

Sr. Anselma Biskach
75th Anniversary of Religious Life
St. Gertrude Monastery – Ridgely, MD
Monday April 21, 2008 – Feast of St. Anselm

The celebration of Sr. Anselma's 75th anniversary of religious life spans, not years, but epochs. It began in the fifth century when Benedict of Nursia, Italy founded western monasticism. It spread throughout Europe and eventually took root in the life of an Italian teenager who led a worldly life. Fast forward to the 11th century, Anselm is born in Acosta, Italy. He ends up in France and is named the Abbot of Bec in 1078. In 1092 the clergy of England elected him Archbishop of Canterbury. His Italian nature clashed with the royal style of King William. They got off to a bad start when the king demanded an exorbitant payment for his nomination and Anselm refused to pay. He went to Rome and appealed to Pope Urban I who sided with Anselm and ordered William to permit him to return to England and assume control over confiscated property.

Anselm returned upon the death of William in 1100, but encountered difficulties with his successor, Henry II of the Plantagenet dynasty, the one who orchestrated the assassination of Anselm's successor, Thomas Becket. The Archbishop and the King reconciled and it endured for the remainder of Anselm's life.

He is known as the "Father of Scholasticism." His treatise "*Cor Deus homo?*" was the outstanding theological treatise on the Incarnation in the Middle Ages. He died at Canterbury on April 21, 1109 and was named a Doctor of the Church in 1720.

134 years later the Benedictines of St. Walburga Monastery in Chiemsee Germany crossed the Atlantic. The Benedictine rule of life took root in St. Mary's, Pa., then in Newark, NJ and from there in 1857 to Ridgely, MD. Fifty-seven years later Sophie Biskach was born on March 31, 1914. The seeds of her vocation as a Benedictine Sister of Ridgely, MD were sown on the day of her baptism at Fourteen Holy Martyrs Church in Baltimore. The year of her birth was full of headlines. In 1914 –

- The Ford Motor Company announced an 8-hour workday and a \$5 a day wage.
- ASCAP was formed to protect copyrighted musical compositions.
- On March 27, 1914 Belgian surgeon Albert Huston made the first successful non-direct blood transfusion.

- On June 28, Archduke Francis Ferdinand and Duchess Sophie were assassinated in Sarajevo.

- On July 11 Babe Ruth is born.

- On July 28 World War I break out.
- August 1 – Germany declares war on Russia for their military mobilization in support of the Serbs.
- August 15 – Panama Canal opens
- September 3 – Benedict XV succeeds Pope Pius X as the 258th Pope.
- September 26 – Federal Trade Commission is established.
- October 7 – Rose Fitzgerald married Joseph Patrick Kennedy, Sr. in Boston.
- October 13 – Boston Braves beat Philadelphia Athletics 3-1 to win World Series.
- December 24 – British & German Troops interrupted WWI to celebrate Christmas. It was the first war time Christmas truce.

Some other famous people born in 1914 were:

1. Danny Thomas who died in 1991
2. Ida Lupino who died in 1995
3. William Westmoreland who died in 1996
4. Edmund Muskie who died in 1996
5. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Jr. who died in 1998
6. Alec Guinness who died in 2000
7. Clayton Moore (a.k.a. *The Lone Ranger*) who died in 1999
8. Jonas Salk who died in 1995
9. Joe DiMaggio who died in 1999
10. Bert Parks who died in 1992

Sophie Elizabeth Biskach has outlived 8 Popes (beginning with Pius X), 16 Presidents (beginning with Woodrow Wilson) and 7 bishops of the Diocese of Wilmington (beginning with Thomas Monaghan.) When it was erected as a diocese in 1868, it was 46 years old when she was born. In this 94th year of her life the diocese is 140 years old. That means she will be 104 when the diocese celebrates its sesquicentennial in 2018.

Around 1920 the Biskach family relocated to Secretary, MD and became parishioners at Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish. She attended the Hurlock Public School before coming to St. Gertrude Academy. She entered the Priory on July 12, 1923 when Mother Margaret Mary Meyer was Prioress. She made her final vows on August 20, 1936 in the presence of Bishop Fitzmaurice. A Silver Jubilee was celebrated on August 19, 1958 (no doubt without air-

conditioning), a golden jubilee on Oct. 22, 1983 (with air-conditioning), a diamond jubilee on Sept. 26, 1993 (diamonds are forever) and a Platinum Jubilee on June 28, 2008 (and that is still top secret).

In her second year as Prioress, 1957, the Benedictine School for Exceptional Children began as a pilot program with about 19 students. It was the dream of the late Sr. Augustine Kern. She won't be around for the 50th anniversary next year, but Sr. Anselma plans to be here.

These nuggets from monastic history to personal biography link Sr. Anselma to the consecrated life and to the Diocese of Wilmington. They also link her to the gospel of life just proclaimed for this feast day liturgy.

In a homily on the 5th World Day of Consecrated Life in 2001, Pope John Paul II spoke these words: *"If every Christian is a believer who contemplates the face of God in Jesus Christ, those in consecrated life are so in a special way. You must never tire, then, of pausing to meditate on Sacred Scripture and on the holy Gospels in particular, so that the features of the Incarnate Word are impressed upon you."*

These words invite us to meditate on the readings for this feast day liturgy so that the features of the Incarnate Word are impressed upon us.

The words from John's gospel (14:21-26) are part of Jesus' discourse at the last Passover meal, on his departure and return in the Spirit. He speaks about love and obedience as the conditions for a shared life with him and the Father. Judas is mentioned, not as the Iscariot (for he has already left the supper room). This is the son of James identified as Thaddeus in Mark's gospel. He is puzzled by the words of Jesus. The answer that he gives is that the destiny of every Christian is to live in this world while waiting for the Parousia. The Paraclete is mentioned as a distinct person in the godhead. As Jesus was sent in the name of the Father to do his works, so the Spirit will complete the revelation of Christ by enlightening the Church concerning the true and full meaning of what Jesus had done and said.

The reading from Acts (14:5-18) is St. Luke's account of how the evangelization of the town of Iconium ended with a persecution of Paul and Barnabas. This drove the Word to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe. Lystra was a Roman colony and Derbe was incorporated into the Roman Province under the rule of Claudius. Because of a miracle they perform Paul and Barnabas are identified as spokesmen for the Greek gods. Their refusal of any divine honor spurs Paul to protest in a speech that condemns idolatry. His invitation for them to turn toward the *living God* is Paul's way of distinguishing Yahweh from false gods. He exhorts them to notice the rains from heaven and gladness for their hearts as ways in which the living God has not been hidden from them.

Today, we are being evangelized again to notice the revelations of Christ and the gladness in our hearts on this 75th anniversary of Sr. Anselma's love for Jesus and the Church in the consecrated life. As we rejoice with her, a new chapter and verse is written in the book of your community life. It has to do with the seeds of love and obedience she has sown as a follower of Jesus Christ according to the Benedictine rule for 75 years. May these seeds take root in those who will follow Jesus here and continue your tradition of evangelization following the witness of Paul and Barnabas and Anselm. And let us not forget to notice the rains from heaven today. It is God's way of gladdening our hearts and pouring out special blessings upon our Jubilarian, Sr. Anselma.