



Monastery of the Ascension

THE DESERT CHRONICLE

XXVIII, No. 4 DECEMBER 2019

El Salvador - The Savior

By Hugh Feiss, O.S.B.

“we hover in a calm protected world like
netted fish, exactly like netted fish.”

-Carolyn Forché, “Ourselves or Nothing”



I JUST FINISHED READING CAROLYN FORCHÉ, *WHAT YOU HAVE HEARD IS TRUE: MEMOIR OF WITNESS AND RESISTANCE* (PENGUIN, 2019). I READ IT BECAUSE LAST WEEK SOME PEOPLE IN THE AREA and I completed a class on Archbishop Romero, now Saint Oscar Romero, based on María López Vigil, *Monseñor Romero: Memories in Mosaic* (Orbis, 2013). I also read Peter M. Sanchez, *Priest Under Fire* (University Press of Florida, 2015) a biography of David Rodriguez, a priest under Romero who joined the guerrilla coalition trying to overthrow the brutal military rule in El Salvador, and Lucia Cerna, *Verdad: A Witness to the Salvadoran Martyrs* (Orbis 2014). These authors give four views of the history of El Salvador, particularly the period between 1975 and 1992, when a savage regime, backed by the Salvadorian military and the United States. ruled the country.

The Salvadorian military kept the United States on their side by describing the opposition forces in the country as communist. In fact the vast majority of those who opposed the government were not communists, but ordinary people in whom hope of a better life had been inspired by priests, nuns, and catechists who embraced the teaching of the Latin American Bishops' Conference at Medellín (1968). That Conference committed the Church to a preferential option for the poor. The government reacted by organizing death squads who began serious killing in the late 1970s, culminating in 1980 in the assassination of Archbishop Romero, the rape and murder of four American Catholic women missionaries, and the murder of 18 priests and the deportation of many more. The decade of terror ended with the murder of five Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter at the Catholic University of Central America in San Salvador in 1989.

A truce was finally arranged in 1992, largely through the efforts of Leonel Gómez Vides



The savior Romero

INSIDE

El Salvador-
The Savior
page 1

Prior's Letter
page 2

Mindfulness
page 3

Finding
Spiritual
Freedom in
Simplicity
page 4

Monastery
Chronicle
page 6

Upcoming
Events
page 8

See “EL SALVADOR”, cont. on page 7



Dear Friends of the Monastery,

I am writing this a week before Thanksgiving. We surely have much for which we are thankful here at the monastery and good reasons to send our thanks to all of you.

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of Vatican II has a passage that clearly speaks to why we need be grateful at Thanksgiving, Christmas, and always: "It pleased God in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will, which was that people can draw near to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature. By this revelation then, the invisible God, from the fullness of his love, addresses men and women as his friends and lives among them in order to invite and receive them into his own company... *The most intimate truth thus revealed about God and human salvation shines forth for us in Christ.*"



As we celebrate Jesus' birth we are called to reflect on how much we are loved by God and show our thanks by loving those whom God loves. God tells us all this in a language we can understand, Jesus, fully human and fully divine, the *Word of God*.

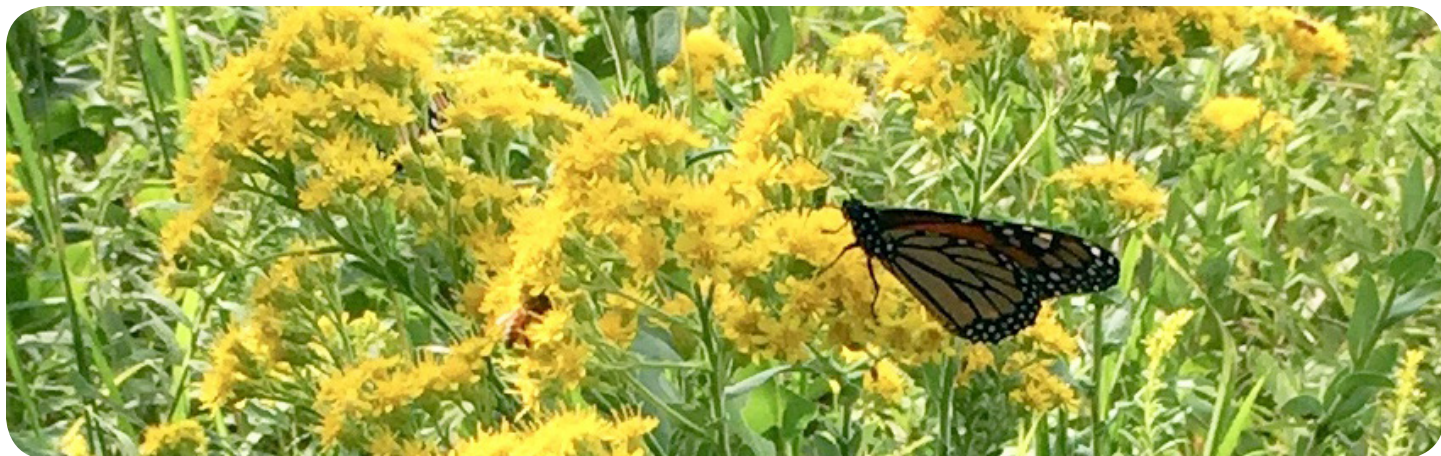
The consequences are many and compelling. They provide insight into the way that leads to peace in our world and our hearts. So we greet one another at Mass with "Lord be with you" or "Peace be with you".

We send our Christmas greetings to all of you. Be assured of our prayers. Please pray for us.

Peace and good things,

Fr. Boniface, O.S.B.





Mindfulness

By Myra Takata

MINDFULNESS, BEING PRACTICED IN OUR COUNTRY AND THE WORLD, HAS ITS ROOTS IN EASTERN TRADITIONS AND RELIGIONS.

When it was adopted in the U.S., the religious aspects of it were taken out. According to the American Psychological Association (APA.org, 2012), mindfulness is *"a moment-to-moment awareness of one's experience without judgment. In this sense, mindfulness is a state and not a trait. While it might be promoted by certain practices or activities, such as meditation, it is not equivalent to or synonymous with them."* A practical working definition comes from Jon Kabat Zinn, who is renowned for his work on mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR): *"The awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally"* (Kabat-Zinn, in Purser, 2015). Jon Kabat Zinn is an American professor emeritus of medicine and in 1979 established the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Personally, I prefer the definition: *the practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis.*

Why practice mindfulness? The UMass Stress Reduction Clinic opened its doors in 1979 and taught mindfulness to people with chronic back pain, victims of industrial accidents, cancer patients and sometimes paraplegics. It proved effective in reducing stress, anxiety, depression, and other clinical symptoms and in improving general mental health and well-being.

Why would we want to practice mindfulness in terms of following Christ? We can refer to the Scripture verses, John 15:4 and John 15:7. Many of the saints have followed these verses in their lives. For example, let's say one is driving and gets cut off by another driver. The first reaction might be anger. If one chooses to practice, one would be aware of one's anger, look at it, experience it and allow it to pass through. If one chooses to follow Christ into the situation I would propose one could use mindfulness to be aware of the anger within, acknowledge it and then embrace

the anger in love and forgiveness, bless the other driver, and continue on. We could have a discussion as to what would actually work in this situation for each of us on a practical level or what has worked for us.

How to practice mindfulness? One exercise is deep breathing. Breathe in through your nose for a count of 2, exhale through your mouth for a count of 4, repeat 3 times. Breathe in through your nose for a count of 4, exhale through mouth for a count of 5, repeat 2 times. Breathe in for a count of 5, exhale for a count of 6, repeat 4 times. In this exercise you are mindful of your breath. Another exercise is to stop 6 times a day whatever you are doing except for driving or anything that requires your attention. Connect with God in unconditional love for 10 seconds. In this exercise you are mindful that God is always present.

Mindfulness is meant to be practiced throughout one's day. However the reality is that it is a process and how often is dependent on the individual. For me, I find it difficult to practice without practicing meditation and I am working to establish a meditation practice that is consistent. During the day we all have habits which are often performed without thinking. With mindfulness, you would be present to that habitual activity. While washing dishes one would be present to the scrubbing of the dish on the bottom surface and on the top surface, feeling the surface of the plate and its weight, noting the temperature of the water falling on one's hand and how it feels. Hence one would be present to one's life and to the miracle of life. Christ is present. •



Finding Spiritual Freedom in Simplicity

By *Julia A. Ferraro*



THE FIRST WORD OF THE RULE OF ST. BENEDICT IS “LISTEN,” AND I’M A LISTENER BY TRADE, MEANING I’M A JOURNALIST.

I’ve seen myself primarily as a Franciscan for more than four decades, but I’ve also studied Benedictine spirituality, visiting many monasteries in my travels and getting to know the monks and nuns.

The concept of simplicity, I’ve discovered, is about more than just limiting the amount of material goods in one’s life. There are mental and spiritual aspects to the practice, as well.

First, and most important in my estimation, is mental simplicity. This begins with self-knowledge.

In our consumer-driven society, we see ads in newspapers, magazines and on television every day, touting the merits of products from cereals to toys, e-cigarettes to prescription drugs, cars to face creams. The spokesperson narrating for those 30 seconds tries to convince us we need to purchase a specific health insurance or watch a critically acclaimed movie.

We are so conditioned, through society in general and all this unwelcome input, that we come to believe that without these products we aren’t whole or fulfilled.

Self-knowledge shows that is not the case.

Beginning the moment a child is born, the mind is bombarded with input. Even infants can register sensations of comfort, contentment, happiness or, on the other hand, cold, hunger and other unpleasanties. Learning to listen, the child hears statements which lay the foundation for how he will think

in later years. Ideas that money can buy everything from candy bars to popularity, or older children somehow have power over smaller ones, are impressed upon young minds constantly.

If that’s what happens when we’re young, imagine how much clutter our minds have added in the years that followed?

How we view other people, or life as a whole, stems from that clutter. When we meet someone, we automatically apply labels, by a person’s gender, race, clothes, and so forth.

Rather than seeing all people as human beings, we unconsciously categorize them according to our life experience.

Becoming conscious of this helps eliminate these tendencies. That’s where self-knowledge plays into the idea of simplicity.

The key trait to acquiring self-knowledge is honesty. Going through the day, be aware of the impulses and thoughts coursing through one’s brain and determine whether they are just old clutter, needing to be discarded, or do they lend themselves to the Christian mission?

As with other aspects of simplicity, this cannot be done in an hour or a day. Once we embark upon this road to inner simplicity, it will be our a perpetual task and require perseverance.

From self-knowledge comes self-respect and, consequently, respect of others.

Identifying bad habits and working to eliminate them will make us more tolerant when recognizing the shortcomings of others. It is not an easy task.

Responsibility comes into play here. The mistakes we make should not be shielded by excuses or evasions.

Whether something as simple as a sarcastic remark to a friend, hurting their feelings, or a more serious action, standing up and owning the deed is far easier than trying to remember what lies were told to deflect the shame.

Taking responsibility lends itself to simplicity.

Simplicity on a physical level has been explained by many. I still recall the way the late comedian George Carlin described it when talking about “stuff.”

He rationalized, “That’s what your house is, a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get... more stuff!. Sometimes you gotta move, gotta get a bigger house. Why? No room for your stuff anymore.”

When St. Francis decided he wished to give up everything





and walk in the footsteps of Jesus, he stripped off his clothes before his father, the bishop and most of Assisi's citizens, walking naked into the wilderness.

He understood that material possessions distract us from what is most important in life: loving and serving one another.

St. Benedict said all in the monastery should be given what they need and give what they can. He extended this to guests, who he said should be received lovingly as Christ.

Ownership of material goods raises the question: do I own it, or does it own me?

Houses and cars are a prime example. Even when paid off, there are routine expenses that continually require attention in a never-ending cycle.

Having a lot of stuff also generates worries about whether those goods are safe, or will be stolen or damaged in a fire or some natural disaster.

Additional worries invade the mind when it comes to technology.

It's already possible to speak into a remote control, or some device on a kitchen counter, and dim the lights, lock the doors, brew the coffee, play music or adjust the temperature of the furnace.

Already, reports of how these devices can be hacked, putting sensitive personal information at risk, are rampant.

By simplifying, instead of stockpiling more and more possessions or the latest technological gadgets, it is possible to help those who don't have enough food, clothing or sufficient shelter.

Uncluttering our minds and dwellings will free up to offer a willing ear, to listen while others tell their story and lighten the burden on their souls. Giving time can be more meaningful than donating money or goods.

The soul is unburdened and freed by such simplicity, allowing a person to rest in the divine presence, to suspend active recitation of psalms or rote prayers, and just be.

St. Benedict, in Chapter 52 of the Rule, advises those wishing to pray to "enter with simplicity and pray, not with a loud voice, but with tears and fervor of heart."

Remembering that God already knows the heart's intentions, the possibility of being in that presence, content, calm, is essential.

It's not seeking a spiritual high, so to speak, or some divine revelation. It's realizing existence is what's most important.

No amount of doing, speaking or reading will compensate for ignorance of this truth.

Whether on a mental, physical or spiritual level, simplicity is all about being true to self, as God made us. When we unclutter from unnecessary thoughts, unnecessary possessions and even unnecessary prayers, we will find a freedom to be as God intended, and share ourselves fully with all people. •

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Paintings by Georges Rouault (d. 1958) and Fr. Stephen MacPherson; photos by Tina Thorman, Fr. Stephen MacPherson, Michael Feiss, and John Wasco.



Monastery Chronicle Sept-Nov 2019

By Fr. Boniface Lautz, OSB

SEPTEMBER

During September, we hosted several groups of quilters and a Unitarian group from Boise. Some of the programs have been back-to-back, which means that rooms needed to be cleaned quickly. We have some great volunteers who make that transition happen. When we express our thanks they assure us that they consider it a privilege to help. Such a blessing!

Fr. Ezekiel returned on September 17. It's good to have him back. Fr. Andrew is particularly happy to have someone who can take turns at playing the organ.

Fr. Hugh began the Adult Faith program on Tuesdays. The participants, about 20, are studying materials related to the life of Archbishop St. Oscar Romero. They meet weekly for six weeks. Fr. Norbert began the program some years ago.

On Sunday, September 15, we hosted a group discussion of Bishop Barron's book, *Letter To A Suffering Church, A Bishop Speaks Out On The Sexual Abuse Crisis*. Two oblates purchased 150 copies of the book that were distributed in the weeks before the discussion of this evil rot that harmed so many people directly or indirectly.

Communication via electronic devices is such a blessing, but a mixed one if they do not work. Our stress level increases measurably when they don't. We've had repair people here several times this month to get things operating again, with some degree of success.

From the abundant produce of the garden, LuAnn and Adam made 80 quarts of salsa. There are still lots of tomatoes to be processed. We have enjoyed raspberries, peppers and varieties of squash and eggplant and taken some produce to the food pantry in Jerome. Now that the temperature has begun to drop we will soon be done with the harvest.

A generous benefactor has offered to re-surface the floors in the conference room and the guest dining room. The current carpet has served well for almost 30 years, but needs replacing. We have been looking at materials and may be able to make a change before long.

Our Oblate, Jane Huston, has come to help catalog library books. She does that several times a year. Fr. Andrew has been preparing to participate in a KAIROS retreat at Idaho State Prison in October. Br. Tobiah's name day was on September 16. He spent the day welcoming guests.

OCTOBER

The month provided us with many reasons to be grateful. The front parking area has been re-sealed. Our windows have been professionally cleaned. Measuring for the new carpet is done and the replacement has been scheduled. All of this is due to generous friends. The Room to Learn quilting group made us beautiful quilts for eight rooms in the guest house,

with the promise of furnishing the other eight rooms next year. The quilts really brighten the rooms.

On Saturday, October 5, the local Hispanic community held a "pilgrimage" from the monastery to the church in Jerome. It's about a seven-mile trek. The pilgrims come from St. Edward's in Twin Falls and St. Jerome's. Fr. Kenneth met with them in our parking lot and gave them a blessing to send them on their way.

The next day our Oblates held a pot-luck lunch in our dining room. A good number attended.

On October 13 we hosted the annual appreciation dinner for those who help us in so many ways. About 60 were able to attend. Lu Ann and Adam, assisted by some gracious volunteers, served the meal. Br. Sylvester decorated.



Fr. Andrew vacationed in Oregon and Br. John took some days of vacation to visit his mother and brother in Texas. Br. Tobiah and I made a quick and enjoyable visit to St. Gertrude's Monastery in Cottonwood to visit Fr. Meinrad and see some of the Prairie area.

October 15. Jim Paxton was here to winterize the sprinkler system he installed 25 years ago along with the walking path. To blow the sprinkler system out, he used equipment loaned by Barry Rental. We are grateful to them.

Our health insurance agent spent time with us one Saturday morning. She was very helpful, and patient, helping us pick the right plans. This fall we have put the Medicare and the supplemental insurance to good use, with colds, sinus infections and back problems. The local pharmacies know us by name.

Fr. Andrew spent four days helping with a KAIROS retreat for prisoners incarcerated in Boise. He has been doing that ministry for over 15 years.

We've begun hosting a post-Confirmation group once a month on Sunday evenings. The students, gathered by Pete Espil, join us for Vespers and supper and discuss issues of concern to them with Pete and Fr. Hugh.



See "CHRONICLE", cont on page 7



(1940-2009), Carolyn Forché's mentor during the time she spent in El Salvador. By the time the truce was signed more than 70,000 people had died, most of them poor. Several hundred thousand people had left the country, and half a million were internally displaced. The peace accord brought a dismantling of the paramilitary death squads, limitation of the army to 17,000 members, free and fair elections, and the right to organize and assemble. A truth commission investigated the killings and published the results, but an amnesty was passed so few of the perpetrators of the murders have been punished. The poverty in El Salvador is still horrific and now gangs have replaced the military as the murderers du jour.

There are several things about this history that are particularly disturbing. The first is the failure of the United States to make any positive contribution to alleviating the suffering of the Salvadorian people. The main involvement of the United States was billions of dollars of military aid and training for the Salvadorian military. Now, President Trump is using the threat of an end to United States aid to force the Salvadorian government to expend its very limited resources to keep people from emigrating northward. Moreover, if the current American administration gets its way, the 200,000 Salvadorians living in this country under Temporary Protected Status will be forced to go back to the starvation and violence they sought to flee. If they are forced back, they will also no longer be able to send back remittances of money to their relatives and friends in El Salvador.

More disturbing are the results the many ways the Church encouraged the hopes of the poor of El Salvador to seek a better life. In the 1970s base ecclesial communities multiplied throughout the country. They were composed mainly of peasant farmers, who learned to read the Bible and reflect on the contrast between what God wanted for his people and the reality of their lives. Since the right of assembly was not recognized and they had no other place to meet, if they gathered indoors it was most often in a church. When they wanted to demonstrate, they occupied a church. Then, as the military started killing people in the churches, there was no place to meet other than secretly under the cover of darkness at the risk of their lives. By the time Romero was shot, the bishops and priests could no longer protect their people.

Most disturbing is the unthinkable violence committed by the death squads on their fellow citizens. The killers did not just murder people, they tortured and mutilated them in twisted ways. In many cases the killers were just ordinary people who joined the army to have a better life and were gradually transformed into torturers and killers. They are a frightening example of the evil that lurks in the heart of each of us. Their behavior is every bit as brutal as the brutality of those who put Jesus to death. *Homo lupus homini*, human beings can be wolves to human beings.

Was the death of 70,000 people in vain? Not for them: many or most of them are genuine martyrs, killed for their embrace of the gospel, and now among the most revered constellation of saints. But what about the people of El Salvador today: what hope do they have? I hope they haven't given up, but when there seems to be no way forward, hope is hard to maintain. A friend of mine went to El Salvador recently. She said that there are remembrances

of Archbishop Romero everywhere. Shortly before he was murdered, Archbishop Romero said: if they kill me I will live on in the Salvadorian people.

One lesson from their political history is that Lord Acton was correct: power tends to corrupt. Successful revolutionaries can often become oppressors in their turn. We in the United States are blessed with stable institutions and checks and balances on the three branches of government, as well as a free press. We need to cherish those institutions. But we also need to ask ourselves, can we and will we, the citizens the United States and the baptized who are the Catholic Church of the United States, help the citizens of El Salvador and other countries lay down the foundations for just and adequate institutions for themselves?

The end of Ordinary Time and the beginning of Advent are the most future-oriented period of the liturgical year. This time looks forward to new birth and eternal rule of Christ in a new heaven and a new earth, where there will be no weeping, and no people disappearing only to be found along a roadside tortured and dead. All Saints and All Souls are feasts of communion. Forché quotes Albert Camus that "one can be right and still be beaten, that force can vanquish spirit, that there are times when courage is not its own reward." Archbishop Romero knew that and still he hoped. We need to think why we should hope. Perhaps we can only learn why if we are willing to join in the struggles of others who hope in Christ and for a better life. •

"CHRONICLE", *from page 6*

NOVEMBER

Mass on All Saints had a few extra participants. We began the month by hosting a Spanish Marriage Encounter. We do that several times a year. It is always a joyful event.

We began making peanut brittle. We sold it at the local parish bazaar. The proceeds go to local charities. We can count on selling whatever we make and often, as we did this year, get requests for more.

Our phone system has required considerable attention this month. The technicians from a local firm seem to have solved the problems.

We hosted a knitting retreat which was organized by our Oblate, Joanne Draper. There were 35 participants. Three of these retreats are been scheduled for next year.

Fr. Hugh has been the Catholic participant in several local ministerial events. He represented the Church at an interfaith service in Twin Falls on Sunday, November 10.

Tom McCaughey, a close friend of the monastery, died on November 13. We have known the family for years and have been privileged to share their lives. We were able to provide spiritual support and friendship.

At the community Mass on November 17, Robin Boies of Contact, NV, made her oblation as an oblate of the monastery.

Thanksgiving dinner, prepared by Fr. Ezekiel, will be special. We hope some local guests will join us.

Advent and Christmas are just ahead. Br. Sylvester and John Wasko have created a card that we hope will suitably express our greetings. •





THE DESERT CHRONICLE

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Programs at the Monastery

Purling a Prayer Knitting Retreats

March 20-22, 2020
July 24-26, 2020
November 13-15, 2020

To register, please contact the instructor, Joanne Draper email at joanned23@gmail.com

Peaceful Quilting at the Monastery

August 10-16, 2020

Instructors: Marilyn Shake mshake1905@yahoo.com
Laura Pukstas

Send registration form and payment to:

Monastery of the Ascension
c/o Brigid Hom-Schnapp
P O Box 261091
San Diego, CA 92196-1081

For information or registration form, contact: Fr. Hugh Feiss at hughf@idahomonks.org or call 208-761-9389



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