



MONASTERY OF THE ASCENSION THE DESERT CHRONICLE

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Benedict's Guidelines for Peaceful Communities

Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB

IN SEARCH OF PEACE



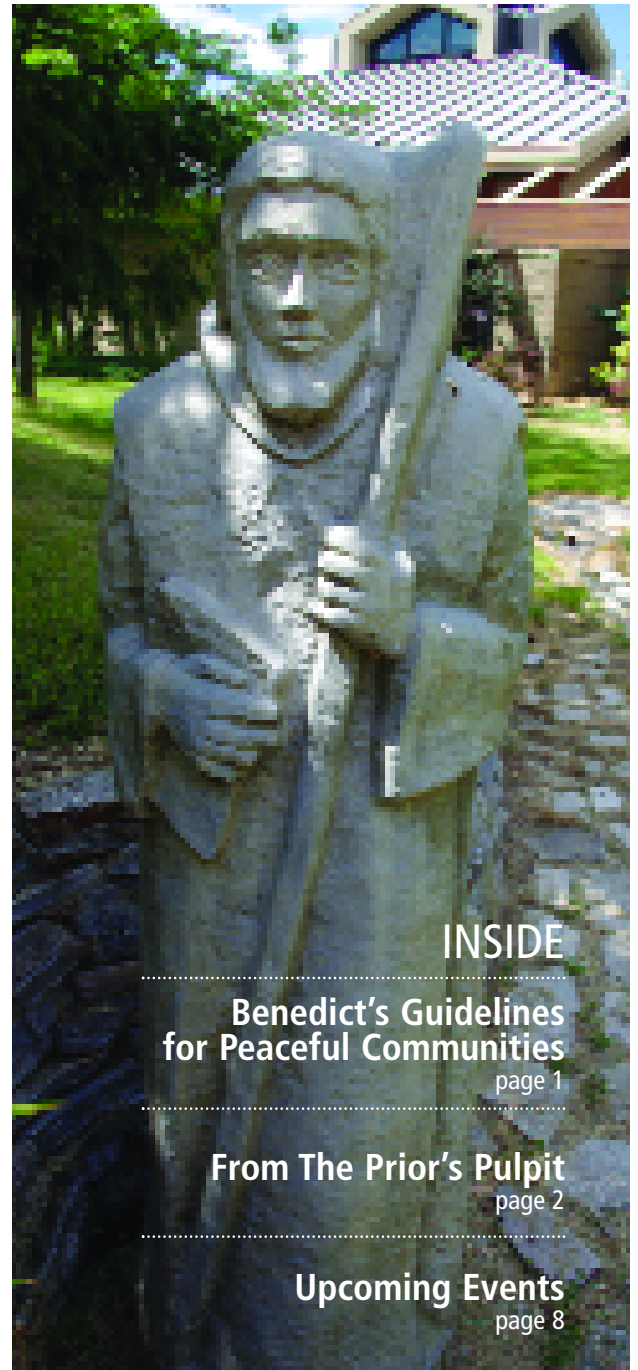
"*Pax*," peace, is a venerable Benedictine motto. At Mt. Angel Abbey over an entrance door is the biblical question, "*Amice, ad quid venisti?*" "Friend, why have you come?" Just around the corner from that inscription is another that answers the question:

"*Pax*," "peace." That question was the one Christ addressed to Judas in the Garden of Gethsemane when Judas had betrayed him. Perhaps it was put over the monastery door as a warning that peace is easily betrayed. We see that betrayal in wars; in polarized politics and polarized churches, where the assumption is that those who don't agree with us are either evil or utterly stupid; in families; in our hearts. It seems worthwhile to think about what St. Benedict says about achieving peaceful Christian community so we can be peacemakers in the communities where we live and work, whether as monks or lay people.

PEACE AS THE WAY AND THE GOAL

The Benedictine motto "*Pax*" has its roots in the biblical word for "peace," "shalom." "Shalom" means prospering or human flourishing,

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From the Prior's Pulpit

Fr. Kenneth Hein, OSB., prior

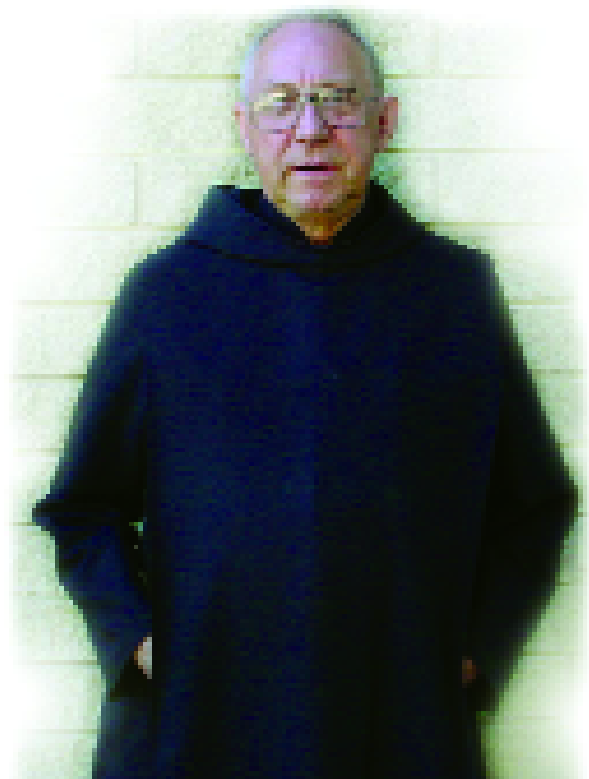
SEPTEMBER 8TH IS THE DAY ON WHICH THE CHURCH ANNUALLY CELEBRATES THE BIRTHDAY OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY. It is also the day on which many members of the Swiss-American Congregation of Benedictine monastics made their first profession of vows. The calendar of the Monastery of the Ascension reveals the following professions for September 8: Fr. Andrew Baumgartner, 1955; Fr. Boniface Lautz, 1955; Fr. Eugene Esch, 1949; Fr. Norbert Novak, 1958; Fr. Meinrad Schallberger, 1958; and Fr. Hugh Feiss, 1960. With a bit of quick calculation and with the help of “higher math”, we note that 2010 is Fr. Hugh’s jubilee year of profession. Besides wishing him *ad multos annos*, I heartily thank him for his years of virtual servile labor on behalf of the Monastery of the Ascension and its Elderhostel (now “Road Scholar”) activities, its ministries and thriving oblate program, and for his endless, scholarly productions, productivity, and for his ever “feiss-ty” outpouring of energy and ideas.

A full list of his feats and what he has accomplished for the Church and the monastery would soak up a goodly quantity of ink. But frugal Fr. Hugh is also editor of this newsletter, and he would very likely cut into this column with a large pair of scissors to exorcise much of it just to save some ink and paper. Nevertheless, he might tolerate

my noting his efforts on behalf of the environment and in keeping our part of Idaho smog and smoke free. Thus green fields and blue skies continue to surround us.

By way of marking the 50th anniversary of Fr. Hugh’s monastic profession (and in keeping with his desire to “keep things simple”), an after-Mass reception is planned for September 5. He will be on the trail, hiking with a group of Road Scholars on his jubilee day. So along with one of my favorite childhood heroes, Roy Rogers, I also wish him “happy trails” now and always and in all ways. May God continue to bless him and all of my confreres with good health, good humor, and good friends.

*Feast of the Transfiguration
August 6, 2010*



not just in a material sense. A peaceful Christian community is a place where people are flourishing together and in their relations with God, other people and

“Prefer nothing to the love of Christ. Do not act in anger, or plot vengeance and deceit. Do not give a false peace. Do not abandon charity.”

the world. Such a community realizes the Kingdom of God in its midst.

It was to construct such a peaceful community that Benedict wrote his *Rule*. As the first chapter makes clear, he intended it for cenobites, for monks who choose to live in community. He respected hermits but thought no one should become a hermit before spending a long time in a monastic community. The *Rule of Benedict* thinks of monastic life as a process of growth that never stops until death. Interaction with peers, the admonitions of superiors, good work, *lectio divina*, and the liturgy should prompt us to change for the better, to grow deeper into the life of Christ.

A peaceful community, where people flourish individually and collectively is very difficult to achieve. We are all flawed, and we can only change so much and so fast. Our weaknesses and psychological difficulties limit how far we can change, and generally speaking there is hesitancy to admonish us when so often that makes us defensive and resentful. Moreover, our individualistic culture does not encourage or support community. When there is an apparent conflict between individual aspirations and the needs of community, we instinctively side with the individual.

Nevertheless, Benedict believes peace is possible. Early in the Prologue, citing a Psalm, St. Benedict says seeking peace is the way to get to heaven: “If you wish to have true and eternal life, keep you tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit; turn from evil and do good; seek peace and go after it.” Peace is the way and the goal. A few verses later Benedict cites Scripture and the *Rule of the Master* to the effect that the one who will find rest (admittedly not quite the same as peace) on God’s holy mountain is the one who is faultless and just, who speaks

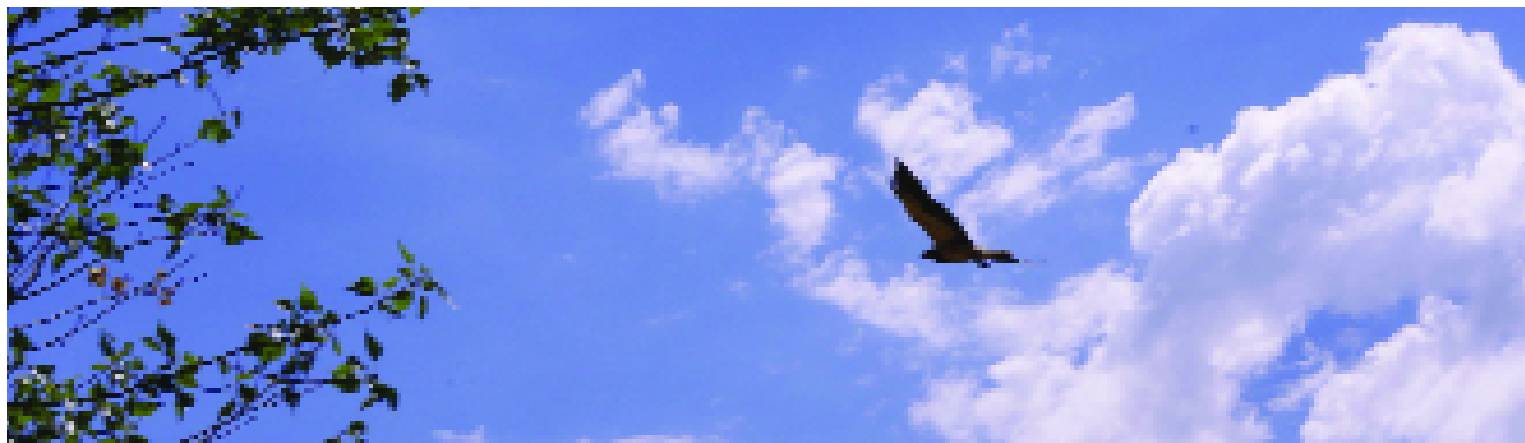
the truth from his heart and does not listen to slander. So, peace is a goal, and it is impossible without controlling one’s tongue and guiding one’s deeds—it requires effort.

In chapter 34 of his *Rule*, St. Benedict arranges for distributing goods to each according to their need (rather than giving each an equal share). “So, the one who needs less should thank God and not be sad. And whoever needs more should be humble about his weaknesses and not gloat over the mercy shown him. Thus all the members will be at peace.”

Benedict knew, as Pope Paul VI said, if you want peace seek justice. And he adds immediately, thinking of what destroys peace: “Above all, the evil of murmuring must not appear for any cause by any word or gesture whatsoever.”

Three times Benedict connects peace and love. In chapter 4 on the tools of good works he writes: “Hate no one. Do not be jealous. Do not act out of envy. Do not be





habitually quarrelsome. Flee pride. Respect the seniors. Love the juniors. Pray for your enemies *for the love of Christ*. If you have a quarrel with someone, *make peace* before sundown.” In another section of the instruments of good works, St. Benedict says something similar: “Prefer nothing to the love of Christ. Do not act in anger, or plot vengeance and deceit. Do not give a false peace. Do not abandon charity.” False peace could be passive aggression; it could be failure to change in one’s heart and just opt for a lack of external conflict.

Again, saying that the abbot should appoint the prior, Benedict writes in chapter 65, “for the sake of preserving *peace and charity* we think it best that the ordering of his monastery depend entirely on the abbot’s own judgment.” In the end, the buck stops with someone; and in the monastery that someone is the abbot. In a close-knit community, there cannot be two independent authorities; otherwise there will be factions.

In chapter 31, which concerns the cellarer (business manager), Benedict writes, “If the community is rather large, let him be given helpers to aid him so he can *peacefully* perform the duties entrusted to him.” Benedict tries to make sure that an important official has the opportunity to live in inner peace. Hence, Benedict will go on to urge people to come to the cellarer at suitable times. This balances the early description of the tact and cheerfulness required of the cellarer. The goal is that no one—cellarer or other monk--will be perturbed or disturbed in the house of God.

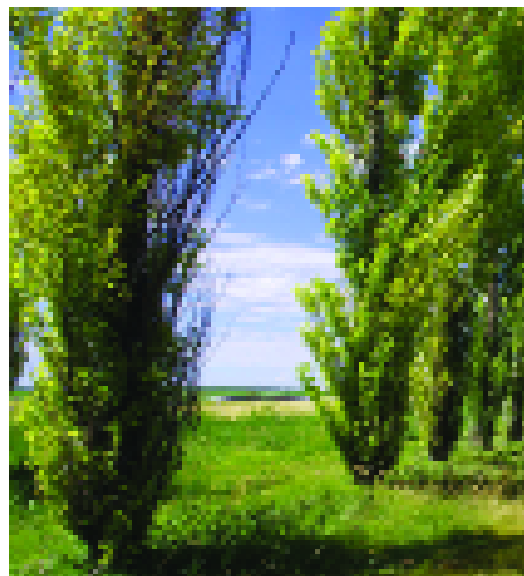
Aiming to establish a peaceful community of flourishing people, Benedict insists on certain attitudes and practices that make such a community attainable: restraint in speech, obedience, community prayer, and mutual forgiveness, which in turn express and nurture the basic virtues of love, humility and—St. Benedict perhaps does not give this as much emphasis as it deserves—thankfulness. Here we will concentrate of the first four, more tangible ways of sustaining a flourishing community.

RESTRAINT IN SPEECH

St. Benedict returns often to the topic of speaking. He puts a chapter on restraint in speech between obedience and humility in the theoretical part of the rule, perhaps because in the early Church all three were seen as virtues of Christ, who humbled himself becoming obedient even unto death; he was silent like a lamb before his shearer. In any case, the *conversatio morum*, the way of life of the monastery, reflects the quality of the *conversatio verborum*, the conversation and communication among those in the community. Benedict makes a number of points about the Benedictine way of speech.

Chapter 6 on restraint in speech begins with a quotation from the psalmist who declares that he will guard himself from sins of the tongue and restrain himself from good speech. Why restrain from good speech? Because it is the role of the master (Christ, the Scriptures, St. Benedict himself) to speak and teach. One should spend time and effort listening to them. Only then, and when it is constructive and appropriate, should one speak. Contrary to this, we tend to be anxious to be heard and to impress by what we say.

Benedict adds that if one must ask something from the superior, it be done “with great humility and reverent submission.” It is not completely clear what he means here,



but it probably should be taken in a wide sense: one should not be overly insistent in asking anything of a superior—whether a clarification, an exception or some other request.

There should be no crude jokes and idle talk aimed at arousing laughter. Benedict may underestimate the value of laughter, but he is surely right to put under a perpetual ban all speech that is silly and stupid—serving no purpose but to kill time, fill up emptiness, or exchange gossip.

In small, relatively tight communities (including families, schools and offices, as well as monasteries), it seems to be important that everyone know what everyone else is doing—otherwise we start imaging the worst. So, a community needs to be as open as possible, with as few secrets as possible. But that requires that its members not betray the trust implied in that openness by bearing tales beyond the community.

The sort of speech that concerns Benedict most of all is murmuring—habitual and corrosive griping and complaining and unrelenting negativity. Twelve times he mentions murmuring and condemns it. Murmuring puts one in the position of the Israelites who murmured all during the Exodus. They were being led from captivity into freedom in the Promised Land, but they griped the whole way. To avoid murmuring, one needs keep in mind the big picture and the goal. We are being led to inner freedom and away from many kinds of slavery, but we can stifle progress by negative complaining.

However, we should not end this talk about restraint in speech on a negative note.

Benedict does not want us to be passive listeners. He wants us to make a positive contribution. In chapter 3, on calling the brothers for counsel, Benedict says when there are important matters to be dealt with, the abbot should call the whole community together and tell them what is involved. There are two assumptions here. Everyone should be informed and everyone should be listened to, because God can reveal what is best to anyone—even the youngest.



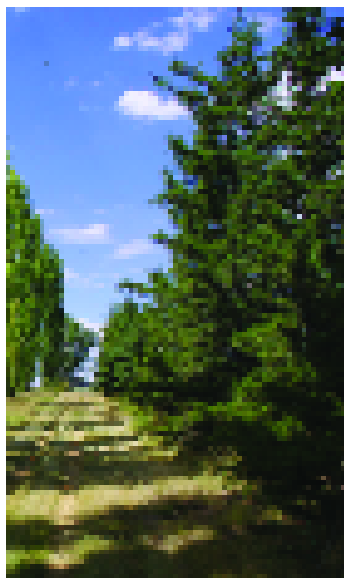
On the other hand, people should not be pushy or domineering, but present their advice with humility and deference—attitudes appropriate to the abbot and all the other members of the community. On lesser matters the abbot should consult just the seniors—otherwise, there will be too many meetings and endless distraction.

OBEDIENCE

“Obedience” is not a welcome word. It seems to connote having to do something because of a capricious or arbitrary decision of another person, who has the power to make us do what he or she wants. That, of course, is not what St. Benedict meant by obedience. He gives a great deal of instruction to the abbot about getting advice and making wise and unprejudiced decisions and so forth before he makes his Spirit-inspired but all too human decision. In doing so, the abbot is not so different from any Christian burdened with authority.

Benedict writes, “The abbot is believed to hold the place of Christ.” The abbot is teacher and leader of the community of disciples who make up the monastic family. What constitutes that family is faith—a shared vision of reality and fidelity to a common purpose—that in all things God may be honored and people within and without the community may be brought deeper into the life of the Trinity.

St. Benedict gives some directives about obedience as he understands it. He is writing of those who cherish Christ above all. Out of fidelity to the holy service they have professed or because of fear of hell or for the sake of heaven, they obey the superior’s command as if it came from God himself. So their obedience, impelled by love is quick, even instantaneous. It is whole-hearted, not reluctant and grumbling. God loves a cheerful giver; and murmuring in one’s heart or verbally deprives obedience of merit.



Chapter 71 of the Rule says that obedience is a blessing to be shown to all. In a community of any sort, individuals have areas of responsibility and they should be obeyed; they should also take counsel as the abbot does. Beyond that, people sometimes need help, and it should be offered them.

To obey requires a combination of selflessness and self-assurance: selfless, in that I regard the common good as more important than getting my way; self-assured in the sense that having passed beyond adolescence, I don't need to have it my way in order to feel whole and at peace.

Obedience, then presupposes humility, a genuine sense of who one is before God with others. It also requires listening, both on the part of the one in authority and the one called to obey. Ultimately, Benedict says, all are trying to hear the same divine voice speaking in their midst.

FORGIVENESS

In chapter 71, Benedict says that if a junior monk sees that a senior is perturbed with him he should immediately go and ask pardon; certainly the senior should do the same if someone is perturbed with him. Elsewhere, St. Benedict

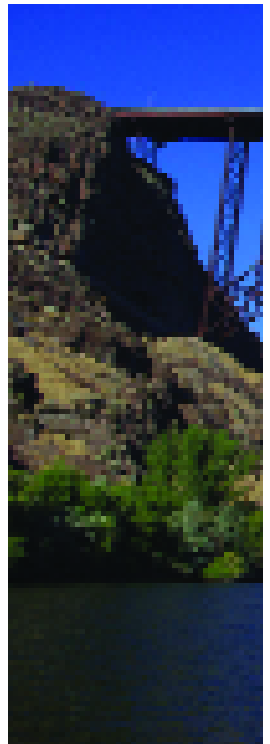
peace. Do not return evil for evil. Suffer wrongs patiently. Love your enemies... Hate no one. Don't be jealous." The chapter ends with "never despair of God's mercy." God extends mercy to us in Christ; we extend the same mercy Christ's brothers and sisters. As Benedictine oblate Paula Huston writes in her book on *Forgiveness, Following Jesus in Radical Loving*, forgiveness does not deny that evils, even horrible evils, have been done, but it acknowledges that the perpetrator did the evil out of a propensity for evil that we all share. Forgiveness requires that one not brood over others' limitations, speak negatively, or make unreasonable demands. Above all, like St. Benedict, she says that one key step toward forgiveness is praying for those who have really harmed us (which is different from bruising our egos).

COMMUNITY PRAYER

St. Benedict says that nothing should be preferred to community prayer. Such community prayer should be offered reverently and orderly in a place set aside. Our hearts should be in harmony with the words that we say or sing. The Psalms which make up much of our community prayer are part of a 3000 thousand-year-old tradition of religious poetry which Jesus himself prayed. We need not endorse all the sentiments expressed in the Psalms, but we do need to acknowledge them.

Community prayer requires all the skills of community life: good communication, listening to others' wants and needs, blending with their voices, patience with others' limitation, forgiveness for their faults. The goal is to find a speed, a format, a length, a language, and a style in which this particular community can pray with the Church. No liturgy will satisfy everyone completely. The goal of each must not be to have their way in everything, but to find a way that all can pray together. Our task is to forget the irritants and concentrate on the essentials—just as we must in any community endeavor.

All of our prayer and all of our lives lead to and flow from the central mystery of our existence: the gracious coming of the Son of God in human form and his return to the Father. Christ is God's offer of friendship to us and he is



says that at Morning and Evening Prayer the superior should say the complete Our Father because of "the thorns of quarreling that often spring up." The Lord's Prayer commits everyone to forgive as they wish God to forgive them. Benedict reinforces this at two places in chapter 4 on the tools of good works: "Do not act under impulse of anger. Do not wait for vengeance. Do not give a false





also our response to God. We bring to Christ all that we are and do and he offers it to the Father. We receive from Christ all that he is: his divinity and humanity. That we can turn even this into a battleground is a sobering reminder of how much we need to listen, to restrain our speech, to forgive each other so that we can “receive communion” worthily.

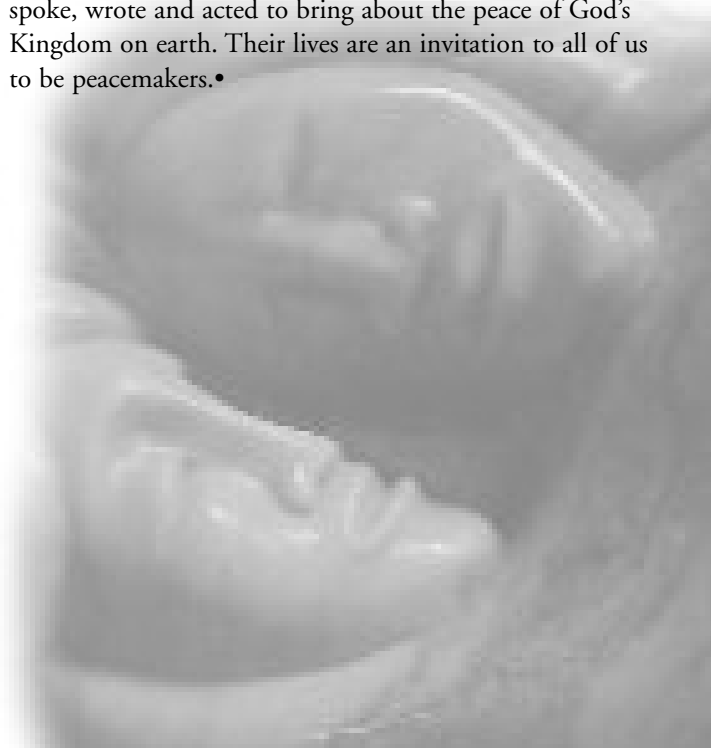
BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS FOR THEY SHALL BE CALLED CHILDREN OF GOD

Ultimately, the peaceful community is the product of love. Chapter 4 on the tools of good works makes this clear. “First of all to love the Lord God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and then your neighbor as yourself.” “To put nothing before the love of Christ.” To love fasting and chastity. Not to love much speaking or excessive laughter or contention. “In the love of Christ to pray for one’s enemies.” Benedict concludes the chapter by saying, “Eye has not seen nor ear heard what God has prepared for this who love him.”

There is a book called *Benedict in the World* that recounts

the lives of several dozen oblates. These are stories of lay people or clergy affiliated with Benedictine monasteries trying to bring the peace of God to the world. The great philosopher Jacques Maritain and his wife Raïssa and her sister Vera turned their household into a domestic monastery, in which they took turns being the superior. Just before he died, St. Oliver Plunkett, Archbishop of Armagh, who was arrested because he would not abandon the people of Ireland during a time of intense persecution, forgave those whose perjured testimony and bigotry led him to the scaffold. H. A. Reinhold, a priest who was expelled from Germany by the Nazis, sought to

promote active participation in the liturgy as the heart of the Church’s mission in the world. Each of them listened, spoke, wrote and acted to bring about the peace of God’s Kingdom on earth. Their lives are an invitation to all of us to be peacemakers. •



The
Editor,

50 years a monk, and needing copy, decided to rework here a retreat he gave this summer, first to the monastic community of Holy Trinity Monastery in St. David, AZ, and then to the oblates of our monastery. Thanks to all in both communities for their encouragement and feedback. The photos of the monastery and of the Snake River Canyon that accompany this article were taken by Tessa Knight, a volunteer at the monastery. The photos of the inscriptions at Mt. Angel Abbey were taken by Nikki Martin. Thanks to both of them.



Upcoming Events

September 5

9:00 AM Mass at the monastery with reception following: 50th Anniversary of Fr. Hugh's Monastic Profession.

October 28-31

Prayer and the 12 Steps (4-day retreat for members of any 12-step group) Contact: Grace C.
gracec77@aol.com or 208-404-4178.

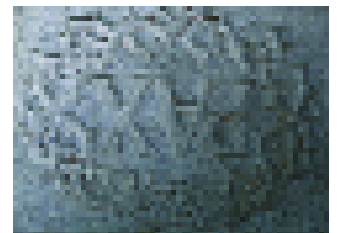
Oblate Retreat:

November 5-7

Contact: Fr. Hugh, 208-761-9389 or hughf@idahomonks.org.



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