

# MONASTERO DI SAN BENEDETTO NEWSLETTER

NORCIA

Monastero di S. Benedetto  
via Reguardati, 22  
06046 Norcia (PG)  
Italy

monastero@osbnorcia.org  
www.osbnorcia.org

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Dear friends:

This issue of our newsletter is about death and life. On the first weekend of May Cardinal Mayer died: a great man, who was like a grandfather to our community. Cardinal Augustin Mayer, O.S.B. was a monk of Metten in Bavaria. He was born in May 1911, so when he died he was just short of his 99<sup>th</sup> birthday. I first met him back in 1984, when he was a young 73 years old. He was made a Cardinal a year later when he was 74, and he would often joke that he was a “late vocation.” He was very devoted to the Benedictine College in Rome, Sant’Anselmo, since he had been prior and rector there for some 17 years or so before being elected abbot of his community (it was after that that he was called to Rome to work in the Curia). Since I was very much involved at Sant’Anselmo, he took an interest in me, and when our community was founded in 1998 (by then he was 87) he was very supportive of our pioneering endeavor. In 2004 he fell (again) and broke various bones, so the Alma Sisters who were taking care of him, asked if we could supply a male nurse to assist the Cardinal while his bones mended. Fr. Clement and Fr. Benedict both served in that capacity: their stories are included here. On the afternoon of April 19, 2005, we had just had tea with the Cardinal, and stepped out onto the street when the sightings of white smoke in the piazza of Saint Peter’s announced Pope Benedict’s election. So we were bound to Cardinal Mayer by many ties. He was truly a great man and a holy monk.

This issue is about life too: the rich and full life of the monastery. As of this writing there are two new candidates for the monastery. Five young men are signed up for our Summer Vocational Discernment Program which lasts the whole month of July. The superior has the difficult responsibility of taking care of the material needs of the monastery, while not losing sight of the spiritual needs of the monks. Some of our pressing material needs are described below: challenges, to be sure, but signs of life and vitality.

Death and life: we constantly weave in and out, back and forth. As St. Paul says, “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Rm 14:8).

With gratitude for your participation in our monastic life,

*Fr. Cassian Folsom, O.S.B.*

Very Rev. Cassian Folsom, O.S.B.  
Prior

*Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine!*

On July 7, 2010 in the Basilica di San Benedetto a special Mass with the music of Mozart’s Requiem was offered for the repose of the soul of Cardinal Mayer. It was an experience of unforgettable beauty.



His Eminence, Augustin Cardinal Mayer, O.S.B.

## AUGUSTIN CARDINAL MAYER, O.S.B.

*Fr. Clement writes:* In the summer of 2004, I had the great honor of assisting Cardinal Mayer for a month, right after he had fallen and broken his shoulder. Then, during the academic year of 2005/2006, I was blessed to assist His Eminence once again.

I remember one of my first days with His Eminence in the summer of 2004. The Alma Sisters of Mercy had prepared a little feast for him and his opening words to greet us all were: “I still have much to learn!” For a young monk to hear a monk in his 90's profess that he still had much to learn was a tremendous insight into the meaning of our life and the path of holiness. Becoming a saint isn't about figuring everything out, but rather, remaining always humble and open to learn that which our Lord wants to teach us.

Often, during the evening meal, he would share with me the joys and sorrows of his long life lived in the service of our Lord, His Church, and the Benedictine order. In a few words, he was able to pass on to me the wisdom of his experience, and I could tell that at the same time he was striving to help me grow and become a holy monk and priest.

Every day spent with Cardinal Mayer was truly a blessing. His humble trust in our Lord and his desire for heaven were the driving force of his life and a great inspiration to all who came in contact with him.

*Fr. Benedict writes:* I often find literature which describes the saints less than helpful. The task of the author of course is not an easy one. He must use the limited vocabulary of the natural order to tell the history of a supernatural life, a life which in mysterious ways spanned the abyss between man and God, between man's freedom and God's grace. Often in the process of telling the story the very stuff from which the saint was drawn gets lost in sentimentalities and clichés. The true heroism of the man is lost in an attempt to emphasize God's grace. The man no longer inspires in a real way. He has become a saint and is so utterly different from us that one dare not try to imitate him.



Cardinal Mayer's coat of arms: “The love of Christ has gathered us together” from the Holy Thursday hymn “Ubi Caritas”.

Cardinal Mayer defies that typology. Perhaps to biographers of the future he too will fall into that neat pattern which distances saints from us. Perhaps the real man Paul Augustin Mayer will also be lost to gloss and schmaltz. But to me he will remain a hero of the real; a saint one might actually become. Towering at six feet five inches tall, he was a man like St. Jerome, like St. Paul, a man completely sure of himself, yet no less sure of his need to beg forgiveness. He had studied every corner of his brain, of his soul, of his heart, he knew every weak spot. And one knew that he knew every weak spot.

I lived with the Cardinal during my second year of philosophy studies at Santa Croce in Rome. The university, just past Castel Sant'Angelo, was a fifteen minute walk from his apartment off of Via Conciliazione. When I arrived at his house I expected Borghese style lodgings, renaissance living, dining with princes. I was a pompous junior monk, simply professed for two years. I had monastic life figured out and I was looking forward to a taste of luxury, cardinal-style, after several years of 'tough' monastic life. The fact that I would be living with a ninety-six year old man, assisting him to bathe, dress, walk, eat –these things had not occurred to me as anything that would require much physical effort, let alone spiritual.

The first shock to my system came after several days of getting to know the Cardinal's routine. The good sisters who looked after him (and did so until his death) had gone off for a holy hour—which seemed to last three hours—and I was alone with Cardinal. Feeling the weight of my responsibility, my authority, and of course the mere gift of myself to His Eminence's service, I sat by him on the couch (not a sixteenth century couch mind you, but a 1976 style couch) and tried to start up a conversation. I asked him if I could get him something to drink. “No”. Would he like to go for a walk? “No”. Shall we pray a rosary? “No”. This was a blow. The Cardinal did not think my presence in the house necessary. He was recovering from a broken hip, but in his mind that was nothing he couldn't handle on his own. Doting sisters are one thing, but a snot-nosed junior monk was quite another. The silence lasted for hours. In fact it lasted for months. I was a punk and the Cardinal had no interest in punks. Yes, monks can be punks too.

We had many silent meals together. We monks are used to silent meals. That's normal for us. But these were a different kind of silent meal. The Cardinal was simply not interested in me and he made no effort to hide that. I saw the Cardinal as a peer. That was my first problem. A ninety six year old cardinal does not need a peer, a buddy, at least not one as smug as I was. The good sisters kindly looked on, wondering no doubt if we were really getting along. I tried to pretend all was fine. There is no way to describe how painful and yet how purifying that silence was in those first few months. I would say it lasted ten years, only that I know it was far less than that.

This article is supposed to be about the Cardinal, not about me. But my own growth there helps tell the story of his sanctity. Although I raged in my mind over his lack of concern for me, over his lack of interest, my heart was slowly softened. Slowly and in immeasurably small units I began to notice his humility. His chill was not the direct attack I felt it to be, but the natural response of one who loves in a quite mature way to a rambunctious and immature boy. The more I noticed it, the more his humility seemed to show itself, seemed to shower itself upon me with graciousness and love. He would apologize to me for things large and small. He would show with the gentlest look that what I had asked of him was totally appalling, and yet he would do it.

What made Cardinal Mayer saintly, and perhaps actually a saint was struggle. What for my first several months with him seemed to be a total lack of humanity, was in fact the humanity, the manliness, the virtue that I was too blind to see, too much a boy to understand. Perseverance in struggle is the virtue that makes a boy into a man; that makes a monk into a saint. What I hope the biographers never bury in the midst of inspiring and heroic stories, is the real heroism of the man Paul Augustin Mayer who got up as many times as he fell, who loved God to the point of total abandonment to His Will, who begged for forgiveness of even a young twerp like myself.



Scaffolding covers the noviate roof during repairs.



The Project on hold. The sign says: “Entry prohibited except for authorized workers”

## GROWING PAINS

The present monastery has two buildings separated by a small garden. There are eight cells in the building next to the Basilica, and seven in the Novitiate building, for a total of fifteen. All fifteen cells are occupied. Our high hopes for beginning the work on the new monastery, San Benedetto fuori-le-mura (St. Benedict outside-the-walls) have been dashed by the economic crisis. We were able to do the initial work of clearing the rubble and overgrowth in the ruins of the 1592 Capuchin monastery, and we succeeded in getting the work site secure enough to meet the safety code. But that's as far as we've got, and the work has come to a halt for lack of funds. At the same time, back in town at San Benedetto dentro-le-mura (St. Benedict inside-the-walls), the roof of the novitiate building was leaking with the winter and spring rains, and we had to face the daunting prospect of very significant repairs. What we use for the Novitiate was built in the 1960's, cheaply and in a hurry; in fact, in building the roof, they hadn't even placed a vinyl or plastic layer between the clay tiles and the wood. An inspection revealed that many of the tiles were broken (letting in water) and sections of the wood had rotted, since there was no vinyl layer, which explained why it was raining inside the novices' cells. So we had to bite the bullet and replace the roof – actually, only half of it; the other half will have to wait for next year. Thus limited resources were diverted from the Project to ordinary Maintenance. The long and short of it is this: the novices and juniors will keep dry, but they'll be pretty crowded. To encourage me, people offer the cheerful comment: “These are good problems to have!” The adjective “good” is encouraging, but the noun “problems” remains what it is. O God, come to my assistance, O Lord make haste to help me!

## GIFT GIVING

If you are able to help us and are in the United States, please address your check to the SEDES SAPIENTIAE FOUNDATION. This foundation is a 501 (c) (3) tax exempt organization whose purpose is to support the monastery. Your donations can most quickly benefit the monastery if you send them directly to the foundation address in the United States:

**Sedes Sapientiae Foundation - 511 Kearsarge Mountain Rd. - Warner, New Hampshire 03278**

For benefactors in Great Britain, please address your check to FRIENDS OF SAN BENEDETTO, NORCIA (registered charity no. 1107186):

**English Friends of San Benedetto, Norcia  
c/o Stuart Dewar - 15, Main Street - Adlestrop - Moreton-in-Marsh - Glos. GL56 0YN - England**

For benefactors in Europe, please address your check to MONASTERO DI SAN BENEDETTO and send it directly to the monastery in Norcia, or make a bank transfer to:

**Cassa di Risparmio di Spoleto - Agenzia di Norcia - IT / 39 / F / ABI 06315 / CAB 38580 / c/c 000001005246 (IBAN)  
Swift (BIC) - CRSPIT3S**

Personal correspondence should always be sent directly to the monastery.

*Reward with eternal life, O Lord, all those who for your sake do good to us.*