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Monks and the City—A Unique New Experience

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Abba Matrona said, “There are many in the mountains who behave as if they were in the town, and they are wasting their time. It is better to have many people around you and to live the solitary life in your will than to be alone and always longing to be with the crowd.” (From *The Desert of the Heart: Daily Readings with the Desert Fathers*, edited by Benedicta Ward [London: Dartman, Longman + Todd, 1988], p. 18)

I. Introduction¹

A banner currently hanging on the bridge that spans Martin Luther King Boulevard and connects the buildings of the Newark Abbey complex proclaims “We’ll stand with you.” It is a response to the question that Cory Booker used to punctuate his inaugural address as Mayor of Newark: “Will you stand with me?”

Newark Abbey is a monastery situated in the center of New Jersey’s largest city. Its presence there is almost accidental. Boniface Wimmer only reluctantly accepted Bishop Bayley’s request to take over a city parish and establish a priory. Over the years, there were a number of times when a move out of the city was seriously contemplated. The commitment to being part of the city, and not just being located in the city as a matter of accident, took quite a few years to

develop. Newark Abbey is not the only monastery located in a city. But its commitment to, and relationship with, the people of the city, is what has come to define it, and make it unique.

Very little has been written on urban monasticism. The magisterial *Benedictine Bibliography* contains no entries on urban monasticism. In 1950, a young monk of Saint John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota, wrote an article on urban monasticism. He notes that, to many Benedictines, the term "urban monasticism" is an enigma, which he attributes to "the misconception that there is no such institution as urban monasticism or that it has never successfully existed anywhere."² The continued existence of Newark Abbey seems to be proof that a monastery can survive in the middle of a city. Next year, the community celebrates the one-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of its establishment as a priory. And its Benedictine connections go back even further. But it was not always certain that it would survive. In fact, it is arguably not until 1973 that the community's commitment to the city was secure. Until then, it seems, the perceived monastic ideal, and the realities of city life, were held in tension. It was not until the monks began to commit themselves to their neighborhood that the issue of the relationship of the monastery to the city was finally settled.

II. The Reluctant Acceptance of the City

Boniface Wimmer, founder of Saint Vincent Archabbey in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, which is the motherhouse of the monastery in Newark, was not overly fond of cities. In fact, he only reluctantly accepted the proposal to establish a monastery there, although he did convince himself of the benefits of having a monastery in Newark. One of these benefits was its nearness to New York City, through which many of the Europeans, both lay men and women seeking to establish a new life in America, and missionaries coming to serve them, would enter the country. Wimmer's ambiguous relationship to the city would define much of the history of the community in Newark.

Wimmer was not the first Benedictine to come to the United States. Another Benedictine had preceded Wimmer to America. Nicholas Balleis, a monk of Saint Peter's Abbey in Salzburg,

Austria, came on his own in the 1830s to serve the German immigrants. After a period of time in Pennsylvania, he settled in New York, and, along with John Raffener, served the German Catholics of Newark, which city was, at the time, still part of the Diocese of New York. The Germans in Newark had been gathering for Mass in the basement of Saint John's Church on Mulberry Street. By 1842, the congregation was sufficiently numerous that a plot of land was bought at Grand (now Court) and Howard Streets. A wooden church, 30 by 50 feet, was erected. This proved sufficient for the congregation's needs for a few years, but, since the immigration of Germans continued to increase, by 1846 the need for a bigger church became obvious. Land was bought on William Street, between High (now Martin Luther King Blvd) and Shipman Streets, as a site for the new church, and a company was hired to move the wooden church to the eastern end of the new property, leaving the rest of the site for the proposed church. On the appointed day, the workman placed the church on rollers, and the move was begun. Before the move could be completed, however, a labor dispute led to the workers walking off the job, leaving the church where it was, sitting in the middle of William Street. The history of the parish proudly notes that, even during the three weeks the church sat in the middle of the street, the angelus bell was tolled every day and Mass was celebrated on each Sunday. After the dispute was settled, the church found its rest at the intended site. By this time Balleis had taken up residence in Newark as the full-time pastor.

That same year, Boniface Wimmer would arrive with eighteen young men who had agreed to join him in the founding of a Benedictine monastery in the United States.³ One of the first people he consulted upon his arrival was Balleis, who discouraged him from making a foundation in Pennsylvania.⁴ One can only wonder whether Balleis already at this time offered to let Wimmer settle in Newark and take over Saint Mary's Parish. However, Wimmer continued on to his original destination in western Pennsylvania. In 1847, Balleis made the first known overture to Wimmer to take over the parish. Wimmer declined the offer, citing a lack of manpower and financial resources. But at the same time, he recognized the value of taking over

the parish: "It could be a very fine monastery, a hospice for confreres from overseas, and would be very well situated for an academy. By steamer it is half an hour to New York and five hours to Philadelphia, where more than 30,000 Germans live; Newark itself has more than 25,000."⁵ Soon, though, Wimmer was able to send help to Balleis, and even contemplated the founding of a priory in Newark. In a letter to a friend, dated March 1, 1848, Wimmer wrote that "If only I had a single priest more, I could found a second monastery in Newark (New Jersey)." Wimmer had gone to Newark to speak with Balleis, who was eager to turn over the deed to the Church. Wimmer agreed to send a priest, and also a brother as a cook. At the same time, Wimmer wrote to New York Bishop John Hughes, proposing to found a priory in Newark. While he did not receive a reply, he says that Balleis told him the bishop "received the proposal graciously" and provisionally agreed to Wimmer's sending a priest to Newark. Hughes was also prepared to offer Wimmer two parishes in New York with whose pastors the Bishop was not satisfied. But Wimmer was going to "politely decline," something, he said, he would do even if he had the priests.⁶

On July 23, 1849, Wimmer wrote to King Ludwig of Bavaria, who was funding many of Wimmer's projects, describing the foundations he, Wimmer, had made. The third foundation was in Newark:

The third house was founded just this year after the Council of Baltimore, at which I was the first to represent the Benedictine Order. The foundation was made in Newark, only nine miles from New York, and also numbers two priests of the Order along with one brother. It has a splendid location on a hill overlooking the city (with 32,000 inhabitants), with a view of the bay and towers of New York, the commercial metropolis of America.

The two priests are engaged in the care of souls in the local city parish, which has a rather large congregation. As soon as there is an increase in personnel, and provided we have sufficient funds, we shall have to give more serious consideration to the founding of a German institute since there are over 150,000 Germans living in the nearby cities of New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. Even so, at this very moment my confreres not only in Newark (New-Ark) but also in Carrolltown in Cambria County have undertaken the training of gifted boys so as to prepare them for higher learning and education.⁷

Father Placidus Döttl, the monk Wimmer had sent to help Balleis in the parish, was recalled after only seven months. Whether this was the result of the need for Döttl's services at Saint Vincent, or Döttl's request to be brought back to Saint Vincent's after having tried to live with the irascible Balleis, is unknown. In any case, Balleis apparently got no more help from Saint Vincent's until 1852, when Charles Geyerstanger was sent.

In 1853, Newark was established as a see city, with the new diocese encompassing all of New Jersey. James Roosevelt Bayley was named Bishop, and within a year, he would implore Wimmer to take over Saint Mary's. But before he did this, he wrote to Bishop O'Connor of Pittsburgh, the diocese in which Saint Vincent's was located, asking his advice concerning the Benedictines: "Shall I allow them to hold property in their own name; have they the men and the spirit to take charge of this mission."⁸ O'Connor's response expresses the frustration he must have experienced dealing with Wimmer:

You know that I had some trouble with the Bened[ictines]. I am sure we must make up our minds for such things in one form or other from time to time. But on the whole I would advise you to let them make the establishment for their order, I find the only way to manage the Germans in general and friars of any kind is to put them in a position where they cannot annoy you, and then let them have their way and do as they please. I find it useless to expect to direct them or control them, and you would be sadly mistaken if you exposed yourself to any difficulties relying on their paying any attention to your opinion, your advice, or anything but their own views of their interest and duty of the strictest kind.⁹

Bayley followed O'Connor's advice, and allowed the Benedictines to come to serve in his diocese. But Wimmer was still ambivalent about monastic life in a city. Contemplating the sending of monks to Newark, he wrote: "It is true, the parish has a fine location, the city can easily be reached, but I am afraid of cities."¹⁰

Wimmer's fear of cities, and of Newark in particular, could only have been exacerbated by the events of 4 September 1854. On that day, Saint Mary's was attacked by a group of Know-Nothings, radical Protestants who resented the influx of immigrants, particularly Catholic ones. The riot would leave the Church in shambles, one man dead, and one dying. An inquest would determine that Thomas McCarthy was shot point blank, but despite the estimated crowd of 2,000-

3,000, no one could be found who could identify his assailant. Michael McDermott, who sustained a deep sword wound to the neck, died, at least according to the inquest, of cholera, which had claimed many lives that year.¹¹

Wimmer went to Newark to console Balleis, and while he was there, Bayley asked Wimmer to visit him. Wimmer seems to have avoided the visit at first, since he suspected that Bayley was going to ask him to take charge of Saint Mary's. When he did go to visit, the Bishop was out. Wimmer wrote to him on 12 September, explaining that he at one time had thought about taking over Saint Mary's, but that, because of the attitude and actions of Balleis, it would be impossible to integrate him into a monastic community.¹² Bayley again wrote to Wimmer, emphasizing the advantages of having a house in Newark. In reply, Wimmer reiterated his concerns:

In the country, far from the noise of the cities, we lead a happy life, and if we are not doing first rate we are doing at least well How we would do in a city, I do not know; for a short while, maybe well enough, after a while maybe bad enough, just in proportion to the exactitude with which we observe the holy rule; but there is the fear, the fear we might lose the simplicity of our manner, the poverty in our diet, the spirit of self denial and the pure intention of our efforts The experience of nearly twenty five years of monastic life and the guidance of past ages are raising great doubts as to whether it would be good or evil for the order to settle in cities.¹³

As a result of the riot, Balleis left Saint Mary's and took over a parish in Elizabeth, and Geyerstanger was recalled to Saint Vincent. The parish was put into the hands of a Redemptorist, Martin Hasslinger, who would put into motion the building of a new, brick church that would be dedicated in 1857. Hasslinger would not last long in the position, and, upon his departure in 1857, Bayley once again asked Wimmer to take charge of the church. This time, Wimmer acquiesced, and took canonical possession of the parish, establishing a priory in May 1857. The Benedictine community in Newark was now firmly planted.

III. The Flight from the City

The monastic community in Newark grew slowly. More and more Germans joined Saint Mary's Church. The grammar school, which had been founded during the very early years of the parish, flourished. In 1857, Benedictine Sisters came from St. Mary's, Pennsylvania, to take over the education of the girls in the parish. One of the young men who was a son of the parish, and attended Saint Mary's Grammar School, would heed the call to the monastic life, and go to Saint Vincent's to become a monk. In 1884, when the Newark community was raised to abbatial status, James Zilliox, whose widowed grandmother had been left alone in the church to fend off those marauding Know-Nothings, was elected abbot. Zilliox had been part of the group who sought a more contemplative atmosphere for American monasticism. Illness that plagued him for a number of years would force him to resign his office less than two years later.

But previous to the elevation to abbatial status, the community in Newark, at the request of Bishop Bayley, opened a day college for the sons of the middle class. At first called Saint Benedict's High School, a literal translation of the German *Hochschul*, by the second year it would adopt the name under which it would be incorporated, and which more nearly represented the type of program being offered, *Collegium Sancti Benedicti*, or Saint Benedict's College. Founded as an alternative for those young men who could not attend the residential college, Seton Hall, that had been founded in Madison twelve years earlier, but was soon moved to South Orange, the original student body was composed of sons of the working class, most of whom were immigrants. But despite the fact that it was run by German monks, and situated next to a German parish, the majority of the students were Irish. It was one of Boniface Wimmer's dreams to bring the Irish and Germans together. This desire of Wimmer to bring together two groups who generally were not getting along, foreshadowed the role that Saint Benedict's Prep and Saint Mary's Parish would play over the years, as we will see.¹⁴

In 1884, at the behest of Boniface Wimmer, the monks of Saint Mary's Priory approved the purchase of a three-hundred-acre farm in Denville being offered by Bishop Wigger.¹⁵ It had been the site of the Catholic Protectory, which was being moved to Arlington. The possibility of

moving the monastery there does not seem ever to have been a consideration. It was, according to a letter from Prior Gerard Piltz to Wimmer, “especially suitable for raising vegetables, cattle, and cows.”¹⁶ The monks held title to the property for only a few years before it was sold, one of the first official acts of the chapter of the newly erected Saint Mary’s Abbey.¹⁷

Although one of Wimmer’s proteges, Zilliox did not share Wimmer’s enthusiasm for the active life, and desired that form of monastic life that he had come to know during his studies in Europe, which was exemplified by the Wolter Brothers, who wanted a monasticism that did not include running schools and staffing parishes. After Zilliox was elected abbot of the newly-established monastery in Newark, he expressed surprise that so many others were willing to join him, knowing his preferences for a more contemplative monastic life. In a letter to Wimmer, he seems to regret that the farm in Denville had been sold, since it would have been a perfect place for a scholasticate.¹⁸ But whether this was because it was outside the city, or because it offered more room for a group of young scholastics, is unclear. But that tension between the city and the country would be a theme that would echo through much of the history of Saint Mary’s Abbey.

After Zilliox’s resignation in 1886, Hilary Pfraengle was elected the second Abbot. He had also been a classmate of Zilliox, and shared some of Zilliox’s concerns about Wimmer’s activism. It was he who accepted the invitation of Bishop Bradley to send monks to New Hampshire. The community first established Saint Raphael’s parish there and then, a little while later, Saint Anselm College. New Hampshire was seen as preferable to Newark as a place for young monks to live while receiving their training. At the same time, Pfraengle came to experience the difficulty of being abbot to two communities, in places much further apart than are Newark and Morristown. At one point, he requested permission from the Vatican to live in Manchester, and he did so for five years.

It was Abbot Hilary who first considered the possibility of moving the monastery out of the city. In 1909, in speaking to the capitulars, he discussed the question of expansion. He proposed buying a farm “not too far from the city” since, he explained, “here in the city we would

always be pressed for space and could not develop as we ought.”¹⁹ Abbot Hilary died shortly after making this proposal, and so the monastery remained firmly rooted in Newark.

Ernest Helmstetter was elected to succeed Abbot Hilary. Like James Zilliox, he was born in Newark. In 1918, the monastic chapter authorized Abbot Ernest to purchase the Sully farm in Hackettstown. The reason for his desire to purchase the property is unclear. Was he planning for the eventual independence of Saint Anselm and hence the need for a new house of studies? Was he simply looking for a country place? Or was his intention to move the monastery out of the city? Perhaps we will never know. In any case, it was discovered that the title to the property was not clear, and so the attempted purchase was aborted. We might wonder if some in the community saw this as a providential way of letting the community know that they should remain in the city, as perhaps they had seen the death of Abbot Hilary so soon after he made his proposal.

Abbot Ernest began to look for another place in which to establish a theologate. Two pieces of property in New Jersey were considered. One was “Delbarton”, the Morristown estate of Luther Kountze. The other was the “Darlington” estate at Mahwah. Whether the final decision was a result of one of the monks, who favored Delbarton, planting medals of Saint Benedict on the property, or the bishop of Newark telling Abbot Ernest that the diocese was interested in purchasing Darlington as a new site for the diocesan seminary, is unclear.²⁰ In any case, the Kountze estate was purchased in 1925, and a priory was established there.

A photo essay in the Newark *Sunday Call* of May 31, 1942, which talks about the 400-acre “model farm” being run by the monks, shows photographs of Br. Isidore Stumpf plowing a field with two draft horses, and Br. Ambrose milking one of the “fine heard of cows.” Another article speaks of the farm as “a model in efficient and scientific procedure.” The difference with the atmosphere in Newark could not have been more dramatic.

It was under Patrick O’Brien, the fourth abbot of Saint Mary’s Abbey, that abbey did, in a sense, move out of the city. A native of New Hampshire, and an alumnus of Saint Anselm College there, he was elected abbot in 1937. He was a sickly man, and many of those electing

him did not expect him to live much longer. Yet he would go on to serve just under thirty years as Abbot. He would continue what he perceived to be the intention of his predecessors in office: the move of the monastery out of the city. In this, he would be encouraged by his friend, Archbishop Boland, who himself seems to have had some concerns about the city.

Less than a year after his election, Abbot Patrick was already looking at Delbarton as a preferred place for a monastery. In a paper read to the chapter meeting of 12 May 1938, he spoke of “the present condition and future prospects of Delbarton.” It was, he reminded the capitulars, bought as a substitute for the newly-independent Saint Anselm’s. It is, he said, “so beautiful a place that all who visit it, including the clergy and laity, the seculars and the regulars, from our monasteries at home as well as abroad, even those visitors from other religious communities, concede it ideal for religious.” Looking to the future, Abbot Patrick said that “it has everything that could be desired for a present home and for a future monastery. It is conducive to the health of soul and body.” In short, it was the perfect setting for religious life, unlike the city. Speaking in a way that seems characteristic of him, that is, assuming that everyone must agree with him, he continues: “We must have a suitable place for training our clerics. We shall surely agree that the city is no place for such training, for developing sincere members of the Benedictine Order. This has been proved by experience. The distractions in a city hinder not only the progress in study, but also the spirit of recollection, of true asceticism.” After talking about the necessity of having a place for rejuvenation, Abbot Patrick continues: “It cannot be gainsaid that life in a city is a deterrent to religious progress. Some cannot be persuaded of this, but the fact is attested by the very nature of religious life.”²¹

In 1945, consideration was given to moving the school and monastery to north Newark, to the site of the athletic field that had been purchased in the 1920s. It was not the suburbs, but it was away from the center of the city.

Those who feared the city were probably not encouraged when, two years later, Fr. Matthew Hoehn, the prior of the monastery, was sitting at his desk late one night, working on his

Catholic Authors, when a bullet tore through his window, grazed his cheek, and lodged itself in the ceiling of his room.²² It had been fired by a policeman pursuing a criminal. This was also the year that separation was first broached, in a chapter meeting of October 30.²³

The fate of the monastery in Newark and the fate of Saint Benedict's Prep were understandably intertwined, especially after the purchase of the Delbarton estate, and the establishment of a priory, a school of theology, and the Delbarton School. Were Saint Benedict's to close or relocate, the monastery in Newark would presumably close, with the monks going to Morristown, or relocate along with the school. Throughout the 1950s, discussions were held about the possibility of relocating Saint Benedict's (and the Newark monastery). The Headmaster's Report of 1951 reported on the results of one such deliberation. Over the years the geographical composition of the student body had changed, so that at that time 70% of the enrollment was made up of students who did not live in Newark, but who hailed from "every town on the outer periphery of Newark" and "communities as far distant as Spring Lake."²⁴ Consideration was given to moving Saint Benedict's to a suburban location. A move to any particular suburb, however, would mean that Saint Benedict's would not be easily accessible to students from other suburbs. The decision was made that Newark was the perfect site for Saint Benedict's Prep, because its location makes it accessible to "scores of communities and thousands of potential students."²⁵ So the decision was made not so much to stay in the city, but to *not* move to one suburb at the expense of potential students from other suburbs.

Regularly, each monastery is visited by monks from another monastery who help the community perform a self-examination. Over the years, the visitators continued to raise the issue of one monastic community split between two monasteries. The visitation report of 1949 recommended "complete union" of the two communities.²⁶ This recommendation was ignored, and the visitation of 1952 made reference to the recommendation of 1949.²⁷ But small groups of monks began to meet through the 1950s to discuss the issue of separation. The visitation of 1955 again emphasized the need for the union of the two communities. This time, a change would be

made. It was not the unification of the two communities, but a change certainly rare, and perhaps unique, in Benedictine history.

The visitation of 1955 required that, within a year, the community submit a report on how this union was to be achieved. As a result, Abbot Patrick formed committees to examine the situation. The goal was to bring the entire community together in one place. All possibilities were considered: moving everyone to Morristown, moving everyone to Newark, uniting in a place other than Morristown or Newark. The question of separation, perhaps not envisioned by the visitators, was also part of the discussion.

At the chapter meeting of May 17, 1955, Abbot Patrick explained that he had intended to call a meeting to deal with the charge that the visitators had given to find a way to bring the whole community together. In the meantime, he had heard of a Housing Authority program that was being spoken of in Newark. Because of this, he delayed a discussion until a committee he appointed to get information about the program could report to the chapter.²⁸

Abbot Patrick appointed Father Philip Hoover to chair a committee that would look at the cities plans for the redevelopment of the area around the monastery. The committee found that “the present site is adequate for any expansion of the school or monastery, and that such a project would be justified in view of the city’s redevelopment.”²⁹ The committee called for a master plan, a study of the probable needs of Saint Benedict’s Prep, and an examination of the financial implications.

A second committee was established a few months later with a broader charge. This one, chaired by Father Matthew Hoehn, the prior in Newark, was also to survey the capitulars on their preferences concerning the relationship between the two communities: separation, or consolidation in Newark, Morristown, or a third site to be chosen.³⁰ Abbot Patrick informed Archbishop Boland of the discussion. Boland did not want to see the abbey leave his diocese, but he also agreed that the High Street site was not an appropriate one for the training of young

monks. He recommended a site in West Orange. Sites in Livingston and Scotch Plains were also considered.

Over the course of the next few months, Abbot Patrick seems to have restricted the discussion to two possibilities: union of the monastery in Newark, or transfer of the title to Morristown. The *status quo* does not seem to have been, for Abbot Patrick, a possibility. This was perhaps because he recognized that the recommendations of the visitators over the years needed to be addressed finally. Union of the community in Newark is understandable as a response to the demand of the visitators. Transfer of the title to Morristown is not, unless one assumes that the ultimate goal was the union of the two communities at Morristown. But that would have meant abandoning the original home of the monastery and the moving or closing of Saint Benedict's Prep. History and tradition would argue against this, and so it is understandable that Abbot Patrick would be reluctant to propose this possibility.

At a chapter meeting in May 1956, Abbot Patrick framed the question to be considered by the capitulars. He said that he had again visited Archbishop Boland, who agreed that the best move would be to transfer the title to Morristown. Once again, the overriding consideration, at least the one that was expressed, was the perceived impossibility of training young monks in the city, and the unlikely chance of obtaining more land there. No discussion followed Abbot Patrick's statement, and no vote was taken at that meeting.³¹

The capitulars were brought together in June to vote on Abbot Patrick's proposal. Abbot Patrick prefaced the vote with another statement, in which claimed that he was simply fulfilling what had been a plan all along, beginning with Boniface Wimmer's purchase of the farm at Denville, to which, Abbot Patrick claimed, Wimmer had intended to move the monastery. The land was sold by Abbot Hilary, says Abbot Patrick, when the request came from Bishop Bradley of Manchester to establish a monastery there. When Saint Anselm's was granted independence, Abbot Patrick continues, the Delbarton estate was purchased, with the intention of transferring

the monastery there. Thus, Abbot Patrick concluded, “It is incumbent on me to do what my predecessors intended to do.”³²

That Abbot Patrick was simply doing what his predecessors intended to do is debatable. An argument can be made that the farm at Denville was purchased to provide a source of fresh vegetables to the monastery. Secondly, it was used a place to recreate. That there was ever any thought to move the monastery there is unlikely. In 1884, in one of its first acts, the chapter of Saint Mary’s Abbey decided to sell the Denville property, seemingly because it became apparent that it was cheaper to buy vegetables from the farmer’s market in Newark, than the raise them in Denville and ship them to Newark. The farm was sold to the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, who wanted to establish “a water cure establishment à la Father Kniepp.” As part of the sale, in return for a reduction of \$1,000, the monks required the sisters to allow them the use of a room *in perpetuum*.³³

It is true that young monks were sent to the priory in Manchester, New Hampshire to study. This was perhaps part of the idea that the city was not a proper place for young monks to be trained. But the fact that Saint Anselm was a college, where young monks could receive a proper philosophical and theological education, was certainly a factor.

So what Abbot Patrick proposed, the transfer of the title from Newark to Morristown, may have reflected more his own personal preferences, than any desire on the part of his predecessors.

In any case, in 1956, after obtaining an affirmative vote of the monastic community, Abbot Patrick requested and received permission from Rome to transfer the title to the dependent priory in Morristown. An article in the *Advocate* that year explained that “the Abbey, nearly 100 years old, was deemed inadequate by the Abbot and his community for the education of novices and clerics. Furthermore, the fullness of the Benedictine life with emphasis on the Liturgy can be better achieved, they feel, in a monastery apart from the hustle and activity of the city.”

The article continues: “The transfer means that the Abbot will make his residence in Morristown and will have more immediate governorship over the young men training for the priesthood. He considers the change fitting since an Abbot is the father of a monastic family.”³⁴

Abbot Patrick explained to another reporter why it would not be sufficient to build another building in Newark to take care of the increasing number of young monks: “The motto of the Benedictine . . . is ‘pray and work.’ And this for the clerics especially means work, and preferably outdoors. There’s no room for this sort of activity in the city. Also, it is impossible for clerics to take recreation undisturbed by the distractions of a large city.”³⁵

The abbey did not abandon Newark, however. While building was proceeding apace at Morristown, a new school building was announced for Newark. In 1959, a new classroom building was dedicated. It included a 695-seat auditorium, and a new cafeteria. In a letter addressed to “Dear Friends of St. Benedict’s” that appeared in the May 24, 1959 dedication booklet, which sported on its cover the phrase “Dedication to Community,” Abbot Patrick says that “today’s dedication marks the beginning rather than the end: the beginning of further development that will go hand in hand, we hope, with Newark’s reconstruction. If the past centenary has seen marked progress in our school, it is our wish that the next years will be no less rewarding in this respect.”³⁶

In 1962, plans were made for an even greater expansion, using urban renewal land to increase the monastery’s property, so that a number of buildings and some open space could be added. For various reasons, this expansion did not take place.

IV. The Embrace of the City

The push for renewed independence for the community in Newark goes back at least to the late 1940s, when the issue of separation was first raised at a chapter meeting.³⁷ The differences between the two houses, and the schools they ran, were noted. St. Benedict’s, it was observed, was “more appropriate for work with the poor.”³⁸ Discussions continued in the 1950s,

when groups of monks met privately to discuss the relationship between the two houses. It was becoming more and more apparent that the two houses were growing apart, each with a different mission. The Morristown of the 1950s, and the Newark of the 1950s, were already two very different places, a difference that would only increase as the years passed. The committees that Abbot Patrick had commissioned to examine the questions of the relationship between the two communities, and the solution to the problems seen in the split community, helped to raise the awareness of this difference. The move towards independence for Newark, and the embrace of the city, had been set in motion.

In 1963, faced with a vote on the expenditure of two million dollars, which would entail one million dollars of debt, seventeen members of the community in Newark signed a petition seeking independence. They were moved, they said, not so much by financial considerations, but by “solidly monastic, spiritual, and apostolic concerns.” As they explained, “The two communities have already begun to pull apart in the directions that their objectives and apostolates have taken. We feel that because of the special conditions in Newark regarding the Negro and Puerto Rican population, and the college and business area, this division will soon become even more pronounced. Such differences require different methods of training, different ideals, and different types of sacrifice.”³⁹

At a meeting less than two weeks later, Abbot Patrick explained his reasons for not favoring separation:

Going back to Abbot Boniface Wimmer we find he had some misgivings about establishing an Abbey in the midst of a city. However, he must have convinced himself that it would be worth trying[,] for he laid the foundations for an abbey in Newark. I still feel that for monks who are formed in their religious life and practices and ideals, a vigorous and exemplary monastic life can be lead in the city, although there will always be at least psychological hindrances from the proximity of the busy and distracting activities of modern city life. But when it comes to the training and formation of novices and clerics I cannot bring myself to believe the city either an ideal or suitable place. In view of my belief in this matter I cannot see the feasibility of setting up an independent and complete Abbey in Newark at the present time.⁴⁰

Abbot Patrick did forward the petition to Rome, but he expressed his concern that separation was “inopportune.” Rome agreed.

Never of robust health, Abbot Patrick had developed cancer by 1965 and his health gradually worsened. In 1966, he requested that a coadjutor Abbot be elected. On 28 November of that year, the community chose Martin J. Burne.⁴¹ A son of Blessed Sacrament parish in Newark, and an alumnus of Saint Benedict’s Prep, Burne had also participated in the March on Washington in 1963, and was very much in tune with the civil rights movement. He quickly realized the difficulty in being a Father to two separate, and quite different communities. One of the first tasks he set himself was to see Newark independent.

In a series of chapter meetings over the course of 1967-1968, the community discussed the various possibilities concerning the two communities. In 1967, Abbot Martin spoke with each of the capitulars he was able to contact about the problem of personnel and finance. On 21 November 1968, he spoke to the chapter about the “three or four currents of thought—or consensus” that emerged from these discussions. At the time, the community was running two prep schools—St. Benedict’s in Newark and Delbarton in Morristown—as well as staffing eight parishes, and running a seminary at the monastery in Morristown. Three monks were staffing a mission in Brazil. Some of the monks were away for graduate school or serving as chaplains in the armed forces.

In the course of his discussions with the capitulars, several ideas for dealing with the personnel and financial problems were broached: relinquish some (but not all) of the parishes; close Delbarton School (suggested by only two capitulars); close the seminary; open the seminary to outside seminarians. The general consensus was that all of the current ministries should be continued, with a reduction in the number of men assigned to them. There was little consensus, however, when it came to the question of Newark. Abbot Martin reported that one capitular asked him if he had contemplated separation for Newark. He replied that he had not seriously

considered it. He did, however, speak to the members of the community, and did find that there were a number of men who would be willing to be part of an independent community in Newark.

Abbot Martin in his statement then reflected on the community and the city:

I feel that we, as a Community, are at a turning point in our history. Everyone among us realizes that American cities are a real problem today, and even the dullest among us would be forced to admit that a monastery in the middle of a city of over three hundred thousand people is bound to be affected by the changing conditions our cities are experiencing. The question that lies before us is this: do we wish to maintain a monastery in the middle of a rapidly changing city, or do we wish to withdraw from the city completely?

After stating that he thought that the community would “continue to experience some measure of division” no matter what the decision, Abbot Martin proposed for the consideration of the chapter that they “request from the Holy See the independence of the Priory in Newark, provided that a sufficient number of able bodied men are interested in carrying on that operation and are willing to be a part of it permanently.”

Abbot Martin goes on to say that the community had enough physical resources that could be sold should there arise the need for “a changed existence, and even locale.” One wonders if, at the time, Abbot Martin foresaw the eventual “changed existence” that would take place in Newark, leading to a ministry that would embrace “the black belt”. He certainly foresaw one major change, one that he recognized was in the spirit of Vatican II: the increasing number of laymen on the faculty. He foresaw the need for a staff of twenty-five. Since, as he says, “in this post-Vatican II period, most of us felt that a few laymen, at least, ought to be members of our faculties,” he concluded that if twenty monks expressed a desire to commit to an independent Newark, he would support the move.

In preparation for a future vote, he asked that, in both Newark and Morristown, the Mass of the Holy Spirit be celebrated once each week for the next few months.⁴²

At a chapter meeting on 19 December 1967, Abbot Martin reported that a few non-capitulars (monks not yet in solemn vows) expressed interest in being part of an independent community in Newark, and only twelve capitulars had done so—far short of the twenty that

Abbot Martin had set as a minimum. Because of this, he suggested “that the question of the two communities be respectfully laid to rest.” He did, however, recognize that the Newark community needed to be considered separately and differently from the Morristown community, and developed a plan for the future of the community in Newark: priory, prep, and “the City as a whole.” “Indeed,” he reflected, “there are some people who feel that cities generally are in for a bad time in the years ahead,” and he spoke of the possible effect of “the vandal of poverty and underprivilege [that] seems to be at the door.”

While Abbot Martin recognized the perceived problems of the city, he also indicated a possible future for the urban monastery, one that took into account the special circumstances to be found there:

[R]ecognizing the area in which the Priory and School are located, I wish to identify us as well as possible with the civic community around us, i.e. with the poor and underprivileged in the City of Newark. I know this reflects the mind of many in the Community—the many who want Newark to perdure, but who sense an incongruity in our living in an area that is poor, yet failing to identify with the people of that area. A Saint Benedict’s of the future, it seems to me, must come to grips with this problem and endeavor to do something about it.

Abbot Martin goes on to say that he will begin a process of interesting the business and industrial community in the contribution that the “vibrant institution” he envisions would make to the city. Martin saw education as the future of the community in Newark, because it is the area in which the majority of the community feels “most at home.” But he did envision a change in the clientele of the Saint Benedict’s Prep of the future:

For the present, we shall continue to operate Saint Benedict’s Prep. as a secondary school that will draw for the most part, perhaps, from suburbia. But increasingly we shall try to identify with the underprivileged, in order to render a service to our environs that the times seem to be demanding of us. If we really want to be part of the best trends in our culture, we shall not anticipate an all black or an all Puerto Rican population in our school. We shall try hard to conduct a school that reaches out to all races and colors and creeds, offering for the love of Jesus Christ whatever talents we have to the least of Christ’s brethren as well as to the more fortunate.⁴³

Before ending with a reminder about the weekly Mass of the Holy Spirit, Abbot Martin expressed a sentiment that perhaps came as a shock to many in the community. He called for an

end to the status quo, and announced that he would take up residence in Newark, meeting with the monastic community for discussion, until the problem be resolved. If the community indicated that they did not think Newark should become independent, Abbot Martin would call for its dissolution. If the community indicated that it desired to keep the status quo, he would resign, and ask the community “to seek someone else to serve as its abbot.” As he explained, “I am simply not able to do the trick.”⁴⁴

At a chapter meeting of 14 October 1968, the capitulars of Saint Mary’s Abbey voted on the following resolution: “That the chapter of Saint Mary’s Abbey request of the Holy See that Newark be granted the status of an independent monastery at once.” The resolution passed, and a new era in the history of the Benedictine community in Newark began.

The newly independent community met on 13 December 1968, for the purpose of electing an abbot. The name “Newark Abbey,” meant to signal the commitment to the city, had already been chosen. While still under the patronage of Mary of the Immaculate Conception, the monks followed an English Benedictine tradition of identifying the monastery with its locality. An abbatial election begins with the chapter members naming monks who, in their opinion, should be considered as candidates. The chapter discusses the merits of each of the candidates in turn, as the monk who is being discussed leaves the room. Twelve monks were named, including two who had remained members of Saint Mary’s Abbey. The election itself took place on Saturday, December 14. On the fourth ballot, Ambrose Clark was elected first abbot of Newark Abbey.

At the first chapter of Newark Abbey, held on 21 December 1968, Abbot Ambrose spoke about the needs of the newly formed community:

[W]e are a small group in comparison with other monasteries of our federation.⁴⁵ We need each other, at communal functions—we need the witness of one another—the presence and support of one another. Stay conscious of the community; although many duties draw us away, be wary of too easily dismissing the group. We have always been a community that understands and encourages need for outside friends; I hope it stays that way—but never to the exclusion of the community.”⁴⁶

He went on to remind the capitulars of the need for mutual support and, at times, fraternal correction. After dealing with matters pertaining to the formation of the small chapter, Ambrose offered a final resolution for the consideration of the chapter:

Resolved: We the monks of Newark Abbey extend our deep and heartfelt gratitude to our brother monks of Saint Mary's Abbey, Morristown for all the charity they have shown in the process of our seeking independence. Our greatest debt of thanks is owed to Abbot Martin, for whose leadership, dedication and devotion to us we are eternally grateful. We hope that he and his confreres will be frequent visitors and that they will always feel at home in Newark Abbey.

The resolution passed unanimously.

Early on in the life of the new community they were called upon to express an opinion about the church and the city. Twenty priests of the archdiocese had signed a statement accusing Archbishop Boland of ignoring the needs of the inner city. Abbot Ambrose called a chapter meeting on 10 January 1969 to discuss the statement. The community decided, "after much discussion", "that it would not be wise for the community to make a statement on the matter at this time since the entire story was not known." Abbot Ambrose said that he would send a personal note to the Archbishop saying that he did not think the attacks were justified.⁴⁷

With the new community established, questions about the school began to be broached at the chapter meetings. On 13 January, Abbot Ambrose spoke about the need for secrecy with regard to questions discussed at chapter meetings, lest talk lead to rumors. One of the issues discussed was the question of special scholarships for inner-city students. The tenor of Abbot Ambrose's remarks show the beginning of the tension that would be a concern for the monks for a number of years to come: the commitment to the families that had traditionally sent their sons to Saint Benedict's Prep, on the one hand, and the young men who lived in the area immediately surrounding the monastery, on the other. Abbot Ambrose noted that the question of scholarships for inner-city youths was a delicate matter. "White backlash says that their money shouldn't go for Negro students unless they approve. Underlying this, among some, is the idea that they as parents have no obligation to help the black students."⁴⁸ Much of the discussion over the next

years would revolve around the question of the relationship of the monastery to the city. In discussing this relationship, Abbot Ambrose recognized the need for “the blacks” to be in on the planning, “[o]therwise any steps that we might take might go awry or not be needed because it is not accepted or understood by the inner-city residents.”⁴⁹ The community then discussed various programs that they could start, as well as how to educate themselves to deal with the needs of the inner city, including, one monk suggested, educating themselves in “the psychology of the black man.” The community committed itself to regular Monday evening meetings, and a vigorous study program was set up, which was to include consultation with diocesan clergy who had been working in the inner city apostolate, such as Father John Nickas and Monsignor Thomas Carey; a study of what city agencies were doing; and reports about other inner-city Catholic schools. Lewis Rowland, the principal of Queen of Angels Grammar School, suggested that perhaps the monks needed “black sensitivity training”, and that if they really wanted to know what was going on in the city, they should speak to the black militants, who will “tell things as they are.”⁵⁰ Abbot Ambrose also suggested visits to the homes of black students in Saint Benedict’s who were not doing well scholastically.

Regular meetings continued in an effort to examine the role of the monastery in the inner city, but there seems to have been some discomfort on the part of some capitulars, since, at a chapter meeting on 24 March 1969, Abbot Ambrose asked the capitulars “to be more charitable about these community meetings and with each other.” He said that they had to listen to one another, and talk to one another. But, as a result of a suggestion by the little chapter, he did change the tenor of the meetings. Rather than discuss what they were going to do, the community would begin to discuss who they were.⁵¹

At that same meeting, the community listened to the proposal of two Sisters of Charity who saw the need for a special program for inner-city African-American males.⁵² While the program, to be modeled on Harlem Prep, would be based at Saint Vincent Academy, the Sisters asked to use some of the facilities of Saint Benedict’s. Reading the minutes, one can get the

sense of the community struggling with its commitment to the city. They had decided to stay, but in what did this commitment to the city consist? Some monks thought that the parents of current students should be consulted. “It was felt that our biggest commitment was that we were here and that there was no need for us to take upon ourselves the burdens of the community.”⁵³ The tenor of the discussion that followed shows a community to a great extent fearful of the future. On the one hand, it seemed, limiting the student body to the traditional clientele might be the death-knell of the school. On the other hand, the monks were not quite ready to make a full commitment to serving an urban clientele. And there seems to be that undercurrent of concern about the effect any decisions perceived as a radical change would have on the parents of the current student body. Some monks also expressed concerns about the African-American community:

It was pointed out by some that the blacks are talking of burning again. As far as Benedict’s is concerned, it’s an unknown, it’s feared and they feel unwelcome here. In conjunction with this, it was pointed out that we should stop trying to project our image and stop worrying about suburbia; let’s let the blacks use us.

This theme of the suburbs and the city would thread throughout the community discussions of the next few years.

The proposal of the sisters would be voted on at a chapter meeting on 14 April. If the proposal passed, Abbot Ambrose said, “We should try to sell the parents of our students on this matter.”⁵⁴ But at that 14 April meeting, the community still had too many questions, parents and lay faculty had not been consulted, and monks were still concerned about the issue of black separatism that the proposed school seemed to represent. A vote on the proposal was postponed while Abbot Ambrose presented the community’s questions to the Sisters.

At the meeting of 28 April, Abbot Ambrose spoke of the grave crisis threatening the school. He saw five reasons for the crisis: 1) the neighborhood, 2) tuition cost, 3) the school itself, 4) white backlash, and 5) the whole attitude toward Catholic education.⁵⁵ Concerning the neighborhood, he noted “it’s a real problem. It should lessen; the police are helpful, but it is a real problem.” But he also warned the capitulars about too easily placing the blame on the

neighborhood. Speaking to the issue of white backlash, Abbot Ambrose said that “if we are going to go under because of this then Christianity is failing.” He placed most of the blame, however, on what he saw as the problems in the school, for the most part having to do with a reluctance to change. The current crisis, he said, is a test, a test of themselves as persons, and of their belief in God and the power of prayer.

While recognizing the possibility of failure, he also recognized the role that Saint Benedict’s played in the life of the monastery.

I believe that Saint Benedict’s is so intimately involved with our lives, our very identity, that the assessment in case of failure will have to be drastic. I can’t predict what will happen. But I do know that if we are going to fail I want it to be after we have really tried—not just kind of dribble out of existence. And I want it to be done with our eyes open. I am proud to be the first abbot of Newark Abbey and I could face being the last abbot—but not if we all just run away from the problem and act as if it didn’t exist or panic and bolt now.

The suggestions that followed said little about the needs of the neighborhood. Much was said about changing the structure of the school, the need to listen to the students, the need to become more professional, the changing attitude toward Catholic education. The only reference to the neighborhood was a reference to the problem of students being assaulted on the way to and from school. Before the meeting ended, Abbot Ambrose proposed as a topic for a future meeting “a consideration of the factor of the neighborhood as far as our future here was concerned.”⁵⁶

Apparently the Board of Trustees was made aware of the topics of the previous meetings, because the minutes of the meeting of 5 June 1969 report that “The Board of Trustees was apprised of our situation; there were mixed reactions. They were somewhat stunned that we are being hurt by the neighborhood and the white backlash.”

On 1 October the abbot called the monastic community together. The discussion again focused on Saint Benedict’s Prep. The minutes note at one point: “It was further pointed out that we have the idea that we must uphold middle class morals and ideals. We should be looking for new approaches and if we are only going to uphold middle class standards, we should close now.”

The meetings over the following months treated, among other topics, the liturgy, the requirements of the monastic life, table reading, and the running of Saint Benedict's Prep. It was not until 11 February 1970 that the community was again asked to consider what they were doing for the local community. At that meeting, the chapter discussed a proposal by Father John Meehan for a "full-time, all-year program of community action within the neighborhood of St. Mary's Parish." This would consist of recreation and education. While the monastic treasurer reported that there would be sufficient funds to support such a program, concern was expressed that, should the community see the need to raise tuition at Saint Benedict's, the perception would be that tuition was being raised to support this program--another example of a concern about white backlash, perhaps. But it was also noted that, should Saint Benedict's close, the proposed program could be something that the community as a whole could adopt.⁵⁷ The proposal was adopted by a significant majority.

The Saint Benedict's Prep *Catalog* for the 1970-1971 school year which, incidentally, was the first year that there was a significant number of African-Americans in the freshman class, included, as was the usual practice, a statement of the philosophy and objectives. What was added that year, however, was a specific reference to the fact that the school was located in "a ghetto section of the city of Newark." In a statement of goals that reflected the ethos of the time, the philosophy and objectives spoke of developing a community of students who were "socially conscious," a community "of openness to one another, friendship, and mutual respect and cooperation in an environment reflecting the social problems of the larger world." There were three goals that directly related to the surrounding community. The administration vowed "to maintain in a ghetto section of the city of Newark" first, "a plant and facilities which houses a stable community," second, "a place where people of all races and socio-economic backgrounds can meet, learn, and understand," and, third, "a house where hope is offered to the poor and underprivileged and where all can meet and know and better learn the value of community living."⁵⁸

On 11 March 1971, a proposal was made to the monastic chapter about the 1971 summer school program. The report began by noting the success of the program in 1969. That program had introduced twenty-eight students (13 African-Americans, 12 whites, and two Puerto Ricans) to Saint Benedict's Prep. The report noted that "blacks and whites got along well and helped each other to remove feelings of uneasiness[,] as many of these students came into a very 'strange' – or, at least, different – world than they had known before in their school experience."⁵⁹ Those students were now doing well in Saint Benedict's. The 1971 program was to be expanded, so that it would include not only students coming to Saint Benedict's, but also students who would be going to their public high school better prepared for a college prep program.

"Such an open Summer School," the report noted, "would establish good P.R. in the neighborhood and in the wider community served by Saint Benedict's Prep." In addition, "it could serve in the removal of a barrier – attitude – so many in the neighborhood *seem* to have towards Saint Benedict's." The report also mentions "the philosophy/theology of Newark Abbey Community for remaining in Newark" without further elaboration. Discussions of the theology of remaining in the city would occupy much of the monks' time over the next several years.

Community meetings continued to focus on the crisis of Saint Benedict's Prep. At the meeting of 17 February 1971, four proposals for dealing with the crisis were raised, including moving the school to another site or joining the school to a diocesan high school.⁶⁰ One question that had to be investigated was whether the monks could continue to live on High Street if Saint Benedict's closed, given agreements that had already been made with Urban Renewal.

The two-hour community meeting of 17 March was followed by another two-hour meeting the next night, at which the nature of community life after a closed, or greatly altered, Saint Benedict's, was considered. One of the concerns about a changed Saint Benedict's, especially a Saint Benedict's that would have a higher entrance standard, was the effect this would have on the local community. One proposal was for the school to draw only from a clientele at the 85th percentile or above. But this, it was noted, would not be of assistance to

many of the African-American youth of Newark, since few would be in that percentile range. “Would the community around us,” asked one capitular, “tolerate a school in their midst which by its nature excluded almost all of its members from attending it, even though this would be done in the name of superior standards and excellence.”⁶¹

Over the course of the next months, the community discussed the changes necessary for the survival, at least for another year, of Saint Benedict’s Prep. One of the monks expressed concern about the low number of entering freshman, and reiterated a remark he had made at an earlier meeting, about “the desirability of accepting as many black students from the city as possible.”⁶² Others were concerned that accepting a majority of African-American students would radically change the character of the school. Discussions started to focus on the assumptions that were being made about the character of the school and the future of the monastery. At a chapter meeting on 28 September 1971, Abbot Ambrose proposed four topics for discussion: 1) moving the school (he noted that he was unalterably opposed to this proposition), 2) going under diocesan system, 3) teaching locally, living here, 4) reuniting with Morristown. This discussion was taking place just three years after Newark had become independent.

While a Benedictine monastery is not defined by its apostolate, and while Saint Benedict’s was not the sole apostolate of the monastery, certainly the discussion on the nature and future of Saint Benedict’s Prep drove much of the discussion.⁶³ While a study revealed that only seventeen alumni said that the school should move out of the city, “or should not be involved in present efforts towards inner city students,” the monks also had to take into account the influence the growing negative view of the city was having on prospective candidates. Father Cornelius reported at one meeting that one student from Colorado and two from Parsippany were not going to be allowed to take part in an exchange program when it was found out that they would be attending a school in the city of Newark.”⁶⁴ Father Cornelius also noted an ideological split within the school faculty itself. Some wanted the continuance of the college-prep curriculum that

had been traditional; some wanted a program more geared to the needs and abilities of the young men in the surrounding community. Very few, it seems, did not think the two mutually exclusive.

Over the course of the next two years, community discussions focused on the role of a monastery in the city of Newark, the future of Saint Benedict's Prep, and a reexamination of the reasons for seeking independence from Morristown just three years before. Some saw it as a commitment to the city, while others saw it as a result of the continuing resentment at the transfer of the canonical title from Newark to Morristown in 1956.⁶⁵ Over the next few months, the monks discussed their reasons for being in the city, or their reasons for saying that the monastery should leave the city. Passions were high on both sides. One monk stated the case bluntly:

I have thought for some time that if the school closed that I would leave. The need for the gospel to be preached is just too great for us to work and cook just to support ourselves. If we don't want to help the people in our immediate community—which is a main characteristic of Benedictine history—my decision will be easy—If we come to the conclusion that we don't want to or that we can't offer blacks more than they get at Central, I'll leave. I'll never leave the priesthood, but I would have to leave the community as long as we live in Newark but have our hindsight and foresight in the suburbs.⁶⁶

Judging from a comment this same monk made later in the meeting, he was not arguing that the monastery should not leave the city, but that, if it stayed in the city, it should be of service to the people of the city.

Over the course of the next month, some monks spoke about the sign value of having a monastery on High Street. Others said that the monastery should leave the city as soon as possible. One idea was to follow the alumni of Saint Benedict's where they had gone: to the suburbs, or to the shore. Abbot Ambrose called for more discussion, to try to resolve the issues splitting the community. While most of the monks were teachers in Saint Benedict's Prep, and so their view of the situation reflected that fact, one monk who had a different perspective was Maurus McBarron. Father Maurus was a Newark native and a graduate of Saint Benedict's Prep, as were many of the monks. He served as a chaplain during World War II. At the end of the war, he returned to the monastery for a short time, but then returned to the chaplain corps. After he

retired from the Army, he became pastor of Saint Mary's, the abbey church. While the parish itself, which had been a German-language parish, had few parishioners by this time, Saint Mary's Grammar School was flourishing, and serving many African-Americans from the city. Fr. Maurus had also, along with several other city pastors, taken his turn staying in an apartment in the projects, as a church presence to the poor and alienated. Given his experience of the great good that Saint Mary's Parish was doing for the people of the city, it is not surprising that he urged the monks to look at Saint Mary's Parish and Grammar Schools as a vehicle for serving the poor of Newark, especially if St. Benedict's Prep were to close.

At the chapter meeting of 10 February 1972, the community voted to close Saint Benedict's Prep. The following Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, the students of Saint Benedict's gathered in the auditorium, and the announcement was made that as of June 1972, Saint Benedict's would "suspend operations." The community now had to decide what monastic life meant on High Street without the primary apostolate that many of the monks had shared their whole monastic life.

The monastic community continued to have regular meetings. A small group of monks was already planning a new school venture, one that would more directly answer the needs of the inner city. Other monks were proposing that all of the property be sold, and the monastery move to another place. Some suggested a middle ground: lease the school buildings to provide some income, while the community decided on the direction it should take. The split in the community began to widen, as those who were not involved in the proposed new school venture felt left out of the process. Several of the monks called for a special visitation.

At a community meeting on 23 March 1972, Father Maurus reiterated his opinion about the role of Saint Mary's Parish:

I feel very strongly concerning the importance of St. Mary's Church and St. Mary's Grammar school to the community in which we find ourselves. I believe that this importance is of such a degree and magnitude and scope that serious harm would result to our surrounding community if St. Mary's Church and Grammar School were to suddenly and simply drop away.⁶⁷

Over the next weeks, the community continued to discuss options: accept the invitation of the Bishop of Camden to move the monastery there; take over another Catholic high school; reunite with Morristown. A committee reported that Abbot Leonard would be open to the reunification, or simply to receiving back those Newark monks who would want to rejoin Morristown. The community continued to discuss the possibility of selling or leasing the buildings, and of moving out completely.

At a meeting of 15 May 1972, Abbot Ambrose presented two proposals for discussion. The first, “That we move lock, stock, and barrel out of Newark to some locality – and do what? I do not know” The second was that the community “stay here at the present site of the Abbey and – again, do what? . . .” Abbot Ambrose obviously recognized the frustrations in the community when he added: “What can we begin to say to each other about staying in or leaving Newark?” Much of the discussion that followed centered on the reasons that the community had for seeking independence in 1968 in the first place. Not everyone agreed on what had been the original purpose. Many of those who would stay in Newark even after the closing of Saint Benedict’s emphasized that the original reasons for choosing to stay in Newark had to do with a sense of commitment to the city. Father Melvin Valvano, who would be elected second abbot of Newark abbey, stated simply, “I feel that we should stay. The city needs a Benedictine Abbey.” Father Theodore Howarth, responding to a monk who suggested that the monks move and do pastoral work in the Trenton diocese, said, “Why not do this same thing here. We don’t know the people of the city – they don’t know us. Our present challenge is to learn how to work with the people we have always been living with. When we voted for separation we voted to stay here and implied in that, we voted to be of service to those around us in the city of Newark.” Father Virgil Stallbaumer recommended patience, a quality he saw as lacking in previous efforts of the Church to respond to the inner city:

What happened to the 23 priests who wanted church properties turned over to blacks for recreational purposes? Where are they now? . . . I believe that we should stay here, work

slowly, do a good job in what we do and then those among whom we live will slowly but surely come to see who we are and what we believe in.

One of the monks who had served as Headmaster in the years after 1968, and would depart at the end of the school year to return to Morristown, questioned the motives of those who argued for staying, suggesting that “if [the] community really wanted to work with the poor, something would have been done before this.”

Abbot Ambrose then suggested that the community continue the discussion about moving out of or staying in the city, and the possible variations, including returning to the status of a priory dependent on Morristown, so that those who wanted to stay in the city could. Father Maurus suggested that expanding the grammar school would give the community time “to investigate a number of new ideas and possibilities.” The discussion then shifted to the question of whether the possibility of moving out of Newark had ever really been investigated when the question of separation arose in 1968. To this, one of the younger monks, Father Edwin Leahy, pointed out “the difference between the insights of the community into these areas then and now – and that the question before us should be whether to stay in Newark as a monastery from 1972 onwards – not so much should we have stayed in Newark from the time of separation until now.” Father Maurus put into words what probably lay behind the two radically different perspectives on the city. He said that “he did not just see rubble around us in our setting at Newark – I see people. This makes a big difference. As long as there are people then we can presume that there is some relationship possible with, to and for them.”⁶⁸

One day after what was thought to be the final graduation exercises for Saint Benedict’s Prep, thirteen monks who had, in 1968, chosen to stay with the community in Newark, left for the monastery in Morristown. Now with a changed composition, the community meetings that followed took on a slightly different cast. Although it was not certain that the community would stay in Newark, that quickly became the assumption. The monks began to recognize that the decisions they were making, most notably to have Saint Mary’s Grammar School move into the

Prep buildings, presupposed a commitment to the city. Father Albert, in a prepared statement at the chapter meeting of 5 June 1972, said that

the proposal to allow St. Mary's School to take over the former St. Benedict's Prep. "old building" seems to presuppose that the community of Newark Abbey should stay where it is, and help the local community of blacks and Puerto Ricans in this and in other ways to be explored. Some perhaps see this presupposition as arguable. I myself however find it neither novel nor repulsive. Going back over the past nine years, I find that a Christian witness to those around us, in this neighborhood, was precisely the bases on which we stayed here.

He reviewed the arguments that had been made four years before. One of these, the full import of which the monks in 1968 perhaps did not realize, would come to summarize the attitude of this smaller community: "We belong here not so much as a witness to the black community as to the white community."⁶⁹

At the meeting of 10 July 1972, Abbot Ambrose announced several topics for discussion, one of which was "Our Presence in Newark." He offered three questions for reflection: "What do we WANT to do," "What are we ABLE to do?," "What are we morally OBLIGED to do in Newark?" At the meeting of 12 October 1972, the community voted unanimously to "start an educational venture" the following September. Over the course of the next year, the community discussed their mission and their options. At the same time, in order to provide income, monks took jobs on the outside. Some got jobs as teachers in local Catholic schools. One worked at a drug rehabilitation house. One drove a delivery truck. They invited speakers in to educate them about the needs of the community, including diocesan priests who were serving in inner city parishes, and members of the black community. All the while, they discussed the nature of the school that they were planning to open.

On 1 July 1973, the new school venture began. In many ways, the mission was no different than the one Boniface Wimmer envisioned in 1868. But instead of bringing together the German and Irish, Saint Benedict's would bring together African-American, Hispanic, and white students; those from the city and those from the suburbs; the children of the poor, and the children of the not so poor, Catholics and non-Catholics. Saint Mary's Parish no longer serves a German

community, but it now serves a predominantly West African community. And Saint Mary's Grammar School continues to offer a Catholic education to the children of the city. No longer would there be any discussion of moving out of the city. The community of Newark Abbey committed themselves to be, not just in the city, but for the city.

One of the ideals of the Benedictine tradition is to "grow where you are planted." The monastery in the city, reluctantly begun by Boniface Wimmer, several times almost uprooted, is now firmly planted. The derelict buildings and empty lots that for years surrounded the monastery have given way to playing fields and middle-income housing. As we prepare to celebrate our sesquicentennial, the abbey and its apostolates—Saint Mary's Parish and School, Saint Benedict's Prep—continue to stand with the city and its people as a sign of Christ's presence.⁷⁰

Notes

¹ I would particularly like to thank Benet Caffrey, O.S.B., archivist of Saint Mary's Abbey, for his help in locating material.

² William Matys, "Urban Monasticism," *Scriptorium*, X (Easter 1950): 113.

³ Jerome Oetgen, *An American Abbot: Boniface Wimmer, O.S.B., 1809-1887*, rev. ed. (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 65.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵ Letter to Rupert Leiss, dated Saint Vincent, October 12, 1847, in Jerome Oetgen, ed., *The Letters of Boniface Wimmer, O.S.B.*, 1995 [in typescript], p. 110.

⁶ Letter to Rupert Leiss, dated Mount St. Vincent, March 1, 1848, in Jerome Oetgen, ed., *The Letters of Boniface Wimmer, O.S.B.*, 1995 [in typescript], p. 125.

⁷ Letter to King Ludwig I, dated St. Vincent, July 23, 1849, in Jerome Oetgen, ed., *The Letters of Boniface Wimmer, O.S.B.*, 1995 [in typescript], p. 149.

⁸ Giles Hayes, "Early Bayley-Wimmer Correspondence (1854-1857)," *American Benedictine Review*, XIV (1963): 472, citing Bishop Bayley's letterbook for 7 June 1854 (located in the Archives of the Archdiocese of Newark).

⁹ Michael O'Connor to James Roosevelt Bayley, undated, but responding to Bayley's letter of 7 June 1854. Archives of the Archdiocese of Newark, RG 1, James Roosevelt Bayley papers, 1.37, Bishop's and Archbishop's Correspondence.

¹⁰ Wimmer to Abbot Gregory Scherr of Metten, July 6, 1853, Archives of the Abbey of Metten, quoted in Felx Fellner, *Abbot Boniface and his Monks*. Latrobe, PA: Saint Vincent Archabbey, 1956. [mimeographed], 277; Giles Hayes, *Unto Another Generation, Saint Mary's Abbey/Delbarton, 1836 – 1900 : A History*, (Newark, N.J.: Newark Abbey Press, forthcoming), 4.

¹¹ For a fuller discussion of the attack, see my article, "The 1854 Attack on Saint Mary's Church, Newark: A Typical Know-Nothing Incident," forthcoming in the *American Benedictine Review*.

¹² Wimmer to Bayley, 12 September 1854, in Hayes (1963), 474-475.

¹³ Wimmer to Bayley, 3 October 1854, Hayes (1963), 480; Hayes (forthcoming), 5.

¹⁴ It might be noted that, while Wimmer could see the Irish and Germans studying together in his new college, he could not see the Irish and Germans living together in the monastery, and so when some Irish applied for admission to one or other of the monasteries, a separate monastery was founded in Creston, Iowa, specifically for the Irish vocations.

¹⁵ Minutes of the Board of Directors, Order of Saint Benedict of New Jersey, 14 April 1884, SMAA.

¹⁶ Quoted in Giles Hayes, *Unto Another Generation, Saint Mary's Abbey/Delbarton, 1836 – 1900 : A History*, (Newark, N.J.: Newark Abbey Press, forthcoming), 8.

¹⁷ Saint Mary's Abbey Chapter Minutes, 10 August 1885 (SMAA).

¹⁸ Zilliox to Wimmer, May 23rd, 1886, SVAA, VABI FM 10 (Zilliox) 1872-1887

¹⁹ Hilary Pfraengle, Speech to Capitulars, 1909, quoted in Hayes (forthcoming), 22.

²⁰ Giles Hayes, *Unto Another Generation, Saint Mary's Abbey/Delbarton, 1836 – 1900 : A History*, (Newark, N.J.: Newark Abbey Press, forthcoming), p. 19. For the history of the diocesan seminary see Henry G. J. Beck, *The Centennial History of the Immaculate Conception Seminary Darlington, N.J.* [Darlington, N.J.], 1962.

²¹ Abbot Patrick M. O'Brien, Statement to the Chapter, 12 May 1938.

²² *Catholic News*, August 2, 1947, clipping in St. Mary's Abbey Scrapbook #1, NAA.

²³ Chapter Minutes, 30 October 1947; see Thomas Allan McCabe, "Miracle on High Street: A History of Saint Benedict's Preparatory School Newark, New Jersey," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Rutgers University, 2006), 111.

²⁴ Saint Benedict's Preparatory School. Headmaster's Report, 1951, p. 7, NAA.

²⁵ Saint Benedict's Preparatory School. Headmaster's Report, 1951, p. 7, NAA.

²⁶ Hayes (forthcoming), 63.

²⁷ Hayes (forthcoming), 64.

²⁸ Remarks of Abbot Patrick O'Brien to the Chapter, May 17, 1955. Chapter Minutes, SMAA.

²⁹ Hayes (forthcoming), 65.

³⁰ Hayes (forthcoming), 65.

³¹ Hayes (forthcoming), 66.

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- ³² Abbot Patrick M. O'Brien, Remarks to the Chapter, June 13, 1956; Hayes (forthcoming), 66.
- ³³ Chapter Minutes, Saint Mary's Abbey, 26 March 1895, SMAA
- ³⁴ *The Advocate*, August 11, 1956, clipping in St. Mary's Abbey Scrapbook #1, NAA.
- ³⁵ Judkins, William F., Jr. "Transfer of Abbey to Morristown Serves Ideal of Abbot's 'Fatherhood.'" Clipping from an unidentified newspaper in St. Mary's Abbey Scrapbook #1, NAA.
- ³⁶ "Dedication to Community", dedication booklet, May 24, 1959, NAA.
- ³⁷ Chapter meeting of October 30, 1947; Hayes (forthcoming) 55.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ St. Mary's Abbey, Chapter Minutes, November 4, 1963, SMAA; Malachy McPadden, ed. *The Benedictines in Newark, 1842-1992*, [Newark: Newark Abbey, 1992], p. 41.
- ⁴⁰ Abbot Patrick O'Brien, Statement to the Capitulars, November 15, 1963, SMAA.
- ⁴¹ For a biography of Burne, see Br. Eamon Drew, O.S.B.'s biography, "Abbot Martin J. Burne, OSB: American Christianity Exemplar," originally written as a course paper in 2005, and now published as an appendix in Hayes (forthcoming).
- ⁴² "Abbot to the Chapter," 21 November 1967, SMAA, copy in NAA.
- ⁴³ Martin J. Burne, Statement to the Chapter of 19 December 1967, SMAA, copy in NAA
- ⁴⁴ Martin J. Burne, "Suggested Notes for Chapter—Saturday 29 June 1968—Priory, Newark", SMAA, copy in NAA.
- ⁴⁵ At that time, the size of the monastic communities in the congregation ranged from 18 members (St. Augustine's, in the Bahamas) to 359 members (St. John's, Collegeville Minnesota). The average membership was 101, and the mean 81.
- ⁴⁶ Chapter Minutes, 21 December 1968, NAA
- ⁴⁷ Chapter Minutes, 10 January 1969, NAA
- ⁴⁸ Chapter Minutes, 13 January 1969, NAA
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Chapter Minutes, 20 January 1969, NAA
- ⁵¹ Chapter minutes, 24 March 1969, NAA
- ⁵² For the most part, I have referred to "African-American" males, even when the original texts used a different term.
- ⁵³ Chapter Minutes, 24 March 1969, NAA
- ⁵⁴ Chapter Minutes, 24 March 1969, NAA
- ⁵⁵ Chapter Minutes, 28 April 1969.
- ⁵⁶ Chapter Minutes, 28 April 1969.
- ⁵⁷ Chapter Minutes, 11 February 1970.
- ⁵⁸ St. Benedict's Preparatory School Catalog 1970, p. 11; NAA
- ⁵⁹ Chapter Minutes, 11 March 1970.
- ⁶⁰ Chapter Minutes, 17 February 1971.
- ⁶¹ Chapter Minutes 18 February 1971.
- ⁶² Chapter Minutes, 15 March 1971.
- ⁶³ For a good discussion of this era, see Thomas Allan McCabe, "Miracle on High Street: A History of Saint Benedict's Preparatory School Newark, New Jersey," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Rutgers University, 2006).
- ⁶⁴ Chapter Minutes, 25 January 1972, with corrections reported in the Chapter Minutes of 3 February 1972.
- ⁶⁵ See the discussion in the chapter minutes of 3 February 1972.
- ⁶⁶ Chapter Minutes, 3 February 1972.
- ⁶⁷ Chapter Minutes, 23 March 1972
- ⁶⁸ Newark Abbey Chapter Minutes, 15 May 1972.
- ⁶⁹ Chapter Minutes, 5 June 1972
- ⁷⁰ For information about the monastery and school since 1973, besides Thomas McCabe's dissertation, see two works by one of the Newark Abbey monks, Albert T. Holtz: "Benedictine Conversion: In Dialogue with 'the Street' in Newark." *Benedictines* 40:1 (Spring-Summer, 1985): 8-17, and *Downtown monks : sketches of God in the city*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2000).