



Egg Tempera Paintings 1966-67

by Father Dunstan Massey, OSB

In the cloister walk, as one passes under the parabolic arches of the bell tower, there is revealed a large closet with folding yellow doors, containing the cucullas, or choir robes of the monks. Above the closet are three panels each measuring 5'6" wide and 2'8" high, gessoed, and painted in the egg-tempera technique. The subjects depicted were inspired by the second book of St. Gregory's Dialogues, which relate the life and miracles of St. Benedict of Norcia.

The central panel shows the boy Ben-

edict receiving the monastic habit and cowl from the monk Romanus. Also shown on the left side of this panel is the young Benedict (now no longer a boy) standing by a window in his cell, praying with arms outstretched. This figure is connected with the miracle being enacted in the next panel on the left, where we see the same window from the outside.

The miracle involves St. Maurus running on top of turbulent waves to rescue his younger confrere St. Placidus who had fallen into the lake and was calling out for help. When the boy had been rescued and brought ashore, a pious debate ensued between St. Benedict and St. Maurus as to why the latter had been able to run on the water. The Abbot insisted it was his prompt obedience, while the other maintained, that no, it was the Abbot's prayer. St. Placidus settled the question. "It was the prayer, because I saw the Abbot's cowl and scapular flying over my head as I was drowning."

The third panel on the right shows St. Benedict's last visit with

his sister, St. Scholastica. They had spent the whole day singing God's praises and conversing about the spiritual life. After their meal together, when it was growing late, his sister asked him, "Please do not leave me tonight, brother. Let us keep on talking about the joys of heaven till morning." Benedict refused to hear of it, so she clasped her hands and bowed her head in prayer. Immediately, lightning flashed with a great clap of thunder, and such a downpour of rain followed that it prevented the Abbot's departure. "God forgive you sister! What have you done?" "When I appealed to you, you would not listen to me. So I turned to my God and He heard my prayer..." They spent the whole night, therefore, in holy conversation. St. Gregory observes that since her love was the greater she prevailed with God. On the right beside the stormy window, St. Benedict salutes the soul of his sister at her death as she enters heaven in the form of a dove.

These tempera paintings marked a turning point in my style's development. The flat, hard-edged linear manner of Beuron gave way to a fully modeled chiaroscuro within a spatial com-

position, all of which would characterize the later work.

The silvery shading of a monochromatic underpainting (with diluted India ink) allowed the modeling to register with subtle tonal variations. This was so even when a single colour value was laid over light or dark in the underpainting. Lighter values over darker ones produced an opalescent or fog-like quality while darker values over lighter one yielded transparency and the sharpening of the image. Playing one against the other gave maximum control over the growing image – a beautiful medium!

