



THE DESERT CHRONICLE

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Fifty Years a Benedictine Priest

By Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB

THE MONASTERY OF THE ASCENSION HAS ENTERED IN 51ST YEAR. A HISTORY OF THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS OF THE MONASTERY BY JOHN O'HAGAN IS AT THE PRINTERS. IT WILL be available soon. I have also entered my fifty-first year as a priest. What I would like to do is to write a reflection that expresses the wonder of fifty years doing what I loved and still love doing, serving the Body of Christ. I don't know how to do that, but maybe if I just tell the story, something of the joy of those years will shine through. If not, this effort will make it easier for whoever has to write my obituary. I'll divide the story into the seven ages of a human life as distinguished by Latin writers.

INFANTIA



*Cathedral of St. Francis de Sales
Baker City, OR*

I was born in Lakeview, Oregon. My father worked for the U.S. Forest Service. From Lakeview my parents moved with me to Austin Junction, between Unity and Prairie City. Then we moved to Baker (where my brother Michael was born), and finally to John Day, where my brother David, who had Downs syndrome and is now deceased, was born. His birth was very difficult so I spent part of the first grade with my grandparents in Sloat, California, attending the one-room school where my father went to school and where my mother taught. I finished the first grade in Eugene, OR where my father moved to set up his own forestry consulting business. Over the years, I have gravitated back to

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From the Prior's Pulpit

GOD'S POETRY AND OURS

By Fr. Kenneth Hein, OSB

POETRY COMES FROM THE GREEK WORD FOR “MAKING.” WE ARE IN FACT GOD’S POEMS. AND GOD MADE US TO BE MAKERS. IF YOU HAVE NEVER entered or considered entering a poetry contest, you are very likely a citizen from a planet other than Earth. At this moment, I shall resist regaling you with my own failed efforts at poetry. However, I would like to introduce you to some of the “poetic devices” that are found in the Psalms of the Bible, human poetry inspired by God. I do so in the hope it will help us read, recite, and pray the Psalms with greater appreciation and insight. I shall use my own translation of Greek and Hebrew texts in what follows.

Let’s start with “parallelism”, which means that two lines of poetry say more or less the same thing for the sake of emphasis.

The Blessed Mother’s Magnificat is a perfect example:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;

my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

Sometimes the order of thought in the second line reverses the order of the first line. This is called “chiasm”, meaning “x-formed”:

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, *may my right hand wither;*
Let my tongue cleave to my palate, if I do not remember you
(Ps 137:5).

The Hebrew poets loved alliteration and assonance: i.e. repetition of consonant and vowel sounds:

Brawny bulls from Bashan bear down on me (Ps 22:12b).

The repetition of “Bs” imitates the bellowing of the bulls from Bashan and is present in the Hebrew text of this Psalm.

Of course, picturesque or figurative language is the heart of all poetry:

If I take up the wings of the dawn,
and come down on the sea’s farthest edge,
even there your left hand would precede me,
and your right hand would follow upon me (Ps 139:9-10).

Note also the parallelism in lines 3 and 4.

Rhyme is not prominent in Hebrew poetry. But a succession of somewhat similar sounding words is often employed by the psalmist. Psalm 86:1 uses the sounds “ah-nee, ah-nee, Adonai” which sound like someone weeping and crying out: “Why me, why me, O my Lordy”. And indeed the psalm is a petition to the Lord to “hear me!”

Finally, paronomasia (word-play or punning) is a prominent element of many poems and a real favorite in Hebrew poetry. Of course, what is a pun in one language will most likely not be “punny” in another language. But there is a pun of sorts in the statement: “brawny bulls of Bashan bear down on me.” In this example, we could very well and accurately translate with “brawny bulls of Bashan bully me about.” But, as we would say nowadays, “That’s just too corny!” So, with this example, I will now close our uh...bull-session regarding the poetry of the psalms. •



Eastern Oregon, to bird watch, camp, and find solitude.

PUERITIA

I attended St. Mary’s School in Eugene from

the second to the eighth grade. It was an old fashioned Catholic school, taught by Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary. There were perhaps 60 students in our class, the majority of them female. When my parents and my brother David died around 2005, my former grade school classmates, then mostly retired, came to the funerals and helped with the receptions, which was extremely kind of them.

I knew I wanted to be a priest when I was about ten years old. The question was whether that was what God wanted. I couldn’t have much certainty until a bishop laid his hands on me. So there were sixteen years of uncertainty and hope ahead. Like most teenagers I had a wild period; in my case it came somewhat precociously in junior high. A friend suggested I go to the high school seminary at Mt. Angel with him. I applied and was accepted. My dad, not a churchgoer, was reported to have answered queries from his friends with “At least he is not in it for the money.” My brother noted that now I wouldn’t have to pay taxes.

ADOLESCENTIA

I joined eleven other boys in the freshman class at Mt. Angel Seminary High School. The faculty was cobbled together from monks and graduate students in the theology who had expertise in various subjects. My freshman science teacher was an atomic scientist, and I took geography from someone with an advanced degree in the field. Both were excellent teachers. The seminary high school was a combination between a nurturing village and a boot camp. We learned discipline and concentration and were introduced to the liturgical movement and social movements like Madonna House. By the time I graduated I had studied Latin for four years and Spanish for



St. Marys Church Eugene OR

three. At the end of high school we took the SAT tests and these earned me an honorable mention or something like that in the National Merit Scholarships. From that I calculated how many hundreds of thousands of people in America were smarter than I was; that knowledge was somehow liberating.

After two years of college, during which I learned to read German and French under the tutelage of Fr. Athanasius Buchholz, OSB, it was expected that we would decide what sort of priest we wanted to be. I applied to enter Mount Angel Abbey. I like putting off decisions until they have to be made, but my mother said she knew all along that I would enter the monastery. The decision seemed easy enough: I was attracted by community life, the variety of activities, and the study and teaching. I needed a structured life (without necessarily liking it). As time went on, I realized that the monks whom I most admired, especially Fr. Bernard Sander, OSB, were not typical of the community as a whole; it gradually dawned on me that just as they did not quite fit in, neither would I.



Mt. Angel Abbey

The training regime for young monks (which lasted until we were ordained, that is seven years) was strict and detailed. Life was quite formal—for various reasons that seem intertwined: reverence for God, good order, and to present a to people outside

the community. We studied philosophy and theology, much of it from Latin textbooks. The aim was to understand what was in the books. There was not much scope or encouragement for creativity. We learned a great deal, and Abbot Damian Jentges, OSB, assured us that there would be occasion in our priestly lives to use everything we learned. He was correct.

Meanwhile, we prayed the eight hours of the divine office every day, served private Masses, and attended the community Mass. There was a great deal of singing, either chanting on one note or singing Gregorian chant. I can hear pitch, but I cannot imagine music, so I cannot sing solo. In spite of this, I had to take my turn intoning psalms, singing the martyrology, and so forth. One of my peers, Fr. Marion, was equally inept. It was excruciating for us and for everyone else. I learned from it never to embarrass anyone, but not to sing.



IUVENTUS

Finally, by the abounding grace of God, I made final vows as a monk and was ordained. I said my first Mass, and then prepared for further studies. Fr. Leander Maffia, OSB, the academic dean, had me register for advanced study at The Catholic University of America. I was to earn a licentiate in theology in preparation for studying liturgy in Europe. (Abbot Damian thought I had been told to attend the University of Ottawa and was upset that I didn't). I stayed at St. Anselm's Abbey in Washington, DC, my first experience of another monastery. The monks there were very cultivated and hospitable. I had some famous teachers at Catholic University



Sant'Anselmo, Rome

and some good ones (the two categories did not always overlap). Oddly, the man who made the most impact on me was a visiting Jesuit, Edward Duff, who had been the editor of a journal devoted to social justice. He taught courses on religious sociology

which ignited in me a lifelong interest in sociology. He also told me to be a writer.

I earned the degree, but toward the end of the year Abbot Damian wrote and told me I needed to return to Mount Angel to teach philosophy, since the monk who taught philosophy was leaving the community. By this time, 1967, it was the post-Vatican II era in the Church and a time of social upheaval in Western society; there were many defections from the priesthood and religious life. I spent the summer taking courses at Harvard in preparation for studying liturgy, which now I was never to do, (which was probably just as well). Then back I went to teach philosophy and to be assistant to Fr. Andrew who was dean of college men. These were times of rapid change in seminary education. We were inexperienced, but did our best. In the summers I went back to Catholic University and eventually earned a licentiate in philosophy, about the time I stopped teaching it. It took a lot of energy to teach, live in the dorm, and go to summer school. I seldom got enough sleep.

I found it hard to think theologically without some sort of ministerial involvement, so I coached some basketball and

tennis in the seminary high school and served as a very part-time chaplain and counselor at a Catholic high school in Salem. The stipend given me by the school paid for supervision by a professional psychologist.

In 1974 I asked for a change because I was not getting along with the seminary rector. I thought—as he did—that I would be sent to a parish, but instead, evidently through Fr. Bonaventure Zerr's doing, I was sent to Rome to earn a doctorate in theology at Sant' Anselmo, I spent two years there mostly devoted to writing a dissertation on Richard of St. Victor, a canon regular in twelfth-century Paris. I chose him because he lived at a time of rapid change and was adept both in the traditional monastic theology and active in the new theological methods that were associated with the schools of Paris. He was a man of prayer, scholarship and ministry. For these reasons he seemed like a good role model. In retrospect, I wish I had taken three years instead of two, but I finished in the Spring of 1976 and returned to Mount Angel, which by then had a new seminary administration. I came back with a broader vision of Benedictine monasticism, as result of living and studying for two years with monks from all over the world.

GRAVITAS

In 1984 I had my one sabbatical year, which I spent in Ireland and Switzerland. During that year, I finished my first book, a translation of some of the works of Peter of Celle, a twelfth-century Benedictine. I didn't like his writings very much at the time, but over the



Unity Lake

years I have returned to them, and have become rather fond of them. I traveled back from Europe by retracing the conjectured route by which Brendan the Navigator was supposed by some to have discovered North America. My brother, who happened to be in Europe at the time, and I traveled by ferries from Scotland to Shetland to the Faroe Islands, and then to Iceland. From there we flew over Greenland back to the United States. This was the epic journey of my life. At Tórshavn on the Faroe Islands, we spent a week in the basement of a woman poet,



who read us her poems, of which we understood not a word. We were afraid to order anything at a cafeteria, not knowing what we would be served (puffin, pilot whale, etc.) so we subsisted on baked potatoes served on a stick and Danish pastries.

In 1982 I received a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship to take part in a summer seminar for college teachers at The Catholic University of America about the liturgy at Medieval Cluny. Over the next dozen years I received three more of these fellowships: Cornell (Latin sources of vernacular literature), Yale (paleography), and the University of California at Santa Clara (heaven). These were wonderful experiences, spent with stimulating company and expert mentors, which inspired thinking and writing and established lasting friendships. I think that it would be a good idea for the Benedictines of the United States to sponsor some of these so that monks and sisters involved in theology or monastic studies could learn from a master scholar and connect with each other.

Sometime toward the end of this period, I asked to be allowed to spend a month in solitude somewhere. Permission was granted, and I have stayed a month each year at St. Joseph's Church in Unity, Oregon, ever since. I love the place and the people. As I discovered later, my foot was put into the wet concrete of some steps at the one of the Catholic rancher's steps when I was six months old. Now the town and the church are much diminished, as are so many small communities in the West.

SENECTUS

Around 1986, Abbot Bonaventure was looking for someone to be library director. I volunteered, unaware that I would have to earn a degree in library science, which I dutifully did at the University of Iowa. During the next ten years, with Abbot Bonaventure's support, the library grew and improved. I continued to teach. In 1996 the thinking of those in charge of the monastery regarding the library changed. I resigned and was prompted to transfer to the Monastery of the Ascension. As Fr. Andrew, who also was reassigned to Idaho, reminds me, the move probably added twenty years to our lives.

Meanwhile, I reached the twenty-fifth anniversary of my



Mt. Angel Abbey Library

ordination as a priest. I was told I could celebrate the community Mass on Sunday morning and have cookies and lemonade at 2:00 in the afternoon. This was very inconvenient for people who might want to come, and while it may have been all I deserved, they deserved better. So we had a picnic at the house of my friends Loris and Jane Buccola. People I had known in many different roles (teacher, counselor, librarian) came and met each other. We had a wonderful time, and I was deeply moved by how blessed I had been to know these people over the twenty-five years of my priestly ministry.

Just before I stopped teaching and moved to Idaho, a woman I had taught when she was in high school came to see me. She was very depressed. I was supposed to be part of an examining team that day, but in my estimation she was clearly more important. This set me to thinking that St. Benedict wanted his monks to divide their time between prayer, reading, and work, but in such a way that they would be available to help guests and other monks in monastery. This was the nucleus of what became *Essential Monastic Wisdom*, which I wrote shortly after going to Idaho, where initially I had considerable time for writing.

Before long, though, I was immersed in various tasks: coordinating the Road Scholar (Elderhostel) programs and the Oblates. Then came editing the *Desert Chronicle* and managing the library. I still had time to do some study and finish some writing projects, the most important of which has been serving as managing editor of and contributor to the ten-volume Victorine Texts in Translation series, which has taken me back to the topic of my doctoral dissertation.

DECREPITUDO

Before coming to Idaho, I hosted at Mount Angel Abbey Library a meeting of Catholics committed to ecological



responsibility. Out of that meeting grew the Columbia River Pastoral Letter that was published after I came to Idaho. There was not much Catholic interest in the environment in Idaho at the time, but I was invited to join the Shoesole Group, which was formed of the owners of two (now three) ranches and various Government agencies (BLM, NRCS, Nevada Department of Wildlife, etc.) and private parties interested in sustainable management of rangeland. I was invited because I could offer some ethical insight, though how much of that I have offered I'm not sure. Anyway, I continue to be involved in the group to this day, and have found the association very rewarding.

I began teaching in a Catholic Adult Education Program in Boise not long after I came to Idaho, and when I went to Boise I stayed with Fr. Simeon at the Cathedral where he was working. I continued to visit him when he moved to St. Paul's

Catholic Student Center at Boise State University. He told me that if something happened to him I should take his place as chaplain there. He died in 2006 and I remembered what he had told me; it seemed



Boise Ranch beaver dam

like a good idea. So, at the age of 68, with the permission of Fr. Prior Boniface Lautz, OSB, and the diocese, I became chaplain at BSU and continued there for seven years. Then I moved to Idaho State University in the same capacity. I like the combination of quiet and solitude in the mornings and time with the students in the afternoons. It has enabled me to study and write, to live as a monk, and to help people—a very satisfying combination. At BSU I worked with Deacon Chuck Skoro, one of the kindest men I have ever known, and at Idaho State I work with Pete Espil, a very energetic person, who is deeply committed to Benedictine spirituality. In



Mass at St. John's



Mass at St. Paul's with Deacon Chuck Skoro

both places we have had daily prayer together.

CONCLUSION

If there is a thread to this story, it is that God's grace has steered me where God wanted me and used me for his purposes. Wherever I have ended up, there has been an opportunity to serve the Lord. For the most part I have no way of knowing how much good or bad has resulted from my efforts, but one must trust that God can do good with flawed instruments. I have made many wonderful friends, but now near the end of the journey, I have less contact with them than I would like. God willing, we will meet again when time is no longer a constraint, in the light and warmth of God's eternity. From that perspective, the struggles of the past and present seem very petty; all will be well and all manner of thing will be well. •



Poems

Ruth Saxey-Reese

SCHOLASTICA OPINES

Dove-shouldered, I'm not so
wash-and-wear anymore,
dear brother.
Come, let's fill our cups,
pull chairs closer to the fire.
I can still school you in chess.
One night a year is not enough.
Stay,
hear my heart.
No-one will send a search party.
One day we will be saints,
then you can be tired of me,
of this storm that hems you in.

SELECTIONS FROM *EL CAMINO DEL AMOR: UNA GUÍA*, A PROSE POEM CYCLE

(Roncevalles)

I.
Heed pilgrim mass bells. Walk dazed under stone entrance arch, sit in front
pew. Kneel on cold stone. Devour each curve, each weighty drape of gleaming
baldachin above *La Virgen*. Pray silver canopy, golden lady. Refuse to take all
in. Vanish candles, She alone illuminates. Sing *Salve Regina* without words.
Sing through tears.

II.
Enter misted dawn woods. Peer short distances, interlaced stems, untold lay-
ers of dead beech leaves. Catch flickers in eye corners, keeping pace. Hooded
huntmen, stealthy soldiers, hanged women, keep abreast. Heed shades repeat-
ing, keep on the path. Muffle stick-thumps, only measure of time.

(Zabaldika)

Climb breathless to the old stone church on the hill. Breathe in the shady
courtyard, accept warm greetings and cold water. Fly up the narrow spiral
steps to the belfry, strike the bell once, wonderstruck at the reverberations, the
distant hills through the glassless window, the baby starling on the high rafter
beam. Swear to never come down.

(Villamayor de Monjardin)

Trail apprehensively toward summit crowned by crumbling castle. Pause at
submerged Moorish *f fuente*, consider immersion. Continue to village, rejoice
that path to castle is tourist trail, not *El Camino*. Duck into shadowed church
to give thanks. Emerge blinking, greeted by old man who urges reentry, flicks
hidden switch to illuminate hidden silver cross. Catch passionate story bits,
caballero's vision embodied in silver, cross hidden during Civil War. Leave
with emblazoned heart, guide-now-farmer gazing into distant warnings of
las tormentas.

THE WATER IS WIDE (CORACLE SONG)

*But ye said, No; for we will flee upon
horses; therefore shall ye flee: and, We will
ride upon the swift; therefore shall they
that pursue you be swift. Isaiah 30:16*

who would make this boat
would be a heaven boat
would be a savior boat

would be a horse boat
hide stretched over rock willow ribs
living hide, rise and fall as breath
warm within, laying abreast
two abreast and as wide

nestle deep
nested easy willow sleep

this boat a flank with slight sheen
a blanket for bodies
keen waters no match for
its singing hull for
the curled hair at your nape for
the slack oars

who would make this boat
would be a heaven boat
would be a savior boat

who would make this boat
would woo me back to
back to the bright shore
to grass underfoot
to untangled time

(Ruth Saxey-Reese is the pen name of a lec-
turer in the English department at Boise State
University. She recently walked the Camino
to Compostela. She is a frequent and welcome
guest at the monastery)•





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Daniel Berrigan, SJ (1921-2016)

By Phillip Anglin

Daniel Berrigan was a prolific writer and poet regarding matters of social justice and anti-war activism. He came from a humble background. In *No Bars to Manhood*, he wrote, "We lived most of our lives in a sixty-year-old house on the top of a hill, surrounded by ten not very fruitful acres. I remember vividly that we housed and fed a continuing number of homeless men during those dark years of loss." After joining the Society of Jesus in 1939, he led protests, was sought by the FBI, and was arrested and held in prison for a number of years. His correspondence with his activist brother, Philip were published this year. Come and visit our library at the Monastery of the Ascension and see a few of the works Daniel Berrigan published.

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(Phillip Anglin, a professional librarian
and researcher, is spending the summer at
the monastery, as a volunteer-guest, and
discerning his vocation.)•



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