

Homily for the
Solemnity of the Founders of Cistercian Order
Preached by Fr. Brendan Freeman, Abbot
(January 26, 2003)

[Scripture Readings: Gen 12:1-4a; 1 Cor 1:26-31; Mt 19:27-29]

Today we are celebrating the feast of our three founders, Robert, Alberic and Stephen. Actually there were 21 founders, but we mention only the first three abbots of the new foundation. The Rule of St. Benedict gives a lot of power to the abbot and one of the reasons the twenty-one monks left the Benedictine monastery of Molesme to settle in a place called Citeaux in Burgundy, was because they wanted a stricter interpretation of the Rule of St. Benedict. But it takes more than an abbot to make a monastery. In fact I can think of nothing worse than a monastery full of abbots bossing each other around!

Daily life in a monastery is a complex interchange between authority and obedience and often times it is difficult to know who has which-no matter what the official documents say. Take for instance the job of cantor. Who has more power than the cantor? Who could put a note on the board on a Saturday stating, "The Mass readings for Sunday have been changed from the ones given in our Mass reading booklet!" So, what if the abbot had a homily prepared based on the old readings! So the homily you are about to hear is based on six scripture readings! It will be twice as long too!

Really, all the Mass readings are concerned with one theme, the call of God.

Our founders, all twenty-one of them, left one monastery to found another based on certain ideals they had about how the monastic life should be lived. It was not a smooth transition. The first abbot, Robert, was ordered back to his original monastery. No one joined the new group for years. They were on the verge of giving up when St. Bernard arrived with a large group and joined. After a lot of trouble they were eventually able to live out their dream.

Now almost a thousand years later, we are celebrating their memory. It is a good occasion to look at our own calling, our own dream. The scripture reading chosen for this celebration gives us a way of evaluating how we are doing.

The first reading is the call of Abraham. The call to leave his country, his relationship with his father's house. Each of us is free to interpret what that means for us. The early desert monks called it the three great renunciations or detachments. Country meant all the wealth and riches of the world, to leave your kindred and relationships meant the life of sin and vice that cling to us and become like kindred to us. To leave our father's house means the whole visible world as opposed to the invisible world of the Spirit.

These are radical renunciations just as are the ones in today's Gospel and even more so the ones Paul speaks of: leave our own wisdom and justice, even our own holiness.

What does all this mean? All this renunciation and detachment? I think it means that each of us is called to go out of ourselves, to go beyond ourselves. Take the journey to a new place, an unknown place. In the letter to the Hebrews we read that our ancestors set out on the journey not knowing where they were going. They were living on a promise and they died before the promise was fulfilled.

We too live on a promise. We can demand nothing. Monks have been accused of being Pelagians, making things happen by our own effort. If we fast or get up at 3:00 am, we will become spiritual men. Life is not like that. Life is a great teacher of detachment. We don't set our program and then watch it being fulfilled. We live our life and then come to understand it in the light of scripture. Life is a call to move out of ourselves. As youth gives way to middle age we are challenged to detach from perceived ideals. As middle age gives way to old age we are forced to give up false ambition and pretences. As old age progresses, we are made to detach from physical health itself, our body. The world we wanted to create is slowly taken from us and something unfamiliar and new replaces it. It slowly dawns on us God is calling us and leading us on-no matter how dark it seems or how unfamiliar the road. The new self made in this image of Christ is replacing the old self. We leave ourselves to find ourselves again. Are we good monks? Are we following our Founder? Are we good Christians? Who are we to judge? Life is teaching us. Let us put ourselves in the hands of the Lord of Life.