



# THE DESERT CHRONICLE



Monastery of the Ascension

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## FR. BONIFACE CELEBRATES 90 YEARS

*An Interview with the Prior*

Fr. Boniface celebrated his 90th birthday after Sunday Mass on February 9th. He has learned a great deal in 90 years of life and almost 40 years as head of the monastery. If it could have survived at all without him, it would be a very different and lesser place.

**Interviewer:** Congratulations on reaching this milestone. How do you feel about it?

**Fr. Boniface:** Reaching 90 is something I didn't think a lot about until the time finally came. And then it occurred to me that I was really getting to be an old man. I have received lots of congratulations and appreciation for which I am grateful. Along with the limitations that can go with 90 years I'm still able to participate in community life. God has given me these years to do his will. He has been patiently waiting. I hope it's happening.

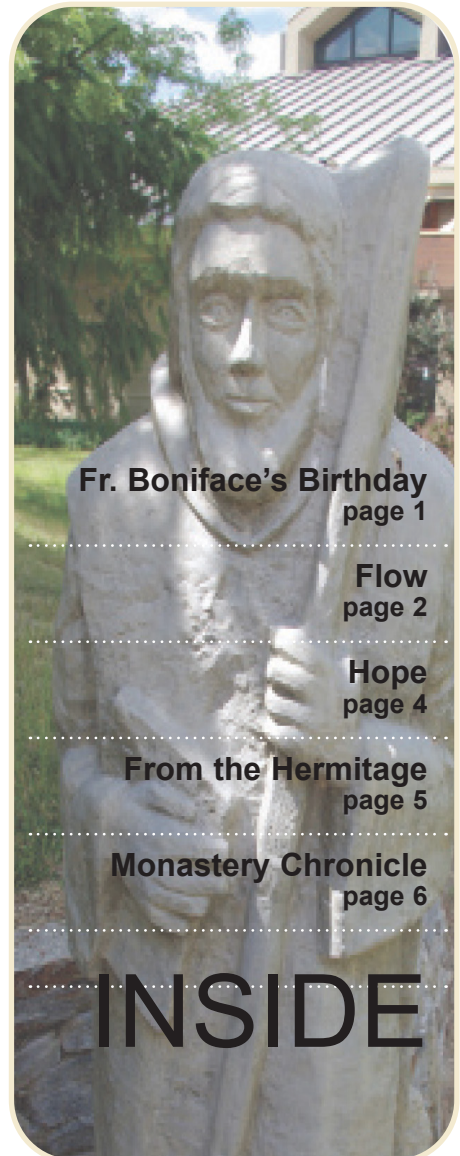
**Interviewer:** At one time you specialized in ministry to older people. Has that helped you cope with your own aging and that of the Monastery of the Ascension?

**Fr. Boniface:** I had the good fortune to do pastoral ministry in a nursing home setting for about 20 years. It was a gift. The lives of the residents were often an inspiration. Their faith and perseverance have given me models for life. Being able to collaborate with professional care personnel has helped me to recognize the practicalities of caring for my own community.

**Interviewer:** Who are the people and teachers who have inspired you?

**Fr. Boniface:** As a student and member of the community at Mt. Angel, the monks all influenced me. They attracted me to a monastic vocation. I look back especially to men like Abbot Damian Jentges,

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# INSIDE

There is a wonderful, animated film entitled *Flow*. It was produced in Latvia, but with collaborators from several European nations. There are no words spoken. The story is about a flood that sweeps over the world. Near the beginning, a dog makes friends with a cat. When the flood comes, they take refuge on a derelict boat and are eventually joined by a capybara, a lemur, and a secretary bird. As they cope with the dangers of the flood, they learn to help each other. Early in the film, one of them would periodically look at its reflection in the water or in a mirror the lemur has hoarded. At the end of the film, they line up side-by-side and look at their joint reflection in a pool of water. Four individuals have become a “we.”

# FLOW

By Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB

The term “flow” is also used in sports. I recently watched a women’s college basketball game between two very good teams. They played evenly for 35 minutes of the game. But, in the other five minutes one team outscored the other 17 to 1. They made basket after basket and played amazing defense. They could do that because they had played together for a long time but, most of all, because each of them was focused entirely on a common task: getting the ball into their basket and keeping it out of their opponents’ basket. No one was thinking about their statistics, their endorsements, or even themselves. At such times, the spectators enter the flow also and become participants.

In a management class I took, we learned to make flow charts to design a smooth operation in the enterprises we might be leading. Now, flow charts have morphed into giant digital networks that enable Amazon and Walmart to deliver things with amazing speed and efficiency. However, that is a different kind of flow. Efficiency in producing and delivering goods can deliver profits and convenience, but it is inherently alienating; monetizing efficiency seldom results in “we.”

Much of the liturgical reform after Vatican II was aimed at flow. The Eucharist is the enactment of Christ’s

life, death, and resurrection, an action into which the participants are invited to move together with Christ toward his Father. They do that by listening, responding, singing and praying together. At moments they achieve flow, forgetting self and self’s preoccupations to be the body of Christ celebrating the coming of God into the world and the world’s going to God. If the revised liturgy does not achieve flow more often, it is in part because we live in a society which values functional reason over contemplation, getting more than giving, profit over care, and choice over cooperation.

It took a flood to bring the animals in the film *Flow* together. Our country is experiencing a tsunami now, in which the power of money is on display and people are being sacrificed to ideology. Perhaps the waves of deportations and layoffs will force us into the same boat of misery and teach us how much we need each other. If - like the basketball players - we work together, we may experience the generosity paradox and feel the flow of divine love.





Fr. James Koessler, Fr. Thomas Brockhaus, Fr. Bernard Sander, Fr. Matthias Burger. My memories of them continue to inspire me in what I do.

**Interviewer:** Who are the writers you like to read for relaxation?

**Fr. Boniface:** I have become a fan of medieval murder mysteries. Br. Cadfael and Sr. Frevisse are favorite characters, and I can read them again. The fact that they are realistically written in monastic settings makes them special.

**Interviewer:** Was it difficult to adapt when you moved from Mount Angel Abbey to become prior at the Monastery of the Ascension.



**Fr. Boniface:** Coming to Jerome from western Oregon was a major change in many ways. From green Willamette Valley to dry southern Idaho took some doing. But the sunshine was a plus. From a community of 50 or more to one of 7, from a very busy and in many ways a satisfying life to an undefined path, not quite sure of what to do. It was a challenge. But overall, the change was a blessing. Not that I regret what was before, but new doors opened and valued relationships developed. My youthful vocation choices were priesthood, medical doctor, and farmer in that order. Coming to Jerome gave me clarity that farming was not one of my gifts.



*Monks and friends gathered in the monastery's dining room to celebrate Fr. Boniface's 90th birthday on February 9.*

**Interviewer:** Many monasteries and religious orders are closing. How do you interpret that?

**Fr. Boniface:** Our community is one that is closing. Lack of vocations is a reality. I could speculate about how that happened. To go back and change things is an exercise in futility. I find peace in thinking that somehow it all fits into God's providential plan. We have been a contribution to the Church in Idaho. Our plans with the Missionary Servants of the Word are a continuation of that.

**Interviewer:** What special gifts has God given you?

**Fr. Boniface:** So, 90 years... gifts. God has been patient with me. The gift of my confreres, not always clear. The necessity of the virtue of hope is ever clearer. The opportunity to have some clarity on what it means to seek God. A beautiful location and monastic setting and the security of knowing that my needs are being met.



# HOPE

By Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB

Several years ago, when it was clear that our monastery was going to close, an official from the Benedictine congregation to which we belong came to interview each member of our community. He asked - I thought somewhat jauntily - "What do you hope for your community?" I answered, peevishly, "Nothing." Then, he asked, "What do you hope for yourself?" I thought of the time I visited the derelict Shaniko Hotel (since renovated) in central Oregon, where some shuffling, silent old men were housed, and replied, "Nothing."

I didn't hope for anything specific, but I was not without hope. I was deeply impressed by the *Heaven Tree Trilogy* (1960-1963) by Edith Pargeter (d. 1995). It is the story of two generations of Welsh stonecutters who are forced to help a brutal Anglo-Norman lord to build a chapel for his castle. In the end, the chapel is destroyed. A fragment of one of their carvings is incorporated into a peasant's hut. They did not work in vain. From that, I have developed the theology of brick making. The good we do may not have much impact, but each good thought, word or act is a brick taken up by Christ to build the City of God.

Charles Péguy (d. 1914), a French Catholic, wrote a book-length prose-poem, *Portal of the Mystery of Hope*. Hope is a little girl who, every morning, wakes up to a world to explore. In one segment of the poem, she and her slightly older sisters, Faith and Charity, are walking in a Corpus Christi procession. The two act grown-up, carefully dressed and walking demurely. Hope, on the other hand, runs ahead, then back, then ahead again, full of exuberance like a puppy.

These literary versions of hope point to something Terry Eagleton writes about in *Hope without Optimism* (2015). When one puts sad or frightful matters into words, one circumscribes them. They may be tragic, but they are just this, not more. The same thing happens in confession: when one confesses a crime or sin, it, too, is delineated to be this, not more. Ordinarily, the one to whom one confesses does not faint in shock, a further indication that the wickedness is finite.

Our world has given us some witnesses to hope. Anne Frank, a teenager, hid from the Nazis for two years in an attic in Amsterdam. She was then discovered and taken to Auschwitz and, from there, to Bergen-Belsen, where she died in 1945, one of over 100,000 Jews killed in the Netherlands by the Nazis. In the diary she kept in the attic, she wrote, "In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting

of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again."

Vaclav Havel (d. 2011), who spent years in prison as a dissident in Soviet Czechoslovakia, was elected president after the overthrow of Soviet government. He wrote that he understood hope "as a state of mind ... it is a dimension of the soul; it's not especially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons ... I feel its deepest roots are transcendental ... an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed."

Alexei Navalny, a champion of human rights and opponent of corruption in government, was poisoned with a lethal nerve agent by the Russian regime. He was taken to Berlin for treatment. When he was well enough, he flew back to Russia knowing that he would be arrested as soon as his plane landed. At the end of the autobiography that he wrote before he died in a Siberian penal colony in 2024 at age 47, he wrote in his breezy style, "Ask yourself whether you are a Christian in your heart of hearts ... Are you a disciple of the religion whose founder sacrificed himself for others, paying the price of their sins? Do you believe in the immortality of the soul and the rest of that cool stuff. If you can honestly answer yes, what is there left for you to worry about? ... The morrow is perfectly capable of taking care of itself. My job is to seek the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and leave it to good old Jesus and the rest of his family to deal with everything else. They won't let me down ..." Pope Francis has also published an autobiography: *Hope* (2025).

Hope lies somewhere between the slough of despond and the gaudy lights of empirical fact. It is not optimism. It looks to the future from which new possibilities may be born. It is performative by helping to midwife those possibilities. It is rooted in faith and operates in love. "I know well the plans I have in mind for you—oracle of the Lord—plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope" (Jer. 29:11).



# FROM THE HERMITAGE

By Julie A. Ferraro

As a writer for more than five decades, I've known for a long, long time that being alone is the ideal state for me. I can't write fiction when others are likely to distract me and break my train of thought.

Admittedly, as the years passed, I developed a discipline that would allow me to write articles about breaking news in a noisy open office space, but I still prefer solitude.



Over the past 13 years, as well, I've lived in intentional community with vowed religious - males and females - for extended periods, and I still prefer solitude, because I still write fiction.

When the opportunity to apply for the Brandt Oyster River Hermitage "contemplative-in-residence" program popped into my email inbox last August, I initially dismissed the message (though I did pass it along to others who might be interested). I was too busy working as director of communications for the Center for Benedictine Life at the Monastery of St. Gertrude in Cottonwood, Idaho, to consider making a change.

A vacation to visit my best friend in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, that same month, however, opened me to the possibility of shifting my living situation from intentional community in a monastery to solitude on Vancouver Island.

The timing of the drive from North Central Idaho across the Canadian border worked out perfectly - October 31 and November 1 - as snow hadn't blocked the Snoqualmie Pass along Interstate 90 heading for Seattle. Once I drove onto the ferry that would transport me to the island, I felt myself growing calmer, a sensation reinforced as I settled into the midst of

more than 20 acres of natural beauty surrounding the hermitage, built by the late Fr. Charles Brandt.

(If you wish to learn more about Fr. Charles and the hermitage, check out the website: [charlesbrandt.ca](http://charlesbrandt.ca))

November and December were mostly rainy, which prevented me from getting out much to wander the trails on the property. I wrote - a lot - worked on some other web-based projects, and gradually "untrained" myself from being a workaholic. I was able to take time to meditate, to contemplate, to enjoy the silence, to be.

That includes awakening on December 19 with the abrupt awareness that something was quite wrong with my physical body, and maintaining a rather bizarre equilibrium through Christmas week - spent in hospital - before a pacemaker was implanted on December 27.

January brought abundant sunshine, and a single snowfall of eight inches in early February proved the highlight of the winter season. To just be able to watch the snow fall, to appreciate those exquisite, individual flakes as they eased earthward... fantastic!

A lesson I have definitely learned: simply being has its merits, rather than racing around in frantic attempts to complete tasks that can always wait until another time. As St. Benedict advised his followers in the Rule: when the bell rings, leave what you're doing and attend to prayer.

Focusing on being in the moment brings home the truth that the rush of activity around us isn't what's important. What's important is the relationship with things divine - and each other - but it can only be fully recognized in solitude.

I'll always be appreciative for the time I spent in the hermitage, and will take the lessons I've learned here with me as I resume a more active life, sharing my skills where they are needed.





# Monastery Chronicle

*By Fr. Boniface Lautz, OSB*

## **November 2024**

The month began on a happy note. Fr. Abraham's visa status was successfully upgraded, and he returned on All Saints Day. The MSPs held some devotional services following Mass on All Souls Day.

Fr. Hugh was invited to a wedding in Florida the same weekend the hurricane hit. It made for some travel problems when he came home, and some travel weariness. The couple was especially grateful that he could come.

November 5: two water pressure tanks were replaced.

November 7: Fr. Boniface accidentally dialed 911 and hung up. He wondered what the local sheriff was doing in our lobby, surrounded by the whole community, discovering he was the problem. The police have to respond to false 911 calls and search the premises to make sure no one is left unattended.

November 8 and 10: the MSPs held a marriage retreat. The couples who need to have care for their kids bring them along. It is an impressive custom. We had a full house.

November 11: we observed Veteran's Day. We also hosted a dinner for the local inter-faith ministerial group. Fr. Hugh is a member.

November 13: the Marshalls brought two tractors with snow removal equipment. Outside of two small traces, we've not had snow yet. We have had some cold and windy days.

November 15-17: we hosted a Regnum Christi Retreat. They had their own specific program and brought a priest. It was a first-time event for us.

November 18: One inch of snow fell.

November 22-24: the MSPs hosted a special bible study event. An MSP Sister who holds a Doctorate in Scripture came from Mexico to lead the sessions. It was well attended.

November 28, Thanksgiving Day: we followed our Saturday daily order for Mass, had early Vespers and a very nice dinner, prepared by MSP chefs. The MSPs had a social gathering following their evening Mass.

November 30: Fr. Ezekiel's birthday.

## **December 2024**

Christmas preparations and celebrations were a theme that played off and on through the month. Br. Sylvester and recruited helpers decorated the chapel, monastery and guest dining room. Once again, our Sunday Mass congregation helped trim the tree in the dining room: 300 ornaments in about 30 minutes. The MSPs made the hallways and lobby areas look festive. The chapel was tastefully and beautifully done.

Celebrations got an early start when we received socks from friends on the feast of St. Nicholas. Our Lady of Guadalupe was celebrated in our chapel. And, on the 14th, the MSPs celebrated Posada with a large group. We and the MSPs celebrated Christmas together with Mass and a very nice dinner.



We have begun using a program with a local health care organization. They have years of providing all levels of care for people our age and will do that at the monastery. We will have continued supervision and treatment of our health. We are fortunate to have this in place. It was clearly needed and removes a large concern from us.

Our weather has been on and off snow, rain, warm, cold, sometimes a mixture on the same day. John Wasko and the MSPs have used tractors and shovels two or three times.

We didn't have a white Christmas, but did get three inches of snow on the 27th.

The MSPs have made several trips to California for community meetings and needs. They mostly go by car and make the trip each way non-stop.

December 23: Fr. Jerome's birthday.

December 31: Br. Sylvester's birthday.



### *January 2025*

January 1: we began 2025 with some snow in the morning. We celebrated Mass at 9:00, Vespers at 2:00, followed by dinner at 3:00. The snow was welcome, but didn't last long. More snow fell on the 10th, 19th, and 31st.

January 2: the Visions Health team made a preliminary visit to meet us. Some of us watched the Notre Dame football game.

January 3: John and Br. Roger re-wired the security cameras in the parking lot. Bonnie was here in the office, Diane resting at home.

January 4: the heat pump for our chapel failed. A collection of space heaters kept the temperature where we could pray and have Mass. The weather outside was cold and windy.

January 5, Epiphany: we made a pastoral visit to one of our good friends. The MSPs had the 4:00 PM Mass in the conference room. The heat system worked there. We had our monthly social.

January 6: Fr. Abraham was celebrant at the community Mass. We had a late celebration of his birthday.

January 7: Visions Health foot care was here. Five Lay MSPs arrived from California. Three remain here and two go to Mountain Home.

January 8: Visions Health here. We met with Marshalls regarding the farm. The chapel fan was fixed. We will need a heat pump eventually,

January 11: The Cursillo team was here all day, planning for a weekend retreat.

January 13: Diane returned to the office. Some monks went to physical therapy and hearing aid services.

January 14: all three of the office crew are here... great!

January 17: Cursillo begins. They join us for Mass on Saturday. Fr. Hugh went to Boise for Oblate meetings.

January 19: Local Oblates were here for Mass and their meeting with Fr. Hugh. We had a slight snow.

January 21: Fr. Meinrad's name day.

January 23: Fr. Hugh began a semester course on the history of medieval philosophy with the MSP seminarians. Visits to physical therapy and doctors.

January 24: John and the MSPs cleared storage space in the garage to make a better parking area.

January 25: MSPs held Lay Theology 1&2 and Bible Classes. They also participated in the March for Life in Boise on a cold day.

January 30: Visions Health came. The dish washing machine had repairs. Some made blood donations.

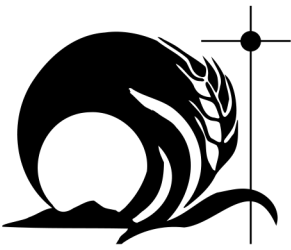
January 31: plumbing repairs. Snow began at noon.

### *February 2025*

February 7: Br. Selby's birthday

February 9: Fr. Boniface's 90th birthday!





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*May this Lenten season  
be blessed with time for  
prayer, contemplation  
and good works!*



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