

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

I recently spent a full week at Conception Abbey. Priests are supposed to make a retreat once a year, and I've tried it different ways. But the last several years I've taken a week in January to spend hours a day in prayer with the monks of the abbey, to visit with them, and to enjoy the peaceful silence of the abbey grounds.

I'm an alumnus of Conception Seminary College. When I graduated from high school I wanted to continue my studies for the priesthood, but for some reason I didn't want to go to Conception. I had visited there before, but it hadn't really grabbed me. However, Bishop Charles Helmsing, who was helping to sponsor my education and my future, wanted me at Conception Seminary, so I went, reluctantly. But from the moment I set foot on campus, I felt warmly welcomed by the older students there, as well as by the monks and teachers. Over four years of college, I learned a lot in school, but I also developed a spiritual life through daily prayer in common with others. I never wanted to become a monk; I always preferred the work that parish priests do. But there is a part of my spiritual home that remains at Conception Abbey. So I always enjoy my return visits there. It's a place I can go to reboot my system.

Any encounter with Christian spiritual life is an encounter with Jesus Christ. Today's gospel shows the profound effect he had on people from the beginning of his ministry. His message was compact: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," and his invitation was personal and dreamy: "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of" people - not fishers of fish. He taught in synagogues and cured illnesses. He must have been a dramatic figure to meet, the kind of person for whom you would drop everything to see, hear and follow, which the first disciples did. Matthew says Peter and Andrew followed Jesus "at once" and James and John followed him "immediately".

There are times when we have a very clear vision of our future call. We know what job we'd like to have. Or we meet a person with whom we'd like to spend our life. Like those first disciples, at times we know the right decision immediately. Other times, like me weighing my college options, we are reluctant about where to go or what to do. Our plans may not be thought out very well. We may get stuck by indecision, or we decide to do something on the advice of people in authority or others whom we trust. This feels risky at the time, but it often works out well.

To each of us Christ continually invites us to repent and come after him. He asks a lot - the first disciples had to give up livelihood, property and family. But he gives a lot - a spiritual center where we can find peace all our days.