story, not simply as God's people, the Church; nor just as individuals, as Christians; but as a monastic community as well. We Brothers often speak, as Father Benson did, of being *men of the moment*, but I would also say that we are *men of movement*. Like all of God's people, we too are called to be pilgrims.

Last summer, we Brothers were able to embark together on an incredible pilgrimage to England, celebrating the one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of our founding, by getting in touch with the deep roots of our tradition and

visiting sites sacred to our community. We stood in the place of the Society's founding, prayed in Father Benson's parish church, and took a week's retreat on Iona, where members of our Society once ministered. We laughed, we cried, and we were transformed by our experiences. As so many pilgrims do, we returned home with hearts aflame.

You can see some glimpses of our journey throughout this issue of *Cowley*, which takes up the theme of pilgrimage. In the Monastic Wisdom reflection, Br. Geoffrey explores the inner dimensions of spiritual pilgrimage. In his article, "Like a Beaten Bell," Br. Keith reflects on experiences of thin places. You can also read about the recent pilgrimage to the Holy Land, through reflections



Brothers at Father Benson's memorial in Cowley, Oxford.



by a former SSJE intern, Amy Nizolek, and Br. David Vryhof. These stories of diverse experiences in diverse lands testify to how, in amazing ways, any pilgrimage takes us out of our everyday life only to return us to it more energized and ready to follow God's call. Our community's time overseas galvanized our passion for this life of ours, here in Cambridge and West Newbury. For more on that, check out Br. Jim's interview about our new vocations website "Catch the Life" (p. 16-19). We hope that these stories of pilgrimage will strengthen and inspire you, wherever you find yourself along your path.

It's easy to read Exodus as an account of something which happened long ago, to a people far away. It's easy to think of Saints Columba and Aiden and Cuthbert, whom we encountered in Britain, as dusty relics of a bygone time. But these are living stories. Their power comes when we allow them to be a lens through which we can examine our life as God's pilgrim people today. To read Exodus simply as history is, perhaps, interesting. To read it as a pilgrim journey of risk and renewal - in which God's people discover for themselves the meaning of their life with God - invites us to discover for ourselves the story of our own pilgrim journey, as we journey ever deeper into life in union with God.

Thank you for being our companions on this journey.

Faithfully,

James Koester, SSJE
Superior

(Top): Brothers outside the parish church of Cowley Saint John.

(Middle): Praying inside Cowley Saint John.

(Bottom): Walking through the former SSJE Mission House cloister garden, Oxford.

Letter from the FSJ



Amy Nizolek
2017-18 SSJE Monastic Intern

Late last spring, forty pilgrims and three SSJE Brothers gathered in Jerusalem to begin a ten-day pilgrimage through the Holy Land. As a group, we were diverse: there were married couples and single individuals; monks, clergy, and laypersons; retirees and working professionals; and members of a variety of Christian traditions. Some had the calm demeanor of seasoned pilgrims. Others looked a bit more apprehensive. As we sat together for the first time in Saint George's Guesthouse to begin the process of getting to know one another, we were each asked to answer a question: "What have you left behind, and what do you hope to find?"

What had we left behind? Pilgrims must travel lightly out of necessity, but that extends to more than just one's suitcase. Every pilgrim sitting there that evening had left something meaningful thousands of miles away. Some had left family members, some had left demanding jobs, and some had left an intangible onus such as grief. From a distance, this feeling of lightness might sound like a relief, but the reality can be quite different. Those mundane burdens are often the ballasts that keep us stable. Our group of pilgrims was temporarily unanchored and sailing straight into uncharted spiritual territory.

The second part of the question (*what do you hope to find?*) was harder. We typically get to choose the weights that anchor our lives. We can choose our careers, our friends, and our partners in life and love. But when we become pilgrims, we are not given the luxury of choosing the gifts of the Spirit that will fill the gaps where our carefully-chosen burdens once were. Go on a pilgrimage to find peace, and you're just as likely to find yourself aflame with passion. Go on a pilgrimage to find an answer, and you'll leave with questions that had never even crossed your mind. That is, however, the beauty and mystery of a pilgrimage - you open yourself to God, you trust that God will plant the right seeds in your soul, and you wait in anticipation and wonder to see what grows. God will give your soul the ballast it needs; it just may not be the one you expected!

Of course, that is an easy enough statement for me to write as I sit in England three months after leaving the Holy Land, but it was much harder to keep in mind while I was actually on the pilgrimage. Although I had few well-defined expectations of what gifts I would find, I did have a strong notion of *where* I would find them. Surely they would happen at the holiest of the holy sites! Surely my unbidden emotional responses to each place and church would be in proportion to its particular Biblical importance! But alas, that is not how such things work.

I don't know why some places moved me more than others that I had deemed "more worthy." I have no idea why I wept when I stood beneath the sealed Golden Gate, but not when I touched Golgotha, and I can't answer why I wanted to walk straight out into the Judean desert at dawn in search of God, but found it difficult to pray at the



“I have no idea why I wept when I stood beneath the sealed Golden Gate...”

Church of the Annunciation. At the time it was frustrating; I wanted the *whole* experience, and if I was not moved, stretched, and impassioned by every site, then I must have missed something. But if the pilgrimage taught me anything, it's that you cannot anticipate when the Holy Spirit will enter your heart. Some of us cried while standing in the Jordan River; I personally was more distracted by my feet being wet. Nevertheless, when I looked around at my fellow pilgrims glowing with the love of God, I saw the Holy Spirit at work moving others, even if I myself remained still.

It seems to me that this is exactly as it should have been for me, as one small part of a large group of pilgrims. Although some of what I experienced was intensely private and always will be, much of what moved me was visible to my companions. We saw the Holy Land through our own eyes first, and then through the eyes of our fellow pilgrims. When my own spiritual well had run dry, and the Holy Spirit seemed momentarily to have forgotten about me and my expectations of holy sites, I learned to look for God's work in the friends who surrounded me. Their joy became my own. If at any given moment I failed to find God's grace and

gifts within myself, I learned that I could find them in the hearts of my companions, my fellow pilgrims on the journey of a lifetime. I may not have understood that perfectly at the time, but as I continue to pray about the pilgrimage, God reveals more and more wonderful gifts. My time in the Holy Land may have come to an end, but the pilgrimage is far from over. 🙏



Pilgrims renewing their baptismal vows at the Jordan River.



Letter from the Bishop Visitor

The Rt. Rev. Frank T. Griswold, III

Dear Friends of SSJE,

As Bishop Visitor, it was my great privilege to accompany the Brothers on their pilgrimage last summer to the United Kingdom, and to follow the path of the Society from its beginning in Oxford and ending at Bishop's House on the island of Iona, a place of pilgrimage and prayer, which the Society had once overseen. There, with a profound sense of the Communion of Saints which was and is so much a part of Celtic tradition – of Columba, Aidan, Oswald and members of the Society who had ministered here – we spent a week in a retreat of our own. The island, the sky, the sea, the wind, sunrise and sunset, the austere beauty of the restored abbey, and the intricately carved high crosses that had withstood all weathers over centuries were all part of what addressed us. The place was, as it were, a word of its own.

This past year has been one of great grace for the Brothers, and at the same time they continue to face a number of significant challenges in the future.

One of the great graces of the past year was the Life Profession of Br. Jim Woodrum on 17 June 2017. In addition two new men were clothed as Novices: Br. Lucas Hall and Br. Sean Glenn. The community received a new Postulant in September. Br. Luke Ditewig has also been accepted into the ordination process in the Diocese of Massachusetts. With new men and others entering the ordination process, educational debt has become a fact of life for the community. Virtually every inquirer with whom the Brothers are in conversation has some

level of educational debt. SSJE has now committed itself to keep loan repayments current, as long as an individual remains in the community. Friends are asked to consider supporting the Next Generation Fund to assist with the repayment of student debt and cover the costs associated with Life Professed Brothers entering the ordination process.

The Brothers also continue to support the wider Church through their online ministry. Once again this past Lent the Brothers, in partnership with Virginia Theological Seminary, developed a video series, workbook, and curriculum. *Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of John* was adopted by 9 dioceses in the US and 4 in Canada as their Lenten offering, resulting in the distribution of 40,000 copies of the workbook. The series attracted 7,500 new subscribers, of which 2,350 were identified as group facilitators. For the first time the Brothers also worked with the Fellowship of Saint John Trust (UK) to distribute over 2,000 copies of the workbook to parishes and individuals in the United Kingdom. There has been an overwhelmingly positive response this year from many of the participants of the video series.

As well as the video series, “Brother Give Us a Word,” the daily meditation distributed by email, goes out to over 20,000 each morning. This, along with the regular posting of sermons; the online and print editions of *Cowley* magazine; retreats for individuals and groups in the Monastery Guesthouse and Emery House are just some of the ways in which the

Brothers continue to feed and nurture the spiritual life of countless individuals.

For the past several years the Brothers' ministry of hospitality has been ably assisted by Monastic Interns. This year there are three very capable Interns living in the Guesthouse and helping around the Monastery in a variety of ways. Last summer the Brothers also initiated a program of Summer Seminarian Residents. This year the Brothers were joined by three Seminarists for a number of weeks in the summer. Both Interns and Seminarists receive mentoring and formation in the spiritual life during their stay with the Community.

It is within this context that the Brothers continue to work towards financial equilibrium and within the means of a balanced budget.

In the just-completed fiscal year (July 1, 2017 – June 30, 2018) SSJE achieved a balanced budget. Projected operating expenses (\$2.4 million) are supported by:

- Gifts to the Annual Fund - 44%
- Guesthouse income - 10%
- Other sources - 13%
- Spending from Endowment (with a 4.6% draw) - 33%

The fiscal 2018 Annual Fund was budgeted at a 4% increase over fiscal 2017 actual results. Through the kindness of many, the fiscal 2018 target was met.

As always, the Brothers continually monitor their expenses – in this they are assisted by the expertise of a group of lay advisors.

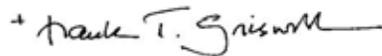
At Emery House, the Brothers continue to partner with a local organization called *Nourishing the North Shore*, which provides fresh, locally grown, organic food, and food education, to low income residents of the Newburyport area. This existing partnership will be expanded with an additional partner, *Three Sisters Project*, who will bring larger scale organic farming to the Emery House property.

In addition to signs of grace and growth over the past year, the Brothers are aware that they will be facing some significant challenges in the year to come.

For each of the previous five years the Brothers have produced a video series that was made available during Lent. During this period, web-based communications marketing and technology – as well as the competitive nature of sales and marketing in that area – has significantly altered the field. As a result, the Brothers have decided to take a year to develop and explore other avenues to get the message of God's love out to a world that is "hungry for good news that life is full of meaning in union with God" (SSJE Rule, Ch. 19). This period of rethinking and refocusing SSJE's communications ministry may well have an impact on their ability to attract and maintain donors.

Finally there are a number of internal challenges for the community. Several Brothers are currently dealing with aging parents, and the additional responsibility this involves. At the same time, the Brothers continue to engage in a generational shift, whereby younger members are trained and raised up for leadership in the community. For some, this will include training for ordination. Because they want to maintain a stable community life, which will attract new members and give retreatants the best experience possible, the Brothers also need to maintain a certain number of Brothers at home at any one time. All of this will mean that occasions for external ministry may necessarily be more limited, and may have a potential impact on their budgeting and fundraising process.

Yours Sincerely,



The Rt. Rev. Frank T. Griswold, III
Presiding Bishop, retired



Journey to the Center of the World

SSJE's Pilgrimage to the Holy Land

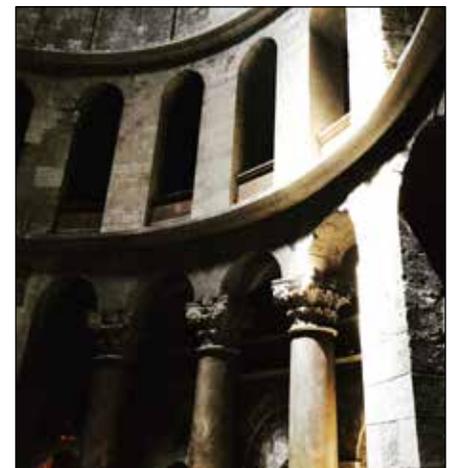
David Vryhof, SSJE

In late May 2018, I journeyed with forty pilgrims – members of the Fellowship of Saint John and Friends of SSJE – and Brothers Jonathan Maury and Nicholas Bartoli on a ten-day pilgrimage to Israel/Palestine, the sacred land where Jesus was born, where he ministered, and where he was crucified and resurrected.

Our journey brought us to Bethlehem, the birthplace of the Savior, and to Nazareth, the tiny village where he grew up. It led us into the Judean wilderness, where we celebrated the Eucharist in dawn's early light. It took us to the Mount of the Beatitudes, the Sea of Galilee, Capernaum, and Tabgha, the place where Jesus fed the multitudes. It led us through the four quarters of the Old City of Jerusalem, to the Western Wall of the Temple, the Temple Mount, the Upper Room, and the Church of the Resurrection. We renewed our baptismal vows at the Jordan River and floated in the Dead Sea. We feasted on Middle-Eastern cuisine and enjoyed the generous hospitality of Palestinian Christians. We laughed and cried together. We had so much to talk about, but we also needed time alone and in silence to ponder these wonders in our own hearts.

We gathered first, as you would expect, in the Old City of Jerusalem. At the Church of the Resurrection – regarded as the most holy site in all of

Christianity – a marble compass marks "the center of the world." The reference is from Psalm 48:1, where Jerusalem is described as "the city of our God...beautiful and lofty, the joy of all the earth... the hill of Zion, the very center of the world..." Jerusalem is a focal point not just for Christianity, but also for Islam and Judaism. A short distance from this compass is the Western Wall of the Temple, the holiest site for Jews. Atop this wall is the Temple Mount, home of the Al Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock, from which the Prophet Muhammad ascended into the heavens on his Night Journey. A tremendous



The Church of the Resurrection, "the center of the world" for Christians.



(Left): Jewish pilgrims praying at the Western Wall. (Right): Br. Luke Ditewig visiting the Dome of the Rock during SSJE's 2016 pilgrimage to Israel/Palestine.

amount of sacred and strife-filled history is encompassed within the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem. Pilgrims experience this mix of energy. Jerusalem, and what surrounds it, is as fascinating and as complicated now as it was in Jesus' own day.

The psalms speak repeatedly of "going up to Jerusalem," this "city set on a hill." For many centuries before Jesus' birth and since, Jerusalem and the Holy Land have been a magnet for pilgrims. Joseph and Mary, with Jesus, would have observed the great Jewish holidays, three of which were pilgrimage festivals, ideally spent in Jerusalem. Passover, in the spring, recalled the exodus from Egypt. Fifty days later, the "Feast of Weeks" was an agricultural festival thanking God for the fruitfulness of the land. In the autumn, the "Feast of Booths" was an eight-day harvest celebration marked by music, feasting, and dancing; which recalled the forty years the people of Israel spent in the wilderness. During this festival everybody was to live in temporary dwellings or "booths."

Throughout our pilgrimage, we were accompanied by a local guide, Canon Iyad Qumri, our cherished, long-time friend. Iyad is a Jerusalem-born Palestinian, an Anglican and a licensed Israeli guide. His understanding of the history and geography of the region, of the Bible, and of the intersection of cultures, ancient and new, is brilliant. We Brothers complemented Iyad by leading worship and offering meditations along the way to help our companion-pilgrims make meaning of the many layers of revelation.

Every first-time pilgrim to the Holy Land arrives with at least some sense of what he or she will experience. A pilgrim may have their mind's eye informed by museum artwork and stained-glass depictions of scenes in the life of Jesus. These scenes may or may not prove to be accurate depictions of the places and people we discover on pilgrimage. Usually not. We soon discover that the people of the Holy Land bear little resemblance to the Anglicized figures depicted in our Sunday School papers. We *knew* that,

intellectually, before we arrived; but it's a completely different experience to be immersed in a Middle-Eastern culture which, in so many ways, parallels the political, social, and religious landscape of Jesus' own day. Pilgrims also bring expectations and biases, conscious or otherwise.

The SSJE Brothers serve as chaplains to the pilgrims, helping them to integrate and make meaning of their personal histories, of the biblical accounts, of the geography and culture, and of the present situation in Israel/Palestine. Sometimes, when visiting a particular place, we would say, "This is where the Church has remembered such-and-such happening," e.g., a particular scene remembered in the Gospels. Whether or not the scholars are in agreement that *this* particular place is definitely *The Place*, nevertheless the site has been made holy, down through the centuries, by the countless number of pilgrims who have come there to pray and to worship. In SSJE's *Rule of Life*, we speak of helping people "to pray their lives," and this takes on a multi-dimensional meaning in the Holy Land.

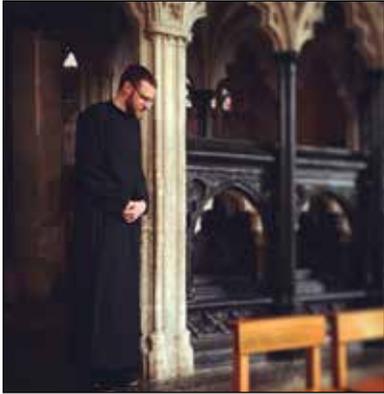
A pilgrimage typically includes three experiences: leaving something, gaining something, and struggling with something. Many pilgrims will want to leave a concern, or leave a need, or leave a sin or a sorrow in God's hands while on pilgrimage. The desire is for relief of this burden which weighs down one's life. Many pilgrims are also looking to gain something: healing, hope, freedom, a sense of belonging, an insight that comes from "the eyes of one's heart" being enlightened. Pilgrimage also typically includes a *bonum arduum*, an "arduous good." There's at least one thing about a pilgrimage that will be difficult for each person. Pilgrims following Jesus' way will somehow get in touch with "the cost of discipleship." The cost may have to do with one's own internal "baggage."

The cost may relate to one's memories, or hopes, or health, or to one's fellow travelers. Pilgrimages are fascinating and transformative; they are not altogether easy. Sometimes they're messy or overwhelming. Nonetheless, most pilgrims will say or sense that making a pilgrimage is something they really needed to do in their lifetime.

Whether or not you have the experience of making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land sometime in your lifetime, you may find it very significant to make pilgrimage a periodic practice in your life. You may be drawn to make a pilgrimage to some place or places that were significant to you, your family, or to others who are important to you. A pilgrimage invites you to recollect your life, or perhaps to make meaning of your life in and through a particular setting. A pilgrimage will inspire you to find freedom to be fully alive. To where are you intrigued to go on pilgrimage? God's inspiration is behind your intrigue. 🏴



An FSJ pilgrim visiting the monastery on the Mount of Temptation, near Jericho.



Like a Beaten Bell

Praying in Places Thick and Thin

Keith Nelson, SSJE

My best friend and I went camping in Utah a few months before I came to the Monastery as a Postulant in 2014. The trip was a pilgrimage into a landscape wonderfully strange to us as east coast natives. I use the word “pilgrimage” here in a less-than-conventional sense. Our holy destination was The Desert – both literal and physical, but also inward and spiritual. In the desert, we hoped to taste something of God’s vast, untamed power, just as Jesus did, and just as generations of saints have done from the ancient Israelites to the Desert Fathers and Mothers of Egypt. Perhaps because our eyes and ears were opened by this intention, God came to meet us everywhere we turned. Every horizon held our gaze and enlarged it, beckoning us beyond that vanishing point where endless blue sky and rippling red stone merged. As we hiked about this desert paradise, we wept or fell silent or laughed in wonder, as unself-consciously as the shooting stars or lightning that flashed in the night sky or the rainbows that shimmered in the rare desert rain. At so many moments, utterly surprised by the Creator, we could have echoed the sentiment of author Annie Dillard, writing from Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains: “I see something, some event that would

otherwise have been utterly missed and lost; or something sees me, some enormous power brushes me with its clean wing, and I resound like a beaten bell.”

In 2017 I undertook a quite different journey, but one with some remarkable parallels. Our community embarked on a pilgrimage – in the conventional sense – to England and Scotland, to see some of the sites that have shaped the course of Anglican history and the story of our own community. We prayed our way to and from Canterbury and Oxford, Durham, Lindisfarne, and Iona, sites famed for their holiness throughout the Western Christian world. I felt drawn deeper into God’s heart through my encounters with all of these places, but the Spirit surprised me in a much humbler place: as we ascended, one behind the other, the winding staircase of our Society’s old Mission House in Oxford, to arrive at a final landing and duck through a modest door into the “Founder’s Chapel.” This is an attic room, converted into a small chapel, where the very first Brothers of the Society of St. John the Evangelist worshipped, day by day. It is entirely unremarkable in its outward personality. If I hadn’t known anything about its history, I would have found it quaint, but not much more. But because of who we are – men whose spiritual forbears laid hold of a strange and special calling here, who sang

and knelt and preached and probably laughed and cried here – it was imbued with a holiness that made us weep and linger in love and gratitude for what God has done for us. With my eyes closed, I could almost see and hear those first courageous men whose hearts were set on fire and whose lives were offered to the glory of God as they listened to a man named Richard Meux Benson proclaim what God had done for him, and what God would do for them, if they only let him.

Now, I mention these two experiences because each place – the soul-enlarging terrain of Utah’s high desert and that soul-enfolding room at the top of the Mission House stairs – was for me a *thin place*. This term, originating in Celtic Christian traditions, designates a physical place where the line between Heaven and Earth is thought to be “thin”: the wall is more porous, the veil more diaphanous.

It’s a term that has been in the vocabulary of contemporary spirituality for a number of years, and there is a simultaneously delightful and maddening lack of agreement about just *what* it means, depending on whom you ask. Questions, my own included, abound. Why should this “line” or “veil” be thinner in some places and thicker in others? After all, isn’t God present everywhere and in everything, as the One “in whom we live and move and have our being”?

Words are such fragile, brittle tools to communicate our deepest, truest, most powerful encounters with God. When the curtain is pulled back and we glimpse a flicker or flash of a reality that is both wholly other and nearer than our next breath...well, a stammer or a song or a long lull of silence will do. Word’s won’t, except as shorthand (*and oh, how I love words!*). The term “thin place” is a shorthand that many find helpful for pointing



The Cloister at Canterbury Cathedral.



“ Our own garden patch or dining-room table or the corner where our easel stands hold the redolent grace of awakened possibility that dwells in thin places. ”

to a place where encounters with God are *prone* to happen. Such places disarm us, draw forth a deeper quality of perception from us, strip us of our expectations, and simplify or still our galloping thoughts. Deep forest or rocky ocean coastline, darkened churches flickering with candles or wayside shrines clustered with cairns are among the world’s frequently acknowledged thin places.

Alternatively, some places may leave us feeling, in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, “bleared with trade, seared, smeared with toil.” We feel heavier of heart; we feel less connected to God and our fellow creatures; the whispered revelations of truth or beauty are barely audible. Many people feel a heightened sense of this “thickness” in places where there is little green space, silence, or natural light (as in many urban centers) or in places where there is unceasing visual and auditory competition for our attention (as in stores, airports, or anywhere a wifi signal can be found).

And yet, we are here. And so is God. Wherever *here* happens to be, the possibility of reconnection with God is as close as our next breath. My experiences of thinness in Utah and Britain *did* unfold because I undertook those journeys with the seeking heart and open eyes of a pilgrim. But while numerous thin places can be found at the beginning, middle, and end of pilgrimage routes, going on pilgrimage to a far-flung place is *not* necessary for an encounter with God in the million-and-one thin places of the world. One could make an argument that the *whole world* – created, redeemed, sustained, and groaning for the consummation of God’s mysterious purposes – is a single thin place bequeathed to God’s

children. But until we can wrap our heads and hearts around that wondrous truth, the specific, small, and particular places our wandering souls encounter as “thin” must be for us “the House of God, the gate of Heaven.” In this way, they are not unlike sacraments. Without participation in those “outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace,” the awesome reality we know intimately as God in Christ would be far too large to see, taste, touch, or love in a personal way.

Our own garden patch or dining-room table or the corner where our easel stands hold the redolent grace of awakened possibility that dwells in thin places. I have come to believe that the more consciously we cultivate relationship with these particular “thin places,” however humble and ordinary, the more well-equipped our praying perception becomes at noticing God’s presence in the unlikely and challenging places. The “thickness” we anticipate at the airport security checkpoint, under the humming fluorescent lighting of the hospital hallway, in the drab office cubicle, or in the lowly but well-swept tent of a refugee camp is slowly eroded to its thinness in God’s sight. Through our trust in Jesus, the thickness of the cross becomes the thin place of resurrection – while our feet are still planted on Calvary.

The ancient Celts seem to have revered many, many thin places – and Christians in Celtic lands followed suit – but this is probably because they had a predisposition to *look* for them. And, by the movement of God’s Holy Spirit stirring in our depths, so too do we. 🙏

(Facing page, clockwise from top left:) Hermitage, Emery House; Saint Anselm’s Chapel, Canterbury Cathedral; Parlor, Emery House; Christ Church, Oxford.



Inquirers, Millennials, and Angels

A conversation with Br. Jim Woodrum about SSJE's new vocations website: catchthelife.org

We're talking about SSJE's new vocations website, called "Catch the Life." What is "Catch the Life" and why did SSJE decide to launch this new site?

The phrase "Catch the Life" comes from our founder Richard Meux Benson, who wrote: "If we only let people see that we are living upon a truth, and loving it, they will soon catch the life." That line has come to mean a lot to our community, because it captures how and why we love to share our life with others. Like all evangelists, we don't want to keep the truth we've discovered to ourselves; we want to pass it on to guests and retreatants, friends and visitors – and that's why we are a community who actively welcomes others to share our life. Our charism is to be the Society of Saint John the Evangelist: spreading good news. In the last few years, the phrase "catch the life" has come especially to symbolize and express our desire to share with other men the deeply satisfying and counter-cultural possibility of living the religious life today.

Many of us Brothers can point to the exact moment when we first learned that monastic life exists in the Episcopal/Anglican tradition and is a viable and accessible vocation. If you're anything

like me, that awareness hits you as a joyful revelation. Suddenly you realize that there is an answer to this yearning you've felt and that perhaps has evaded you until now – a desire for another way to live, for a different way to express your vocation as a Christian man.

Discussing this together as a community, we began to realize that we wanted to start being more open in talking about this life of ours – about how we love it and why we love it. The religious life is actually a very bold, adventurous life. It's a risky life. It's fulfilling and abundant in every way. As we began talking about this life of ours and our identity, we also began talking more broadly about masculinity and about what it means to be Christian men in the church today. We realized that we wanted more men to know that this life is out there, that it's an option.

Catch the Life is our campaign to spread the word about the monastic life: this bold, risky, fulfilling path. To help get the word out, we've built a website, catchthelife.org, which is full of images, video, audio, and text we've drawn together to express how we are "living upon a truth, and loving it," and that we want to help others "catch the life."

How has the response been to "Catch the Life" so far?

It's been really inspiring! Before *Catch the Life* was launched, we had three men who were actively exploring our life – "inquirers" we call them – two of whom had been at that stage with us for a long time. Nobody was biting. (And we were not alone in this. Religious life seems to be declining, not only among Anglican religious communities, but across the wider Church.)

Yet after launching *Catch the Life*, all of a sudden we had a steady stream of inquirers knocking on our door, reaching out to us and wanting to chat, asking to look a bit further into the life. In less than a year, I'd say a good twenty or more solid candidates have been in touch with me. We've gone from having three inquirers to having a dozen men actively inquiring into our life.

I now spend three, maybe four nights each week having conversations with interested men, talking with them about the religious life and our community, answering their questions. Listening to these men – hearing about their desires and needs, what excites them and what gifts they have – has been an incredible

process. I feel like, along the way, I've been gifted with the opportunity to forge relationships with men who are seeking something that resonates with them and to see the multidimensional aspects of so many men who bear God's image, each in their own way.

What are the desires and needs you're hearing? What is drawing men to consider the monastic life today?

Society tries to sell us this one model for a wonderful life: you have to go to school, you have to get a degree, you have to get a job and make this much money, you have to get married and have kids, you have to buy this kind of house and live in this neighborhood and have this kind of car, and accumulate this much stuff, so that eventually people will say, "Oh you must be very successful and happy." But that's a myth.

Younger men are seeing this. I hear them saying, "I don't subscribe to this worldview – of dominance, of power, of toxic masculinity." They're sitting there going, "You know, I don't want to give my life to something like *that*. But I *do* want to give my life intentionally and prayerfully. I *do* want adventure,



Provocative questions and bold, beautiful imagery set the tone on the site, catchthelife.org.



SSJE Brothers, photographed in the same spot 127-years apart.

abundance, and to live boldly. I *do* want to give myself to something bigger.” So many people assume that millennials are afraid of commitment. From these recent conversations, I’d say that’s not true. They aren’t afraid of living bold lives, or of giving themselves to something bigger. What they’re really afraid of is conforming to an inauthentic life that serves no one but themselves.

There are millions of ways that you can be happy and live an abundant life; the trick is finding one that is actually tailored to you and your gifts. You can’t fit a square peg into a round hole. These men are seeing this – especially younger men – and they’re knocking on our door, to see if maybe this life would be a good fit for them, their talents, and the kind of life they want to lead.

How do you help men through the next step in the discernment process?

The first thing I do is encourage them to really explore this life, without any expectations or pressure. There’s another line from Richard Meux Benson that resonates for me, which I often share with them: “We cannot bound into the depths of God at one spring; if we could, we should be shattered, not filled. God draws us on.” Whatever God calls us to next is not the resting place, it’s only a step on our pilgrimage. That’s true

for us monks, as much as for the men inquiring into our life. God is always calling us onward, and therefore we keep discerning the next thing. For us monks, that next thing will happen within the context of this community! But even though we remain in this place, we can never think we’re done growing and changing.

I encourage inquirers to soak up everything that this experience of discovery can teach them about themselves – whether or not they end up deciding to look further into having a monastic vocation. And I ask them to be okay with dwelling in *not knowing* for a time. I had a priest tell me once, “If you know where you’re going, God is probably not in it. If you have no idea where you are, or what’s going on, God is all over that! That is the fertile soil of an adventure with God.”

I think some men carry this baggage about being afraid to inquire, or to test whether they might have a monastic vocation, because they hate the idea of having been “wrong” or having “failed,” if it turns out not to be the life for them. But that’s not how we think about it at all. There’s no such thing as a “failed” vocation that has been well-tested. The experience of engaging vocational discernment – looking at this life, asking questions, learning about the monastic

life of intention, prayer, and ministry: this will give you food for the next stage of your journey, wherever God is leading you.

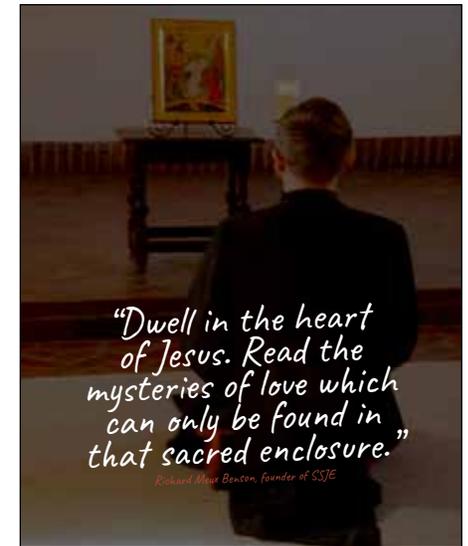
How can friends of the community support and take part in *Catch the Life*?

Be an evangelist – better yet, be an angel! We get the word *angel* from the world *euangelion*, meaning “bearer of good news.” Share your knowledge of this community with those who are looking and seeking, who are perhaps unable to articulate the desire they’re experiencing.

There are men out there who are looking for something that the world can’t give them. I know because I was that square peg trying to get into the round hole; I know how it feels. And I know there are *other* men out there, who are wandering, who are adrift, and who are searching for happiness, but always coming up a little bit short. We need people who know us to be evangelists, to let people know, “Hey, there’s more than one way to live. There are more adventures out there than you could possibly shake a stick at. Here’s one of them; why

don’t you think about this?” Keep your eyes open for men who might fit into this life.

We need angels. We need people who can say, “You know, I know this place, and this group of men, who are looking for someone like you, and you just might fit. Visit this website, and see what you think.” 🙌



What draws men to monastic life today?
Might God be calling you?

- PRAYER
- SILENCE
- WORSHIP
- SIMPLICITY
- PASSION
- COMMITMENT
- STABILITY
- COMMUNITY
- ADVENTURE
- SERVICE

catchthelife.org
explore why we love being monks

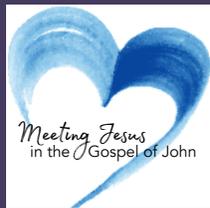
Print materials for *Catch the Life* capture Brothers’ stories and the spirit of this life.

Join us for Lent

with one of our

Online Faith Formation Series

Prayer, videos, and questions from the SSJE Brothers
Facilitator support from Lifelong Learning @ VTS



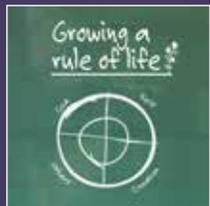
Meeting Jesus

Deepen your relationship with God, through prayer and reflection on the Gospel According to John.



Five Marks of Love

We share in the Divine Life from our Baptism. Learn how this Life expresses itself in and through us.



Growing a Rule of Life

Explore a monastic framework to cultivate our relationships with God, Self, Others, and Creation.



It's Time To...

Recapture time as a gift. Discover how to experience the joy of the present moment.

Sign up now at
www.SSJE.org/everyday



The Blessings of our Challenges

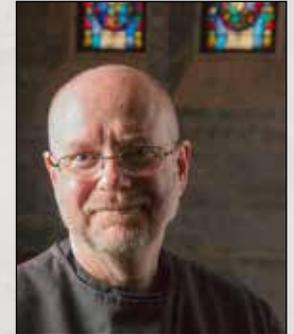
"Our monastic community gives thanks to God and to you, our friends and companions, for the blessings bestowed upon us. There is great hope and energy in our community. A full season of retreats and workshops is now underway. Postulants are arriving to test their vocations and we hope to have some Professions, both Initial and Life, next year.

Yet there are challenges we face, and as Christians, we know of the blessings that emerge from challenges. We are in the process of a generational shift as our younger Brothers grow into roles of greater responsibility within the community. For some, this will include the ordination process. Other Brothers are caring for sick or aging parents. All the while, we recognize the importance of nurturing our relationships with God and with one another, as Brothers. Our inward focus over the next year may contain a financial risk, as some aspects of our ministry may scale back slightly in the short term. Yet nurturing these relationships is a necessity, for if we are to attract new vocations, we must be grounded in the healthy rhythms in which God intends us to live.

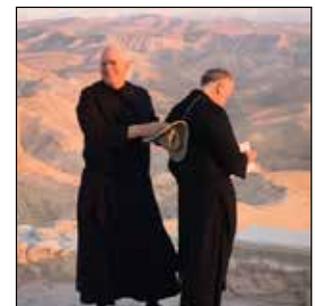
We embrace the challenges before us faithfully, for we believe God is forming and fortifying our community through them. We ask you to abide with us during this transitional time. Please pray for us. And please consider a gift to support our life and our ministry."

SSJE is blessed by the support of friends

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— Br. James Koester



Brs. David Vryhof and Jonathan Maury in the Judean desert.



Brothers with the 2017-18 Interns: (on the left) Nathan Leach, Lydia Simmons, and (second from right) Amy Nizolek.

Reflection, Not Reaction | *Monastic Immersion*

So much of contemporary life is spent in reaction mode. A constant barrage of news cycles, notifications, likes, and advertisements interrupts us, asking us to react quickly (and perhaps thoughtlessly) to the latest thing. We move along to an ever-increasing drum beat, and so many of us feel beaten down by the relentless pace of contemporary life. Especially for young people – pushed along from school to university toward a career – there can be little room left for asking big questions, developing a sense of themselves, or listening to discover a larger purpose.

This is why SSJE has developed our Monastic Immersion program, inviting women and men between the ages of 21-30 to experience the transformative power of intentional living in community. Over nine months, we invite young people to experience something utterly different than our current culture of reaction: a culture of reflection. Imagine nine months paced by the ringing of a chapel bell. Instead of the static and noise of the culture, we share a day infused with silence. In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul writes, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” Such inner transformation is a central aim of the monastic life. As we attend to our conversion in Christ and grow in love for God and one another, we trust that this monastic way is shaping us into deep reservoirs, to be used by the Spirit for the sake of the world’s healing, wholeness, and reconciliation.

We Brothers are stewards of this ancient tradition, which we hope to pass on to the Interns, sharing with them practices and skills that have enduring value: **Worship. Silence. Stillness. Reflection. Prayer. Discernment. Community. Listening. Hospitality.** The Interns, in turn, help us to stay engaged with the contemporary world, its needs, and its hungers. We believe that these nine months will reshape how the Interns experience our world. We pray that they will be empowered to transform it.

Why Brothers Love the Immersion Program

“Learning is mutual in our daily life classroom of worship and hospitality. They’ve nurtured my own conversion. I delight in watching them discover and change.” – **Br. Luke Ditewig, SSJE**

“It’s like learning a dance step with a new partner. Nervous and a little clumsy at first, and then we soar.” – **Br. Curtis Almquist, SSJE**

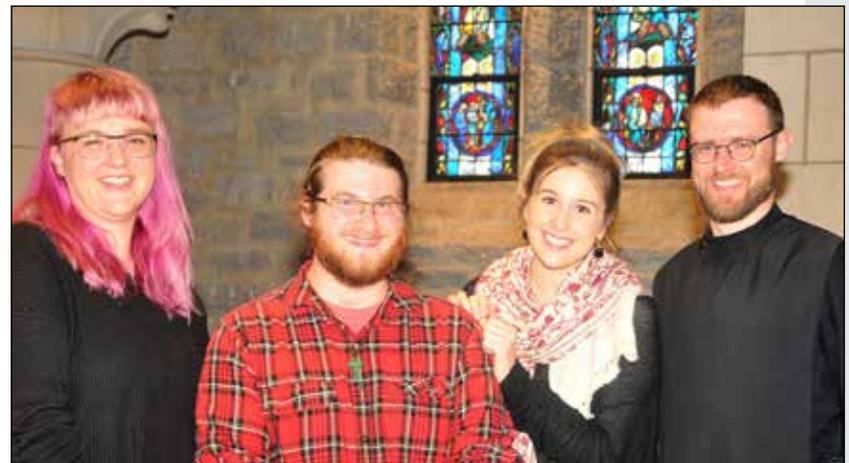
“It has become impossible for me to imagine our community’s life without Monastic Immersion Interns. They are vital to our connection with the wider church and the cultural matrix.” – **Br. Jonathan Maury, SSJE**

Why the Interns Came | *Meet the 2018-19 Interns*

“I feel drawn to SSJE for the opportunity to pause from work and reflect on my vocation. It’s been a few years and I still feel uncertain about my goals and hopes for my future. I’d also like to spend more time considering how my vocation and my Christian spirituality can be more closely aligned.” – **Betsy Noecker**

“I’m drawn to SSJE because I’m searching for some deep discernment in a fully supportive community. I am looking to find the intersection of Food and Faith, and I’ve been interested in monastic traditions and want to learn more. I first discovered SSJE when I was searching the internet for a recording of the great O Antiphons during Advent a couple years ago. I just fell in love with how the Brothers combine tradition, education, hospitality, and sacred music.” – **Jimmy Pickett**

“I was originally drawn to this monastic internship because I wanted to learn more about prayer. I have trouble keeping a sustainable routine, and I thought that nine months in a relatively distraction-free setting would help me set a solid foundation. I am interested in having more two-sided conversations with the Lord (rather than long-winded monologues at Him). Basically, I am hoping to be still, and listen.” – **Lina Palmer**



The 2018-19 Monastic Interns – Betsy, Jimmy, & Lina – with Br. Keith Nelson.



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