

Renewal Is In Our Genes

Stone Chapel: 1965-2015

Fifty Years of Prayer

A FULL DECADE BEFORE THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Abbot Leo, at that time the Abbot of Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem, conceived of Weston Priory as a Benedictine monastery in the evolving spiritual movement for “renewal” and “return to the sources.”

In 1953, Weston Priory was in the process of coming to birth. With the invaluable help of devoted friends and very limited financial resources, Abbot Leo purchased an abandoned farm house with attached remnant of a barn and the surrounding woodland on the edge of the Green Mountain National Forest in Vermont.

The location of the priory breathed of wilderness. Access was only by means of winding dirt roads. Two swamps, invading brush, and the Green Mountain National Forest bordered the long abandoned and forlorn farm house on all sides. At first sight, a friendly visitor was prompted to exclaim, “Why would anyone come to this God forsaken place!”

But Abbot Leo saw something much deeper. Wilderness is not God forsaken! Wilderness is promised land, holy chaos praying for the creation of something new. Fleeing from the turmoil of Nazi Germany, assigned to revive the faltering abbey in the Holy Land, Leo saw in Weston a beckoning sign for renewal of monastic life in “the new world!”

To begin, the crumbling attached barn could be renewed and transformed into a house of prayer, the heart of a new community. Leo poetically expressed that vision in an interview with the Boston Globe:

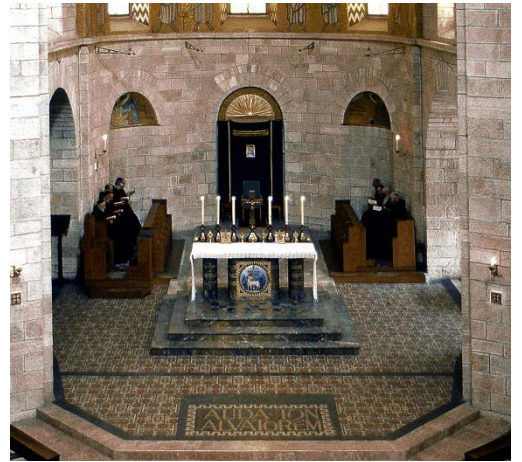
When it is finished...it will be strikingly different from its parent, the Dormition Abbey. There will be neither stained glass windows nor elaborate carvings. Instead, the chapel will be made to fit the landscape of encroaching forests, and the song of birds will accompany the Gregorian chants of the monks. The outside of the chapel will keep its simple, barn like shape, with small windows high up in the walls; the interior will be paneled in the pine that grows in the surrounding forests. (*A Benedictine Legacy of Peace*, p. 90)

Under the direction of local architects and builders, Ray Austin and Al Wilcox, the chaotic barn was transformed into a simple rustic chapel—the realization of Abbot Leo’s dream. The new Oratory, the visible sign and symbol of a new monastic community!

The renovated barn, in its simplicity, was rooted in the beauty of surrounding nature: the chanted prayer of the monks in harmony with the chorus of birds—nature and community came alive in a new moment of time. Prayerful presence of thanksgiving, reconciliation and welcome—the Benedictine word of Peace!



Abbot Leo at the Dormition Abbey



The monastic chapel of the Dormition Abbey



Ten years later Pope John XXIII announced the opening of the Second Vatican Council for the renewal of the Church. In contrast to previous councils this was not a council of reform. It was not intended to just repair what was damaged, broken and deteriorating. This council announced a new beginning, a “renewal” and return to the way of the Gospel, a “return to the source.”

“Return to the source” is not a call to fall back into the past or to copy what was done before. It is to drink in the Spirit that brought newness and life to the earliest followers of Jesus and to make that Spirit alive in the present moment.

The vision of Pope John for renewal of the Church was radiant. It resonated with Abbot Leo’s vision for the renewal of monastic life in Weston.

In 1963 there was an abundance of candidates for the monastic community in Weston. Visitors and guests crowded the small monastic oratory for Sunday worship. At the same time, Abbot Leo harvested three young and untried monks from Weston Priory to assist him in his hoped for renewal of the aging community in Jerusalem.

Father Stephen was the last of the seasoned monks from other monasteries who served as Priors of Weston during the first ten years. In the spring of 1964 he departed from Weston because of ill health. The emerging young Weston Priory community was at a new moment – now, under Abbot Leo’s watchful eye, it was coming of age.

At that moment the community’s first step was the renewal of the house of prayer, the oratory. Abbot Leo’s early vision of the monastic house rooted in the beauty of nature and responding to a new moment in time became the basis for renewing the house of prayer. The Second Vatican Council inspired and guided the renewal of the monastic oratory and the community.

In the early summer of 1965, as the Second Vatican Council drew to a close, Abbot Leo returned from the stress in Jerusalem and surgery in Germany. He led the Weston Priory brothers in a solemn blessing of the renewed oratory, God’s house and the heart of the renewed community. The building and renewal of the community went hand in hand with the building of the oratory. Renewal became the way to continue to build God’s house.

When completed, the monastery chapel became the heart and symbol of renewed monastic life for the Weston community. It prompted Abbot Primate Beno Gut, on the occasion of his canonical visitation to Weston Priory in 1966 to remark: “We feel that your beautiful chapel is a miniature rustic gem, worthy of the house of the Lord...” ■

- brother John

