



# THE DESERT CHRONICLE

XXVIII, No. 2 JUNE 2019

## Singleness and Vocation

By Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB

### *Is there a vocation to the single life?*

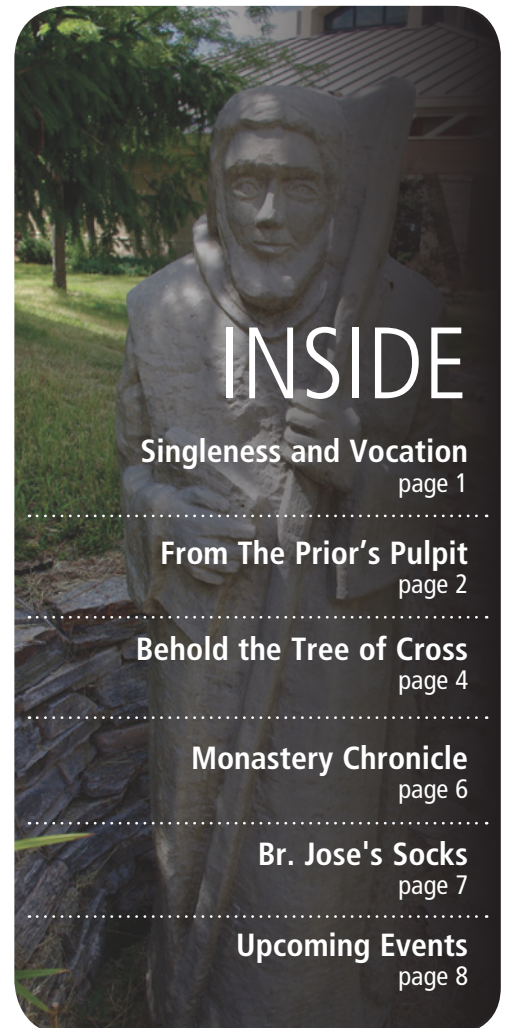
This comment is a bit theological for a newsletter, but it seems relevant insofar as 45% of American adults are single. I recently read a book by an Evangelical professor, Christina Hitchcock, *The Significance of Singleness* (Baker Academic, 2018). It was an honest, theologically informed, and perhaps a little brave (her church assumed everyone should be married) consideration of how her own unchosen singleness (she was surprised to find herself married by the time she published the book) prompted her to think about the role single people have in the Church. It reminded me of how little thought we Catholics have given to those in the church who are neither married nor religious nor priests. However, it had never occurred to me that anyone would think there is no such thing as a vocation to the single life.

A year or so ago I heard a talk by a FOCUS official to a Theology on Tap session, most of whose attendees were either young, unmarried college students or older widows and widowers. He urged his audience to embrace one of two vocations: (1) marriage and (2) religious or priestly life. I wondered why he didn't talk about the vocation to single lay life that most people there were living. Then, recently there appeared on Facebook an entry by a young, recently married Catholic who said that there is no vocation to the single life as such. This led to a typical digital dialog: I told him he was wrong, and he said I was wrong.

### Meager Church Teaching

When I tried to find clear statements in the Catechism of the Catholic Church or in Vatican II documents about a vocation to such a vocation to the single life, I could

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# From the Prior's Pulpit



Dear Friends of the Monastery,

I was thinking about some of the changes we've made here at Ascension in the past year. Some of them were planned and some of them were not on our schedule of events, but could have been foreseen. Whatever the case, something now is different and we've needed to make adjustments, or try to figure out in advance what adjustments might be needed in view of future changes.

We've spent lots of time thinking about our future. Our experience is like that of families that plan for aging members. The well being and support of members is an

important and complex issue. We're like many religious communities. One advantage of that is our common efforts in planning have resulted in positive ways to look forward and we've been able to draw on that. We've consulted with other communities and benefited from their experience. For a community of autonomous monks like us who are used to relying on our own abilities, that has been a challenge for sure. We're still working on it. "I can do it myself" is a pretty ingrained attitude.

This past February Benedictine men and women superiors met in Cullman, Alabama. Indicative of the common experience of many of us, the theme of the conference was the necessity of *hope*. It was timely and appropriate, because it put a perspective on all the changes we have to consider. The clear message was that while we struggle about the future, we must put our confidence in the Risen Lord, who is with us now and is our ultimate goal. The oft-repeated Easter message, "I will be with you," makes a lot of sense, not humanly speaking, but in faith.

So what we're celebrating these past six weeks of the Easter Season needs to be taken seriously, because in our time of uncertainty it is the only solid basis for moving forward. This week we celebrate the Ascension of the Lord. Where he is, we hope to be.

Be assured of our prayers. Please keep us in yours. Peace and good things. •

Fr. Boniface Lautz, OSB  
Prior



not find any. I had high hopes that Pope Francis would clarify the issue in his new exhortation to young people, *Christus vivit*. All I could find in the document on singleness was this: "#267. For those who are not called to marriage or the consecrated life, it must always be remembered that the first and most important vocation is the vocation we have received in baptism. Those who are single, even if not by their own choice, can offer a particular witness to that vocation through their own path of personal growth." This emphasis on the fundamental vocation received at baptism is important, but there is no mention of any vocation to the single life, or of any particular role unmarried lay people have in the Church. So maybe I was wrong.

## Examples

However, I kept thinking of Blessed Carlos Manuel Rodriguez Santiago, a Puerto Rican who died unmarried in 1963. He came from a family of five: two sisters married, one became a Carmelite nun, and his brother became a Benedictine and eventually an abbot. Blessed Carlos thought about becoming a priest, but he developed ulcerated colitis in high school and his education was spotty after that, though he was a very intelligent person who read voraciously. He did office work to support himself, but dedicated long hours and all the money he had to promoting greater understanding of the liturgy all across the island. He particularly promoted the use of the vernacular and the restoration of the Easter Vigil (which he lived to see happen in 1952). His motto, inscribed on his tomb, was "Vivimos para esa noche" ("We live for this night"). Wasn't this a vocation?

## Baptismal Vocation and Vocations that Build on It

It is understandable that Church leaders should emphasize Christian marriage, priesthood, and religious life at a time when marriage and the sacrament of matrimony are being rejected by increasing numbers of people in favor of simple cohabitation, and when the number of priests and religious is declining in many areas of the world. Still, in fact, many lay Catholics are in fact single for much or all of their lives. That is what God calls them to be. That is the here and now of their vocation, in this time and place of their existence. Whether they hope for something else or feel God wants them eventually to be married or ordained priests or vowed religious doesn't change that God is calling them to be single saints and contributors to the church here and now.

The fundamental vocation of all Christians is defined at

baptism, which makes us children of God, sharers in the body of Christ, called to a life of deepening holiness taking us toward life eternal. This is what we are on earth for; it is a lifetime's calling. Everything else is secondary. There is no tragedy in not having another vocation beyond this baptismal calling, but to let another calling substitute for it is a tragedy.

There are five sacraments of vocation: baptism—confirmation—eucharist, holy orders, and marriage. The Sacraments of Initiation commit one to seeking God's will for how one is to exercise the share that baptism and confirmation confer in the threefold office of Christ as priest, prophet, and king (servant-leader). It may be in the priesthood or in marriage. There are in addition non-sacramental callings that the Church regulates and approves: religious orders, secular institutes, ecclesial movements, consecrated virgins, and hermits.

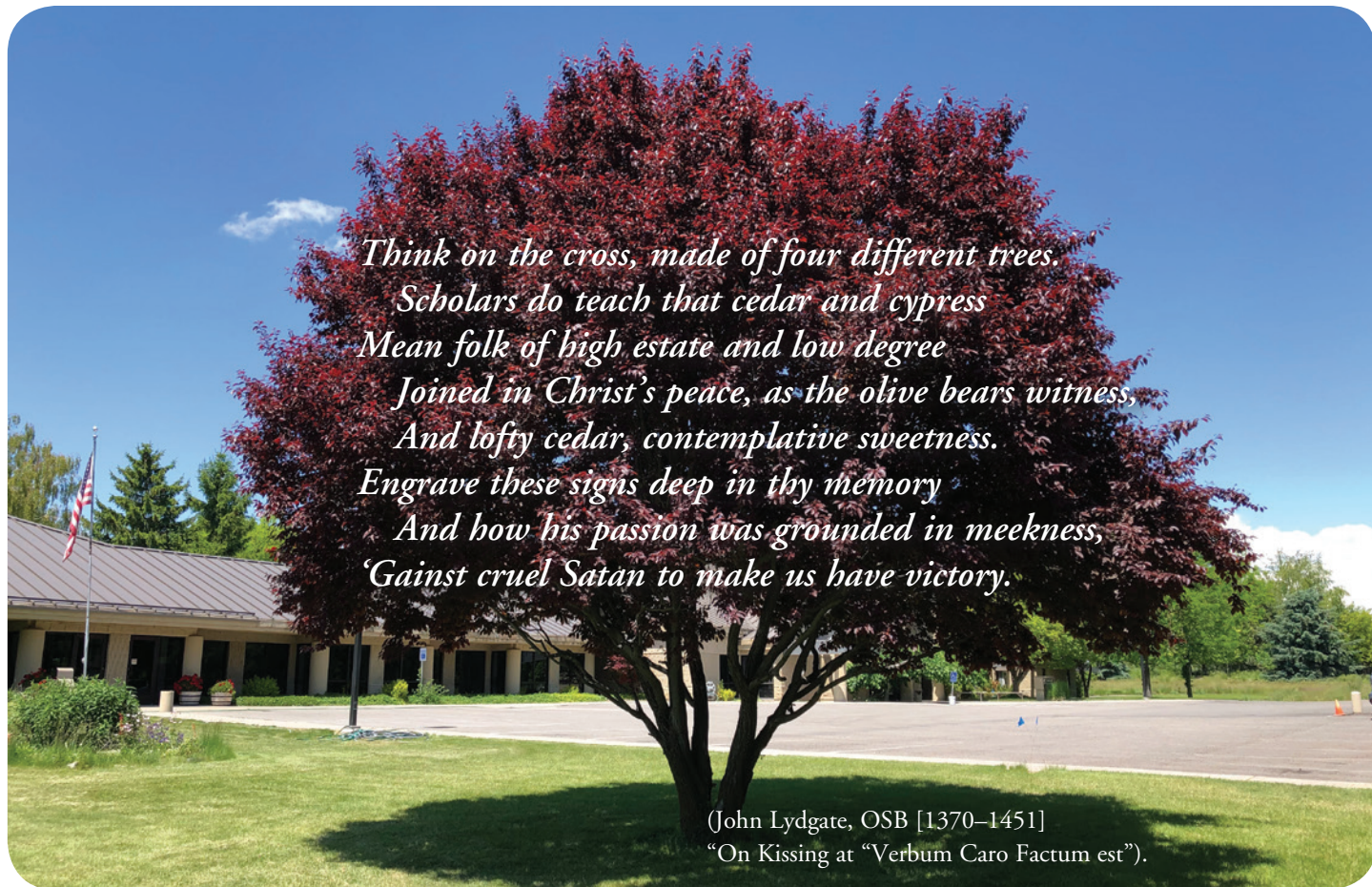
## My Vocation Here and Now

However, vocation is not limited to activities and commitments officially recognized by the Church. Blessed Carlos Rodriguez had such a vocation. So did the Belgian miner, John Bossyn, who was catechist and sacristan at the Catholic Church in Pioneer, ID, from its blessing in 1864 until the late 1880s. A single mother has a vocation. So did Dag Hammarskjöld, who found in the Rhineland mystics Meister Eckhart and Jan van Ruysbroec how "to say yes to every demand which the needs of their neighbors made them face, and to say yes also to every fate life had in store for them when they followed the call of duty as they understood it." The vocation of Pope Francis and the vocation of the unmarried clerk at WinCo, who ushers at his parish, are both elaborations of the basic calling they received at baptism.

Vocation can be considered in the abstract: the fundamental vocation of baptism, the secondary vocations of marriage, priesthood, religious life, but in the concrete, vocation is what God calls me to do here and now, this day or season of my life. Whatever God wants me to do now is my unique vocation. It doesn't matter what God's call (sometimes quite faint) is for me, my unique, complex vocation is to listen and respond now—as baptized, man or woman, married or single, vowed to consecrated life or Holy Orders or not. Whatever it is that God is calling me to now is a service to the Church and the world, and the community of the faithful ought to recognize and support my calling, whatever it is. •







*Think on the cross, made of four different trees.  
Scholars do teach that cedar and cypress  
Mean folk of high estate and low degree  
Joined in Christ's peace, as the olive bears witness,  
And lofty cedar, contemplative sweetness.  
Engrave these signs deep in thy memory  
And how his passion was grounded in meekness,  
'Gainst cruel Satan to make us have victory.*

(John Lydgate, OSB [1370–1451]  
“On Kissing at “Verbum Caro Factum est”).

## “Behold the Tree of Cross.”

*By Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB*

WHEN I WAS PROOF-READING THIS BEAUTIFULLY MODERNIZED VERSION OF LYDGATE’S POEM, I WAS PUZZLED that he spoke of four trees in the first line, but then only mentions three in what follows. So I asked Ellen Martin, who made this version, if she had any insight about this disparity. She did not know how to solve the discrepancy, but indicated some sources for the idea of the four woods. The *Golden Legend* (ca. 1260) for the Feast of the Finding of the Cross reports, among many other legends about the wood of the cross, that “the cross was made of four kinds of wood, namely, palmwood, cedar, cypress, and olivewood. Hence the verse: *Ligna crucis: palma, cedrus, cypressus, oliva* (The woods of the cross: palm, cedar, cypress, olive).” Ellen found that the typical allegory assigns cedar to the upright, the cypress to the transverse, palm to the footrest, and olive to the inscription.

Behind these legends are passages of the Bible. Isaiah 60:13, looking forward to the restoration of Jerusalem and the Temple, reports God’s words: “The glory of Lebanon shall come to you—the juniper, the fir, and the cypress altogether—to bring beauty to my sanctuary and glory to the place where I stand.” In Song of Songs 7:8 the bridegroom describes the bride as having the stately form of a date-palm. Sirach 24:17–19 mentions all four of these woods in a self-description of Wisdom: “like a cedar in Lebanon I grew tall, like a cypress on Mount Hermon; I grew tall like a palm tree in Engedi, like rosebushes in Jericho; like a fair olive tree in the field, like a plane tree beside water I grew tall.”

Recently, when studying the pilgrimage to the House of Mary at Ephesus, in which both Muslims and Christians participate, I found the description of Mary’s house in the





report of a vision in the *Life of the Blessed Virgin* by Anna Catherina Emmerich (first half of 19th c.). She said that in Mary's room there was a cupboard, resembling a tabernacle: "in it stood a cross. . . . It was told me that the pale stem of the cross was cypress, the brown arm, cedar, the other arm of yellow palm wood, while the piece at the top, with the title, was of smooth yellow olive-wood."

These texts take the wood of the cross back to a tree in the garden of Eden, to the Temple of Solomon, to the Bride of the Canticle and the figure of Lady Wisdom. They emphasize the strength and beauty of trees and their wood. At the monastery we might substitute some of our most abundant trees: apple, spruce, plum, and Russian olive. Were allegory of the type found in the *Golden Legend* still in favor, many other things are being discovered that could be seen as symbolic of the Cross of Christ. Trees sequester carbon, purify air, and communicate through their root systems, which enables them to share nutrients. Walking in woods ("forest bathing") is being touted by Japanese scientists as a way to physical and emotional health.

Trees are making our planet inhabitable. Climate change threatens to reduce their numbers and range, with far-reaching consequences in desertification and rising temperatures. This is ironic since the temperature in even a small grove a trees can be twenty degrees lower than in the open sun. It is hard not to see a modern parable here. As trees help make human life possible, so the tree of the Cross has brought us new life. Part of new life is to enable and call us to live in harmony with the trees and flowers and animals around us. Lydgate wrote his poem to help Christians remember what they are doing when in devotion they kiss stone, wood, earth, of metal in church. We should be mindful as he recommends, but we should also venerate not just the statue or crucifix that present us with images of Christ and his saints, but the earth and trees that in their own right are sacraments of the Wisdom of God. It might not be a bad idea to hug a tree now and again, or better yet, plant some. •





# Monastery Chronicle, March-May

By Fr. Boniface Lautz, OSB

## MARCH

Our community retreat was from March 10 to 15. We made use of Bishop Barron's dvd *Pivotal Players*. The presentations were well done and we found them inspirational. Given the difficulty of getting people to give retreats, this approach may well be a helpful option in the future. For one thing, it permits flexibility in scheduling.

Earlier in the month we hosted a knitting retreat. Joanne Draper, one of our Oblates arranged the program. There were about 25 participants. It was well received and has been rescheduled for next year; another is scheduled for November 8-10, 2019

About 20 joined us for Mass on Ash Wednesday. The local paper announced several other churches distributing ashes, even at designated outdoor places. Black smudges on foreheads may not continue to be a sign of Catholic identity.

St. Benedict's celebration on March 21 is a day when the Subprior, Fr. Andrew is celebrant. He is also our only organist. We do pretty well on our own singing, but we do miss his talents. Our cook Adam provided good corn beef and cabbage on the 17th, St. Patrick's Day. For those who wanted more, we were invited to the annual celebration at Immaculate Heart Parish in Buhl.

Fr. Andrew attended the local ground water district meeting. The projected water supply for this year looks good. Our small snow blowers have been put away for the season. Here's hoping. Planting on the farm has begun.

On March 28 we hosted the annual dinner for the clergy and religious of our deanery. LuAnn and Adam provided a lovely meal which was enjoyed by about 45 people, including ourselves.

Recent correspondence from Fr. Ezekiel lets us know that he is doing well in the initial stages of his eremitical life in Italy.

## APRIL

Holy Week and Easter were the major events of the month. We sang quite a bit *a capella*. Fr. Andrew hasn't figured out how to be

celebrant and play the organ at the same time. Br. Selby did well leading as cantor. In our small community we all had something to do. Services were well attended. as sacristan and MC, Br. Sylvester had a very busy week.

The week following Easter Br. Selby participated in a centering prayer retreat given at St. Gertrude Monastery in Cottonwood.

Quilters came for two programs in April. They will be with us several times again in May. They made some beautiful hangings which now decorate the walls of the conference room.

Spring gardening has gotten a lot of attention from good friends. Raspberry vines have been trimmed and show new growth. Planting is a calculated risk. We've had warm days but also cold and windy days.

The lawns and flowers are perking up. The mower started but



soon needed a new part. The repair shop picks up and delivers only on Thursdays. The needed part takes a week to arrive and the repair job gets done when its turn comes. The lawn keeps growing. John Wasko ordered the part on line and fixed the mower himself. The mowed lawn looks very nice.

In the maintenance department we have replaced the heat pump controlling the chapel. The lighting there also needed repair. It's one place that needs to be kept up and running.

Our Oblates arranged a Sunday afternoon pot-luck dinner. It was really an enjoyable time. The food was very good. The ones who were to bring a vegetable dish didn't come. But the desert preparers did. Talk about a childhood dream being fulfilled!

Fr. Hugh's scholarship came to fruition in a recently published volume, *A Benedictine Reader, 530-1530*. Fr. Hugh was one of the main editors and contributors. He said it took years to complete and he was greatly relieved to have it done. Congratulations to our confrere.



The month began with a Spanish Marriage Encounter. The enthusiasm of the participants brings the raised energy level here. We're glad they come. Quilters were here twice. Episcopal clergy were here for a weekend. We ended the month with a week of Road Scholar study about the geology of the Snake River Plane.

Our surrounding groves and pasture are once again a summer home for a herd of deer. Deer are annual visitors. They seem to feel safe on our premises. In addition to the raspberry blooms and berries, they have plenty of fresh growth to eat, including sugar beet sprouts and the vegetable garden.



Our gardeners have done great work. If the plants survive, the variety and abundance of produce will provide for great meals. Salsa from the store isn't quite the same.

Fr. Jerome has a new hip. He was down to "bone on bone" and with the schedule he keeps in three small parishes, limited and painful mobility was not a good option. He was released from the hospital two days after surgery and is recuperating well at the parish in Kellogg.

Our bookstore and gift shop are undergoing inventory. It's a tedious task to say the least. Thanks to some dedicated volunteers and Fr. Stephen and Br. Selby, it's getting done.

Our patronal feast, the Ascension, was on Thursday, May 30. We celebrate then and again on Sunday. •

## Br. Jose's Socks

Joanne Draper, Oblate

Brother Jose Echanove was a member of the Monastery of the Ascension community for many years. He was born in the Basque Country of northern Spain, and came to the Magic Valley as a young man. While at the monastery, he demonstrated his many talents in cooking, sewing, and gardening — and knitting socks. Almost any afternoon he could be found in his chair outside the chapel, knitting away on big double-pointed needles. His fingers flew, and he could knit a pair of socks in a weekend, a skill he learned from his mother back in Spain. He said the little tassels on the backs of his socks were to tie them together when they were washed, so none would ever be lost.

Brother Jose attended the very first Purling a Prayer

knitting retreat here at the monastery, where he gave a demonstration on spinning on his homemade spindle. In this picture, he is brandishing his carding tools, which he used to prepare the wool before he spun it. Anyone who is interested, can request his directions for making socks from Joanne Draper, joanned23@gmail.com. She will also provide information on upcoming knitting retreats. The next one is scheduled for Nov. 8-10, 2019. •







## THE DESERT CHRONICLE

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The Lord calls us to share in his work of creation and to contribute to the common good by using the gifts we have received. . . . For our life of earth reaches full stature when it becomes an offering. . . . Your own personal vocation does not consist only in the work you do, though that is an expression of it. Your vocation is something more: it is a path guiding your many efforts and actions.

-- Pope Francis, *Christ is Alive* (2019)



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