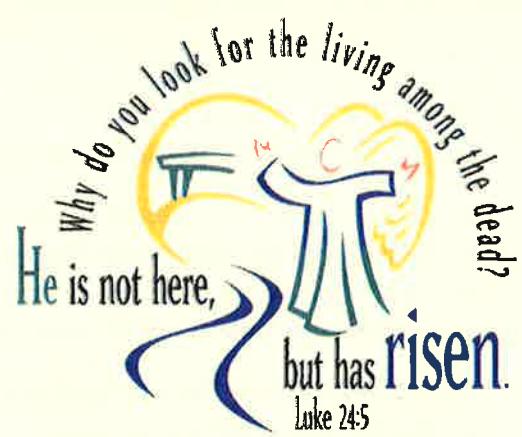


EASTER 2017



Parishioners, family, and friends,

It is no surprise why I wanted to meet the man. The guest master at the monastery set up the place – “he will be in the library after dinner”. I positioned myself in the stacks. He easily found my row and gently asked, “you wanted to see me?”. I was meeting one of my first authors and a monk! And he was named, Fr. Raymond. * A Trappist monk of Gethsemani Abbey, oldest monastery in the country, was notably just 25 miles north from birthplace of Abraham Lincoln. About ready to enter a seminary for priesthood, I thought he might give me some ‘presidential advice’. He did.

I am now in a slow journey through one of his books, SPIRITUAL SECRETS OF A TRAPPIST MONK. (1957 – 394 pages) He desires not to keep any of his secrets secret, and in reading them it’s obvious that secrecy is impossible. He says a lot about God, us, and the ‘two of us’. “...for you were not born to be simply a nice person to live with. You were called to become like God!”

On page 144, he says something that I sort of knew, but did not articulate with such clarity and brevity. With a mischievous mind, I have not read straight through to page 144, sort of skipping around. Three paragraphs alert us to the truth that everything is deteriorating or slowing down. Cherry trees. And we will lean forward, away from youth. Rocks can even erode with water and wind. The athletic body at age 32 has significant deficiencies with the 22-year-old. Streets wear out. I personally never made it the front of the class and now I know I never will.

And then the ‘presidential’ truth is brought into his writings: ... “But as long as life lasts, the spiritual energies of your supernatural soul can go on increasing day by day, moment by moment, for you can always go on growing in grace and thus become more and more like Christ. Death can find you at your spiritual strongest”. I think he would not mind if I added, “IF we choose so!”.

He surely would find it appropriate for me now to wish you a HAPPY EASTER. And an invitation to make the next one, right to your last one, THE BEST! Of course, Christ’s Easter is our last one – can’t get any better. Don’t dare wait.

In the surrender of His Hope,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Fr. Raymond Cotter".

Just, Fr. Raymond Cotter

*Fr. Raymond, O.S.C.O., religious name at the Monastery in Bardstown, KY. Founded 1848. He was born, David Joseph Flanagan (Massachusetts’s Irish – explains the gifts!) 1903 – 1990. First a Jesuit priest. Contemporary of well-known Thomas Merton, prolific author, of the same monastery.

"The branches, stories, can change ...from the wind.....Vine always the same."

As a priest, I have been blessed meeting some significant stories. A multitude that I have observed, listened to, and yes, interrupted by (often the best). Packages never fully unwrapped: good fortune, family, despair, joy, diseases – natural and spiritual, forgiveness, revenge, grins that need more space than allowed, and always HOPE when chosen – Christ cannot be topped.

Prisons have brought me into types of stories not seen or experienced by most. Can be complicated getting in..."yes, remove your socks". I share one man's story that is equipped to take on Easter. We have become friends over several years and we do not see the friendship ending. He is a spiritual strength to a priest who needs it.

We are the same age. He committed a serious act of violence amidst both a reckless and quality life. His past 32 years in prison have obviously been different than mine on the "outside" – from my motorcycle rides across the country to opening a refrigerator when I wanted to.

"Mark", #A -207--- was up for parole review in early '17. A fellow becomes very anxious about that. He was truly remorseful and began a faith relationship after ten years in. He became a Catholic when confirmed by a Bishop visiting a southern MI prison. My luck – he got transferred north.

He was viewed by me, a few other priests and volunteers, as our 'parish administrator' to our little flock amidst the 1,500 guys inside. Guys on benches looked up to him. He was calm, peaceful. The prison chaplain used him as a means to distribute rosaries and Sunday Missals that our parish offered.

He would gather in the yard, with the rule of only four, to help guys. A Christian in prison is not an identity to be overly heralded. Inmates and officers can have their reasons. Complicated – but ok.

Mark wrote often about the details in the parole process started in Jan. '17. We wrote letters of support to the board and to him. We found him a place to stay and a likely job (key to a release). He always shared serious thoughts of Christ. Discouragement or a mediocre faith were not in his penmanship.

A few of his words:

Christmas '14: "Hello Father Cotter...from all of us here, we would like to wish you and your congregation a very Merry Christmas...hearts and home filled with Joy of Our Lord. We would also like to express gratitude for your people giving us the St. Joseph Sunday Missals...will last us a lifetime...something that came from love that we can pass along to family."

March '17: ...early (unknowingly on my birthday)... "no matter what decision the parole board makes, you need to know that my life has been so enriched, God has given me so much through all of you. I have more love, hope, and faith that I have ever had before in my life."

March 20,'17: "Hello Fr. Ray...God granted me a parole! My projected release date is late June...I truly believe that the power of all these prayers have prayed me out of prison, by the grace of God!! ...through the love and support that all of you have given me, it has carried me through some of the darkest days of my life. Now to ever flourish. Your friend and brother in Christ, with love, Mark".

***Need I say anything more of
Christ's Easter Resurrection!***

