

God Family Country

The Extraordinary Life of an Ordinary Monk

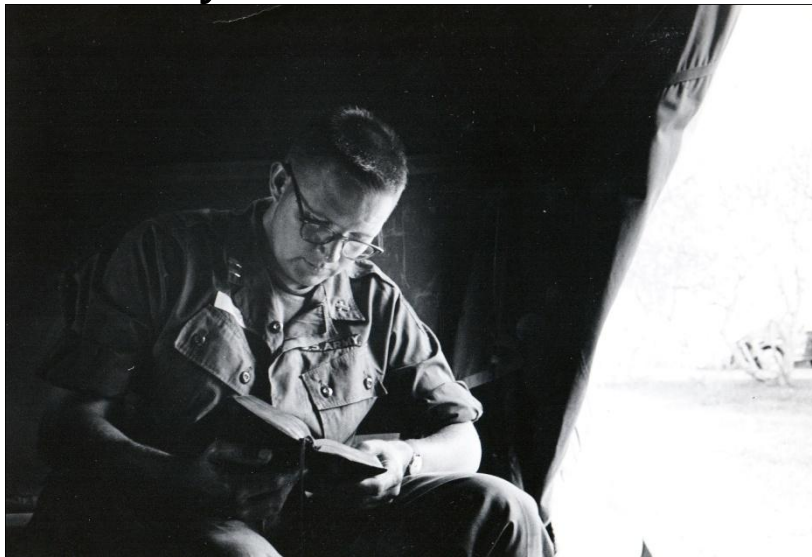


Photo Courtesy of St. Mary's Abbey Archives

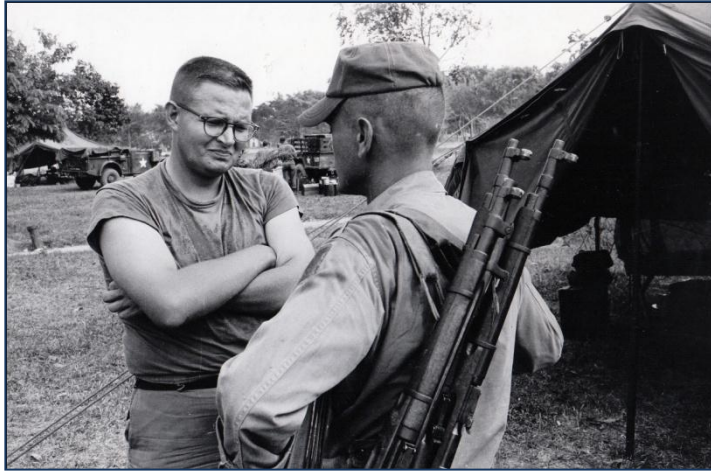
By Lynn O'Gorman Latchford
15 August 2010



Photo Courtesy St. Mary's Abbey Archives

It was near Easter in 1966. The unit was surprised, ambushed and surrounded. Fr. Tom arrived with the resupply helicopter bringing water, ammunition, medics and what could be found of God in this dense jungle. Many boys had been killed, but many more were wounded. Fr. Tom closed his eyes in prayer with the whomp, whomp, whomp sound of the helicopter overhead as he reached into his bag for anointing oil. His was a ministry of presence. "I am here." He comforted the sick and dying, reaching over each one lying as they were bleeding and alone, moaning and calling out for their mothers, their wives, as Fr. Tom anointed their heads with oil and said prayers of comfort. The wounded and killed had been gathered into a makeshift triage unit, the able bodied surrounding them in a circle to protect them from the Vietcong that had attacked the unit. Tom listened to the soldiers' questions of, "How did this happen to us?" and "Who made the mistake that landed us in the middle of this?" Fr. Tom's job was to listen.

And as a Benedictine monk in combat fatigues with boots molded to his feet and a constant trickle of sweat pooling in the small of his back, he listened with the ear of his



heart. Especially here in the jungle, trapped as he was with his men, ministering to them as they called for home and their families in the midst of tragedy. He was their last link with all that was good.

Photo Courtesy of St. Mary's Abbey Archives

Tom's own family was so very different from many of these soldiers and his friends and neighbors. His earliest memories are of running in the door after school and seeing his mother kneeling at prayer, a Benedictine prayer book and rosary in her hands. She was an Oblate to Newark Abbey and with 11 children, prayer and the sacraments were a necessary order in her household. He remembers her as beautiful and tough, loving and firm. She commanded respect and was no nonsense in her approach to life and family. Tom remembers sitting with his father just before he was to ship out for Vietnam and asked how he could have dealt with such a large family. And with a twinkle in his eye and a smile on his face, his father made a short remark about his wife's beauty but retorted to Tom, "I had a lot of faith, a lot of faith," as he winked at his son. Tom was the second youngest child of the eleven. He followed Jessie, Mildred, Edward (Buddy), Andrew, Bill (Fr. Mark), Betty, Cecelia, Mary, and Jim. His youngest sister Teresa (Sr. Teresa) followed. The day he was boarding the USS Gordon for the 17-day voyage to Vietnam, he went to the hospital to visit his sister Cecelia. She was dying of breast

cancer. He arrived to comfort her in her agony. She cried so when he was to leave, screaming after him down the long hospital corridor, “Don’t go, Tom. Don’t go.” Tom could still hear her cries as he boarded the ship for the long trip to Vietnam. On board, he remembers the young soldiers’ fear and anxiety as they approached him quietly noticing his priestly collar. Most wanted some way to accept their own terror and Fr. Tom was there to strengthen them with his own courage. News of his sister’s death arrived while he was aboard ship. The nearness of the reality of death was closer than ever but a deep sense of respect of the cyclic nature of life and the acceptance of the will of God fortified him.

Obedience

Tom had been asked by Fr. Stephen Finlay at the direction of Abbot Patrick O’Brien of St. Mary’s Abbey to become a military chaplain in the summer of 1964. St. Mary’s had always had a chaplain to the military in their history. Tom’s first Benedictine vow of obedience was put to the test and with humility he went to the Military Ordinate in Newark, which was in charge of Catholic Chaplains. Tom was asked which branch he wanted and responded, “Wherever the need is greatest.” Into the Army he enlisted at age 34. Just as he was to be sent to Governor’s Island for training in the Chaplaincy, the largest groups of soldiers were deployed to Vietnam in 1965. He set out for Ft. Riley Kansas to join the “Big Red One,” the First Infantry Division deployed to secure the airbase at Bien Hoa in South Vietnam. There was no time for schooling now. Having been ordained a priest on 31 May 1958, taught Latin, appointed a Prefect, named Dean of Discipline and then Assistant Headmaster of the boys at Delbarton School since 1952,

perhaps that was training enough to deal with the young men he was to shepherd on the fields of battle for more than just their souls.

Tom was born in Newark, NJ on 4 March 1931, to Jessie and Edward Comfroy, in an already large, wonderful and loving Catholic family. He recalls that the reason his family was so different from others was the attention to prayer, order, living up to what was expected of you and obedience to his parents, older siblings and respect for everyone. Theirs was a house of harmony and it functioned as a well-ordered community. He remembers his older sister Mary as his “little mother” and idolized her so. She in turn treated him as her “doll baby” even though there were very few years between them. His older brother Bill who would later become the Benedictine monk, Fr. Mark, was never far away to direct Tom in both school and the monastery they were to serve in together later in life. Tom was closest to his youngest sister Teresa who would later be called to The Sisters of Charity and would serve as a trained nurse not just to the Villa at St. Elizabeth’s, but also as the one who cared for each of their family members. Tom attended Catholic grammar school at Sacred Heart Vailsburg, and went on to St. Benedict’s Prep in Newark for high school, following in the footsteps of his older brothers. Tom recalls St. Benedict’s as having a profound influence on his decision to become a priest. He was inspired by the holy, yet “real men” who were his teachers and coaches. It was at St. Benedict’s that the Holy Spirit must have descended on the row of “Cs” and swept them up for His future plans. The “Five Cs” were called to priesthood together and served together at St. Mary’s Abbey over the last 60 plus years. There was Fr. Gabriel (Marco) Coless, Fr. Conall Coughlin, Fr. Brian (Hugh) Clarke, Fr. Benet (William) Caffrey and Fr. Thomas Joseph Confroy. Following graduation from St.

Benedict's Prep, he entered St. Benedict's Abbey in Kansas for his novitiate years. Fr. Hugh Wilt, OSB, who was the Director of the Minor Seminary and noted for his contemplative approach to prayer, was instrumental in cultivating Tom's appreciation for prayer that allowed Christ's presence to enter the inner room of his heart. Little did Tom know how important this would be for his future ministry in the hot jungles of Vietnam. Tom remembers the *Ora et Labora* of the seminary to be challenging and rewarding. St. Benedict's Abbey was self-sustaining, so the young city boys of Newark were put to work side by side with the farm boys of the Midwest. Tom developed a great respect for these seminarian farm boys as they laughed at him learning to use a hoe or heave bales of hay up onto trucks. He admired their ability to be in tune with all of nature around them, vigilant to the movements of animals in the field, weather conditions approaching and the signs of the changing seasons. Tom was to later trust the farm boys in his army units that led him through the dense and humid, near impenetrable jungle terrain, when they were targets of sniper fire or closing in on landmines. He remembers the terrific heat of the farm where they would work all day then don their black cassocks over their regular clothes for the Divine Office. Once a week they were allowed to shower since water was such a precious commodity. He laughs when recalling that on more than one occasion he hung his sweat through and only cassock on the hook at night only to get up at 5am in the morning for choir and it would still be soaking wet. He could not have known at that time that in just a few years he would don combat fatigues under white vestments with socks literally grafted onto his ever wet feet inside fungus covered boots. His seminary years portend the grinding exhilaration and exhaustion that God would call him to in the military.

Photo Courtesy of St. Mary's Abbey Archives



He took his first Benedictine vows of obedience, stability and *conversatio morum* on 11 July 1952 at St. Benedict's Abbey and then returned to St. Mary's Abbey in Newark. He was back near his family, back in the city of his youth and began work as a young

seminarian by driving the older monks of the Abbey around to all their duties plus run errands for the Prior for the summer. He then went on to St. Mary's Abbey in Morristown as Newark Abbey and St. Mary's Abbey had split, to study Theology under the tutelage of Fr. Adrian McLoughlin, who was one of the founding monks of Delbarton School. Fr. McLoughlin was a strict disciplinarian and required nothing less than constant mindful attention from the young monks in his charge. Tom studied Dogmatic and Moral Theology, Scripture and Canon Law in the morning and taught Latin to the Delbarton boys in the afternoon. Soon he was sent to St. Vincent's Archabbey in Latrobe, PA to complete a Bachelors in Philosophy from which he graduated in 1954. His BA was followed by six summers at the University of Notre Dame for a Masters in Classical Languages. Tom professed solemn monastic vows in 1955 and on 31 May 1958 he was ordained to the priesthood. The year 1958 was wonderful and difficult for Tom. His mother took gravely ill and died suddenly in January 1958, unable to see her second son ordained to the priesthood. His father was devastated as was his entire family. Tom recalls that if it hadn't been for the strength, guidance and presence of his older

brother Fr. Mark at Tom's first mass, he could not have completed it with a dry eye. He looked out onto the congregation assembled of family, friends, his confreres of St. Mary's community and saw tears and sadness due to the loss of an extraordinary woman who had given her all to her family and her church, including three children called to God in consecrated life.

Fr. Tom settled into a life of teaching, acted as a Prefect over the boys of Delbarton then as their Dean of Discipline and finally as their Assistant Headmaster. The days were long and arduous, but he was there in community with the "Five Cs" along with many other of his fellow St. Benedict's Prep schoolmates, who had all been called to St. Mary's Abbey with him. When Fr. Finlay first delivered the news for him to serve in the military, all of this was to change - the order, the balance, and the prayer life he had grown into, harmony itself would be turned on its head. Life in the Army was to prove to be a daunting challenge to confront. But like obedience to his parents, then his novice masters and finally his Abbot, he had vowed to accept with grace whatever God placed in his path.

Stability

Tom did two tours of duty in Vietnam. On his first tour of duty, Tom arrived to serve three brigades of young men as their only Catholic Chaplain. He would hang out each morning at the S2 tent to find out where in the field he would be needed most and usually arranged to hitch a ride on outgoing resupply helicopters. He would carry along his bag that contained his mass kit and vestments, a string rosary and bible and jump onto the copter as it headed out into the jungle. Tom never knew precisely where he would end up as combat raged everywhere. The Vietcong had every soldier hypervigilant and

hyperalert with guerilla warfare tactics that could strike at any time. The men became trigger happy often shooting off into the dense foliage when a sudden noise would startle them. Mass was said quickly in a clearing since Fr. Tom would wear white vestments that offered no protection and literally put the men in danger with the VC nearby. More than once a bullet would wiz by during some portion of the mass. “There were more than a few first communions on the battlefield,” Tom remembered with a smile.

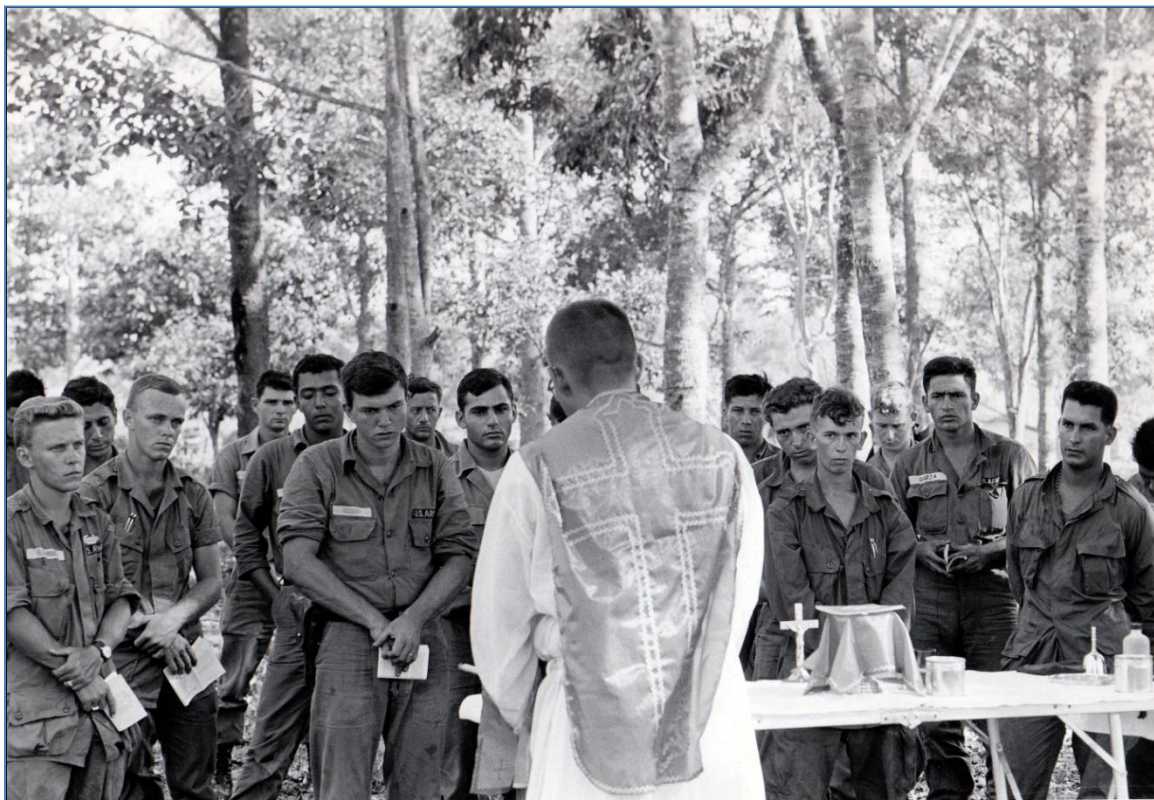


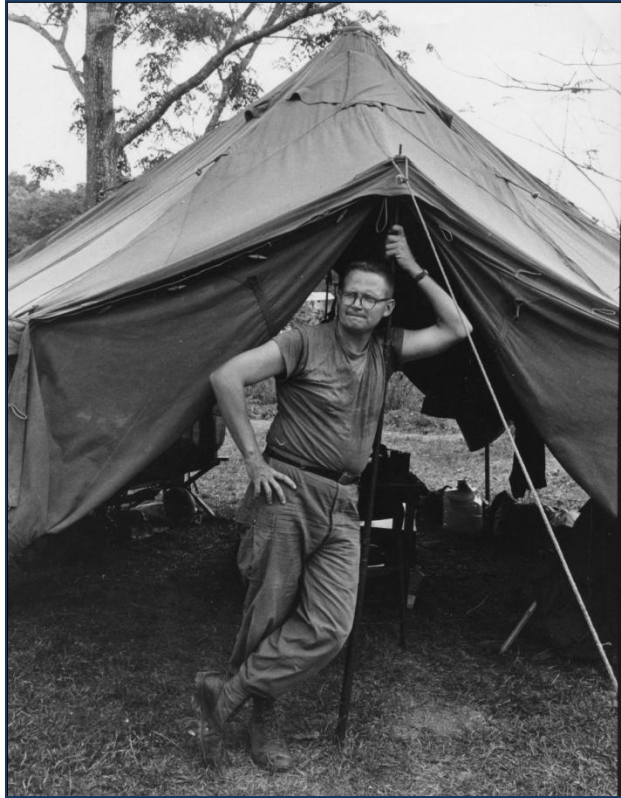
Photo Courtesy of St. Mary's Abbey Archives

Homilies were encouraging as there was no need to speak of death, only salvation in this place of desolation. Men in their units bonded tighter than families, everyone including Tom looking after one another. There was a motor Sergeant named Guimond, who was a French Canadian from Maine and “a sort of a Catholic.” One night when Army Intelligence announced the likelihood their base would be under fire, Guimond took up

position outside Tom's tent all night to protect him. Tom laughs when he remembers that there were three other Chaplains on base, but he was the only one with an all night guardian angel with an assault rifle. The dangers were prescient at times. Once while walking with his unit slowly up a hill, the men relaxed a bit distracted by a cow up ahead walking on the trail in front of them. A terrific explosion erupted and the cow was in pieces all around them. After shaking off the initial shock, the men were glad it had not been one of them as the jungle was booby trapped with trip wire. Any moment could be your last.

Each tour of duty was for about a year. Every soldier couldn't wait to become a "double digit midget." It meant that the days to return to stateside had just reached double-digit days. Fr. Tom was careful to counsel the men not to let their guard down just because the return trip home was looming ahead. Tom counseled many men, from infantry soldiers to battlefield Commanders. Tom fought the battles for righteousness in the most unholy of places while the soldiers were there to protect and serve. Search and destroy missions were the soldiers' primary objectives besides guarding the airfields. There was a strong sense of silence throughout the days and nights, punctuated by occasional staccato bursts of quiet laughter. The silence, the solemnity, the camaraderie, the community of brothers in combat, all was in preparation for Fr. Tom's future Benedictine life as an Abbot. Each moment in Vietnam brought him closer to the values he had learned in high school and then the seminary - courage in the field, obedience to commanders, and fidelity to one's unit. It tested and strengthened his faith in God. It taught him stability, fidelity in action - there was in the group something greater than yourself that should be guarded and served, cared for and committed to even unto death.

Fr. Tom was compassionate but no nonsense with his men. The only time he lost his temper was during his second tour of duty when a soldier on duty was so high on drugs back at the base camp that he was useless as a guard. Tom grabbed him by both shoulders, held him off the ground against the wall and told this “knucklehead” how he was endangering the lives of the men at camp. Fr. Tom was deeply respected by soldier and commander alike, not just for his 6’3” frame but also for his strong sense of responsibility and care for “his” men. Even though a priest and carrying a communion box into battle and never a gun, the men felt protected by him. He was a volunteer



and was there by choice while many of the soldiers were drafted. There was a noticeable difference in the culture of the units during Tom’s second tour in 1971. The protests back home had a debilitating effect on the soldiers who truly couldn’t understand what they were fighting for each day. It was Tom’s duty to encourage and buildup the men, help them to come to grips with and understand the reality of why they were here. But the North Vietnamese had become an organized and difficult adversary to defeat. They had also found how to weaken their enemy, the Americans, with a constant supply of heroin and marijuana. Fr. Tom had more than just a physical enemy living in the jungle to

contend with now, he had an enemy within the men themselves to address and fight. His second tour was much more demanding on his skills as a Chaplain. But the army was not without mercy.

On one med evac chopper that Tom was on, one of the soldiers on the ground suddenly became terrified, screaming and holding on to the chopper refusing to let go, “I have to get out, I have to get out,” he yelled. Tom was traveling back with the wounded and this soldier just hoisted himself into the chopper screaming and crying like a terrified child. The chopper pilots flew him back to base. The MPs were called but it was determined to charge him with a misdemeanor and not the more serious charge of



Photo Courtesy of St. Mary's Archives

desertion that could have received a decision to be shot. He was given multiple assignments and tasks around the base for a few days, counseled by Fr. Tom and once he calmed down, he rejoined his unit. Tom remembers long lines outside his tent when word came through that a major offensive would begin. The men

needed reassurance and strength and a strong dose of faith; a way to make peace with the fact that at any second this could be their last moment. It was a reality for these men since by 1971 one in three soldiers were coming home to the US in body bags.

Overall Fr. Tom spent over 30 years as a Military Chaplain for the Army starting out as a First Lieutenant and finally by 1995 as a Colonel. After his first tour, Tom became a Chaplain beginning at Ft. Campbell in Kentucky, then over to Germany to Ansbach. In Ansbach Tom met a very holy Benedictine monk from nearby who Tom considered better than any civilian Chaplain he had ever met. Fr. Andreas was a weekend assistant to Fr. Tom on base. Fr. Tom was allowed to travel to his Benedictine Abbey, a 10th Century Gothic beauty of a Church. It was there within this community that Tom learned about the importance of a community with no dissension, respect among the monks, and the care they showed this ancient Abbey. Fr. Tom was in awe of the holiness, gentleness and calmness Andreas exhibited, not unlike Fr. Wilt from St. Benedict's in Kansas who had so profoundly influenced his prayer life. Next he found himself in Stuttgart. It was there that Fr. Tom really began to understand the workings of the Army and how he could use the resources available to help the families he counseled on base. As a Post Chaplain, Tom became more experienced in the counseling of military families. He was called on to solve marital issues, help military children transition from civilian to military life, and help wives deal with their husbands being deployed to war. Fr. Tom held mass everyday for the congregation set up on base, conducted catechism courses, heard numerous confessions and offered counseling to all who asked.

After his second tour of duty, Fr. Tom was assigned to Fort Gordon in Augusta. This was a rough assignment as the American protests against the war had a profound influence on the soldiers. There were many who were drafted who wanted to desert and head to Canada. Because of Tom's experience already in Vietnam, he was able to help many of these boys come to terms with the facts of their deployment. He emphasized the

camaraderie of the units, that their country needed them and their base buddies needed them. Fr. Tom helped them accept their fate and see the reality present in their lives. It was Tom's toughest assignment to be based in the US in the midst of the antiwar protests and try to calm the terrified soldiers. Many days he spent 10 to 12 hours listening and counseling, with lines out the door and down alongside the barracks filled with soldiers waiting to be heard.

And so it went, from base to base either in the US or overseas to Europe, Fr. Tom traveled from Massachusetts to Georgia, from Washington state to Kansas to Monmouth, NJ; and from Ansbach to Stuttgart to Bremerhaven to supervise Chaplains on all types of Army bases including Military Intelligence. Finally, Fr. Tom was given the chance to go to Chaplaincy School and was posted at the Chaplaincy Board in Fort Hamilton, NY. He took basic courses for eight months in order to return to the field and teach other Chaplains, visiting them all over the world and conducting workshops on Pastoral Ministry and addressing the dissension as a result of Vatican II changes. He was also sent to Catholic University in Washington when Carter was President in 1976 specifically to study Vatican II documents or what today would be part of Systematic Theology but ended up with a Masters degree in Liturgy. He recalls with a smile one base commander attending a mass he presided over and stomping up to him afterwards barking, "Now you've done it. You've made us all Protestants!" And then the Commander proceeded to march off. This was the reaction Fr. Tom was dealing with in many places as he was trying to disseminate the new Vatican II documents throughout the bases by teaching the tenets to the Post Chaplains. However, Fr. Tom's opinion was that it was a breath of fresh air for the Church. "The Church was loyal to the old systems but recognized that the

world had changed,” Tom remarked. His last military posting was in Fort Benjamin Harris in Indiana where he was put in charge of Religious Education. He was happy there as he loved the Midwest spirit - their openness, genuineness - there were no “phonies” around.

Finally in 1995 he returned to St. Mary’s Abbey in Morristown, NJ. He was elected and confirmed Abbot on 25 June 1998 and Blessed on 12 September 1998. He remembers some of his best decisions when he was Abbot in asking Fr. Giles Hayes (now the current and tenth Abbot of St. Mary’s Abbey) to take over fund raising and especially college guidance and placement with the Delbarton boys. He found in Fr. Giles a man who had an incredible knack for networking and building strong community relationships among the Alumni, as well as his continuing work to build Delbarton School into a powerhouse for college placement. Fr. Tom was also pleased with his decision to name



Photo by Lynn O’Gorman Latchford

Fr. Luke Travers as Headmaster. Fr. Luke presided over many changes in the school and shepherded Delbarton through some key public relations events. Life as Abbot was similar in many ways to his early life as a Chaplain in Vietnam. He felt

called to listen to his confreres and help assist them with the myriad of events that affected their lives as monks of St.

Mary's. Fr. Tom resigned as Abbot on 4 March 2006 on his 75th birthday which was the mandatory retirement age for an Abbot. The community then selected one of his closest confreres, Fr. Giles Hayes as the tenth Abbot of St. Mary's Abbey.

Conversatio

Fr. Tom entered retirement by his own admission reluctantly. He was a man used to commanding and giving orders. This was to be a tough challenge for him as a man and a priest. His usually overfilled days were quieter now. He began to work more deeply on a ritual for his prayer life: Sundays he would pray for his own religious community, especially those most in need of strength; Mondays were for all those in religious life; Tuesday was for the faithful departed and those in purgatory; Wednesdays were for his natural family and any issues or requests made to him; Thursdays were for the Holy Father, the pope, the cardinals and bishops, especially those suffering and for all priests, deacons, pastoral ministers, seminarians and for vocations to the priesthood; Fridays were dedicated to missionaries, since more than anything he had wanted to be a missionary himself; and Saturdays were a special prayer day for himself, if his own actions had unintentionally hurt anyone else spiritually or emotionally. Fr. Tom admitted that following his retirement he suffered through a deep depression and that a book kept in his choir stall, *The Way of the Cross* by Alfonso Liguori, was incredibly helpful to him in meditating on the Passion of Christ and how it relates to his own life. His pastoral work included listening to the confessions of The Little Sisters of the Poor in Totowa. His own sister Mary and her husband Andy are residents at a nursing home the Sisters run there and he enjoys the short time he has to see his sister every couple of weeks. Fr. Tom so admires The Little Sisters and feels great comfort as their Spiritual Director.

I first really began to get to know Fr. Tom when I was home from my doctoral studies at Trinity College Dublin in Ireland to care for a family member. I became his driver to doctor appointments, visits to hear confessions at The Little Sisters and anywhere else he “commanded” me. We were destined to become spiritually attuned to each other, me the Oblate to his Abbey and he, the retired Abbot. We both talked of our lives and how our conversion to a deep and full prayer life was born out of the suffering and sorrow we had seen in our lives. We admitted to each other the falling down and getting up that had occurred in each of our lives and how we were shaped by those events that define character. How choosing the hard and right road over the easy and safe one is never an easy task. Fr. Tom was diagnosed with Leukemia in the midst of this short year that we have become friends. We decided on this project to tell the story of his extraordinary life being an ordinary monk as he had witnessed an incredible time in history that has shaped our country and our Church. His devotion to God, his family and his country has inspired me and given me courage and also humbled me in its simplicity. As he has recounted his life to me and deepened his prayer in the closeness he feels to the Psalmody, praying the same prayers as Jesus had 2000 years ago and feeling the living presence of Christ in his life, I am in awe of the powerful forces of God at work in each of our journeys throughout life. Fr. Tom has taught me the true meaning of the three Benedictine monastic vows of obedience, stability and *conversatio morum*. He has instilled in me the hidden and joy filled meaning of prayer and work, *ora et laborum*, a labor of love and peace. Our conversations ranged from the deep mysteries of theology to the horrific encounters with evil in the jungles of Vietnam as he unzipped body bags to anoint countless dead soldiers. As he approaches his own death due to exposure to Agent

Orange, I walk with him on his own *Way of the Cross*. Though he knows that death is looming, he is at peace as “death is the gate to heaven.” I have no doubt that if he could hear Christ’s whispers to him now, Fr. Tom would certainly hear, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.”



Photo by Lynn O’Gorman Latchford

Lynn O’Gorman Latchford (PA John P. Latchford ’06) is a Doctoral Candidate in Theology at Trinity College Dublin in Ireland, an Oblate to St. Mary’s Abbey, a writer, poet and mother. She holds a Masters in Systematic Theology from Seton Hall University, Immaculate Conception Seminary Graduate School of Theology and an MPhil in Psychoanalytical Studies from Trinity College Dublin. This piece is from a future work on Fr. Abbot Thomas Joseph Confroy’s life entitled *God Family Country: The Extraordinary Life of an Ordinary Monk*.