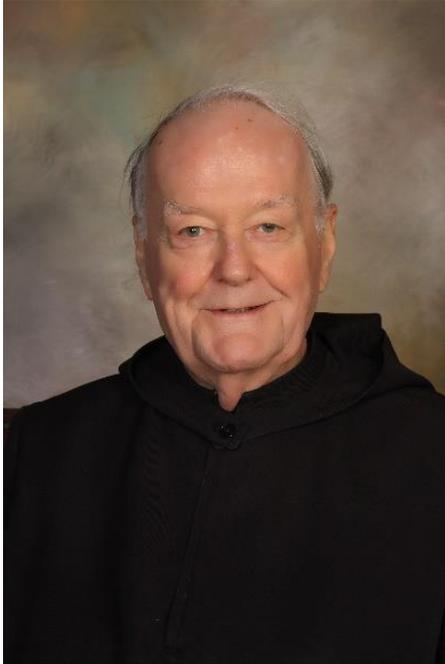


Abbot Gerard Parker Lair, O.S.B.

November 7, 1933–March 6, 2021



Richard Parker Lair was born in Newark, NJ, on November 7, 1933, to George Lair, and Agnes (*nee* Crummy). Abbot Gerard was one of four children in the Lair family. His siblings were George, Jayne and Robert. Abbot Gerard is predeceased by his parents and his brother George.

Parker, as he was called by his family, was baptized in his home parish of St. Peter's Church, Newark. He attended St. Peter's Grammar School, and matriculated to St. Benedict's Preparatory School, also in Newark, graduating in 1951. It was there where the Benedictine monks of St. Mary's Abbey fostered his vocation. Upon his graduation from St. Benedict's Prep, Parker was enrolled in St. Meinrad Minor Seminary, St. Meinrad, In., with "a slight pretense of joining St. Meinrad's Abbey," he wrote in 1952 to Fr. Matthew Hoehn, the then-prior at St. Mary's Abbey. However, Parker discerned it was best to pursue what he called "my original plan," i.e. joining St. Mary's Abbey, where "my earlier thoughts were born and where my vocation was

delicately nurtured by my education there." So began Parker Lair's life as a monk at St. Mary's Abbey, then based in Newark.

During his youth, Parker was an avid baseball player, and was an outfielder in with a local amateur team named the Shamrocks, playing alongside a slightly older Hugh Clarke and his brother Jim. Hugh Clarke would eventually become Abbot Brian Clarke, whom Abbot Gerard succeeded as abbot of St. Mary's Abbey! It was there, in his native Newark, and in the outfield with the Shamrocks, where Abbot Gerard's life-long love of baseball was born and cultivated. Later in life, Abbot Gerard would passionately attend Yankee games, for example, and always preferred to sit high in the stadium. There he could see the entire field and all the players, watching all the players strategizing their next moves, and knowing when the pitcher would be swapped out. When watching a ball game on TV, Abbot Gerard usually muted the sound, as he had no patience for the distracting chatter.

Through the spring of 1953, Parker Lair pursued college studies at St. Vincent Seminary in Latrobe, Pa., completing his first year of undergraduate studies with a strong academic record. In the summer of 1953, Parker was clothed with the monastic habit, given the name Gerard, and began his novitiate at St. Benedict's Abbey, Atchison, Ks. The following year, on the Feast of St. Benedict, July 11, 1954, Frater Gerard professed triennial vows in the presence of Abbot Cuthbert McDonald at St. Benedict's Abbey. Professing vows with him were classmates, Fraters Karl Roesch and Regis Wallace, who both predeceased Abbot Gerard. He would remain close to Frs. Karl and Regis until their deaths. Solemn vows followed on July 13, 1957, in Morristown, in the presence of Abbot Patrick O'Brien.

Between 1954 and 1956, Frater Gerard completed college at St. Vincent Seminary, Latrobe, Pa., earning a Bachelor of Arts with high marks. Theological studies followed at St. Mary's School of Theology, Morristown. In 1957, Frater Gerard took summer courses in English at Seton Hall University, in preparation for a Master's degree in English, pursued at the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, In.

On May 28, 1960, Fr. Gerard was ordained priest at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Paterson, NJ, by Bishop James McNulty, of Paterson. Beginning in 1956 as a cleric (as monks studying for ordination were called then), Fr. Gerard had already begun a distinguished teaching career at Delbarton School in Morristown. During these fruitful years, Fr. Gerard planted in his students the seeds of a love for literature and the mother tongue.

In 1975, when the community elected Fr. Brian Clarke to be its seventh abbot, Fr. Gerard was appointed headmaster. This was to mark a turning point in the life of Delbarton School. Simultaneously, there were several external factors affecting Delbarton School: New Jersey was experiencing a migration westward. There was increased development of real estate in Morris and Somerset Counties, and other areas beyond areas traditionally attracting students. Additionally, New Jersey roads were improving and expanding, making Morristown increasingly more accessible. The need for boarding was declining, as more and more students were within driving distance to the school. Fr. Gerard accepted Abbot Brian's appointment, and was clear that he believed boarding should be phased out. By the early 1980s, it was. To his credit, more and more students were willing and able to attend Delbarton as day students. Today, students travel each day to and from ten of New Jersey's counties, New York, and Pennsylvania!

Fr. Gerard also envisioned different, more horizontal structures in the school administration. He also believed in "discipline by conversation," and created faculty moderators for each class, who would address any infraction by a student. As in the Rule of Benedict, Fr. Gerard felt strongly that a reasonable exchange between a mentor and student would yield more positive results. Fr. Gerard believed a punitive approach to discipline was to be a last resort. More than four decades later, Fr. Gerard's vision continues to animate life at Delbarton.

Following his five years as headmaster, Fr. Gerard spent a sabbatical year at Oxford University, residing at the Benedictine residence, St. Benet's Hall. Fr. Gerard returned to mentor students at Delbarton School until 1988, when he was appointed parochial vicar at Notre Dame of Mt. Carmel Parish, then staffed by the monks of St. Mary's Abbey. He would minister there alongside his classmate, Fr Regis Wallace, the pastor. Fr. Gerard became well-known for his insightful homilies, the fruits of his increased and intense love and study of Sacred Scripture.

In June 1995, the monastic chapter elected Fr. Gerard to succeed Abbot Brian as its eighth abbot. Immediately, Abbot Gerard set out with the same determination as he did twenty years earlier when he was appointed headmaster. With a host of appointments and initiatives, it was clear there was a new abbot at St. Mary's Abbey! Abbot Gerard promoted greater collaboration and collegiality in decision-making, and involved more of the brethren. He questioned community practices, perhaps, in part to force the community to evaluate their value. After a quick three-year tenure, Abbot Gerard submitted his resignation to the Abbot President, believing younger and more sustained leadership was needed.

Upon his retirement, Abbot Gerard took up residence at St. Elizabeth Seton Parish, Flanders, and undertook parochial ministry, Bible studies, and other parish activities, with his usual energy and determination. He also organized, under Abbot Thomas Confroy's leadership,

continuing education for the monastic community. Eventually, Abbot Gerard returned to the abbey, and began to serve on weekends at St. Joseph Church, High Bridge, where he continued to be known and beloved for his tight, well-wrought and powerful homilies.

The last few years, it was becoming apparent that Abbot Gerard's health was no longer robust, and he curtailed much of his activities. He soon took up residence in the newly-renovated west wing with its assisted living suites, but it became clear he required increasingly intense nursing care in the infirmary. Anticipating the renovations of Vincent House, where he lived for many years on the top floor, his thousands of books had to be sorted. It is no exaggeration to say he likely read every one of them, and remembered what he read!

Sadly, the well-traveled man of great study, knowledge, with many friends far and near, was a shadow of his formerly dominant self! Abbot Gerard struggled to maintain his preferred independence, but his poor health made that increasingly impossible. In early March 2021, it was apparent he needed to be admitted to the hospital, where he was quickly given comfort care. Death followed soon thereafter.

At the time of his abbatial election, expressing his gratitude to all gathered for the festive liturgy, Abbot Gerard, begrudgingly wear a mitre for the first time, quintessentially quoted the Bard, from *Henry VI, Part 3*:

My crown is in my heart, not on my head;
Not deck'd with diamonds and Indian stones,
Nor to be seen. My crown is call'd content,
A crown it is that seldom kings enjoy. [III.1]

We pray our confrere is now enjoying a crown of glory and has found contentment, after a life well lived, of fruitful ministry in this vineyard.

Abbot Gerard's body was received at the Abbey Church on Sunday, March 14. The Office of the Dead was sung later that evening at 6:30 p.m. The Funeral Mass and interment followed, on Monday, March 15, at 4 p.m. with Covid-19 restrictions still in place. The homily was preached by the Most Rev. Elias Lorenzo, O.S.B., monk of St. Mary's Abbey and auxiliary bishop of Newark. Bishop Elias served as Abbot Gerard's prior. Abbot Richard and the monks of St. Mary's Abbey request the customary suffrages for our confrere, Abbot Gerard.

*Abbot Richard Cronin, O.S.B.
& the monks of St. Mary's Abbey*

