

DOM GREGORY DE WIT, O.S.B.

The highly conceptual breadth of art work which serves the monks of Saint Joseph Abbey came from the heart, soul and mind of Dom Gregory de Wit, O.S.B. (1892-1978). Although Dutch by nationality, Dom Gregory was a Benedictine monk from the Abbey of Mont César, Louvain, Belgium. The monk, priest and artist made his way to Saint Joseph Abbey in 1945. The paintings which run from floor to ceiling in the monastic refectory and the Abbey church are full of spiritual as well as artistic merit and considered by many to be the artist's *magnum opus*.

For his first mural at Saint Joseph Abbey, Gregory was given the west wall of the monastic refectory and was asked to portray a traditional subject for such a room, the "Last Supper." On Christmas Eve of 1946, after nine months of work, the mural was blessed. Soon after, the monastic community granted Gregory permission to paint the entire refectory and just a few years later, the Abbey church. All of the work in the refectory and church was designed by Gregory. He completed the whole of the refectory by himself in about four years. For the five year venture in the church, Gregory employed an assistant from Switzerland named Milo Piuz.

A key point to understanding de Wit's work in both the refectory and the church is the *inclusio*. In other words, the artist brackets or frames his compositions with reference points. What lies between the "bookends" is the rest of the story. De Wit uses this technique with individual paintings as well as entire rooms. The viewer must, therefore, always be conscious of how the content of each painting relates within itself as well as to the other paintings in the room. A de Wit room is essentially one single composition. Another general point of interest is that the paintings are murals, not frescos. That is, they were painted on dry walls, not wet plaster.

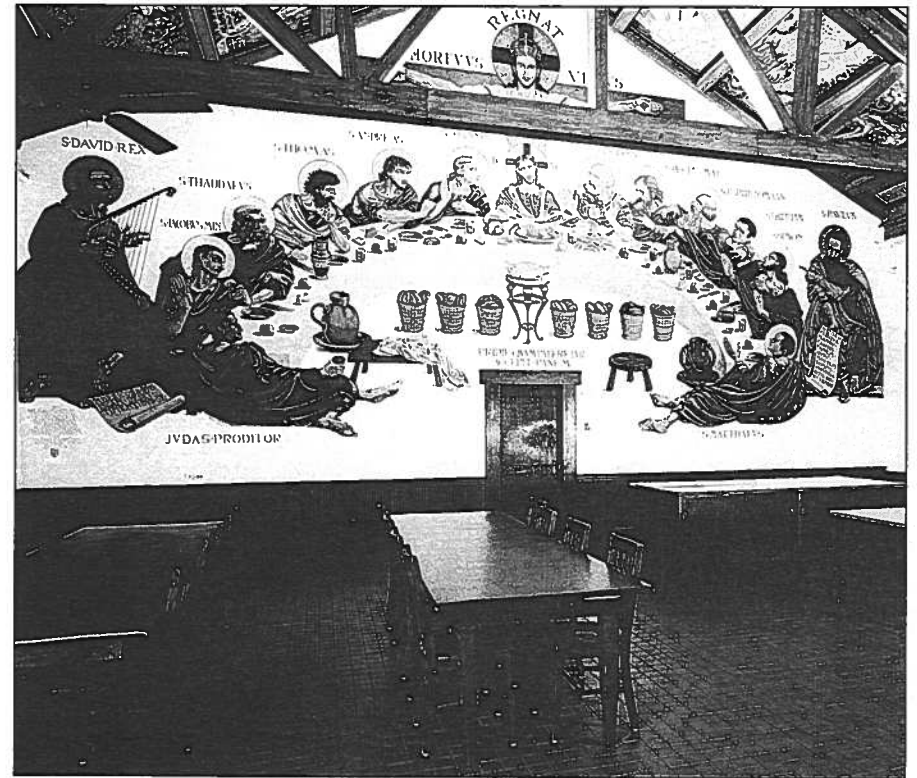


THE MONASTIC REFECTORY

The Last Supper

The refectory (dining hall) is dominated by two murals: the *Last Supper* and the *Good Shepherd*. Covering 732 square feet, the *Last Supper* is believed to be the largest rendering of the event in the world. The *Last Supper* is portrayed not as a singular event disconnected from anything before or after it, but as the focal point to that which the prophets foretold and to which all since refer back. King David and Saint Paul, neither of whom were present for the meal, frame the mural to illustrate this point. De Wit places the meal within the even larger context by depicting what lies beyond the earthly reality. Rising high above the table is Christ the King reigning from the throne of the cross.

A towel, water jug and basin give evidence that Christ has washed his disciples' feet (Jn 13). By the expressions on their faces, it is also evident that he has told his followers of the traitor in the group. With bread in one hand and a cup of wine in the other, Christ has also announced that he will always be present to those who remember him when they eat this bread and drink this cup until he comes again (Mt 26; Mk 14; Lk 22; Jn 13; 1Cor 11:26).





The Good Shepherd

Dom Gregory extends his notion of the *Last Supper's* context to the opposite end of the room. The counterpart to the *Last Supper* is an image of the oldest known representation of Christ, the Good Shepherd. The appropriateness of this image to balance the *Last Supper* is somewhat elusive. The penultimate verse of Psalm 23 reveals the hidden meaning. The psalm begins, "The Lord is my Shepherd, there is nothing I shall want." The psalmist then concludes, "You prepare a table before me . . . my cup overflows." The text below the mural adds further dimension to the meaning. "The Good Shepherd is risen, who laid down his life for his sheep and died for his flock. He is eternal youth, alleluia!"

The Vignettes

What lies between the two dominating references to meals are nine vignettes of Old Testament stories concerning food. From the fateful eating of the Apple to the great Exodus, Dom Gregory tells the story of salvation from the vantage point of the meal. Each scene is framed with an appropriate Latin text.

1. What unhappy Eve took away, you [Mary] have, with your life-giving Child, given back. By eating the apple of destruction he [Adam] hurried headlong to his death (Gn 3; 1Cor 15:21ff).
2. He [God] swore to Abraham that He would give Himself to us (Gen 18:1-15).

3. Esau gave him [Jacob] his oath and sold his birthright. Then he ate and drank (Gen 25).
4. When he [Isaac] had eaten, he, in blessing him [Jacob], said: "Lo, my son's fragrance is like that of a fruitful field" (Gen 27).
5. Our Pasch now is Christ (1Cor 5:7; Ex 12-13).
6. That is the bread which the Lord gave you to eat (Ex 16; Jn 6).
7. The rock, however, was Christ (Ex 17; 1Cor 10:4).
8. Get up and eat; a long journey awaits you (1Kg 19:1-9).
9. Go to Joseph (Gen 42).

The Ceiling

On the ceiling are fifty-six panels illustrating the creative hand of God, the sanctifying Spirit and the four elements of creation: earth; water; air and fire. In this way, Gregory shows all creation giving praise to God. Sun, moon and stars, birds of the air, creatures of the sea and beasts of the forest all join in the eternal hymn of praise. All the creatures are poised with attention on Christ at the Last Supper. With this, the underlying text from Psalm 145 is suggested: "The eyes of all look to you, O Lord, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing" (Ps 145:15-16).

Saint Benedict

Above the door of the room is a painting of Saint Benedict (inside back cover). The artist has captured the character of the abbot described in the Rule of Benedict. Benedict's face commands attention. He is stern, yet loving and compassionate. The depiction of Benedict is appropriate for the refectory not only because he is the patriarch of Western monasticism, but because significant stories from his life concern food.

According to his biography, written in 594 by Pope Saint Gregory the Great (540-608), attempts were made on the life of Benedict by means of poisoned wine and bread. Images of Benedict, therefore, traditionally include a broken wine vessel and a loaf of bread. A raven, which was a sort of pet of Benedict's, is credited with saving the Saint's life by flying away with a loaf of poisoned bread meant for his consumption. The staff identifies the abbot with Christ as Shepherd of lost sheep. The book Benedict holds open is his Rule for monks. The first and last words of his "little rule for beginners," summarize the objective of the monastic life: *ausculta pervenies*, "listen," and you will "arrive."

THE ABBEY CHURCH

The Abbey church is a fine example of classic Western Christian architecture. There are three principal areas of the traditional church: nave, dome (choir or crossing), and apse. The three-tiered longitudinal floor plan naturally lifts the eyes to make the ascent from the nave through the choir and on to the heights of the apse. De Wit's paintings both reinforce the architectural movement and build a sound liturgical theology.

A key Scriptural impetus for de Wit's work in the church comes from Psalm 113:3. "From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the LORD is to be praised." The liturgical space where the monks gather to mark the hours of the day with prayer occurs, therefore, between images of the rising and the setting of the sun. The apse, the eastern end of the building, presents the rising of the sun. Over the doors of the narthex at the western end is the setting. What lies between is the activity of the day, the church at prayer.

1. The Apse – Pantocrator

The *Pantocrator*, creator and ruler of all things, rises up in the apse as the light of the world. The one through whom all things came into being and who was foretold by the prophets who surround him (Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah) makes all things new (symbolized by the golden sky). By his death (indicated by the wounds in his hands and side) and resurrection (indicated by the white encircling burial cloth) the sin of Adam and Eve (far right) is wiped clean. Below the golden sky unfolds a paradisaical scene. The flowery meadow, representing the earth, is pictured according to Biblical thought as floating on the seas. The earth and sea, also according to ancient Hebrew thought, are supported by columns. Here, Gregory has depicted the inanimate structures as active angels. The whole of creation rests in their hands.

While the angelic hands support the cosmos, their elaborate wings press down on the dark niches below and between them. Within these, Gregory painted nine demons with a dark monochromatic pallet making them appear as *bas-relief*. Seven of the demons represent the capital sins (right to left: pride, avarice, gluttony, lust, anger, sloth, envy); the central niche depicts Lucifer himself, and the remaining demon (far left) represents the great temptation of monks, murmuring, gossiping, or complaining.



2. Dome – Angels and Evangelists

Where the apse and nave meet the crossing transepts, there expands a dome. It is under the dome that the monks chant the daily round of prayers. Gregory has their earthly voices accompanied by the angels in heaven playing musical instruments. In this way, the words of Psalm 150 are fulfilled: "Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament!" In the pendentives are images of the four evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) reading and writing their respective Gospel accounts.



3. Narthex – Last Judgment

Over the doorway at the west end of the church, is the *Last Judgement* (front cover). The use of a *Last Judgement* scene over the main doors of churches is traditional. At the center is Christ, seated on a rainbow within a *mandorla* framed by the symbolic representation of the Evangelists with the sun, moon, and stars of an early evening sky as a background. Unlike traditional works on the subject, Gregory's *Last Judgement* is not a vision of punished vice and rewarded virtue. His vision is one of judgement in the more fundamental sense of setting all things right, and so establishing peace and unity in Christ. All classes of American society from the vantage point of the early 1950s are included: a black laborer, disabled people, a devout widow, Saint Benedict, children (including a boy with polio), Church hierarchy, a cigar-puffing entrepreneur, and Gregory himself in his monastic habit and skull cap, along with palette and paintbrushes.

Two side panels frame the Last Judgement. To the left of the doors is a unique baptismal scene in which John the Baptist stands to the side while Christ baptizes. This mural also depicts a double Christ image as was included in Gregory's *Last Supper*. An energetic interpretation of the resurrection is opposite the baptism. The focus of this work is not on the resurrection of Christ, but on those who, in baptism, die with him and now rise with him.

4. Clerestory

In the clerestory of the nave are the twelve "pillars of the church," the ten who walked with Jesus (Bartholomew, Simon, Matthias, James the Major, Thomas, Peter, Jude Thaddeus, Andrew, Phillip and James the Minor) plus the two added after Christ's earthly ministry (Paul and Barnabas). Each of the twelve is depicted with his traditional attribute. The hand of Milo Piuz, Gregory's assistant, is evident in these figures. Gregory's garments flow with grace, while these, executed by Milo, are rather stiff and lifeless.

5. Nave – Side aisles

Saints line the sides of the nave, women on the north side, men on the south. The pairs of saints who face each other across the congregation represent various contributions to the Church and examples of Christian virtue.

Virgin and Martyr: Saints Agnes and Stephen;
 Conversion: Saints Mary Magdalen and Martin of Tours;
 Musicians: Saints Cecilia and Pope Gregory the Great;
 Teachers: Saints Catherine of Siena and Jerome;
 Religious Life: Saints Gertrude and Anthony of Egypt;
 Poverty: Saints Frances of Rome and Francis of Assisi.

6. Theotokos

The oldest title given to the Virgin of Nazareth is *Theotokos* or God bearer. The Virgin Mother of God presents the Christ child with her hands uplifted in prayer. Gregory places this image between the two messengers of Christ's coming into the world, the Archangel Gabriel and John the Baptist.

7. Transfiguration

Although aptly placed over the tabernacle, Gregory's portrayal of the Transfiguration has a peculiar element. De Wit augments Scriptural records of the event by depicting Christ with the wounds of the crucifixion (Mt 17:2-13; Mk 9:2-13; Lk 9:28-36).

8. The Sacrifices

The subject of the pair of paintings in the south transept is the offerings which prefigured the sacrifice of Christ. To the left is the sacrifice which never came to pass, Abraham's willing offering of his son Isaac (Gen 22). To the right is the first recorded sacrifice of Scripture, that offered by Abel. It was Cain's envy of this pure sacrifice from his brother which ushered in the world's first murder (Gen 4:1-16).

9. Saint Joseph Chapel

9a: Statue of Saint Joseph — The statue of Saint Joseph is one of two designed by Dom Gregory and carved from lindenwood by Josef Neustifter of Eggenfelden, Bavaria. Hanging seven feet from the floor and standing ten feet tall, the statues make impressive statements. Both, however, exhibit the strength of gentleness.

Saint Joseph is depicted with the Christ child stepping out from his guardian's strong hands to bless the world with his hand of mercy and forgiveness.

9b: Betrothal of Joseph and Mary — The mural of the betrothal of Joseph and Mary may seem rather humorous with the odd inclusion of pre-Vatican II type altar boys present at the Jewish ceremony, but a serious point is meant to be made. With their backs to the viewer of the painting the altar boys physically bridge the gap between two realities and invite the viewer into the painting and still further to participation in salvation history.

10. Saint Benedict Chapel

10a: Statue of Saint Benedict — The statue of Saint Benedict is the second of the two statues designed by de Wit and carved by Neustifter. It shows Saint Benedict in an attitude of serenity with hands extended in benediction even as he stands with the devil crushed beneath his feet.

The paintings in this chapel are the only examples of paneled continuous narrative at Saint Joseph Abbey. Each refer to stories told by Pope Saint Gregory the Great in his biography of Benedict.

10b: Placid and Maur — In this work, the story of Placid's near drowning is depicted. It was due to Maur's unhesitating obedience that he was able to save his brother. Maur holds the Bible open to the verse the story is meant to illustrate: "The obedient man speaks of victories" (Prov 21:28 *Vulgate*).

10c: Saint Scholastica — The painting of Scholastica, Benedict's twin sister, depicts the story surrounding her death at which time Benedict saw her soul rise to heaven in the form of a dove. The text framing the mural reads: "She was able to do more because she loved more."



THE RENOVATION

In the years following the painting of the Abbey church by de Wit, the building experienced considerable wear and tear from the many who gathered to pray in the spiritually stimulating environment day in and day out. By the mid 1980s it was clear that a renovation project was inevitable.

In the spring of 1996 renovation on the Abbey church began. Frank Kacmarcik, Obl.SB, (1920-2004) was chief designer with Lee Tollefson as the primary architect. Cunningham-Adams Fine Arts Conservators cleaned and treated the murals. The renovated church was used for the first time on Palm Sunday of 1998.

As an aside, it should be mentioned that the murals in the refectory have, as yet, never been cleaned or otherwise restored. The white of the walls, however, was painstakingly repainted by David Leftwich, OSB in 1974-75.