



Monastery of the Ascension

# THE DESERT CHRONICLE

XXIX, No. 1 MARCH 2020

## Advice for Lent from Stella

*By Fr. Hugh Feiss, O.S.B.*

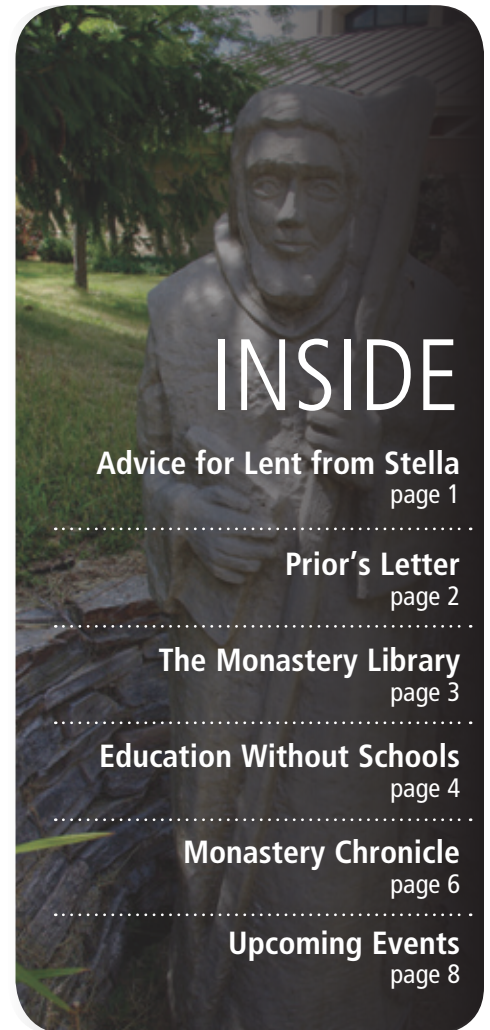
A VERY INTELLIGENT YOUNG MAN NAMED ISAAC LEFT ENGLAND SOMETIME AROUND 1120 TO STUDY IN THE SCHOOLS OF PARIS. HE STUDIED FOR MANY YEARS. A VERY fine career lay ahead of him, serving as an official in the Church or in a secular court. He may have studied with Thomas Becket. In any case, toward the end of his life he was a strong supporter of Becket, but perhaps died just before Thomas was murdered. Anyway, unlike Becket, he left his promising career behind and joined the Cistercian monastery of Stella in France. In 1147 he was elected abbot there, a position he held for twenty years.

He didn't leave behind many writings, but fifty-eight sermons of his survive. Three of these are for Quinquagesima Sunday, which was the Latin name for the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. In these sermons he talks about asceticism, what we would call self-denial. The advice he gave his monks on that topic is, for the most part, applicable to us.

First, he told them "I myself am now a foreigner and pilgrim here, that is, anywhere in the world. It is as though I were not from the world at all. . . . I am by no means a son of my father and mother, or brother of my brothers. . . . You are my brothers. . . . Our father is in heaven. We are natives of heaven, but we are foreigners and pilgrims here." You will recognize several different teachings of the New Testament in Isaac's words. Jesus said, my mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and keep it. The first letter of Peter says we are pilgrims passing through this life to get to heaven. Lent is meant to remind us of this: this earth, this country, this house is a temporary shelter; we must keep moving, walking by our choices and desire toward our true home. As pilgrims, we need to walk lightly. Lent is a time to jettison some of the unnecessary stuff, not just because it bogs us down, but also because there are plenty of people who don't have enough and can use our surplus.

Secondly, Isaac says, whatever we do starts first with God's gracious gift of faith. He puts it rather dramatically: "I do not set up for myself any sure signs of

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# Prior's Letter

Dear Friends of the Monastery,

This evening we will begin our annual retreat. Every year during the first week of Lent we set aside five days to take some extra time for quiet, reading and reflection. We listen to talks that will nourish and help us be aware of the Lord's call and guide us on the way.

Taking "time out" is something that many would want to do if only they could. The demands of family and work don't often make that possible. But we don't always consider retreat a blessing. Sometimes it seems like an interruption. We can't get the things done that need doing. It doesn't fit into our schedule. With all the "important" things going on, we can't back away.

I recently read what a monastic author wrote about "leisure". Sometimes we think of leisure as a time of doing enjoyable things; going for a walk, taking a nap. And so it can be. We certainly need that. However, what about setting time aside to do nothing? No agenda. Nothing that has to be done. Just take time to be quiet and listen. For many it is hard to be quiet and listen. We live in a world when we are surrounded and

immersed in sound. It's hard to find silence. And when we do, we wonder shouldn't I be doing something? Our heads are full of the latest news and worries about everything.

So retreat time, even in the monastery, can be a challenge. The challenge is that we give our "time out" to the Lord. We ask for the grace to be open to the relationship to which he invites us. The Lord is always inviting and responding. In our Lenten journey, all may not have the benefit of making a retreat. However, we pray all will have the leisure to spend some time to listen to what the Lord is telling us.

Please know that you are in our prayers during Lent and Easter.

Peace and good things.

Fr. Boniface Lautz, OSB  
Prior







# The Monastery Library

By Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB

I HAVE BEEN WORKING ON A PAPER I WAS TO GIVE IN APRIL ON THE HISTORY OF BENEDICTINE LIBRARIES. IT IS A GLORIOUS history. It begins with St. Benedict (d. @547), who wanted his monk to spend over two hours a day reading. Benedict seems to have thought that every monk should be able to read. At a minimum there would have to be one book for each monk. In Lent, each monk was to be given a book to read during the season. Book in this context meant a codex, with leaves like ours today, but perhaps no bigger than a single book of the Bible. There also had to be books for the divine office, including the night office of vigils which including readings not just from the Bible but also readings from approved Christian authors. For those who arrived to the monastery unable to read there needed to be grammar books.

The person in charge of the books was called the armarius, that is, the person in charge of the cupboard where the books were kept. He might also be called the cantor, because often the one in charge of all the books was the one in charge of the liturgy and its books.

Books, if available, were very expensive: it would take a year for one person working full time to copy a Bible on to vellum (animal skin) pages. For this reason, and out of reverence for the contents, books were treated with reverence, especially Bibles, which contained the very Word of God. In time, the most

precious books were encased in metal coverings embellished with precious stones.

So right from the beginning of Benedictine history there were books, librarians (armarii), places to store the books (armaria), and readers. Benedict was very careful about keeping inventories, so probably right from the beginning there were also lists of the books in the library, which over the centuries came to be organized by subject and/or alphabetized by author or title. This was complicated because often a single codex would contain many different works, sometimes on unrelated subjects by different authors.

During times of prosperity, such as the Carolingian era on both sides of 800 ad and the twelfth-century renaissance, and the flowering of monasteries during the reform movements of fifteenth and sixteenth-centuries) Benedictine libraries prospered.

For example, in 1147, a monk from the Abbey of St. Blaise in the Germany came to the abbey of Engelberg in the alps of Switzerland (which founded Mount Angel), which had been struggling since it opened in 1120. During his thirty years there he built up the library and a scriptorium where books were copied. He was able to write several long books with many excerpts from Christian authors,



Kloster Engelberg

even some who were his contemporaries. How books written in Paris reached central Switzerland in less than twenty years is a mystery. The books copied at Engelberg during Frowin's time are noteworthy for their beauty.

Another example of Benedictine libraries occurred in the seventeenth century when the Benedictines of the Congregation of St. Maur assigned some of their most talented monks to prepare new

accurate editions of Christian writers such as St. Augustine and St. John Chrysostom. France was then recovering from the Wars of Religion. The Maurists reorganized the libraries in their monasteries and set up a headquarters in Paris to organize their efforts to edit and publish the theological and historical patrimony of the Church.

The French Revolution destroyed the Maurists. French troops invaded Engelberg in 1798, scattered their library of



Engelberg Switzerland

See "THE MONASTERY LIBRARY", cont on page 7





# Education without Schools

*By Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB*

**I**MIGHT HAVE ENTITLED THIS “SCHOOLS WITHOUT EDUCATION” TO JUDGE FROM THE LAMENTS OF SOME PROFESSORS ABOUT THE state of their universities. There seems to be some basis for their laments. Some states, including Idaho, are cutting the funding to their state universities in a time of prosperity; universities with which I have some acquaintance are cutting back in the humanities offerings and requirements in order to concentrate on STEM and job training. Students and their parents want to know that the tens of thousands a year they spend on a college education makes economic sense. That, in fact, may be a key point: evaluating success of an education or a major or a life in purely economic terms. Presumably, most of us can still think of other reasons for becoming educated, such as being able to think straight, to identify untruth and manipulative rhetoric, to learn about ideas and cultures other than our own, to be challenged to think about essential questions and to enjoy the beauty of art, music and poetry. However, this article is not a lament, but a celebration of three educational experiences, none of which took place in a school.

## Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

Recently, I visited a session of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS) at nearby St. Jerome’s parish. The class was made up of three- to five-year-olds. I had never heard of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd before 2019, when it started to appear in some Idaho parishes and a friend at St. Jerome’s and another in Washington state began taking trainings in the program and serving as an assistant in a class. The training one of them is taking requires eight hours of work one Saturday a month for a year and considerable work outside of class. She tells me that she loves the training and being involved in the program.

The program was developed by some associates of Maria Montessori (1870-1952) near the end of her life. It was used in Italy and Spain and then in other countries. CGS is addressed

to the learning capacities of the ages of the children in the three levels (3-6), (6-9) and (10-12). It advises the teacher that their task is only to facilitate: the primary teacher is the Holy Spirit. The first level, which I observed and my friend teaches, does not give the students’ reading materials, but the room where they meet, the Atrium, is chock full of all kinds of learning materials: dioramas, wooden settings for the Christmas crib and Last Supper, miniature chasubles, cruets, little statues of saints, a banner of the Good Shepherd, a pillow on which to display the Bible, and so forth, most of them made by the teachers or others in the parish.

So, here is what I saw. A five-year-old comes in the door. He goes to a drawer and pulls out some drawing materials, goes quietly to a desk and starts coloring. A girl the same age goes to a cupboard and gets some cruets and washes them. They walk quietly and carefully with their “atrium feet,” and talk, when they do, with their “atrium voice.” The children are busy, each with projects they have chosen, for about 45 minutes. Then they gather on a rug, put the Bible on a special stand on a pillow, then bring it to the teacher who reads a parable. She gives each a mustard seed and shows them a photo of a mustard tree. She asks them their ideas about how things grow. Then they work a bit more, put their work away carefully, and do some exercises around an oval pattern (a miniature Roman race track, I thought) on the floor until they (and the instructor) are tired, then return to the rug to pray a bit, then they leave. By then, everything has been put back; the room is just like it was when they arrived. Clearly, five-year-olds—and the Holy Spirit—are capable of much more than I, and probably many others, have thought. All the CGS instructors I have talked with say they wish that had been taught in CGS programs when they were young.

## Post-Confirmation Community

Many people have remarked that after young Catholics receive Confirmation (usually somewhere between their twelfth







and sixteenth year) they just drift in the practice of their faith, and by the time they go to college or enter the work force, they have drifted away from the practice of their faith. Pete Espil, an oblate and a former campus minister at both the college and high school levels, has a group of post-confirmation high school students from our area. They meet once a week. On one Sunday month they meet at the monastery for dinner and to discuss a topic. They picked the topics at the beginning of the school year; for example, faith and objections to it, climate change, death and what comes after it, and exorcism. After dinner they sit in a circle and discuss the topic of the day. Sometimes they start with rather pat answers, but as the discussion goes on they begin thinking more deeply about the topic. I suspect that their most important thinking comes after they have left for home.

Juniors and seniors in high school have extremely full schedules, mostly filled with school, work and sports. That these young people meet one a week is a real tribute to their engagement with their faith. Once again, it is they and the Holy Spirit who are the primary teachers. What they learn is important, but that they do it together is probably more important, insofar as they are for each other a community of faith.

## Adult Faith Formation

Years ago, Fr. Norbert Novak started a series of adult faith-formation classes here at the monastery. The format was to read a book together and discuss it in six two-hour meetings held once a week. Fr. Norbert built up community who were very regular participants. After his death, I inherited his role. Last fall, we discussed *María López Vigil, Monseñor Romero: Memories in a Mosaic* (Orbis, 2013), which is spliced together from transcripts



of interviews with people who knew Archbishop Romero at various points during his life. It is a powerful book. It led us to other books about St. Oscar Romero and El Salvador during his time. By the time we finished, we felt we had to do something. So we collaborated in formulating a letter to the Bishop of Idaho, Peter Christensen, sharing with him some things that had learned about conditions in El Salvador since the 1970s and 1980s when United States gave huge amounts of aid to the El Salvadorian army, who claimed to be fighting communists, but in fact killed over 60,000 campesinos who simply asked for a share in the nation's wealth sufficient to support themselves decently. We suggested ways in which Catholics in Idaho might help El Salvadorians today. We also noticed that the Salvadorian Church had been unduly influenced by the oligarchic wealthy class, because they contributed a large share of the money that the Church needed to operate—and help the poor. In the end that meant that most of the hierarchy in El Salvador did not support Archbishop Romero when he spoke out on behalf of the poor people of his country and told the nation about government atrocities—with a boldness that led to his assassination.

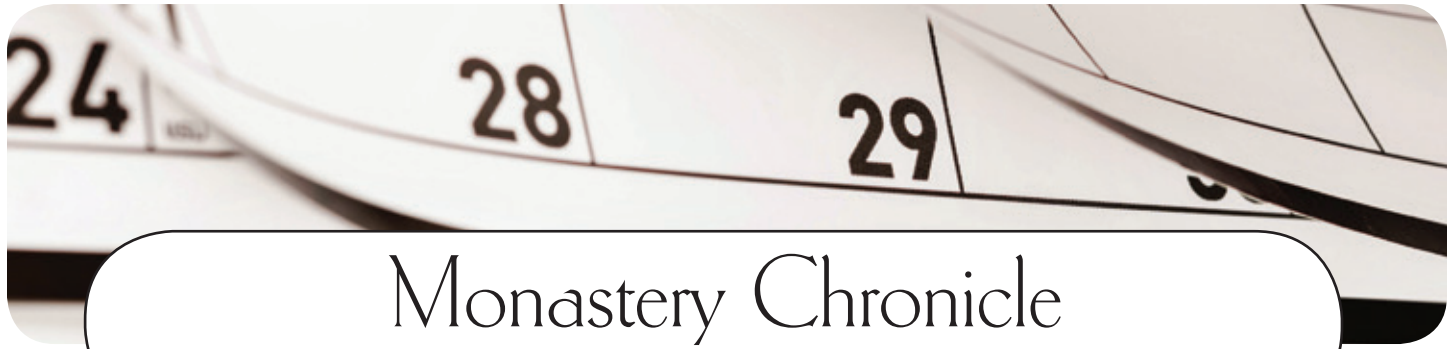
Another action we are going to do is to join the monastery and the monastery oblates in supporting a child in the Compassion International program, which supports the nutrition, health, and education of children living in poverty. We are planning to support a very young Salvadorian named Glenda, whom we hope to follow in her journey toward Christian adulthood.

The significance of this session of our Adult Faith Formation group was that Romero's example of listening, even to those with whom he disagreed, prompted us to listen to him and those who knew him to the point where we had to do something. This seems to be a good template, one very like the method used by the small ecclesial communities (*comunidades de base*) that sparked the call for justice in El Salvador and elsewhere: listen to God's word, compare it with the reality around you, and act to bring the two into alignment.

## Epiclesis

It seems, therefore, that important education (Latin: *ex + ducere* = to draw or lead out) in Christianity can happen outside of schools, or at least in schools that do not so much provide information or a diploma, as invite us to listen the Bible, the witness of martyrs and saints, and the Holy Spirit who speaks in our hearts. One of the words the children (and often their teachers) learn in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is "epiclesis," which means "calling down." It is used to describe the moment when the celebrant holds out his hands over the bread and wine and asks the Father to send the Spirit that those foodstuffs may become the body and blood of Christ. That seems to be what happens in the three educational settings just describe: the Spirit comes down upon believers to inspire them to faith, hope, and loving action. •





# Monastery Chronicle

*By Fr. Boniface Lautz, OSB*

## DECEMBER

The celebration of Christmas was the major event of December. We had Mass at midnight and again at 9:00 AM, followed by a relaxed schedule with Vespers and Compline at mid-afternoon. Fr. Ezekiel prepared a delicious dinner for us at which we hosted five guests. The day was completed with some watching tv, a movie, or early to bed.

Christmas decorations are usually a major undertaking. Not so this year, because installation of new carpet precluded Christmas decorations. However, they were limited to a tree in the dining room and very nice decorations in the chapel. . Br. Sylvester and his helpers, who come annually, did well.

Work on the carpet began on December 9 and finished December 31. The main lobby areas, the conference room and connecting hallways all have a new floor cover. It is a great addition. Moving furniture had some beneficial side effects. We cleaned some areas that had not been touched for years and emptied shelves and desk drawers of many "treasures," wondering "when did we get that?" and "what's it for?"

Gaudete Sunday featured a Christmas sing-along with Fr. Andrew at the accordion. Fr. Andrew played non-stop for about 45 minutes. We had a great turn out, including people who had never been here. Participants were treated to lots of sugar-filled goodies afterwards.

The year was one of many blessings. We have reason to be grateful.

## JANUARY

Around here people go to warmer climates in January. Our travelers didn't exactly do that. Fr. Stephen went to Ireland. Fr. Ezekiel to D.C. and Alabama, and Br. John to Nebraska. That can make a big dent in choir when having a "full house" means 9. However, thanks be, two others came home: Fr. Hugh from Unity and Br. Selby from Mt. Angel.

Medical needs merited attention this month. Fr. Ezekiel slipped while walking in the snow along the station path. He fell into some sharp brush and severely damaged his ear. A trip to the local ER and some careful stitching took care of that.

On Sunday, January 19, we and the Oblates and other local people heard an inspirational talk by Jeannot Chataigne on behalf of Compassion International programs in Haiti. The focus was on the needs of children as well as the current social, political and economic situation in Haiti. Chataigne is Haitian and runs a school there.

Mid-month we had our annual financial report. The report covers the previous fiscal year. It also gives us a chance to reflect on current needs. We had a brief Chapter meeting to elect a Council member. Br. Tobiah was re-elected for a two year term.

The power booster on our dish washing machine broke one morning just as we were finishing Lauds. The machine is adjacent to the chapel. All of a sudden there was a loud explosion and water was spraying in all directions. Someone had the presence of mind to shut the power off. The cooking utensils had already been washed, so we only hand-washed table ware. We are fortunate to have a loyal repair man who came the same day and got things working.

## FEBRUARY

The new carpet project was brought to a marvelous conclusion on February 5. On February 3 we cleared furniture in the chapel to make room for installation of new carpet. It matches the carpet that was put down in January. We had prayer and Mass in the conference room for two days. And we were back in chapel by Vespers, February 5.

The Prior went to a meeting of Benedictine abbots and priors to Prince of Peace Abbey in Oceanside, CA. Five days of 60+ degree temperature, some fraternal gatherings, and some good talks were a welcome gift.

The Inter-faith group that Fr. Hugh belongs to had their monthly meeting and a dinner here on February 10. We had several birthdays this month, mostly remembered for large quantities of German chocolate cake.

The sound system in the chapel needed several service calls. It is important to hear the readings. The limited hearing of some of us requires extra help so sound systems are important.

Trips to local medical resources continue on a regular basis. The limited number of drivers calls for a bit of coordination some days. We are blessed to have generous volunteers who fill in when the need arises.

Lent is upon us. Our annual retreat begins March 1. •



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“ADVICE FOR LENT”, *from page 1*

righteousness in my own fasts, human traditions or Pharisaic dress, not in any righteousness of works or works of righteousness that I do, but rather in the righteousness of faith that comes as a gift beforehand and enlightens those who it saves.” Hence, Isaac says, I always live between hope and fear”—hope in grace, fear about the worth of my own efforts and deeds. The just persons lives by the grace of faith.



Thirdly, Isaac says that if an animal is getting ready to jump, or a bird to fly, they squash down as low as they can in order better to launch themselves. This, he says, is a lesson for us. If we want to launch ourselves toward heaven we need to lower ourselves, or at least our estimate of ourselves. Humility is truth, St. Teresa of Avila said. True humility is to know oneself and accept that you are a child of God, one who has a great deal of growing up to do. The humble person is at peace, knowing he is in the image and likeness of God, by God’s gift a sinner redeemed, a pilgrim on the way to the promised land. Humility is emphatically not worrying about what people think about you; it is looking at yourself from God’s point of view. God, in fact,

humbled himself by becoming human for you, but Jesus, God humbled, tells us to be like he is: forgiving, non-violent, loving neighbors and enemies. Against that criterion, there is no room for pride.

So, Isaac the monk speaks to us from an obscure monastery in France about things to keep in mind during Lent. He says, remember you are on a quick trip through this world; keep you backpack light. Remember that the whole adventure is by God’s gift and grace. Be humbled by how far you are from holiness and perfection. Travel lightly, gratefully, humbly—between hope and fear. •



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“THE MONASTERY LIBRARY”, *from page 3*



*Mt. Angel Library*

perhaps 20,000 books and 400 manuscripts, though Engelberg was one of the few monasteries to survive after the French Revolution. From 1850 to 1970 monasteries and their libraries flourished, and Benedictines once again made important contributions to scholarship. The library at Mount Angel Abbey is an architectural masterpiece by Alvar Aalto that witnesses to this flourishing.

By contrast, the library at the Monastery of the Ascension is a modest place. However, its recent remodeling was inspired by the architecture at Mount Angel. It offers a panoramic view of the Magic Valley and the mountains to the south. It now houses over 15,000 books, most of them donated, an astonishing number for a small community in southern Idaho. Most of the

books are religious in nature. As one might expect, Benedictine history is a strong section. The monastery subscribes to over 40 print periodicals. Most of the cataloguing, shelving, and cleaning is done by volunteers. Anyone is welcome to use the library. Library cards are available and free. There are desks for those who wish to read or study. You can access the online catalog by going to the web page, Monastery of the Ascension and hitting the Library Catalog button.

The future of printed books and of monasteries, if not of Western civilization, is murky, but for the present the 1500-year-old tradition of Benedictine libraries survives in Jerome County. •







## THE DESERT CHRONICLE

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## *Programs at the Monastery*

### **Purling a Prayer Knitting Retreats**

July 24-26, 2020  
November 13-15, 2020

To register, please contact the instructor, Joanne Draper email at [joanned23@gmail.com](mailto:joanned23@gmail.com)

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### **Peaceful Quilting at the Monastery**

August 10-16, 2020

Instructors: Marilyn Shake [mshake1905@yahoo.com](mailto: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](mailto:hughf@idahomonks.org) or call 208-761-9389



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