

On Retreat at St. Joseph's Abbey in Spenser

Last week I was on retreat at St. Joseph's Abbey in Spenser, Massachusetts, about ten miles north of Sturbridge. You may know of St. Joseph's Abbey through its jams and preserves, "Trappist Preserves," which are widely available. The monks of St. Joseph belong to the Cistercian Order. They live in community, working and praying. I have been going to St. Joseph's for my annual retreat for several years now. Every year it is like coming home. It is a place where I can pray, reflect, and renew my ministry.

When I go to St. Joseph's, I am not quite sure what will happen. There is one conference in the morning, and the rest of the day belongs to me. Morning and Evening Prayer and Mass are the high points of the day, and I treasure the way in which the monks celebrate the Liturgy. But the rest of the day is mine to fill with prayer, reflection, reading, and walking—lots of walking.

I suppose it is a sign of my fear of being alone with the Lord that I take lots of books to fill up my day. But I never read the books I bring because the Lord always has a surprise for me. This year the surprise was the Book of Genesis and Pope Francis's encyclical on the environment. First, I read through the Book of Genesis slowly and carefully in preparation for an adult enrichment series I will give in the fall. Although I have read the Book of Genesis several times, this latest reading of the text revealed new insights into the text that I had not seen before. It was an enriching moment, and I will share some of those insights with you in my series, *In the beginning...*

But the great surprise was Pope Francis's encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si*. I had been intending to read it for some time, but had not set aside the time to read it. But when I was in the Abbey Book store, there it was. So I bought it, and I read it. What a magnificent letter! It helped me to see my relation to nature and creation in a new way. It helped me to read the Book of Genesis, especially the story of creation, in a new way. On Sunday, September 27th, I will summarize the encyclical for you in the adult enrichment sessions we have at the Parish Center before and after the 9:30 AM Mass. I will also write some columns about it this fall.

Finally, I would like to say a word about the conferences given by Father Peter, an old Cistercian from Germany. At least he thought he was old until I told him how old I was! At first, I was a bit put off. The first conference was long and filled with digressions. But as I settled in those conferences—so different from what I would have given—spoke to me. I am grateful to Fr. Peter for his conferences, and for being such a joy-filled man.

If you haven't made a retreat for some time, make one this year. This year's retreat renewed my spirit and reminded me of what is important in my relationship with God. The daily liturgy, the quiet, the reading of scripture, all of these renewed my spirit.

Father Matera

“The ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all creatures are moving forward with us and through us toward a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things. Human beings, endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn to the fullness of Christ, are called to lead all creatures back to their Creator.”

Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, paragraph 83.