



Monastery of the Ascension

THE DESERT CHRONICLE

Vol. XXXIII, Number 1 - MARCH 2024

COMMUNITY

By Robin Boies

As oblates, we make a commitment to a Benedictine community and incorporate the Liturgy of the Hours into our day as best we can. It becomes a reminder throughout the day to pause, to breathe, and bring our mind into awareness. I read somewhere that “the Liturgy of the Hours is a repeated reminder of a monk’s responsibility to share in redeeming the world.” As individuals and oblates, our cultivation of pausing in prayer throughout the day reminds us to strive to participate - in our own small way - in taking responsibility and share in redeeming the world.

I was asked to talk about the role of community as developed in the *Rule of St. Benedict*. I shaped this talk

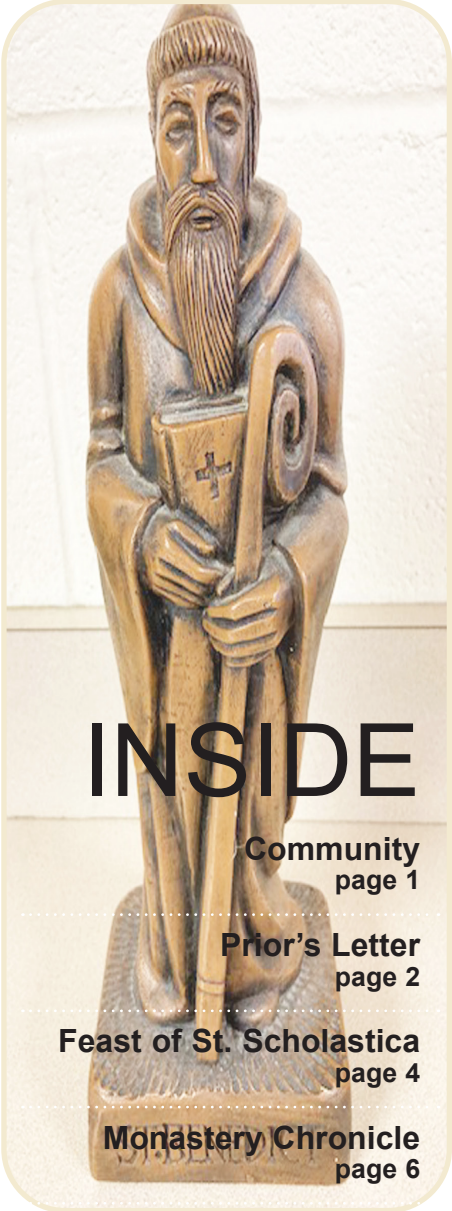
around three elements: divergence, things dispersing, moving away from one another; convergence, the coming together; and emergence, the creation of something new beyond the old.

I will refer often to Sister Joan Chittister’s commentary on the *Rule of St. Benedict* (RB), and *The Gift of Saint Benedict* by Sister Verna Holyhead, SGS.

Divergence

St. Benedict’s world in the fifth and sixth centuries was one of chaos and dissonance. In response to his world, Benedict molded a system of “fidelity to a way of life and behavior” (Holyhead, SGS). The *Rule of St. Benedict* was a response to a need in Benedict’s time. The Rule brought a

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Introduction to March 2024 Desert Chronicle from Fr. Hugh Feiss:
The oblates of the monastery held a retreat from February 17-19, 2023, during which they gave five conferences on key Benedictine ideas. These oblates gave the same talks at the parish in Jerome, Idaho - one each Sunday for the first five weeks of Lent 2023. This issue offers the text of the last of these talks. These are ideas that can apply to anyone’s life, and they express from various angles the Benedictine way to God. We hope you find them helpful.



Prior's Letter

Dear Friends of the Monastery,

As I write, it is Ash Wednesday. We and the MSPs were duly signed with ashes at Mass this morning and embarked on a journey that will hopefully lead us in the footsteps of Jesus. We have annual Lenten practices and make some personal choices that we think will be beneficial to us and even to the people with whom we live. The liturgical prayers for the day ask for the grace and perseverance to struggle against the forces of evil. We pray for ourselves and for you.

We live in a part of Idaho that is not far from the mountains. This time of year, severe winter weather can make living and driving situations difficult.

We live so close to them that we get all the “weather alert” bulletins. They don’t all pertain to us, but they are a valuable warning of what could happen. Avalanches and blizzards are realities not far from where we live.

In the Gospel, Jesus’ disciples are expected to learn the signs that will indicate the coming of the eschatological event, the coming of the Lord. (Mt. 24, 3) In the story of the wise and foolish virgins, his

disciples are told, “stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” (Mt. 25, 12)

What has all this got to do with Lent? Our first reading at Ash Wednesday Mass told us to search our minds and hearts, that is, to take a serious look at how we are responding to the Lord’s call. Is there room to do something different, or to quit doing something? Read the signs. They may lead us closer to the footsteps of Jesus. Lent will lead us to Jerusalem and Calvary, but also to Easter...one step at a time.

“Weather alerts” are valuable, but not always accurate. We’d like them to be so we could be in charge of our travel plans. The “signs” of our journey with Christ are something we take in faith. We’re not in control, followers that we are called to be.

Lenten and Easter blessings to all of you. Let us pray for one another.

Peace and good things!

Fr. Boniface Lautz, O.S.B., Prior



harmonious and ordered way of life to an uncertain world. Benedict asked everyone in the community to seek God and to prefer nothing to the love of Christ, his love for them, their love for Christ.

“Love is not a matter of looking at each other, but of looking together in the same direction.”

- Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Convergence

Benedict centered the Rule's principles around love, prayer, humility, stability, community, stewardship, mutual obedience, hospitality, and peace. Bringing together these thoughts, principles and rules allows the members of a community to thrive together, and care for one another in their quest for God.

Benedict the realist created a balanced daily life of liturgy and leisure, work and prayer. He recognized - and made room for - strengths and weaknesses of the individual in an equitable, but personally accountable, system.

The Rule emphasizes that “stability leads to the possibility of belonging. Benedict tells us, we are to respond by moving over, making room, and sharing graciously with our sisters and brothers.” I was a stranger, and you took me in.

Benedict offers suggestions and practices to help build and sustain community. In the Prologue to the Rule, he tells the reader to listen, to put into practice the labor of obedience, to give up your own will to find and follow the will of God, which will lead us individually and as community into good relationship with God. He urges, “Let us get up then, at long last, for the Scriptures rouse us when they say: *It is high time for us to arise from sleep.* (Romans 13:11).”

The Prologue in the RB asks, *is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?* (Ps 33[34]:13. Then Benedict instructs, “*keep your tongue free from vicious talk and your lips from all deceit; turn away from evil and do good; let peace be your quest and aim*” (Ps 33[34]:14-15).

The reward (RB18): Once you have done this, *my eyes will be upon you and my ears will listen for your prayers; and even before you ask me, I will say to you: Here I am* (Isa 58:9).

The Prologue asks, *who will dwell in your tent, Lord; who will find rest upon your holy mountain?* (Ps 14[15]:2-3). The answer that follows is Paul's, refusing to take credit for his preaching: *By God's grace I am what I am* (1Cor 15:10). That those who dwell in God's tent are *like the wise men [and women] who built their house upon a rock* (Matt 7:24-25).

To build community and stability, we must learn to, “*Bear each other's weakness with the utmost patience.*”

Community then becomes, “*The workshop where we should work hard in all things within the stability in the community.*” That doing this will help us: “*Have perseverance, and the ability to keep going through the desert stretches of life and stay true to values and beliefs.*”

The Prologue ends: “*that now we have heard the Lord's instruction for dwelling in his tent, we must run toward the work that will prepare us to do battle and follow in holy obedience his instruction so that we reach eternal life.*” It goes on to say: “*we intend to establish a school for the Lord's service. We hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome.*”

Emergence

So, what is the result or goal of a stable community? It can be the emergence of something new that arises; something that transforms the old system, transforms the old you.

My falling into this Benedictine way was by happenstance or, perhaps, one of God's nudges in my life. In the mid-1990s, we were in the throes of big changes in grazing on federal lands at our ranch in northeastern Nevada. Instead of battling, we chose to look at ourselves and our actions on the ranch and how we might change our management to better serve everyone: the public, the wildlife, the land itself.

We decided to adopt a decision-making model that brings everyone to the table - or circle in our case - to talk through differences in perspectives and develop agreed-upon goals. In our circle, all voices are valued, listening is cultivated, and solutions are sought.

I found and read, during this time, Kathleen Norris's book *The Cloister Walk*, which introduced me to the world of the Benedictines. I had no idea at the time that there was a Benedictine monastery in the neighborhood, a neighborhood in the western sense of a 100-mile radius.

I found myself driving into the monastery one day, asking for Father Hugh Feiss, and invited him to join our collaborative ranch group. Graciously, he said yes.

Next thing I knew, I'm reading *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* by Joan Chittister, where I read in her Prologue, “Life is a teacher of universal truths. That may be the reason why the religious readings of so many nations speak of the same situations and fasten on the same insights. The Rule of Benedict, too, is wisdom literature that sounds life's themes. It deals with answers to the great questions of the human condition: the presence of God, the foundation of relationships, the nature of self-development, the place of purpose. To the wise, it seems, life is not a series of events to



be controlled. Life is a way of walking through the universe whole and holy.”

At my first oblate retreat, I stumbled through the Liturgy of the Hours, lost much of the time. None of that seemed to matter. Not knowing my way, I was welcomed as I was. It was about finding the way. Again, Chittister, “We come to realize that we did not find God; God finally got our attention.”

Leadership within the Rule establishes listening to the youngest members and the quiet voices, not discounting them, or ignoring them; on the other side not disrespecting the old. There was no building a hierarchy of power by the few.



Flowers on the Boies ranch.

To create stability within a community, you must build trust and order, commitment, and accountability. This builds a foundation of mutual respect, aspirations that we strive for in our families, communities, and work.

Benedict directs, “Arrange everything that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak nothing to run from.” (Chap. 63 & 64)

This was a system that had a balance built around the capabilities of the individual, a recognition and belief in the

sacredness of all people and all things, an egalitarian world, for the most part built on accountability and respect. A house built on rock not sand.

There seemed to be commonalities in the principles of our collaborative process and the Benedictine ways. Both seemed an alternative outside the normal workings of the world. Both “wrench us out of the limitations of our own landscape. We are being called to something outside of ourselves, something greater than ourselves, something beyond ourselves.” (J. Chittister) *If you hear this voice today - discern this opportunity or challenge - do not harden your hearts* (Ps 94[95]:8). *Run while you have the light of life, that the darkness of death may not overtake you* (John 12:35).

Conclusion

Sometimes the community you planned on is not the community where you find belonging. Community is of the mind, as well as the place. It’s where you feel all those divergent aspects of your life, your grumbling, and questioning and protests converging into something bigger and more meaningful and peaceful and purposeful.

The convergence of the collaborative model for the ranch, and the introduction to the *Rule of St. Benedict* and the monastery are two things in my adult life that gave it more depth and breadth and meaning.

The monastery became a spiritual home, a welcoming shelter, a place of respite where I could ready myself for a re-launch back into the complexities of life. It’s where everything seemed to be in its intentional place.

I’m still learning and gaining a better understanding why the Benedictine Liturgy of the Hours is built around the psalms. The psalms bear witness to the common human experience grounded in specific memories and hope. Giving voice to the human experience from the depths of despair and speaking of the old allow for the adoption of a new orientation to move toward a new understanding and equilibrium (*The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, Walter Brueggemann).

God has bestowed this solidarity of love that allows us to get frustrated and angry, to diverge then converge back into relationship and emerge transformed in some way. “We go on and fall down and get up; and go on and fall down and get up ...” in the community where “we bear each other’s weakness with the utmost patience.” “Where we stand firm with members in the concrete realities of everyday life.” “Where we give and receive mutual nourishment through communal and personal prayer.” (Brueggemann)



THE FEAST OF ST. SCHOLASTICA

By Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB

For sixty years, I have been celebrating the feast (February 10) of St. Benedict's Sister Scholastica. This year, I paid close attention to the Mass liturgy, and this is what I found:

The only reference to St. Scholastica we have is a brief narrative in the section of the Dialogues of Pope Gregory the Great devoted to the life of St. Benedict. It is, however, a very powerful passage, the messages of which are echoed in the liturgy for her feast day. Those messages are love, death, and heaven.

LOVE: She had come to visit her brother Benedict, but when it was getting dark, he said she should go back home because it was against the rules to stay outside his monastery at night. She prayed, and a great storm forced them to stay where they were, talking about spiritual things all night. Gregory says God answered Scholastica's prayer because she loved more. The collect prayer for her feast reads: "We pray, O Lord, that following her example we may serve with pure love and happily receive what comes from loving you." The first reading is a passage from the Song of Songs: "Deep waters cannot quench love, nor rivers sweep it away. Were

one to offer all the wealth of his house for love, he would be utterly despised."

DEATH: The first reading for the feast day Mass also said, "Love is stronger than death." Not long after that night, Scholastica died. Benedict saw her soul ascend to heaven. Love carried her from death to God. Benedict had a grave ready for himself; he put her body in it and was later buried beside her.

HEAVEN: The gospel for Scholastica's feast speaks of a righteous person's reward. We celebrate Scholastica as a saint, which means that gospel passage pertains to her. She has her reward, because she has what she loved above all else: God. The preface reads, "made perfect in grace, Scholastica rejoices forever in your love."

Love, death, and heaven. The love of God for us mirrored in our love for him conquers death, and blossoms into the infinite in heaven. So, in the final prayer of her liturgy, we pray, "Lord, by the prayer of Saint Scholastica, may we give you loving and faithful service. Through Christ our Lord."

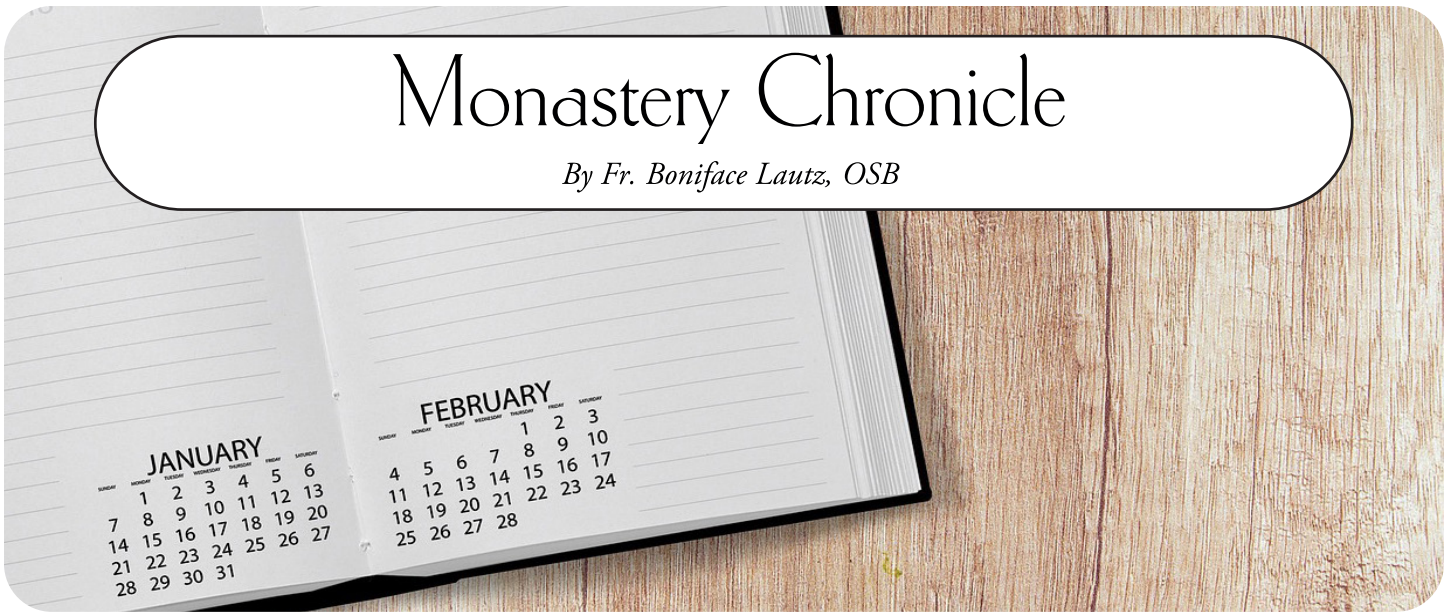


The mural of Benedict and Scholastica at Klosterkirche Elchingen in Oberelchingen, Bavaria, Germany.



Monastery Chronicle

By Fr. Boniface Lautz, OSB



December 2023

The November chronicle began with news of snow. The December entry can begin the same way. The accumulation was mostly gone by Christmas.

On December 2-3, the MSP retreat for young adults was well attended.

December 3, we had our monthly social. That same evening, John Wasko and the Prior made peanut brittle. For most part the brittle was for gifts.

December 5, Fr. Abraham and Fr. Moises went to Mexicoto renew their visas. How long they will stay depends on the immigration service.

December 7, we received a gift of many socks to commemorate St. Nicholas. It is a tradition begun by the Last Family and their children. Fr. Hugh and Br. Sylvester donated blood in Jerome.

December 8-9, Fr. Hugh met via Zoom with Oblates in Pocatello and Idaho Falls. We hosted a long-time friend of the community for several days.

On the 9th, the MSPs celebrated Posadas at Mountain Home.

December 12, the MSPs celebrated Mass, followed by a reception in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

December 13, the MSPs visited the Mexican Consulate in Boise.

Br. Sylvester began decorating the Christmas tree on the 14th. With the help of volunteers, putting up the decorations continued off and on until Christmas. His request for help from the congregation after Mass on the 17th elicited enthusiastic response. On the 24th, his regular helpers decorated the chapel.

Our friend Kathy came on December 21, and stayed with us until the 27th.

December 23 was Fr. Jerome's birthday. Some of the Lay MSPs went to California, not due back at the monastery until January.

We had Christmas Eve Vigils at 8:00 PM and 9:00 AM Mass on the 25th, a very nice dinner at 2:00, and the rest of the day off.

December 28, we had a meeting on Zoom with Abbot Justin Brown and Fr. Charles Benoit.

December 31 was Br. Sylvester's name's day. The MSPs had Mass at 7:00 PM, with a large congregation and a reception afterwards.

January 2024

We celebrated the first day of 2024 with a small congregation at Mass. The Solemnity of Mary was not a holy day of obligation this year. Pizza from a local source gave the cooks a break. Some watched the football bowl games.

January 3, we received some Alaska salmon. John Wasko replaced tile in the dining room. The MSP brothers returned from various missions. It was nice to have them back.

January 4 was the beginning of a long bout of snow that continued the next day with some cold, strong winds. John Wasko cleared the lane.

January 5-6, the MSPs did some traveling to handle their visas. Four lay MSPs arrived from California.

On January 7, there was a small congregation for Epiphany. The weather made a difference. We held out monthly social.

January 8, there was an interment ceremony at columbarium - brief and chilly.

January 9, the MSPs and John Wasko installed additional shelving in the garage, re-arranged things and discarded junk. There were blizzard conditions in the afternoon.

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*Fast from hurting words and say kind words.
Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.
Fast from anger and be filled with patience.
Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.
Fast from worries and have trust in God.
Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.
Fast from pressures and be prayerful.
Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy.
Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.
Fast from grudges and be reconciled.
Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.*

- Pope Francis

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On January 10, we held a brief community meeting. The MSPs helped in chapel, while outdoors, heavy snow fell.

January 11-13, the blizzard conditions continued. All our office staff stayed home.

On January 14, for the first time most of us remember, there was no lay participation at Sunday community Mass.

On January 20, Fr. Hugh was in Boise. The MSPs had the first of their Lay Theology classes, with a good number of participants. The classes will be held every month for six months.

January 21 was Fr. Meinrad's name day. He celebrated with the Benedictine Sisters in Cottonwood, where he continues to serve as chaplain. The local Oblates met at the monastery.

January 22-23, three of the monks received Covid-19 booster shots. We held a community meeting, which included the annual financial report by Diane Sparks.

January 31, we held a pre-surgery Sacrament of Anointing for Diane and Tomas.

February

On February 2, we celebrated the Presentation of the Lord.

February 6 was Br. Selby's birthday.

February 9 was Fr. Boniface's birthday.

February 10 was the Feast of St. Scholastica.

Ash Wednesday, which fell on Valentine's Day this year, saw the monks sporting black crosses on their foreheads.

A number of Oblates gathered at the monastery for their spring retreat from February 16-18, with even more participating via Zoom.





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THE MONKS AND FRIENDS AT THE
MONASTERY OF THE ASCENSION
WISH ALL A VERY BLESSED
LENTEN SEASON
AND
EASTER!



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