

 Part One  
PRIEST AND MONK



# St. Joseph's Abbey Spencer, Massachusetts

1951–2005

The Beginning and the End

*Matthew Flynn, OCSO*

On the feast of St. Benedict, March 21, 1950, a tragic fire destroyed the Cistercian Abbey of Our Lady of the Valley, in Valley Falls, Rhode Island. The community of 150 monks relocated to Spencer, Massachusetts, in December 1950, changed its name to St. Joseph's Abbey, and resumed the full monastic life on a dairy farm in the rolling hills of central Massachusetts. Two months later, in February 1951, Robert Pennington visited this monastic community, convinced that this was where God wished him to be.

Robert entered St. Joseph's on June 18, 1951. He was given the name, Frater (Latin for brother) Basil. He received the novice's habit after one month as a postulant. Six months later, I entered the monastery and joined Frater Basil as a novice. Our Choir Novitiate consisted of twenty-five men. Father Hilarion Summers was the novice master. Father Hilarion had a unique style of directing novices, making sure that they left the novitiate with their false ego broken and seriously wounded. He called the process "cracking the nut," allowing one to be transformed into Christ. In the morning, Father Hilarion would summon a novice, identify one of his predominant faults, and reduce him almost to tears. By day's end, he would check to see how the novice was coping. Father was happiest when he saw that your pain led

you into the church and that you spent time pleading for help before Jesus. His mission was accomplished if, through prayer, you found peace. He would then assure you that God loved you and that in prayer you would find his love and peace.

Frater Basil's many talents were immediately manifested. He possessed detailed knowledge of all church minutiae. He was proficient in Latin, enabling him to master the Divine Office. His physical stature was an asset in all work situations, as he stood six foot, five inches and weighed about 250 pounds. Basil excelled in everything he did, save one—he was tone-deaf.

As a novice, Basil's inability to sing was a major problem. During this time, the community was comprised of two groups: choir monks and lay brothers. The choir monks were priests whose main duty was to sing the full Divine Office five hours daily. They were also obligated to perform five hours of manual labor. The lay brothers worked eight hours and were responsible for the monastery's maintenance.

Five hours in church singing the liturgy was challenging. Basil, however, was unaware that he was tone-deaf and did not understand why he was advised to sing softly. I was assigned to the stall next to Basil in choir. When the novices went to the middle of the church and stood around in a large choir, I stood closest to the book with Basil directly behind me. At the peak of his fervor, Basil sang with all his heart and emotions, and the power of his full and off-key voice forcefully descended upon me.

Basil was large in every way, and his fervor was no exception. He devoted all his energy to community prayer, liturgy, and manual labor. Novices were allotted three or four hours each day for private prayer and *lectio divina*. He used this and any additional free time in quiet prayer, kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament. God does not give the grace of contemplation in

the same way and degree to everybody. Basil received this grace abundantly. Without it, one could not spend countless hours kneeling motionless in prayer. Most of us would be fidgeting and restless. God was generous to Basil. I am sure those hours of prayer were where Basil first experienced the peace of contemplative prayer and were the impetus for his many seminars and retreats on Centering Prayer.

My first job as a novice was working with Basil in the sacristy, where he demonstrated his organizational skills as the novice in charge of preparing the daily private Masses said by each monk-priest. There was a Mass Crypt with twelve altars, and vestments for the next morning's Mass were laid out on each altar. The wine cruets were prepared and placed in the refrigerator. Basil was also responsible for setting out vestments for the visiting priests who resided in the guesthouse and celebrated Mass after the monastic priests had offered theirs.

Frater Basil also spent many hours working on the farm. At harvest time, farm work was a major occupation for the novices. During haying season, one novice would pick up each hay bale and heave it onto a flatbed trailer, where the stacker, frequently Frater Basil, would pick it up and stack it in an orderly and compact fashion. This was essential, because the tractor then pulled the trailer a good distance to the barn with a dozen more novices perched upon the haystack. At the barn, the bales would be restacked. Basil's strength was a major asset for most farm-related jobs. He completed his tasks swiftly, challenging fellow novices to keep pace.

He did have one major mishap. He often drove the tractor that took the manure spreader onto the fields. There was a power take-off (a type of rotating drive shaft) on the back of the tractor that connected with the spreader. The take-off powered the machinery in the spreader that propelled the manure. The

spinning take-off was a true hazard. In those days, all monks wore long, heavy, denim work smocks. One day, Basil jumped off the rear of the tractor and his smock became entangled in the machinery. His smock was ripped from his body by the take-off, and he was severely injured. He was fortunate to survive this accident. His misfortune was the impetus for the discontinuation of work smocks and the introduction of coveralls. Eventually, blue jeans became the work habit.

The groundbreaking for our permanent buildings began in 1952. On March 19, we processed up the hill to the spot where the high altar would stand in the new church. The tremendous work of building this large complex of cloisters would now begin in earnest. All the stones that constitute the outside of the buildings were gathered from the stone walls that surround all the fields on the property. Crews of novices would go with a tractor and flatbed, and select stones that had a face and flat bottom. Far more stones were gathered than were chosen for use. A construction company was supervising the work and a group of the strongest lay brothers joined the union, working for the contractor. The rest of us did side jobs, like collecting stones and going to the railroad freight yard to collect the bricks for the interior of all the rooms as they arrived from a factory in the Midwest. Basil and two choir novices assisted the builders. We celebrated Mass in the new church, eighteen months later, on August 15, 1953.

1953 was a special year for Basil. He had survived the novitiate and in May 1953 was preparing himself for simple profession. The question of his tone deafness, however, had to be addressed. Our abbot, Dom Edmund Futterer, was concerned. As soon as the community had arrived in Spencer, Dom Edmund determined to perfect the choir and requested expert assistance from the great Abbey of St. Peter's of Solesmes, France, to train the monks

in this highly developed method of chant. Dom Edmund, who had perfect pitch, wanted our expertise in chant to be second nature to us. He envisioned our being able to sink into the Divine Presence as our souls rested in God and our voices praised God in perfect peace. Ideally, we would be free of any distractions or worries about tempo and pitch.

Understandably then, Dom Edmund had reservations about Basil's vocation to the choir. Since the abbot, unfortunately, could not become well acquainted with all twenty-five novices, he had to rely on the Novice Master's recommendation of worthiness to make profession. (A novice who could not complete the studies for the priesthood—if, for example, he were tone-deaf—could be asked to join the lay brothers.)

Father Hilarion summoned me into his office and asked what I thought about Frater Basil and whether I would be willing to see the abbot and plead Basil's cause. I told Dom Edmund that Basil had a great devotion to prayer and that he was the most generous person in the novitiate. Dom Edmund thanked me and subsequently Basil made his simple profession on the feast day of his most beloved saint, the mother of Mary and grandmother of Jesus, St. Anne, on July 26, 1953. Basil was ecstatic.

During the fall after Basil's profession, the Vatican issued a decree that all professors of theology must possess a Roman degree to qualify as teachers of students pursuing the priesthood. We had professors who had been teaching for years, but none had degrees from Rome. So Dom Edmund hired a Dominican professor to live in our guest house and teach theology. This was the beginning of Basil's illustrious career as a scholar.

Our Dominican professor immediately recognized Frater Basil as one of his brightest students. After completion of his studies, Basil was ordained to the priesthood, December 21, 1957. Dom Edmund wanted to have his own priests as professors. This

necessitated sending them to Rome for their degrees. Father Basil was one of the first to be sent. He set sail in 1958, navigating the cheapest way possible on an old freighter, headed first for Naples and then up to Rome. He studied at the Angelicum, living at the Trappist Generalate. He returned home with an SDL in theology (equivalent to a master's degree). A year later, he returned to Rome for studies, acquiring a degree in canon law. He was awarded each of these degrees, *summa cum laude*.

Father Basil returned to Spencer in 1962, as professor of canon law and spirituality. He was chosen as a member of the Law Commission of the Order in 1967, following the Second Vatican Council, at a time when the order was beginning to rewrite its constitution. Father Basil put all of his energy, generosity, and intelligence into this work. I served on several monastic councils with him, and it was here that he demonstrated his genius. He was always most objective, and his grasp of the situation was so comprehensive that he could synthesize all that was said and recite it back with accuracy. He always was the last to speak, and we all listened with a certain amount of awe.

In 1968, Basil initiated what I consider to be his greatest achievement, the translation of the Cistercian Fathers. In May of that year, the American Region of Cistercian Superiors accepted the plans for *Cistercian Publications*. The first volumes were published eight months later. Others will have much to say about his work in writing and publishing books. I remember where it all began, at his little desk in the professor's room, off the main cloister.

In addition to his many accomplishments, Basil successfully combined these activities with living the daily life of a monk. One of his positions was as night infirmarian. A fellow monk, Father Raymond, was an aged man who awakened in the middle of the night, needing someone to assist him to the bathroom.

Father Basil would sit in the chapel all night, waiting for Father Raymond's page, which he would immediately answer and, with his big arms, assist Father Raymond as needed. When Father Gerard was dying from cancer, he would wait for Father Basil to come to his aid. With one great swoop of energy, Father Basil was able to lift him, while others could neaten his bed. No one else could do this and cause as little pain as Father Basil.

Father Basil had a particular devotion to the dying. When a brother was nearing death, Father Basil would be at his bedside day and night, holding his hand or just being there, praying quietly. As one brother said to me, "I sure hope someone like Father Basil will be with me when it is my time."

Father Basil's prayerful disposition proved invaluable for the establishment of Centering Prayer. He assisted Abbot Thomas Keating and Father William Menninger in instituting Centering Prayer retreats and workshops. These were initially held in our guesthouse. There were times when the guesthouse was closed to all but those interested in Centering Prayer. As one of the retreat masters, I was not always sympathetic. At that time, I found it difficult to refuse a room to someone whom I thought God, in his providence, was sending us and was in need of our help. I now see that God had a greater plan. Centering Prayer has extended across the globe, providing guidance in the experience of prayer.

In the 1970s, Basil began to travel, but no matter how far away, he mailed cards to each of us, commemorating our birthdays, as well as the anniversaries of our profession and ordination. He never forgot us. When he returned home, he was delighted to give a big bear hug to each of his fellow brothers. On Sunday during his time at home, he would visit with me, and we would share the Sacrament. By now, you must know that I admired Basil as a religious and as a dear friend.

One place where we miss Father Basil is in the attic of the machine shop, where he constructed a Byzantine Chapel. This was before ecumenism became so widespread. The chapel was a rustic, open-beam barn where he placed an altar and a screen decorated with icons to divide off the sanctuary as is necessary for Eastern Liturgy. I think his introduction to the Eastern Church was at the Russicum in Rome where students loved to go for the beautiful liturgies. Basil eventually went to Greece and stayed at Mt. Athos for several months. Many years later, they still remember Basil on that holy mountain. How could Basil not make an impression with his physical presence—his white beard, piercing eyes, warm smile, and large stature?

When word came that Basil was in a terrible car accident, I was devastated. I visited him daily at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester. He was in good cheer during our first visits. He befriended several members of the medical team who cared for him. However, his health rapidly deteriorated, requiring multiple surgeries and being placed on a ventilator. Communicating with him became quite challenging.

In the final weeks of his life, he became withdrawn and refused visitors. He was frustrated with the status of his health and did not want others to see him in this weakened state. During the last days of his life, the medical staff noted additional hemorrhaging and suggested further surgeries. Father Basil communicated to the physician that he adamantly refused any additional procedures and that he “had had enough.” The attending physician informed Abbot Damian of Basil’s decision. The abbot asked me to accompany him to Father Basil’s bedside. Upon our arrival, the ventilator was disconnected. Over the next six hours, the abbot and I sat with him, holding his hand and praying. Father Basil, however, was completely unresponsive. You could sense his painful course was nearing its end.

Back home, the monks were chanting second vespers for the solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, June 3, 2005. During this time, Father Basil took his final breath. This feast was one of Father Basil's favorite devotions. His presence will be sorely missed in the community, but his memories remain. May he rest in peace.

# The Ava Years

1986–89 and 2000

*Mark Scott, OCSO*

Father Basil was overflowing. He was overflowing with gifts of nature and grace. Like any overflow, his could not be contained—not by superiors, and not by the boundaries of ordinary Trappist-Cistercian life, a life to which Basil was dedicated with heart and soul.

Once during Father Basil's first sojourn at Assumption Abbey (1986–89), he and another monk attended the annual meeting of the Squires Volunteer Fire Department near the abbey. Like a true resident of the Ozarks, Father Basil wore his denim bib overalls. During the meeting, one of the ladies brought out a plate of cookies she had made. She handed the platter to “the Reverend” so he could help himself and then pass the platter on to the next person. Father Basil helped himself—again and again. Oblivious to the fact that there was only one platter, and that its contents were intended to be shared all around, Father Basil in the course of the meeting appreciatively devoured all the cookies.

Another time on Father Basil's first Ash Wednesday as *superior ad nutum* (an appointed, interim superior; *ad nutum* is Latin for “at the nod”) of Ava, he gave the homily before the distribution of ashes. It was a participatory homily. In the center of the choir, a stainless steel salad bowl from the kitchen had been placed on a wooden stand. In the bowl were some oily rags. They had been lit, so they were smoldering. Each monk came to deposit a slip of paper he had prepared in the bowl. On the paper were his sins,

his faults, or something he wanted his Lent to help burn away and purify. As the papers accumulated on the oily rags in the salad bowl, the thin steel became hotter and hotter. Soon it was glowing. So was Father Basil, who, unaware of the impending conflagration, or simply unconcerned by it, continued with his Ash Wednesday homily.

Father Theodore, meanwhile, ever the practical monk, bowed, went out, and came back. Up the sleeves of his cowl, he had concealed a small fire extinguisher that he very shortly unveiled and opened up on the flaming salad bowl. Father Basil continued his homily, gesturing for Ted to sit down, or calm down. But the flames broke out again, and Father Ted emptied the little red canister, putting the flames out the second time. After Mass, a monk spotted Father Basil outside, his chin in his hand, contemplating with prayerful yet chastened humility the black bowl with its still-soldering rags.

Another time, the bishop of the diocese, John Leibrecht, who admired Father Basil greatly, invited him to speak at a gathering following solemn vespers in the cathedral. During the psalms, Father Basil fell asleep, and the fact could not be hidden. Hardly anything about Father Basil could be hidden. Sometimes this was in spite of his intentions, but more often than not, hiding was not of uppermost interest to Father Basil and his way in the world.

How could Assumption Abbey, a small, isolated abbey in the Ozarks of Missouri, with nothing at all approaching the glamour and sophistication of the abbey at Spencer that Basil had entered and grew as a monk in, confine him? It couldn't. No place could. But he did confine himself—twice—and suffered the constraint while serving without calculation.

The invitation to come to Assumption Abbey came in 1986 from then superior Dom Flavian Burns. The idea was for Father Basil to foster vocations. It was thought he could do this, not

just because of his growing renown as a spiritual master, but also because of his experience with Tabor House, a vocation initiative that Basil had started at Spencer. Basil could also foster vocations by hosting retreats and going on the speaking circuit to make Ava better known.

Basil devoted his characteristic energy to the task. He also was decidedly instrumental in the abbey's inspired choice of making fruitcakes as a new industry after their concrete block plant had been closed down.

In 1988, after Father Basil had been at Ava for two years and was known by the community, there was an abbatial election. Father Basil certainly must have expected to be elected, but it was not to be. Late in the afternoon of the day of the election, the new abbot went to Father Basil's room. Father Basil was sitting on the edge of his bed in the darkening unlit cell, his disappointment evident but private.

Typically, Father Basil rebounded, just as St. Paul always did after failure and humiliations. He continued at Ava for another year. He kept up his vocation ministry. While no vocations he attracted to Ava persevered here, the Heartland Monastic Vocation Directors's Meeting that Father Basil started continues to take place each winter at Ava, and is now in its twentieth year. He also expanded his speaking engagements outside the abbey and was away more than he was at home that year.

After Father Basil's first stint here at Ava, he had a similar but longer mission at Our Lady of Joy on Lantao Island in Hong Kong harbor. As he had at Ava, Father Basil devoted his talents to promoting Cistercian life at that refugee monastery. Lantao also served as a base from which Father Basil visited the Philippines and other areas in Asia where the order is present. During Father Basil's time at Lantao, that monastery rose to the rank of abbey and Father Clement Kong was elected abbot. For the rest of his

life, Father Basil would tell with justifiable pride how his years of work in China had been completed with the blessing of the first Chinese abbot in history.

In the late 1990s, Father Basil returned to Spencer and started adjusting to the idea of retirement. This was when his second, but shorter, stint at Ava began. As the year 1999 came to an end, Assumption Abbey was again without a superior. The abbot had resigned, and the community did not feel prepared to elect a new abbot right away. Consulting the community and searching around for candidates who were both capable and available to serve as temporary superior at Ava, the Father Immediate, Dom Brendan Freeman, Abbot of New Melleray, settled on Father Basil.

The appointment was not without some controversy (which, in the context of Ava, is never anything more than mild). Dom Brendan had consulted all the members of the community, old-timers and newcomers alike. The old-timers, who had known Basil during his first tour of duty a dozen years earlier, felt that he was, as one of them says, “too big” for this small, remote community. More seriously, some felt that Father Basil’s way of operating lacked adequate reflection and consultation (or, as another puts it, Father Basil was “a bull in a China shop”). On the other hand, the newcomers who knew Father Basil only through his books and reputation thought it would be “nothing short of cool” to have Father Basil as their superior.

When Father Basil got the news of his appointment, his leg was still in a cast from a broken ankle. “Coming back to Assumption Abbey is indeed a return,” he said in the abbey newsletter. “I knew the seniors well and loved them very much. The call to serve again is a very special grace.” It could only have been Providence and divine poetry that Father Basil began his service as *superior*

*ad nutum* at Ava on Valentine's Day, February 14, 2000. He quipped that he was "a Valentine for the Community!"

With his energy and talents, Father Basil began organizing committees to plan the second stage of a building program at Ava. He located architects and, with the community's wholehearted backing, continued to raise funds for the project. With a vision as big as God's, Father Basil wrote, "When the calendar turns to the year 3000, monks will be here at Assumption Abbey, continuing to pray for the friends who built this abbey, and for their heirs and progeny, for the church of Missouri and the whole universal Church, for all the family of God." He also directed his attention to vocational recruitment and initial formation, and invited Father Mark Scott (me), a monk from the Abbey of New Clairvaux in Vina, California, to join the community of Ava temporarily to help him with this.

Just six months after undertaking his ministry as *superior ad nutum* of Ava, the monks of Assumption Abbey received the news that Father Basil had been elected abbot at the Abbey of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia. This news was completely unexpected to the monks but not entirely unexpected to Father Basil.

Just prior to the election at Conyers, Father Basil had gone to visit there. As he explained to the Ava community at the time, he had been asked to help the community of Conyers in its discernment process leading up to the election. In fact, though, Father Basil knew he was one in a small pool of candidates singled out by the Conyers community as possible future abbots. When Father Basil went to Conyers then, it was at the invitation of the Georgia monks who were gathering the candidates together to present them to the community's scrutiny.

Understandably, there were various reactions at Ava to the news that Father Basil had accepted the election at Conyers.

There was confusion, there was resentment, and there was anger. Admittedly, on the part of some, there was relief. There was also uncertainty, since once again the question of leadership of Ava was back on the table. But the monks of Ava accepted Father Basil's assurance that he had prayed and consulted his spiritual director before finally accepting the election at Conyers as God's will for him.

Not unlike St. Paul, Father Basil had a self-promoting drive. He recognized this and tried to channel it in a Christ-like way. Now and again, as everyone who knew him recognized, the driven-persona Basil would break out and reveal itself. He also had a childlike devotion to our Lady, and he explained that his patron saint was not Basil the Great of Caesarea, but Basil the Fool.

What kept Father Basil on track, with such diverse drives and gifts? He may have given us the answer in one of his conferences for the monks of Ava. He told us that as a young monk he was struck by the passage in John's Gospel where Jesus tells his disciples, "I no longer call you servants, but friends." Father Basil was so impressed by this call to become a friend of Jesus, that for the rest of his life he used this as the material of *lectio divina*. His insight into our Lord's covenant relationship with his disciples seems to have been Father Basil's true center.

Perhaps Jesus confirmed Father Basil's personal spirituality by calling him to himself on the Feast of the Sacred Heart. One Ava monk, commenting on Father Basil's life among us, recalled what a provincial had said when asked what it was like to be the superior of a famous Dominican priest. He replied, "It was like leading a lion on a string, but the string never broke." Lion, bull, or gentle dove, Father Basil's heart was love.

## REFLECTION

*Karol O'Connor, OSB*

When I hear the name Basil Pennington mentioned in monastic circles, a warmth encompasses my heart and I am drawn back almost thirty years to when I was a novice here at Kylemore Abbey, the monastic home of the Benedictine Order of nuns in Ireland. On one of the free afternoons when Father Basil was visiting with us, he asked me if I would like to climb to the statue of the Sacred Heart that overlooks our abbey. I jumped at the opportunity because I liked Father Basil from the moment we met. He was totally “over the top” and had a sort of aura that seemed to change everyone and everything he touched—truly Christ-like. He was wild, he was happy, he laughed a lot, he connected with everybody, and when he spoke, it was as if nothing else existed but his big, deep, cello voice.

Onward and upward we went. At that time, it was normal for visitors to climb this path. Unfortunately, landslides and erosion have changed the mountainside drastically and now one can no longer make this climb. Basil and I met many pilgrims on the way, most of them on their way down. They seemed to be running past us as we went slowly upward, but Basil was having none of it. Every single one had to stop. Basil had words for them all, young and old alike. I could tell by the light in their faces, they each went from his presence enriched and touched by God. That was Basil. He was so immersed in God that all he did was give God. I will never forget that day.

# Our Lady of Joy

1991–98

*Theophane Young, OCSO*

At a Trappist regional meeting in late 1988, the prior of Hong Kong's Our Lady of Joy Monastery, Dom Benedict Chao, put out an SOS to the entire order for help. The monks were growing older, they had very few new recruits, and the communists were coming. In 1997, the sovereignty of Hong Kong would revert back to the People's Republic of China.

Our Lady of Joy had been established in 1950 when the monastery that had been founded in 1928 in Hebei province in northern China relocated there. During the revolution in China in the 1940s, the Hebei monastery was attacked by communist troops and one of the monks—Father Labre, who was still living in 2006—was shot through the shoulder. By 1947, the community of sixty monks had gone into internal exile in the city of Chengdu in Sichuan province in southwest China. When the communists later arrived in Sichuan, they did not treat the monks well. So Father Vincent, the acting superior, had the monks slip away in twos and threes. Twenty monks arrived in Hong Kong during the late 1940s, exiles from the communist takeover of mainland China. Later, Father Vincent and another monk Father Albert died from the abusive treatment they received in a Chinese jail.

Understandably, the monks in Hong Kong who had originally come from mainland China were not at all comfortable at the prospect of the communist government taking over the British colony of Hong Kong. In 1986, they even created a foundation in

Taiwan with several American Trappists as a fallback community in case they had to leave Hong Kong.

Basil volunteered to go to Our Lady of Joy and was happily accepted by Dom Benedict. There were already two other Americans in the community, one a former Maryknoll missionary in China and Taiwan, and the other a monk from the Trappist community in Vina, California. There was also one Filipino monk there as a volunteer. Another Filipino and another American (myself) were to arrive subsequently.

In the Joy Community, Basil was Dom Benedict's right-hand man: the two conferred together on every issue, and Dom Benedict always took Basil's views very seriously. In the early 1990s, Basil became the novice master for Our Lady of Joy, and later he became the junior master for a number of years. (I had been at the abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, in 1991 when Basil came back for a visit. He presented a slide show of the Our Lady of Joy Community. Two years later, after a long period of personal and community discernment, I volunteered to go the Hong Kong community.)

Basil was junior master until my Solemn Profession in 1994 and then my advisor and confidant when I was novice master from 1995 to 1998. In these positions, Basil was able to attract a number of new men to the community, including several from Hong Kong and Malaysia who persevered, and others from Canada and Singapore who eventually joined Trappist communities elsewhere.

As a formator (one who helps form new members for religious life), Basil presented the Trappist life as one to be lived seriously, as well as one that should be filled with joy. He enabled the community to pursue a more structured, ongoing formation by helping to set up regular reading and discussion sessions and formation workshops that all the monks in the community were