



THE DUTY TO BE MERRY

August 2023

Dear Friend of Clear Creek Abbey,

Friendship is unique, something like a snowflake or an angel (Saint Thomas Aquinas explains that each angel is unique in terms of personality), and yet freely shared. It differs in intensity, as do the stars (explains Saint Paul somewhere), thereby contributing to the beauty of the universe, a universe that is wonderful in its diversity and proportion. Friendship is a most precious gift in any human life. The same goes for monastic communities.

While a Benedictine prelate, Cardinal Augustine Mayer, was visiting the monks of Notre-Dame de Triors in France many years ago, one day during recreation, upon realizing that there were two Americans in the community (including me), he turned to us Yankees and asked us if we knew of the Poor Clares of Roswell, New Mexico. As it turned out, he was quite familiar with them and professed a profound admiration for these Nuns. I had never heard of them and so did not really pursue the question, though the name did stick in my mind. I think he also mentioned the Abbess, Mother Mary Francis.

Thus, I was pleasantly surprised a few years later, in 1999, upon arriving in Oklahoma as the Superior of a new monastic foundation to find (as my very first official letter) a large envelope from Roswell, New Mexico, with a big tin of pecans next to it. The letter was from the above-mentioned Poor Clare abbess, Mother Mary Francis, author of an interna-



Mother Mary Francis, Father Abbot Antoine, and Father Abbot Philip in the Chapter Room of the Poor Clares of Roswell in 2002.

tional bestseller, *A Right to Be Merry*, as well as many other books and poems. The pecans were from the Poor Clares' garden: it had been a good year. This was the beginning of a lively correspondence between Clear Creek and Roswell, one that never really ended until the departure of the abbess for loftier regions, on the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, in the Year of Our Lord two thousand and six.

Like our Mother House of Our Lady of Fontgombault in France, the Poor Clares of Roswell were founded in 1948. Like the French abbey, they went on to found five new monasteries at a time when this was quite unusual, especially in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, when considerable turmoil attended the religious houses in much of the Western world. For some mysterious

Foundation for the Annunciation Monastery of Clear Creek

5804 West Monastery Road • Hulbert, OK 74441 • Fax: (918) 772-1044 • www.clearcreekmonks.org

reason, there seemed to be a great affinity of minds and hearts between Clear Creek and Roswell from the very beginning.

Here is a quote from that first letter received at Clear Creek from Roswell, when we arrived in September of 1999. It begins with a reference to Cardinal Mayer already mentioned:

[Y]es, the friendship of great Cardinal Mayer is already a deep bond between us, and assures us... that you are just "our sort." We were privileged to welcome him to our little monastery thirteen times, but alas he is now unable to travel such an immense distance. Perhaps his mantle has fallen on the monks of Clear Creek. We are looking forward to meeting you... whenever you can manage to come, though I imagine it will be some time before you are settled in enough to consider leaving your fledgling foundation.

In fact, it was three years before our founding abbot from France, Dom Antoine Forgeot, and I were able to fly to Roswell, on November 11 of the year 2002, in order to make a long overdue visit to this monastic oasis in the desert of New Mexico. To our satisfaction we found everything to be poor and in perfect order. Although it made me tremble just a bit, the abbess, Mother Mary Francis, insisted that we go inside the enclosure to meet the Sisters in the chapter room. I was even more concerned when this diminutive nun with her great smile, key in hand, told us that she was going "to lock us in." Seeing that in true Poor Clare fashion the abbess was entirely barefoot, I also feared stepping on her toes... But all these concerns melted as so much light snow, and the visit proceeded splendidly, in the warmth and glow of the monastic community. I believe that Father Abbot Forgeot came with me a second time. In any case, I have been able to visit Roswell a number of times, sometimes accompanied by one or another of our monks.

During those visits we shared many common interests, including the Latin liturgy (theirs is partly in Latin) and the restoration of Gregorian chant accomplished at Solesmes Abbey. Mother Mary Francis herself was quite a musician and had taken a keen interest in what was often referred to as the *Solesmes Method*. I have more than once been asked to share with the choir mistress of Roswell and the Nuns some of the living tradition we monks of the Solesmes Congregation cultivate surrounding the chant. There were, of course, other points of interest, including many common references to spirituality and theology and certain concerns for disquieting signs appearing in religious life. Of special concern was the state of the contemplative form of monastic life in America and Europe, as an all too obvious process of secularization was continuing to develop. Mother Mary Francis became a precious counselor in this domain, showing a marked wisdom in dealing with various difficulties. Joy, even merriment, was and is always a dominant note (even a sacred duty) of the community of Roswell.

The biography of Mother Abbess Mary Francis of the Colettine Poor Clares is too rich to be reduced to some poor paragraph in an obituary. Her life reads like a contemporary page of the *Golden Legend* of the Saints. On the day of her passing, the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, here at Clear Creek a lovely blanket of snow fell, which somehow seemed most appropriate... I can only encourage our friends to find out more about her from her community in Roswell and, especially, from reading the luminous pages of her many books, including the beautiful *But I Have Called You Friends: Reflections on the Art of Christian Friendship*.

She was a great friend of Clear Creek (and still is from that Roswell in Heaven). Perhaps she will become your friend too.

+ br. Philip Anderson, abbot

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