

# Priest learns 'the past lives' at old novitiate

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

In a recent Newsletter of the Central Dominican Province, there is a remarkably insightful and often poetic article by my Notre Dame colleague, Father Thomas F. O'Meara, OP, entitled, "A Visit to the Novitiate."

The novitiate is in Winona, Minn., where hundreds of young men, including Father O'Meara, were introduced to Dominican life in the years prior to the Second Vatican Council.

Father O'Meara had been driving from South Bend to Collegeville, Minn., when he decided to seize the opportunity to visit the old place.

It is under new management now — the Society of St. Pius X, Archbishop Lefeb-

vre's schismatic group — and it has a new name, St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary. Only the cemetery remains under Dominican ownership.

Father O'Meara found the buildings more or less unchanged from the 1950s. "One still has the sense of open vistas," he wrote, "a superb location for a novitiate (but not for a theological school)."

The chapel retained its familiar appearance, but he noticed at once a different smell. In the past, it always had the fresh scent of wax, with a hint of country air. Now it "smells definitely like an old, musty, mildewed European church," heavy with the odor of incense.

Among the few additions was a large sanctuary lamp and, on a lace-covered altar hard against the back wall, four pyramid-

shaped vessels containing relics.

There is also a set of stations which are "too large and in an ill-chosen dark wood."

Although the changes are relatively minor, Father O'Meara judged them "in bad taste (a hallmark of much of Catholicism from 1850 to 1950)."

"It slowly dawns on you," he continued, "that there are no hymnals, missalettes, no liturgical books of any sort except for a blank looseleaf collection of Latin texts in Prime, Sext, and Compline ... and some ordinaries of Gregorian chant. This absence of books seems unsettling, a first note of emptiness as if no one worshipped here."

As he left the chapel, he noticed two warning signs for visitors. Men were not to



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enter wearing shorts, jeans, or tennis shoes, while appropriate dress for women was described in detail.

He returned the next morning for the Mass at 7:15 a.m. There were seven other people in attendance — only two under 65 — along with about 40 seminarians between their early 20s and mid-30s, dressed in cassocks with starched collars and surplices.

They were "pleasant looking," but "silent and sleepy." Some followed the Mass in bilingual missals but others read devotional books. There was a complete lack of contact among them, even though they were in a community, attending the community's Eucharist.

Only the celebrant and the two servers spoke. The celebrant, a young man in 1950s-style vestments, recited the Latin quietly, almost inaudibly, but reverently.

"But it was clear," Father O'Meara observed, "that this clipped, dead language was still being recited fast: one could not or would not speak one's own language that rapidly. This was not so much prayer or proclamation as ritual."

The celebrant followed the rubrics of the Tridentine rite flawlessly, though his gestures seemed too stylized and perfect, as if learned out of a book rather than from personal experience.

"The Society of Pius X, though they were intent upon preserving an earlier church, were in fact replacing the antiquity of the Church with customs of recent centuries ..."

"Following the incarnational pattern of Christ, its head," Father O'Meara concluded, "the church can never abandon its humanity or humanity's history: If and when it pursues easier courses of becoming a courtroom or a museum, history eventually has its revenge."

"The novitiate has been refurbished, restored. A visitor can enjoy it, especially a visitor with memories. But it is not a school or a priory as much as a kind of refuge or phantom ship where the past lives." What is preserved now at Winona, however, is not the past, not even the Council of Trent, but, as the sign says, "the mind of Pius X."

As Father O'Meara left the chapel at the end of Mass, the sky was bright blue and the sun spread over the hills with their birches, rocks and snow.

He felt a sadness and respect for the past, but as the sun lit up the fields in all directions and the snow mirrored the white-blue Minnesota sky, he knew that it was 1990, not 1290 or 1590, not even 1950, and that "this was the only day which existed."

"The world seemed again in some ways to be changing for the better, and it was time to face again the great issue" for which the novitiate had not really prepared them but which was to dominate their lives and the church's: "how the Holy Spirit acts in history."

# King Ahab's greediness leads to final downfall

By Cindy Bassett  
Courier columnist

"Ahab, you were not at lunch or dinner," Queen Jezebel said to the king. "Are you ill?"

"My mind is very troubled about something," he replied sullenly from the corner of the room.

"What are you brooding about?" the queen asked.

King Ahab went over to the window and pointed. "Do you see that vineyard that borders our land? I think that would be a most suitable place for an herb garden. You know how much I enjoy planting things. But now that can never be."

Jezebel was not one who could conceal her impatience. "I don't understand what your problem is!" she said.

"Naboth owns the land," Ahab replied, turning from the window. "I went to see him yesterday and made him a very generous offer for his land. Naboth refused me, claiming that this land has been in his family for generations."

"Refused you, the king?" Jezebel snapped. "And what did you do?"

"What could I do?" he replied. "Ahab, your behavior is certainly not befitting a king." Then softening, she added, "Stop your worrying. Let me see to it. You will have your garden."

Jezebel set herself about the task immediately. First, she wrote letters to all of the elders and nobles and signed them with



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the king's official seal. The message read: "Proclaim a holiday. Call all of the people together and seat Naboth in a place of prominence. When everyone is assembled, select two men and tell them to testify that Naboth has sinned by cursing both God and the king."

The elders and nobles reacted immediately to what they thought were King Ahab's orders. When everyone present heard the charges pronounced against Naboth, they said, "The mandatory punishment for such a heinous crime is death by stoning!"

As soon as Jezebel learned that Naboth was dead, she went to see Ahab who was still sulking.

"My king, the vineyard is yours just as I promised. Now go and take possession of your land."

King Ahab didn't think for a moment about Naboth. Instead, he went happily about cultivating his new garden. A short time later, Elijah, the prophet, came to confront him there.

"What do you want?" King Ahab asked, not even bothering to look up from his

planting.

"Did you really think that you could get away with this?" Elijah shouted. "God not only sees everything a person does, but he knows what is in the heart. Because of your selfishness, an innocent man was murdered and his property stolen."

"The Lord is going to bring disaster on your house and all of your descendants," Elijah continued. "You will die soon just like Naboth. None of your sons will rule after you. And tell your wife that her body will be devoured by wild dogs at the walls of the city!"

Ahab left the vineyard immediately and returned to the palace. He put on sackcloth, the clothes of mourning, and began a fast. "Maybe if I show my contrition, the Lord's anger will relent," he told Jezebel.

On the other hand, Ahab's wife went on as before. "Elijah's God can do nothing to me."

Once again, the Lord spoke to Elijah. "Because Ahab has humbled himself, I will not bring about this punishment on his house while he still lives. It will occur in the days of his son."

Scripture reference: 1 Kings, Chapter 21.

Meditation: Ahab's first mistake was breaking the tenth commandment by coveting something that didn't belong to him. He wanted the garden so much that it led to murder and stealing.

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