



THE DESERT CHRONICLE

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Fr. Eugene Esch, OSB (1928-2017)

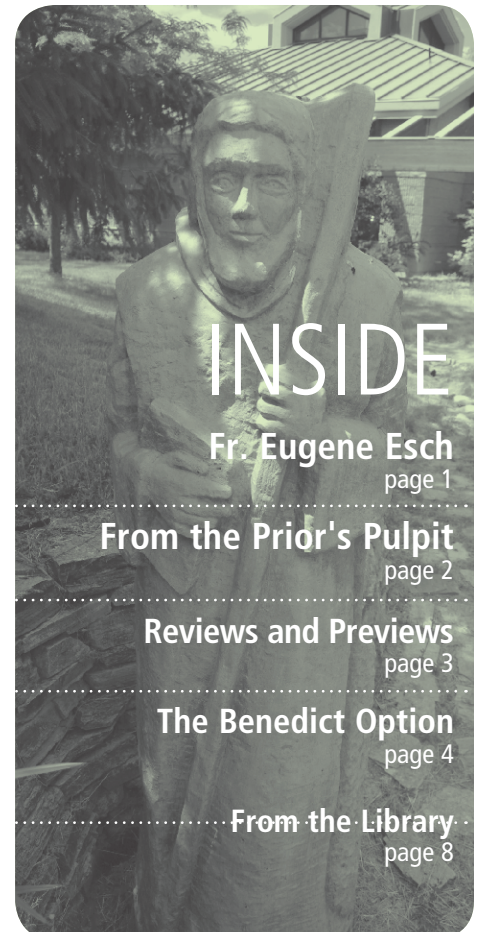
By Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB (with input from many)



FR. EUGENE ESCH OF OUR COMMUNITY DIED MARCH 2, 2017, AT THE AGE OF 89. HE WAS BORN IN MT. ANGEL, OR, AND WAS PRECEDED IN DEATH BY HIS THREE BROTHERS.

He attended school in Mt. Angel before entering Mount Angel Seminary in 1945. Thereafter his course of his life unfolded as it did for many Mount Angel boys: he made monastic profession at Mount Angel Abbey in 1949 and was ordained in 1954. Like many of his contemporaries at Mount Angel he then was trained as a teacher. His specialty was mathematics. He taught at Kennedy High School in Mt. Angel and at the seminary. He studied mathematics at Santa Clara University

See "FR. EUGENE ESCH", *cont on page 4*



INSIDE

Fr. Eugene Esch
page 1

From the Prior's Pulpit
page 2

Reviews and Previews
page 3

The Benedict Option
page 4

From the Library
page 8



Photo by John Wasko

From the Prior's Pulpit

Dear Friends of the Monastery,
As I write this, we're in the third week of the Easter Season. The temperature predicted for today is in the 70's, and our vegetable garden is almost completely planted. Signs of new life surround us.

New life. In some cases it is *new*. One of the gifts we celebrate is the new life given to those recently baptized at Easter. For many of us, already baptized, it is *renewed* life. As we celebrate and reflect on Jesus' risen life and his sending of the life-giving Spirit at Pentecost, we can be spiritually energized. The vision of faith can be clearer. Our hope based on Jesus' resurrection can give us trust in the midst of our uncertainty. And the gift of Christ's love can inspire our relationships with the Lord and with all his people.

All of that certainly gives us reason to be grateful. But it doesn't happen automatically. It's a gift that is offered. It is a gift that has to be sought. It is a gift that needs to be used. There are "strings attached". But they draw us closer to

the Lord and motivate us to seek unity with all. In a sorely-troubled world, our *renewed life* is truly a gift and a challenge.

Elsewhere in this issue of the *Chronicle* you will see what's been going on. Certainly news about our Fr. Eugene Esch will stand out. He is remembered gratefully by many here in Idaho. As I wrote last time, we are giving serious attention to our continuation in Idaho and are taking direct steps to support that. Do keep us in prayer.

The summer days will be full. It is the time of year when we host many from afar who come for educational programs. And if all the tomatoes planted in our garden thrive, we'll have some great salsa! Here's hoping. Until next time, keep us in prayer and be assured of ours for you.

Peace and good things.
Fr. Boniface Lautz, O.S.B.



Reviews and Previews

FEBRUARY

The snow continues. For awhile we thought the warmer temps indicated the end. Not! The thawing showed us where the roof can leak. One of our snow blowers was stolen. We'll probably buy another...once spring sales occur.

Br. Selby attended a retreat at Snow Mass. Fr. Boniface attended the mid-winter conference of Benedictine superiors at Prince of Peace Abbey. The annual event takes place where it's "warmer" than in Winnipeg or Minnesota.

Fr. Kenneth spent several days in the local hospital with atrial fibrillation. He said it was boring and noisy at night, but he came home better than when he went. He was glad and so were we.

MARCH

March 2 we bid farewell to our confrere Fr. Eugene. He had been on hospice care because of his emphysema getting worse. At some point he contracted a virus that his system could not resist. He died close to noon. Fr. Ezekiel, Br. Tobiah and Br. John were close at hand praying with him.

Our community retreat began March 6. Fr. Patrick Caviglia, OSB, from Benet Lake, WI, gave us some talks and led us in discussion. It was a fruitful time.

Signs of spring are evident. Fruit trees are being pruned. The raspberry vines that look dead are sowing signs of life. And the lawn will soon need mowing. March 21 we hosted clergy and religious from our deanery for Vespers, a social and dinner. It is an annual event, one that we all look forward to.

APRIL

Holy Week and Easter celebrations went well. Weather for Easter was beautiful. The paschal candle stayed lit on the way to the chapel!

Strong winds have slowed some of our outdoor activity but didn't stop some great helpers from the local parish who came one Saturday for spring clean-up.

Security has been a concern. We've now installed some cameras. Our ageing phone system will be replaced. We have a new drinking fountain that works! Signs of progress.





A worthy successor to the beattle



Esch Boulevard



Fr. Eugene's chair in the garden

“FR. EUGENE ESCH”, *from page 1*

and earned an MA there in 1969.

In 1971 he became a member of the recently founded Benedictine monastery in Twin Falls, ID. In 1980 he helped the community move to its present location east of Jerome. There he worked as purchasing agent, bookkeeper, and gardener, and also helped catalog the monastery library. From 1987 to 1995



Catfael

he was chaplain to the sisters at Marymount Hermitage in Mesa, ID, and he served as parish priest in Glenns Ferry from 1995 to 2012. He spent the last years of his life at the monastery, gardening as much as his declining health permitted. Fr. Eugene's ancestry was German; his name means “ash.” There are in fact,

45-65 species in the ash genus (*Fraxinus*), most of which are medium to large deciduous trees. Fr. Eugene liked to refer to the drive that leads from the county road to the monastery as Esch Boulevard, since he had a lot to do with planting and watering the spruce trees there. They remain a tribute to his dedication and far-sightedness.

However, Fr. Eugene fits uneasily into any species or genus: he was a man of many attributes, gentle but no pushover, outwardly stable, but never quite as well rooted as the tree that gave him his name. He was a skilled mathematician, who was tutoring students right up to the year he died. He must have been a good musician; he played the violin, and as a young monk he was in the monastic schola. He must have had unpleasant

memories of that duty, because he was wont to grumble about singing the office. He was frugal to a fault. I took his place at the parish in Glenns Ferry a couple of times: there was almost nothing in the house: some drying tomatoes, the books he needed to be a pastor, almost no creature comforts. He drove a very old VW “beattle,” in which he explored the dry hills around Glenns Ferry and presumably paid an occasional visit to Jackpot. He was a gardener, tending his garlic and tomatoes, winning prizes at the county fair. He also cultivated souls. He seemed to accept the diminishment of old age gracefully; people who visited here remember his elfin smile. He was happy to share some garlic and tomatoes with them if he had any on hand.

He came back to the monastery from Glenns Ferry with several cats, at least one of which was pregnant. They were his companions. He fed them and shared his room with them. He even welcomed Catfael, a cat with a different history (who now is luxuriating in retirement in Oregon). One had only to watch him cultivate his garlic or feed his cats to know that he was a man who loved simple things and nurtured the earth and its creatures. Like the ash tree of mythology that drove away snakes, he was the guardian of the living things that were drawn to him and responded to his care. He is now rejoicing in God's care. •

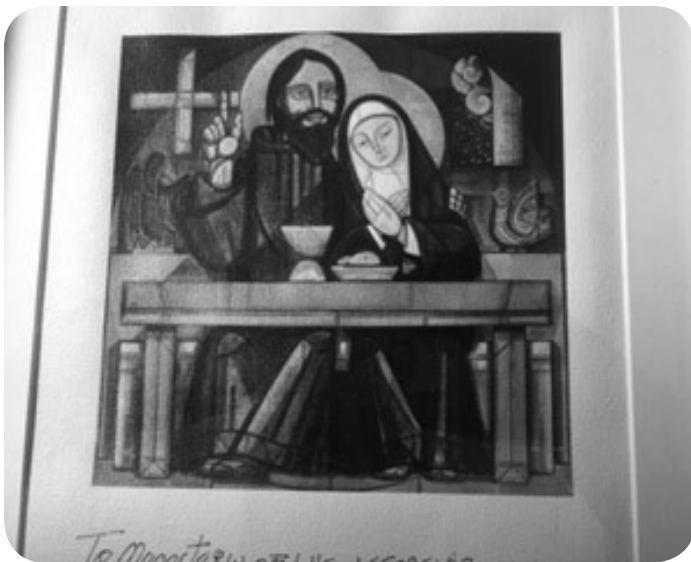


Fr. Eugene Esch, OSB, with his prize winning vegetables



Fr. Eugene's Gravesite





The Benedict Option

By Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB

IN MARCH 2017, SENTINEL BOOKS, A DIVISION OF PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE, PUBLISHED ROD DREHER'S *THE BENEDICT OPTION: A STRATEGY for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*.

It is a New York Times Best Seller. Even reviewers who say that few people will agree with all that Dreher writes in the book think it is a book to be read. David Brooks thinks it is the most important religious book of the last decade, and Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia, who has published a somewhat similar book, says it is "a terrific book." It seems then that we Benedictines might want to think about what the author says.

The origin of the book is in a paragraph in *After Virtue* (1981), whose author, the philosopher Alistair McIntyre, thought that the contemporary world had lost a solid foundation on which to imagine and build a virtuous life. What it needed was a new—doubtless very different St. Benedict. When the Roman Empire was collapsing, people of good will stopped trying to shore up the Roman Imperium. They undertook, not always consciously, to construct "new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness." Benedict's Rule was central to this endeavor.

By Dreher's reckoning contemporary American culture is post-Christian. With the legalization of abortion, same

sex marriage, and the view that gender identity is fluid and electable, to be a believing Christian is to be x-phobic. Questioning the most recently alleged "right" is a form of prejudice, not an example of pluralism. He cites various forms of evidence, such as the sociologist Christian Smith's longitudinal study of young Americans' attitudes on religion and morality. In a thumb nail sketch of Western history, Dreher traces the erosion of the values underpinning Western Culture starting from the philosophical theology of William of Ockham in the fourteenth century and arriving at the sexual and consumer revolutions of the 20th. Reason has ceded to feeling; community to individual caprice.

Then Dreher visits several very traditional Benedictine monasteries—Clear Creek in Oklahoma and Norcia in Italy—where the Rule is followed more literally than in most places and there is emphasis on Latin. By his interaction with those monks, Dreher is able to formulate a vision of Christian living embracing order, prayer, work, asceticism, stability, community, hospitality, and balance. This model will, he thinks, enable Christians to sustain their faith and morals in a culture that finds the Christian ethos odd or even repellant.

In the chapters that follow Dreher suggests that Christians no longer have a strong voice in national politics so instead they should form strong local communities and try to be effective at the local level. The lifeblood of these local Christian communities will be liturgical worship; they will be insistent



on moral discipline; they will evangelize through goodness and beauty. Christian households will be domestic monasteries, networked with other committed households. They will have their own schools, featuring a classical curriculum. He also thinks that Christians will be excluded from many of the professions (e.g., medicine) because of their moral beliefs, so they must be prepared to undertake other work, to network, and to earn less.

In his penultimate chapter Dreher warns of the dangers of the new technologies—their impact on attention span and their manipulation of desire. He is particularly concerned about the impact of electronic devices on the young (Steve Jobs would not let his children have a cellphone).

Since Dreher invokes St. Benedict throughout the book, presumably Benedictines will read it and react to it. One of the first to do so is Abbot Sharbel of Prince of Peace Abbey. He is not at ease with the book. He says that Benedict wrote for monks; he wanted them to be as cut off from knowledge and involvement in the world as possible. Hence his rule is not a blueprint for Christians living in the world, and Dreher's option is not Benedict's option. However, one might counter that it is no illegitimate to look to the Rule for guidance about how to live as a Christian in the world today; that is what 25,000 oblates worldwide are doing.

There is a lively tension in the Benedictine tradition between the emphasis on separation from the world in the Rule of Benedict and the Benedict presented in Gregory's *Dialogues*. Gregory says the young Benedict cut short his education in Rome because of the decadence there and went to live apart.



Dreher cites Benedict's withdrawal from Rome as a paradigm for what Christians today should do. For him it is a strategy: Christians should distance themselves from contemporary culture, in order to form strong local Christian communities that can impact their locales and eventually the wider culture. According to Gregory Benedict is an example of such evangelization. When Benedict had become established at Monte Cassino he was active in evangelizing the area and was very connected with people outside the monastery.

To some extent Dreher offers a viable paradigm. We live in a culture in which religion is regarded as a private and individual matter; for example, pro-abortion advocates say it is okay for people with religious scruples to reject abortion personally, but they should stay out of politics and not be involved in legislation concerning abortion. Today, Catholics (and Christians generally) are a cognitive minority: what they hear on the media is corrosive of their faith; unless they talk to each other (and pray together) the pervasive and permissive cultural definition of reality is likely to erode their faith (as it does in young people in great numbers in contemporary America). So, Dreher is right: strong local Christian communities are necessary to preserve Christian faith.

On the other hand, these communities do not need to be conservative. I didn't find any mention in Dreher's book of the Catholic Worker, which surely was the most influential Catholic counter-cultural communitarian movement in twentieth-century America. The Catholic Worker communities voluntarily remove themselves from the mainstream consumerist culture, but they also dedicate themselves to serving those at the margins.



Communities in the largely Evangelical “New Monasticism” usually do something similar.

In 1960, John Courtney Murray wrote *We Hold These Truths*, a series of essays with the thesis that natural law theory offers a solid foundation for the authentic values of the American political experiment. In a nutshell, morality, rights and virtues, can be solidly based on the order of the world as God created it. Catholics can find in natural law thinking a common ground with other Americans of different faiths. However, twenty years later MacIntyre saw that natural law was being deeply questioned in his time. Now it is even more under question, when gender identity and even physical sexual definition are regarded as matters of choice, and our society continues to act as though it can do with impunity anything it wants to the natural world. Nevertheless, Christian witness in the public square, however unwelcome there, seems to be more necessary than ever. It may be a post-Christian world, but it is a world that still lauds pluralism. It is still possible and necessary for Christians to argue reasonably for care for the planet, concern for the poor, respect for life (e.g., in regard to arms trade, trafficking of people, abortion, and “non-productive” persons), a fairer distribution of the goods of the earth, and freedom of conscience. Our voices need to be heard, even if they are not always welcome or are dismissed as mere religious babble. It seems irresponsible for Christians, including Benedictines, to withdraw when the world needs us most.



“... to have a strong and credible voice, indeed to survive, we need strong supportive Christian communities, which enable their members to identify and withstand the secularizing and dehumanizing forces at work in contemporary Western society, culture, and education.”

On the other hand, Dreher is correct: to have a strong and credible voice, indeed to survive, we need strong supportive Christian communities, which enable their members to identify and withstand the secularizing and dehumanizing forces at work in contemporary Western society, culture, and education. The Rule of Benedict and Benedictine tradition can supply a model for this, but so can the Catholic Worker, the Young Christian Workers and Young Christian Students, Focolari, San Egidio, and Comunidades de Base. These and countless other groups can be ways of making sure that the salt of the gospel keeps its tang and flavors the City of Man so that it does not become completely antithetical to the City of God, which will always be fragile but resilient. Dreher is also correct that without beauty and goodness our Christian communities cannot successfully evangelize the world. We need to pray, work, and think. •





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From the Library – Cistercian Publications

Cistercian Publications (now an imprint of Liturgical Press) has been publishing books since 1968. They have published translations of most of the great twelfth-century Cistercian writers (St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St. Aelred of Rievaulx, Isaac of Stella, etc.) and other monastic authors from the Desert Fathers to the twenty-first century. They currently have over 200 titles in print. The Monastery of the Ascension Library has copies of the majority of these. Here are some of the most important:

St. Bernard of Clairvaux: On the Song of Songs; On Consideration; On the Steps of Humility and Pride.

St. Aelred of Rievaulx: Mirror of Charity; Spiritual Friendship; Two Celtic Saints.

William of St.-Thierry: Golden Epistle; On Contemplating God; Mirror of Faith; Nature and Dignity of Love.

Pierre de Celle: Works.



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