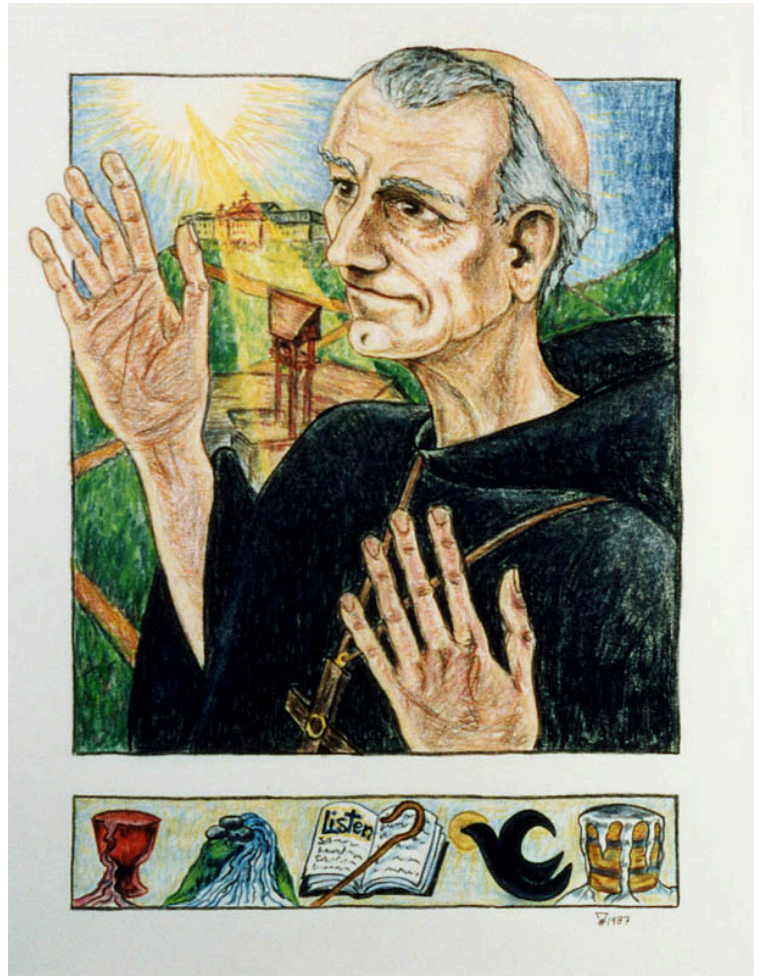


The Planting of a Seed: The Founding of Weston Priory

The founder of Weston Priory, Abbot Leo Rudloff,¹ made his monastic profession in St. Joseph's Abbey in Gerleve, Germany, when he was only 20 years old. He was happy and contented with his monastic life in Gerleve. Loved and respected by his abbot and fellow monks, he had no intention to leave his community or to found another monastery. After obtaining his doctorate in theology in Rome, he taught philosophy to the younger monks in St. Joseph's Abbey and lectured at the College of Social Workers in Munster. He was named subprior of the monastery in 1934. He faithfully loved the brothers and fathers in Gerleve, the community of his first monastic profession, up to the time of his death at 80 years of age in 1982. He had this to say about love: "When I love, I love forever. I cannot simply drop someone who I once loved. Love is eternal and cannot die, even after the greatest hurt."



Brother Leo was sent by his abbot, Pius Buddenborg, to Jerusalem in 1947 to make a Visitation of the Dormition Abbey, which, at the conclusion of the Israeli war of independence, was on the verge of extinction. In his report to the abbots of the Beuronese Congregation concerning the Visitation, Brother Leo expressed the hope that a Benedictine presence could continue in the Holy Land, if the Dormition Abbey would become an international community instead of a German national community.

Entrusted with that task, Brother Leo, now 45 years old, was named administrator of Dormition Abbey on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, subsequently becoming abbot in 1952. Soon after he arrived in Israel he fell in love with the Jewish people, and he devoted the rest of his life to the reconciliation of Christians and Jews. The foundation of Weston Priory was born out of that love and devotion.

The Benedictine community on Mount Zion had few resources. At the end of the war, there were only fifteen or so remaining members of the community, and they were aged and

fearful. The monastery buildings and church were badly damaged by the war. Both the community and the monastery had to be rebuilt. Friendly and cooperative relations with the Israeli government had to be established.

The biggest challenge was to rebuild the Benedictine community in the Holy Land. The existing community of Dormition Abbey was made up of lay brothers and ordained monks. The lay brothers did the manual labor; the ordained monks taught in the seminary, chanted the monastic office, and performed pastoral tasks. Brother Leo did not agree with this separation in the community. He felt that all the monks should be equal — that all should equally share the burdens of work and the occasions for prayer and recreation. But it proved very difficult for him to convince the aging community to change their way of monastic living.

Before Brother Leo went to Israel, he had spent several years in the United States during World War II. At that time, he became a United States citizen and made many friends among the laity and the Benedictine monks of New Jersey. He turned to these friends to help him in his new task of bringing the Dormition Abbey community back to life.

He thought that the United States would be a possible source of help for the community in Israel. In the New World there was the possibility of vocations, as well as financial support, for the Dormition community. But his greatest hope for making Dormition Abbey international in its membership was that it might also be easier to persuade younger men from the United States of his ideas for greater unity and equality among the monks — for a new way of monastic living.

Brother Leo's friends in New Jersey were enthusiastic about the idea of a foundation in the United States. Though there were few funds available, they began to search for property suitable to Brother Leo's hopes and means. After much searching and many disappointments, Brother Leo's friends found a location in Vermont that seemed to be ideal. It was an abandoned farm on the edge of the Green Mountain National Forest. The farmhouse and attached barn were in terrible disrepair, with a rickety chicken coop in the back yard. But the price was right! When Brother Leo, who was in Jerusalem at the time, received the news, he hurried to the United States and visited Weston for the first time. He loved the location, just as he had loved the land of Israel when he first saw it.

But Brother Leo did not have any spare monks from Israel to staff the new monastery, so he borrowed a monk from St. Mary's Abbey in Morristown, New Jersey, to be the first prior of Weston. Repairs began immediately on the old farmhouse, and by 1953 the monastery was ready to be occupied. The first prior, Father Hugh Duffy, had a heart attack on his way to the monastery. Brother Leo had returned to Jerusalem in the meanwhile, since he had extensive responsibilities there. Fortunately, to Brother Leo's great relief, Father Michael Ducey, a monk from the monastery of St. Anselm in Washington, D.C., volunteered to take his place. Father Michael arrived in Weston in January of 1953 and

waited for the arrival of Brother Leo, whose blessing as abbot had just taken place in Rome on December 8, 1952.

Weston Priory had a very precarious beginning. The only monk in that first year was the Prior who was on loan from another community. Brother Leo relied simply on faith and prayer that his new foundation would survive. Later he expressed it this way: "I am the Father Founder; I say this facetiously. Strange as that may sound, I feel more like a mother to Weston. I conceived it, somehow. Then I gave it birth. This was almost a process of nature. Once a woman has conceived — in love, it is to be hoped — things go their way in a natural process over which she has no personal power. The same thing happened with me."

During the first few years after the founding of Weston, Brother Leo went back and forth between Israel and the United States — a big commute to be sure! He and Father Michael worked together to make it known that there was a new Benedictine monastery in the United States. Gradually young men were attracted to come and see what this new kind of Benedictine monastery in the wilderness in Vermont was all about.

On his annual visits to Weston, usually lasting three months, Brother Leo stressed that the purpose of the new foundation was to support Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem, and hopefully to supply the Holy Land community with new members. To the young growing community, he spoke about a new kind of Benedictine monastic life for America and for Israel. In this new community, there were to be no divisions between ordained and non-ordained monks; all were to share equally the burdens and the privileges of the community life. Another departure from existing Benedictine communities in the United States was a return to a more contemplative way of life. The monks were to live in simplicity by the work of their hands, and were not to take on the work of the clergy in parishes or schools. They were to chant the monastic office in common and devote themselves to personal prayer and study.

For the first sixteen years of its existence, Brother Leo nursed and nourished the Weston community on his annual visits. Again he expressed it in his own words in this way: "Using the same metaphor, I nursed my baby. But a baby grows. Soon it needs stronger food than the mother's body provided. The mother still provides in other ways, but then comes the time when the child lives its own life more and more. I think every mother experiences that with joy as well as with pain. She knows it must be that way. She is happy in the development of her child, and yet she experiences a certain nostalgia when it becomes independent and develops where she can no longer be of much help. This is a time of crisis. There are mothers who become possessive at that moment, much to the detriment of the healthy development of the child. I don't think I have committed that mistake."

Brother Leo was a teacher throughout his life. And he lived what he taught. He said that the heart of Benedictine spirituality, and the guide to his own spiritual journey, was Benedict's chapter on humility (*Rule of Benedict*, chapter 7). For him, humility was not to

be 'pusillanimous' — small or mean spirited. Humility was being rooted firmly in the earth and 'magnanimous' — great spirited and open-minded.

Even though the Weston Priory community did not fulfill Brother Leo's dream of saving the Dormition Abbey community and establishing a renewed Benedictine presence in the Holy Land, he remained faithful in his gift of love to the Weston community to the end. "Looking at all that has developed in the life at Weston, I think I am not presumptuous when I say, I recognize in it the seed which I have planted. Naturally, no one could exactly foresee the way Weston has grown and will grow. But the essential identity, I think, is recognizable as in an oak tree the acorn is still recognizable, in a grown up person the child which the mother bore in her womb."

In turn, the Weston community has continued to grow and to nourish others in the open spirit of Brother Leo — in love for the Jewish people, and in extending that love in openness to all, whatever their religious differences might be. Weston Priory is dedicated to the dream, the vision, and the legacy of Brother Leo: that there be no division, no discrimination, no separation within the human community, that all may be one!

This article is an excerpt from a memoir of the life of Brother Leo, being written by Brother John.

1. Upon his retirement as abbot of Dormition Abbey in 1968, Abbot Leo chose to live the remaining years of his life at Weston Priory, choosing to be called *brother*. This was indeed the pilgrimage of his life — the journey into brotherhood. Our community lovingly remembers him as Brother Leo.

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