

By the Rt. Rev. Robert M. Anderson, from the book, *A Sense of Place*, a collection of 32 essays about St. John's and Collegeville, published by St. John's Press in 1987.

On my personal and corporate journey of faith Saint John's Abbey and University continues to be a special oasis for hospitality and friendship. Gregory the Great taught an understanding of the Christian life that saw all of life as a pilgrimage—a pilgrimage on which Christians as friends were better able to glimpse the face of God. We should lay claim to our common history that speaks of friendship in the same breath as it speaks of God.

In recent years I have sensed within me and within the institutional church a priority need for basic spiritual nourishment. Not a spiritual need that calls us away from all the complexities but rather helps us to truly understand the great rhythm of life—the breathing in of the Holy Spirit and the breathing out of the Holy Spirit—the dynamic relationship between our prayer life and social justice. We long for this life-giving connection for as the Psalmist says, “Even as the deer longs for the water-brooks, so my soul longs for you, oh God.” We thirst for God at the center of our lives—where we “live and move and have our being” but often our tongues remain dry because daily life is so full of compulsive behavior and our busyness leaves little time for reflection and the things of the Spirit.

My association with Saint John's began in an unusual way. I was elected the Episcopal Bishop of Minnesota in 1977 and soon afterwards journeyed east with Mary my wife and our four children. In Salt Lake City, Utah, I had served as Dean of St. Mark's Cathedral. Once in Minnesota I quickly realized that I needed help thinking through the pastoral and administrative opportunities of the diocese. How is it possible to develop a collegial style of episcopacy that can reach out to more than 130 congregations serving a land a “little bit larger than England and Wales”? (I learned that phrase at the Lambeth Conference in England in 1978—it came to me when I was asked by an English bishop, “Tell me, young man, how large is your diocese?”) So, I decided early that I needed help and when the chance came to attend a six-week continuing education program for clergy at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia, I jumped at the chance. One evening I excused myself from the program and met with a friend. Loren Mead is an Episcopal priest who founded the Alban Institute in Washington, D.C., a kind of ecumenical think tank for the church.

I met with Loren at a restaurant. The only preparation for our meeting was a telephone conversation in which I indicated that I was planning to hire one or two assistant bishops to be Episcopal colleagues and I hoped they could be placed strategically in areas outside metropolitan centers. Loren arrived with a large map of Minnesota and before we even ordered a meal he simply announced, “I have never been to our state and literally know nothing about it but I have studied the map and have a spiritual challenge for you! Did you realize that Collegeville is almost dead center geographically in Minnesota and that it holds a treasure—the

most exciting Roman Catholic Benedictine community in the world? I don't know Minnesota but I know the Abbey—why don't you see the Abbot and ask if you can place one of your assistant bishops there. It would be a stirring in the wind for the entire church!"

When I returned to Minneapolis I called the Abbey and asked to meet with Abbot Jerome Theisen, O.S.B. The only other time I had talked with the Abbot was at my ordination as Bishop of Minnesota in February of 1978. The Abbot and I met for lunch at the Minneapolis Club and in approximately one hour a spiritual door was opened for both of us. We walked through that door together and a quiet low-key friendship continues to this day. I truly believe that you and I have very unique moments on our pilgrimage—this was certainly one of them for me. I believe that the Holy Spirit opened that door and sustains and guides our relationship as friends—not only in a personal way but also in our respective roles as servants in our ecclesial communities. We knew as friends in that initial conversation, as we know now, that we live in a world of many disconnections—politically, economically, socially, spiritually. We agreed from the beginning to ask basic questions. How can we contribute to deeper love and affection within the body of Christ? What can we do to encourage greater and more lasting friendships in the interfaith communities? How can we foster richer dimensions of spiritual life among Episcopalians and Roman Catholics? How are the Spirit connections between us and others affirmed and nurtured?

From that simple start the relationship between Saint John's Abbey and University and the Episcopal Diocese of Minnesota has grown. The relationship has been guided by prayer and a quiet emerging vision of expectation and hope. Our Benedictine friends constantly remind us of the hospitality of Jesus Christ. We are amazed by their generosity and compassion.

Many of you know the outline of a book of life that we are writing together. The Rt. Rev. William Dimmick, the late Bishop of Northern Michigan and acting Dean of Seabury-Western Seminary, was called as an Assistant Bishop of Minnesota and lived at the Ecumenical Institute on the Abbey grounds. Bill's gift of friendship and humor did much to incarnate a presence in the Saint John's community. Dr. William Franklin, an Episcopalian, is the head of the Christian Humanism project at Saint John's and his personal interest and enthusiasm have been a key ingredient in our ecumenical adventure. Bill, along with Abbot Jerome and other prominent senior members of the community, have stimulated our ongoing dialogue and prayer time together. The Rev. Nicholas Darby came from Canterbury, England, and spent a very significant year with us in Collegeville and he even manages to live in one of the dormitories and be a faculty resident with the students at the University.

Hundreds and hundreds of lay people and clergy in our diocese have visited Collegeville; there have been quiet days, retreats, theological forums, seminars, students have attended classes, basketball games, parties for visiting guests, worship services, quiet walks in the woods and, of course, much visiting and

browsing for books. In all of this activity many Episcopalians have played key roles but one lay person particularly stand forth—Joyce McFarland has helped us develop a strong and active Episcopal Center, Collegeville committee that continues to insure prayerful attention to the spiritual priorities of all our work. Along the way, we have come to understand more profoundly how prayer is both the source and the inspiration for what we do—we see more clearly how the Benedictine way and the Anglican Book of Common Prayer have such a dynamic living tradition.

The Great Invitation, as I have come to call it, is the most important recent event in our pilgrimage. The Great Invitation is, of course, the gracious gift and call from Saint John's Abbey and University to our Episcopal Diocese—"We give you five acres of land that you can lease for 75 years—come and be with us." In my spiritual imagination it is a call of friendship, "come and live among us for prayer, reflection, common walks around the lake—come and build for yourselves a House of Prayer, a House of Reflection—a place to meet and be friends in an even more personal way. Remember, we are not alone in our pilgrimage—on this holy ground we have an Ecumenical Institute, the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, the Liturgical Press, a seminary, a monastic community—a community of scholars and student from Saint John's and Saint Benedict's."

The Great Invitation is a marvelous sign of God's grace—a true expression of hope and mutual affection among us. Francis de Sales described true Christian friendship as the bond of perfection—a bond that grow in time and takes on power by enduring—a bond whose claims are solid and durable yet always open and flexible. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit may our pilgrimage be always open and always flexible.

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