THE MURALS
in the
ABBЕY REФЕCTORY

SAINT JOSEPH ABBEY
Saint Benedict, Louisiana

1951
A Word of Introduction...

Saint Joseph Abbey, located four miles northeast of Covington, Louisiana, has been the home of Benedictine monks for almost fifty years. In addition to their monastic life of prayer and seclusion, these monks conduct Saint Joseph Minor Seminary, educating young men for the priesthood.

In keeping with the Order's traditional fostering of the fine arts, the monastery engaged Dom Gregory de Wit, a European Benedictine Father, to execute a series of original paintings for the monastic refectory. This undertaking, begun in 1946, was completed in 1950.

Because of the lavish praise bestowed on these paintings by competent critics and because of the constantly growing interest manifested by visitors to the Abbey, it was decided to edit this booklet not only to assist the uninitiated to appreciate the paintings but also to reveal one of the most eminent contributions to sacred art in America.

Since a knowledge of the texts which the artist has employed aids considerably to understand both the content of each scene and its relation to the main theme, a translation of the Latin texts will be given beneath each picture.

Christ the Door
(not pictured)

At the entrance to the refectory, immediately above the door, there is a painting of Christ whose extended arms invite His sheep to enter the pasture prepared for them. The appropriate text states that Christ is the door through whom the sheep must pass if they wish to find the food that gives eternal life.
The Last Supper

Covering the whole west wall of the refectory is a painting of the Last Supper, overpowering in its grandiose conception and the harmonious mingling of its rich, varied colors. According to Dom Gregory this is probably the largest mural of the Last Supper in the world. This is the painting that sets the theme for all other scenes in the refectory.

Surrounded by His Apostles, reclining (not sitting) according to the custom of the day, Christ is observing the traditional rite of the Passover. This explains the lamb cooked whole, the wild lettuce, the wine and jars of water used for ceremonial ablutions. (The crumpled linen towel gives evidence of Christ's washing the Apostles' feet.) In the foreground the seven baskets of bread and the two fish call to mind the miraculous multiplication of loaves and fish to prepare the people for the greater miracle of the Eucharist. Because we do not have the Eucharist unless we have sacrifice, and because Calvary and the Last Supper are so intimately related, the crucified Christ is depicted immediately behind Christ at table. On the cross, Christ appears triumphant to show His victory over sin and death. ("Mortuus regnat vivus" means that Christ, though slain, yet lives and reigns.)

On the extreme left, David, the royal prophet and psalmist, is pictured fortelling in inspired song the giving of the Eucharist. On the extreme right is Saint Paul, who after the Ascension of Christ, wrote so eloquently about the doctrine of the Eucharist. At the Last Supper itself, the moment depicted shows Christ offering to the Apostles His body and blood under the appearance of bread and wine. Such an unheard of thing explains the startled expressions on the faces of the Apostles.

To show the unity of conception linking the refectory murals no better text could have been chosen than "Pro omnibus mortem gustavit" (Christ tasted death for all). Because death came through eating, it was fitting that life should likewise come through eating.

The Ceiling

(not pictured)

On the ceiling of the refectory there are 56 panels on which the artist has depicted the works of creation according to the ancient fourfold division of fire, air, water and earth. On either side of the apex, the first series of panels, the twelve signs of the Zodiac, represents the element of fire. In the next series, the element of air is indicated by magnificently plumaged Chinese pheasants. The element of water, in the third series, is portrayed by various fishes, while in the lowermost series the element of earth is represented by animals. It should be noted that all the figures face the west wall on which is depicted Christ at the Last Supper, who is the center of creation "through whom all things were made." In representing material creation the artist wishes to show that all creation shares in the preparation of the material elements essential to the Eucharistic sacrifice.
What unhappy Eve took away you (Mary) have, with your life-giving Child, given back. By eating the apple of destruction he (Adam) hurried headlong to his death.

Our First Parents

This is a scene of contrasts. In the background—the far past—we see our first parents. Notice the various ways in which the effects of the Fall (all brought about by eating) are portrayed—the drab coloring, the leafless trees, the cursed serpent, the thorns and thistles, the shabby appearance of Adam and Eve, and especially the skull—an anachronistic but effective symbol of death. In the foreground—nearer to us in time—we see Christ and Mary, the New Adam and the New Eve. Observe how the life Christ came to bring us is suggested by the bright colors, the flowers and the blossoming tree.

He (God) swore to Abraham that He would give Himself to us.

Abraham Entertains Three Angels

A most unusual feature of this mural is the artist’s clever adaptation of the text to connect this scene with the central theme of all the paintings. Taken from the Song of Zachary, the text states that God (through the three angels) swore to Abraham that He would give Himself to us. Zachary meant that God Himself would come as the Messias, but the artist takes the text to mean that God would give Himself to us in the Eucharist.
Esau gave him (Jacob) his oath and sold his birthright. Then he ate and drank.

Isaac Blesses Jacob Instead of Esau

When he (Isaac) had eaten, he, in blessing him (Jacob), said: “Lo, my son’s fragrance is like that of a fruitful field”.

Esau Sells His Birthright to Jacob

The vast differences in these two sons of Isaac are admiringly expressed by the use of striking color contrasts. Esau, like Adam, forfeited his rights as first-born by his uncontrolled desire for food, while Jacob, a figure of Christ, gained these rights by providing nourishment for his brother.

Isaac's wife, Rachel, stands alongside the bed with an unmistakable look of satisfaction, for it was she who had devised the somewhat complicated scheme whereby her favorite, Jacob, should supplant his older brother. A feature of special note is the coverlet of Isaac's bed, whose folds of changeant silk reveal an unusual technique in painting.
Joseph in Egypt

This is perhaps the very finest of the biblical scenes and undoubtedly one of the most popular paintings in the refectory, remarkable not only for the rich and varied colors employed but as well for its lavish details. Note the background, distinctly Egyptian, with its papyrus and lotus motifs and its hieroglyphics symbolizing Upper and Lower Egypt of about 3000 B.C. Before undertaking this mural, Dom Gregory devoted much painstaking research on the jewelry, costumes and furnishings of this period. The scriptural scene portrayed is that in which the sons of Jacob stood before their brother Joseph, who had become a great power under the Pharao. They are begging food from him to take back to their impoverished land of Israel.

Elias and the Angel

In his flight from the wicked Jezabel, Elias, wearied of life and filled with a sense of futility, sat down to rest under a juniper tree. In the depths of his dejection, he called upon the Lord to take his life and so deliver him from the fatigue of soul and body which oppressed him. Instead, God sent an angel who bade Elias partake of a hearthcake which would provide him renewed vigor and deliver him from his lassitude. In the painting, the angel is pointing out to the prophet the way that he must now continue his journey, reminding him, in the words of the text, “Arise and eat, for there yet remains a long way ahead of thee”. Because of its unmistakable applicability to the Eucharist this scene is very appropriate, for the Bible tells us that, after eating the hearthcake, Elias walked in the strength of that food for forty days.
The rock, however, was Christ.

Moses Provides Water in the Desert

This scene depicts Moses, the great champion of the chosen people, striking, at God’s command, the barren rock to produce water for the Israelites on their way through the desert to the promised land. Saint Paul says that this rock represents Christ who supplies us, on our journey through life, with living water.

That is the bread which the Lord gave you to eat.

The Manna from Heaven

This mural, similar in composition to the preceding one, depicts the Israelites gathering manna, that mysterious substance which God had promised to send as food from heaven. The whole attitude of Moses betrays his anger against the Israelites whose frequent mistrust of God had exasperated their leader beyond endurance.
Our Pasch now is Christ.

The Paschal Supper

According to their law the Israelites were obliged to eat their ritual meal “in haste, standing”. Abounding in colorful detail, this representation is as typically Jewish as is the mural of Joseph typically Egyptian. Even the vaguest familiarity with the rites of this observance will afford enough background to understand many aspects of the work. The paschal lamb cooked whole, the smearing of blood on the lintel, the family standing fully dressed as though prepared to move on at once—all these were divinely prescribed for the ceremonial meal for the Passover. This final mural of the series occupies its place by no mere coincidence. Its reference to the Last Supper is the most obvious of all, for it was at the ritual celebration of the Passover that Jesus instituted the Eucharist.

The Good Shepherd

On the wall opposite the Last Supper painting is found the second largest mural in the refectory—that of the Good Shepherd in paradise. Here Christ the Shepherd is represented as a very young man to indicate that those in heaven will enjoy eternal life with the full vigor of eternal youth. The wounds in His hands and feet serve as a perpetual reminder to those in heaven that it is through these wounds they share in the eternal happiness of their Shepherd. The olive branch in the left hand of the Good Shepherd represents the peace of Heaven. The flowers, the flowing brook, the verdant hills and palm trees were to the desert-dwelling Israelites symbolic of perfect happiness, like the garden of Eden. The letter T above the head of each sheep refers to the passage in the Apocalypse where this sign is mentioned as a special mark of those who are saved.

It is through the Eucharist that man is prepared in this life to enjoy the happiness of eternal youth in heaven.

Between the windows beneath the painting of the Good Shepherd, Dom Gregory has painted two eminent Benedictine monks, Saint Gregory and Saint Anselm, both Doctors of the Church. These pictures are the only two that depart completely from the general theme.
About the Artist...

Dom Gregory de Wit was born in Hilversum, Holland, on June 9, 1892. In 1913 he entered the Benedictine monastery of Mont Cesar at Louvain, Belgium, and five years later was ordained priest. Because his superiors were eager that his artistic talents be developed to the fullest extent, he was permitted to pursue extensive studies at the Academies of Munich, Brussels and Louvain. In addition, Father Gregory spent several years of private study in Italy in the interests of sacred art. Already distinguished for his work in Europe, Dom Gregory was invited to the United States in 1938. After extensive work in Indiana, especially at Saint Meinrad Abbey and in the private chapel of the Archbishop of Indianapolis, he came to Louisiana. His first major work in this state was done in Sacred Heart Church at Baton Rouge. At the invitation of Abbot Columban Thuis of Saint Joseph Abbey, he took up residence in that monastery. The years 1946 to 1950 were devoted to painting the refectory.

After he became an American citizen in 1950, he returned to Europe and spent considerable time in Italy and Sicily in research preparatory to painting the monastery church. With the collaboration of a young Swiss artist, Mr. Milo Piuz, Dom Gregory began this gigantic task in the summer of 1951.