

A Circular Journey through New Norcia, Western Australia.

So why is an Anglican Priest from the U.K. a Friend of New Norcia Monastery and writing about this special place? Well listen carefully child of God and I will explain...

It all began over twenty years ago on my very first flight out of the U.K. and that was to Australia! As a keen twenty-one year old I was fascinated by everything I saw in Australia. Western Australia began my love affair with this fantastic country. My family and I had spent time exploring Western Australia and were returning to Perth from Cervantes via the Pinnacles and an emu farm when, arising from the red dust of the bush, was the most fantastic place I had ever seen; a mirage I felt in the late afternoon sun. But no! New Norcia was real and true! Although thirsty and hungry, I was desperate to see everything I could before the dark hid New Norcia from me.

I squeezed through the slightly open door of the church to discover a ginger-haired monk cleaning quietly. I was a newly qualified teacher and took photograph after photograph of the church including the distinctive Stations of the Cross and a number of the ginger-haired monk who posed beautifully for me. Subsequently I was to use these photographs for a number of years in my class in the U.K. I was enchanted by New Norcia and promised that one day I would return; that this fleeting hour or two would not be the last I saw of this oasis in the red.

Thoughts of return germinated in my mind for over eight years until our Lord led me back to New Norcia. Return was no easy venture, although the advent by then of email eased arrangements. I had to match up flights, with buses, with guest house availability and my family's arrangements until finally a period of about four days became available; three nights at the monastery guest house and one at the monastery owned hotel.

My return to New Norcia initiated my affiliation for monastic communities and particularly those of the

Benedictine Tradition. Books of Benedictine writings and writers fill a number of my shelves now and have blessed me with a developing spirituality that led towards my sense of calling to the Anglican priesthood. A true gift, that New Norcia helped me to find. I also learned to appreciate port and thank the monks for their generous hospitality in this regard!

My next visit came three years later. It felt like returning home; a feeling I often experience when staying at Benedictine Abbeys. Some say that my Anglican Tradition is simply the Benedictine Way written large, so perhaps not surprising. This return visit brought me many more blessings. Firstly I met a number of wonderful people and I encountered our Lord through them. I met a leading Pentecostal preacher, a student, a whole group of retired travellers, the farm manager and two young Catholic men trying to discern their vocations as was I. I now count these two young pilgrims amongst my friends and I have learned a great deal from their experiences.

The hospitality of New Norcia was naturally embracing and I met the then Fr Abbott after sharing glorious meals. On one occasion, Fr Abbott asked if I had ever been to Ampleforth Abbey in Yorkshire in the U.K. I hadn't and promised to visit upon my return home. I have stayed at Ampleforth Abbey towards a hundred times since and grown further into God as a result of my experiences there. Indeed my spiritual director is a monk of this great abbey. I have also visited a number of other Benedictine Abbeys subsequently, including those of the Anglican tradition. I find the time to just be in the presence of God and the space to listen to our Lord is a great service that Benedictine Abbeys give for those of us who claim our lives are busy and full.

The Rule of St. Benedict makes a number of references to sleepiness and supporting the sleepy. I am not sure our Holy Father St. Benedict would approve of sleepy me. One reason I love New Norcia is because of all the abbeys I have been to, it is only New Norcia where I can start the day hearing the earliest prayers of the morning from my bed under the

chapel, where the male guests are billeted! A perfect way to start the day with praise of God all around you!

It would seem to me that my life is ever expanding as I grow into God and that the journey circles and winds its way through New Norcia; each time gifting me immeasurably. There is no doubt that New Norcia will always have a special place in my heart for the blessings that have spilled forth from it.

St. Benedict writes that whoever you may be, if you are eager to reach your heavenly home with Christ then keep his little rule. And I humbly add that if God brings you to New Norcia (or Ampleforth) to learn more and to tread further along the circular path to heaven, listen carefully and praise God for you will be truly blessed.

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