The earth shook as the great oak fell. I felt the pain. Pierced in its side by the sharp and efficient tools of the woodsman’s trade, it thundered its death cry amid the shuddering trees, surrendering its lofty place on the crown of the hill. Above the fading echoes and mangled arms of the fallen giant hung its epitaph: a great opening appeared in the forest sky, bringing a flood of life-giving light to the struggling saplings below.

The busy saws came at last to the center of the tree, to the place extending upwards from the tap root, where I had been planted, had risen like a shoot from the earth and had lain hidden since my youth. They measured out my length and squared off my sides, setting me free for my rendezvous with destiny, for that day of darkness when I would be planted in cruciform shape on a crimson hill of death. An unblemished beam without flaw, of staggering weight for a man of strength, I was chosen by the holy God out of all the wood of the forest to lift on high His valiant Son, crowned in the glory of his agonizing triumph.

Lashed to an ox-cart I finally passed beneath the watchtowers and through the gate and was brought to a small shop and set on a woodworker’s bench. Into two uneven lengths I was cut, then notched and fitted together crossways, as in the form of a man with open arms.

Into the barracks courtyard I was carted, my awkward frame dumped onto the ground and dragged over to a wall. Hanging above me on the cold stone was an array of the frightful tools used by the men of brutality: spears, chains, spikes, hammers, whips, manacles, fists of iron and a few branchlets of thorn.

Abbot Edmund Boyce helped Abbot Leo Ryska celebrate his upcoming 50th Anniversary of priestly ordination a little early by granting him permission to visit Italy once again! Abbot Leo left for his trip on December 20th 2009 and returned on March 6, 2010.

While in Italy, he attended a two month intensive course on the Holy Rule of St. Benedict. The professor was Sr. Dr. Aquinata Boeckmann of the Missionary of Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing. They are the female branch of the St. Ottilien Congregation. Sister Aquinata is a world-class scholar and has taught in Rome for more than 35 years. The course begins on January 2, 2010.

Abbot Leo was able to spend the days of Christmas with the monks of the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls where he was a confessor for the Jubilee Year (2000) and where he feels very welcome and is familiar with the beautiful surroundings there.

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The Way of the Cross

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Scores of soldiers came and went and milled about in groups of chatter and boisterousness. Idleness was their occupation, amusement their god. In games of brute contention and in fearsome punishments they venter their pent-up strength. To the steady cadence of drum beats they marred at appointed times in leather-bound tunics and belts of bronze, exercising their mechanized hearts to the hypnotic rhythm of pounding feet, squeaking leather and clanging swords.

Shortly after cockcrow on that great and terrible day the chilly morning quiet was broken by sporadic shouting and the sound of many men’s voices coming from outside the compound. The noise swelled to a clamoring din when suddenly a man was half pushed, half pulled into the courtyard by three or four of the brutish soldiers. He stood there in the center, hands tied behind him, his hair and beard tousled and matted, his light-colored robe smudged with dirt and flecks of crimson, his cut and bruised face partially swollen.

Though trapped like an animal, his face seemed strangely calm as he met the hostile stares of his captors. He had neither the contemptuous look of the proud nor the sullen look of the guilty. Despite his ill treatment and marrered appearance, there was an aura of hidden strength, an indefinable dignity in his bearing.

Turning his head momentarily in my direction, his eyes lighted up as if in sudden recognition, taking in my cruciform shape with a look of fleeting intensity that drove itself like a nail into my wooden form.

The callous, unfeeling men then scourged him, pressed a crown of thorns into his head and mocked his dignity with insults, spitting and blows to the head. When they had finished making a fool of him, they led him over to where I lay waiting. Two soldiers hoisted me upright, directly in front of the Man of affliction. He slowly raised his head, revealing a disfigured face of livid pain. His two eyes, rimmed as with the banked coals of a living furnace, burned with the fervor of a soul caught up in the supreme moment of its destiny. They reached out and embraced me with a look that was an indescribable mixture of fire and tenderness, apprehension and longing, triumph and surrender.

I felt a voice rising up within me and crying out: “I am here, my Lord! I have come! I have waited to do your will! I will never leave you! Though the earth be shaken and the sky split asunder, I will hold fast to you!” So overcome with grief was I that I hardly knew what my voice was saying. He lurched toward me, grasped me and, hanging heavily on my outstretched arms, pressed his face into the rough texture of my grainy skin.

The soldiers brusquely pulled us apart, then thrust me onto his shoulder. Reeling under my ponderous weight, he staggered and fell, the weight of my crossbeam pinning him to the ground. They pulled me away, kicked and pulled him upright, and once more placed me on his shoulder. With gasping breath and halting step he then began to inch his way toward the soldiers clearing the way through the shopkeeper’s stalls and the boisterous crowd of jeering men, weeping women, staring children and barking dogs.

Slipping past the line of soldiers, a woman rushed up to him, crying out the single word, “Jesu!” He raised his head, emitted a groan and collapsed at her feet. She fell upon him, embracing him with motherly tenderness. The clamor of the crowd fell off to a hush as all strained to catch a glimpse of the sudden, unexpected and brave gesture of compassion.

The momentary silence was broken by the clattering to the ground of the commanding officer’s buckler and sword as he turned and quickly moved toward the fallen Hero and his comforter. He knelt down, gently loosened her grip and drew her away. Standing to the side now, and marked by the wounds of his body, she was held and comforted by some of the women, her weeping gaze remaining fixed on the fallen Man of sorrows.

The soldiers then lifted him to his feet and once more placed my full weight on his shoulder. Stumbling and reeling, the Man of great heart carried his burden down the street, out the city gate and up the face of a rock-strewn hill. Finally caving in beneath me, the fallen Giant lay crushed and spent under my massive frame. They lifted me away and then placed him upon me, our arms and bodies now pressed together in a final
embrace of pain. I wreted as they drove the huge nails through his hands and feet and deeply into my body of wood. Then, with the soldiers pushing and straining against me, I lifted up my Lord of valor and glory, Son of the holy God, like a stark and lofty signal anointed in crimson on the barren crown of the hill.

Dark clouds began to cover the sky. I wept blood as I held up his ravaged body to heaven. The crowd, now more curious and less noisy, gathered around to witness the end. Standing at the feet of the dying Lord of sorrows was the woman who wore his wounds. It grew very dark, deathly quiet and still.

My frame then shuddered with the final spasm of his racked body as the King of suffering cried out in a loud voice, then gave up his spirit. One of the soldiers walked up to him and pierced his side with a sharp and efficient weapon of his trade. The wounded woman collapsed into the arms of a young man at her side.

The earth shook. A cascade of lightning bolts formed an awesome crown of brilliance above the trembling hill. Rocks and boulders split. Bodies rose out of tombs. Then, as I held up the Son of God in honor and victory, I saw his great light break through the clouds and wash the earth and his people with its powerful radiance. The darkness was no more. I felt at peace.

Brother George (Norbert) Koenigs, O.S.B. entered eternal life on Friday afternoon, December 4, 2009. He was 85 years of age. He died from the complications of a second very serious stroke and was surrounded by his sisters and brothers in law at the time of his passing.

Norbert Koenigs was born on April 25, 1924, near Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, the son of Phillip Koenigs and Gertrude Daniels. He had 2 brothers and 6 sisters.

From high school onwards Norbert dedicated himself almost exclusively to serving God and the People of God. In 1939 he entered the Salvatorian Minor Seminary at St. Nazianz, WI., and studied there for 6 years until February 1945 when he transferred to St. Francis Major Seminary in Milwaukee and studied there until June 1948. He then joined the Trappists and made perpetual vows as a Trappist lay Brother for 8 years.

Due to his health, he could not continue in that form of life and he was granted a dispensation. In 1960 Norbert came to St. Benedict’s Abbey where he pronounced his first vows on August 29, 1962, and received the name of Brother George. During his 47 years as a monk of St. Benedict’s Abbey, he spent 33 of those years at our mission Priory in Morelia, Mexico, doing some teaching including that of novice master and many types of practical work for the monastery and the people in the area. When the Morelia Priory was closed in the year 2000, Brother George returned to Benet Lake.

Brother George’s body was brought to the Abbey Church at 8 a.m. for Visitation until the beginning of Mass. The Mass of Christian burial was held in the Abbey Church on Wednesday, December 9th at 11:00 a.m. followed by burial in the Abbey cemetery. The Liturgy of the Divine Office of the deceased was prayed that morning beginning at 6:30 a.m.

The customary suffrages for Brother George are kindly requested and appreciated.

Abbot Edmund Boyce, O.S.B.
and the Monks of Benet Lake
The sewer pipes beneath the retreat center dining room were replaced a few months ago and it was no easy task to crawl beneath the tight space under the dining room floor. Outside help was needed to do the work and all the pipes were replaced in record time...less than a day as a matter of fact.

The Abbey building itself had a little 'cosmetic surgery' this Spring as well. Steam cleaning the bricks is an ongoing effort to remove broken and soiled cement and chips of stone that would otherwise become airborne in strong winds. The workers also put up copper flashing around the tops of the drain pipes to keep out the hosts of pigeons who enjoy the monastic life just a little too much for our comfort. (They tend to soil portions inside the attic which also needed to be thoroughly cleaned before their entrances were blocked for good!)

The cloister garden is getting it's usual sprucing up and replanting and Br. Isidro has already seen a blossoming of his flower garden out back near his vegetable garden! More color has been added in various other places around the monastery where Br. Zachary has planted petunias, marigolds and azaleas: some in hanging pots where there never was anything planted before, and it certainly catches the eye to see so much color in so many new places!