

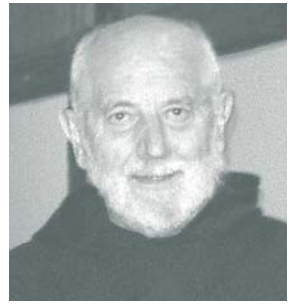
A Memoir

By brother John

*Dedicated in gratitude
to Father Martin Boler, O.S.B.,
for his priceless friendship
and his devoted service as prior of Mount Saviour Monastery
in Elmira, N.Y., from 1969 to 2008.*

MOUNT SAVIOUR MONASTERY AND WESTON Priory were born as brother monasteries within the Benedictine Confederation.

Mount Saviour, founded in 1951, was the elder brother by two years. This brotherly relationship is not an artifact or a legal fiction. The founders of the two monasteries considered themselves brothers. Abbot Leo, in a moment of suffering and discouragement turned to Father Damasus in the summer of 1967, "...I come to you as a brother and friend, proven over many years—sometimes in fire."



Father Martin Boler, O.S.B.

I entered Weston Priory in February, 1957. The community was lively, young, and fragile. Father Bede Scholz, the prior, was on loan from Conception Abbey, Missouri. Stephen Fronckewicz, also from Conception Abbey, was the only Weston monk in solemn vows. In the winter of 1957 he was studying for the priesthood at Saint Bede's Abbey in Illinois. Three Weston brothers were in temporary vows. Two novices were soon to make their first monastic profession. Postulants were numerous and transient.

My sojourn as novice began in March along with two other ordained priests, one from Columbia, S. A., and the other from Pennsylvania. We witnessed a constant coming and going of postulants or candidates. Survivors joked that we would do well to install a revolving door at the entrance to the monastery.

Accommodations in the priory were primitive. A large open room on the second floor of a renovated chicken coop served as dormitory for newcomers. Bunk beds filled the space. One sink, one shower, and one toilet occupied a narrow enclosure at the south end of the dormitory. Ill-fitting windows rattled mightily in the cold winter winds. A stone fireplace added to the rustic atmosphere in the cramped recreation room below. A small woodstove in the classroom on the ground floor radiated heat for the entire structure.

Abbot Leo came from Israel for his annual visit to the community in June, 1957. Immediately, he began to offer daily spiritual conferences and classes on the Rule of Benedict. He made himself available for consultation with all of the brothers. Evening recreations gave him the opportunity to speak of his hopes for his primary responsibility, the Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem. His presence was a breath of fresh air and inspiration for the hard working brothers.

On a warm evening in late June, the community relaxed on the front lawn of Saint Gabriel's, the renovated farmhouse made monastery. It was a relief from the stuffy narrow recreation room of the novitiate. All twelve members were clad in monastic black habits, some with tunic and scapular, others in simple tunics, the dress of postulants or candidates. Abbot Leo and Prior Bede led the conversation. They spoke of Mount Saviour Monastery in New York State and its founder, Father Damasus Winzen.

Father Damasus was recuperating from a prolonged illness. He had recently spent time with the Benedictine community, Our Lady of the Resurrection, founded by Gregory Lemercier in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Damasus and Leo were longtime friends since their years together as students in the Collegio Sant' Anselmo in Rome. In the Hitler years they left Germany, their homeland, to come to the United States. They shared hopes for a renewal of Benedictine monastic life. As often happens with brothers, they had their good as well as bad times together.

Father Bede suggested that this could be a good time for Abbot Leo to visit his friend in Elmira. It was no secret among the brothers that Bede was also thinking of the haying season. A break from classes, conferences, and interviews would free up the brothers to get a little more work done! One of Father Bede's favorite books was "Holy Work" authored by his friend Rembert Sorg, founder of King of Martyrs Priory in Wisconsin.

Abbot Leo readily agreed to the proposed trip. He set off in Suzy, the second hand car provided for him by friends in New Jersey. In the course of two fruitful weeks at Mount Saviour, Damasus and Leo renewed their bond of friendship and brotherly affection. The spirit and observance of the burgeoning community in Elmira deeply impressed Abbot Leo.

When Leo described the difficulties of the struggling Weston community, Damasus graciously offered to help in any way that he could. The two brother-founders discussed possibilities. Perhaps the Weston novices would profit by some time at Mount Saviour? Abbot Leo returned to Weston with that proposal.

Prior Bede was not enthusiastic about sending novices on this new venture. He feared that it would deplete the work force at Weston. It might even endanger the vocation of the unformed members of the community who could be attracted by the life at Mount Saviour. Father Stephen differed. He felt that the candidates at Weston were overburdened with work. Little time was left for

prayer and monastic practices. His argument won out. To test the waters, Abbot Leo decided to send me, at that time known as Father Robert, for a few months of training. At the end of the haying season I was ready to leave for Mount Saviour.

Mark Twain Hotel: Shades of Huckleberry Finn

In the fall of 1957 I set out for three months of training as a novice at Mount Saviour Monastery in Elmira, New York. It was an exciting moment, a journey into the unknown. Travel was long and complicated. It began in early morning.

Garbed in clerical black suit and Roman collar, I loaded my suitcase, packed with monastic tunic and scapular and a few necessities, into the 1948 Ford station wagon for the drive to Manchester, Vermont. There I boarded the bus for a scenic ride through upper New York State and the Genesee hills to Syracuse, New York. In Syracuse I endured a two-hour layover in the bus station for the connection south to Elmira. Arrival in Elmira was not until around six o'clock in the evening.

Somewhat bedraggled from the tedious journey, I settled on a bench in the darkening terminal. The monks at Mount Saviour were anticipating my arrival and would pick me up for the final stage of my journey. It was nearing seven o'clock and still no emissary from the monastery. I decided to phone. "Oh yes, someone will be with you shortly to drive you here."

In a short time a gentleman in black suit and tie entered the terminal and looked around. I stood up and approached him. Noticing my clerical apparel, the man said, "You must be Father Robert?" "Indeed, I am." "Well, I'm here to pick you up." "Great!" The large black limousine seemed a little elegant for a monastery renowned for its simple monastic observance, but then, nothing is too good for a guest!

My driver appeared rather formal and we did not engage in conversation—certainly not inappropriate in a monastic environment. Soon we drove up to the imposing entrance of the Mark Twain Hotel and a doorman assisted me from the car. He led me to a large dining room teeming with clergymen and a head table of bishops and monsignori. The maître-d greeted me, "Father Robert? We were waiting for you. Please follow me." He ushered me to a circular table adjacent to the head table. Several monsignors occupied all the chairs but one—mine! Somewhat numbed from the day's travel and very confused, I took my assigned place with cordial greetings from the distinguished clergymen.

A fine meal of roast duckling was already being served and it consumed my attention while small talk circled the table. I thought, "Mount Saviour sure does things up right for its guests. Still, this does seem a little odd."

"And how are things in Africa, Father Robert?" "Africa? There must be some mistake. I have never been to Africa." "But you are Father Robert?" "Yes, of

course, and I am on my way to Mount Saviour Monastery to continue my novitiate."

"Oh my! There has been some grievous mistake. We have been waiting for Father Robert, the Franciscan friar who has just returned from Africa. We thought he might be delayed in his arrival." And I wondered, do they expect me to give a conference on my missionary adventures in Africa? "Perhaps we should phone Mount Saviour and find out where I am supposed to be!" A gracious waiter placed the call and assured me that a monk was on his way to retrieve me.

The whole affair was a bit disconcerting but I was famished and figured that this might be my last substantial meal for several months. I consumed the roast duckling *à l'orange* and a fine chocolate mousse for desert. Finally a tall, thin, and pale monk, garbed in an earthy gray monastic work habit, a little worn from use, appeared at the entry to the dining hall. Brother Laurence waved his long arm and beckoned me to come with him to the waiting monastery vehicle, considerably less pretentious than my original conveyance. Laurence and Damasus, the prior, were dining at the home of one of the monastery oblates in Elmira and had forgotten that they were to meet me at the bus station to drive me back to the monastery. With all the dignity I could muster I took leave of my table companions and wished them a pleasant evening. "Good night, Father Robert!"

Brother Laurence, friendly and relaxed, enjoyed my story. When we recounted the episode to Father Damasus, he could not control his laughter. So began my three months as a novice with the community at Mount Saviour. While my arrival was remarkable, the stay was unforgettable.

The Narrow Gate

I soon learned that Mount Saviour Monastery was no Mark Twain Hotel! "Good night, Father Robert!" It would take a bit of time to really check out of the Mark Twain Hotel. In the course of a brief stay at Mount Saviour, I would begin to find my way along a different path. Not that the brothers were lacking in hospitality or graciousness. Quite the opposite. This was a School of the Lord's Service as spelled out in the Rule of Benedict. Prayer, work, and humble fraternal service blended into a harmonious communal life. Mount Saviour was on the cutting edge of monastic renewal in the 1950's.

The inspiring conferences of Father Damasus suggested a profound monastic spirituality based on *agapé*, fraternal love and affection, and the Gospel of John. The monks collaborated to create an innovative and modern farm operation—replete with an up-to-date milking parlor—something I had never seen, much less participated in. Brothers David and Gabriel cheerfully accompanied me in the simple work of house chores. Dormitory, dining room, and kitchen were attractive in their simplicity. The chapel and craft areas breathed an

aesthetic quality without being pretentious. A sense of beauty in simplicity shone in the craft work and living areas of the monastery.

Engaging classes and personal conversation with Father Peter Minard, the lively novice-master who hailed from Ligugé Monastery in France, challenged us to enter into a new monastic way based on a return to the spirit of the original monastic movement. Respectful silence fostered a prayerful and reflective atmosphere throughout the day. Personal "lectio" days in Porta Coeli, the little cabin overlooking the picturesque Chemung River Valley, introduced every monk into the alluring experience of solitude. Common prayer was rich and innovative. The chanting of the monastic office and celebration of Eucharistic Liturgy foreshadowed the liturgical renewal that would spread to the whole Catholic Church by Vatican Council II in future years. All this and so much more filled those three months as a novice at Mount Saviour.

An early experience indelibly marked my monastic life and future in Weston Priory. Checking in at Mount Saviour was a bit of a contrast to the greeting at the entrance to the Mark Twain. In place of the mistaken, "Come this way, Father Robert", the impressive and sensitive subprior, Father Gregory, welcomed me into the monastic way with the words, "Here, you will be called brother Robert." A good translation might read, "Please check your baggage at the door!" Check the Roman collar, titles, credentials, or portfolio at the front desk. The entrance to the monastery is not a revolving door. It is a narrow gate.

I had walked out the revolving door of the Mark Twain Hotel with the farewell, "Good night, Father Robert." The entrance to Mount Saviour was something else. There was a narrow gate. The greeting that Father Gregory offered on my arrival summed up all the lessons that were to follow. His words provided food for the years to come. They continue to inspire my journey as a monk at Weston Priory. "Here we will call you brother Robert." Those words launched me into a lifetime journey as a Benedictine monk and a brother.

My return to Weston Priory after a moving celebration of the Christmas Liturgy with the brothers of Mount Saviour Monastery was less eventful than my trip to Elmira three months before. As I passed back through the narrow gate at the entrance to the monastery, I donned my black clerical suit and Roman collar once again. I returned to Weston Priory as Father Robert, but the old garb didn't fit quite so comfortably. As befits a novice, there were now more questions than answers. Years after that extraordinary experience, the questions asked and the lessons learned, continue to inspire me. The outstretched arm of an elder brother propelled me to explore and walk with enthusiasm along the path of monastic brotherhood. The younger brother community of Weston Priory was my chosen ground to continue the journey.

By 1961 I was totally won over by Pope John XXIII who greeted a visiting group of Jewish rabbis with the words, "I am Joseph, your brother." At my solemn monastic profession I assumed the name, John. Abbot Leo and the community at Weston asked me to accept the ministry of prior or elder brother

in 1964. With time we took on the custom of calling one another “brother” as a reminder of our relationship to one another.

A full decade after my stay as a novice, I had the opportunity to return to Mount Saviour. Father Damasus, still a charismatic teacher and founder of the community, made way for younger leadership and retired as prior in 1969. Abbot Primate Rembert Weakland asked me to represent him at the election. Travel from Weston to Elmira was now more familiar. It was non-stop past the Mark Twain Hotel. The Mount Saviour community had matured and was at a new moment and the narrow gate was still in place.

The brothers assembled in the chapter room of the newly constructed monastery buildings. They recognized in Father Martin Boler the qualities needed to go forward as a monastic brotherhood. Once the balloting was completed, Father Martin knelt in the circle of the surrounding community. It was not the community that knelt before Father Martin. The ministry of the prior shone as a ministry of service. Each brother, led by Father Damasus, proceeded to lay hands prayerfully on the head of their elected prior. The communal gesture signified the pledge to move forward responsibly as a monastic brotherhood in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

In his many years as prior, Father Martin has ministered not only to his own community, but has reached out in generosity to many far beyond Elmira. With humble constancy and friendship, and an ever-present sense of humor, he has extended the hand of an elder brother to the Weston Priory community. I join my hope with his that the vision of a renewed expression of monastic life launched by Damasus Winzen and Leo Rudloff at Mount Saviour Monastery and Weston Priory will flourish and be ever new. ☒



**Mount Saviour
Monastery**