

**50<sup>th</sup>**  
**ANNIVERSARY**  
MONASTERY  
OF THE ASCENSION  
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Monastery of the Ascension

# THE DESERT CHRONICLE

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## 50 Years Old? Aging? Mature? Doomed?

By Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB

ON AUGUST 3, WE CELEBRATED THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF WHAT IS CONSIDERED THE OFFICIAL FOUNDATION DAY OF THE MONASTERY OF THE ASCENSION. A FEW FRIENDS JOINED US FOR MASS THAT DAY, AND WE HAD A NICE SPREAD FOR DINNER. The day before the Times-News of Twin Falls published a story about us entitled “An Aging Order: 50-year-old Jerome Monastery Attracts Youth Interest but not Commitment.” It was a nice article, and the author and photographer worked hard on it. However, this is probably not the title that a public relations expert would have wanted for us, but it is true enough—of the Benedictines and of most other orders in the Church, and of this community specifically. There are more of us here now than there ever were before, but we have a median age of over 70. On the other hand, we have a novice (albeit a 60 year-old one), and another resident, John Wasko, who would be a novice if his health permitted it. From an institutional perspective, we are mature: we have buildings, infrastructure, customs, and financial stability. How spiritually mature we are is another matter, but one that probably only God can accurately evaluate. Whether we are doomed or not, again only God can (fore)know. However, it is comforting to know that for many years the monastery had only three members and it survived.

Anyway, however old we are, we are not moribund. It has been an exciting summer, one that has seen some heavy rains and very hot days. We have hosted six Road Scholar Programs and welcomed more than 100 people to them, as they came to study geology, quilting, Medieval England, Dante and detective fiction (not all at once), and enjoy the peace of the setting and the food that LuAnn Kraft serves. On the back of this issue is a list of the programs for 2016, including a brand new one on Benedictine Life, Literature and Culture from 550 – 1500, that Ron Pepin, Fr. Ezekiel, and I are planning to teach, using in part a reader on medieval Benedictine monasticism that Ron and I have been working on and hope to submit to our publisher early next year.

Mid-summer we took off a week from Road Scholar programs to welcome the now annual Benedict-Teen Retreat. There were about 30 young people and half a dozen chaperones from Salt Lake City, Cottonwood, Nampa, Caldwell, Boise, and Jerome. They put some zip into the “aging order,” by joining at Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours and working with us for two half days. As always, it was a delight to have them with us.

Then at the beginning of August, a group of lay people, many of the associated with Salt and Light Radio in Twin Falls, came out on a work detail. They systematically spruced up all around the guest house, trimming, weeding, cutting down dead trees, and so forth. The place has not looked so good for a long time.

The library expansion generated a fair amount of mess and dust in the hallways and basement, but most of that is cleaned up now and we have some additional storage space in the basement where previously there were books. And we have a new library.

So, with one Road Scholar program to go, sunrise coming later each successive morning, Fr. Norbert announcing his fall adult faith enrichment class, and Fr. Boniface announcing a steam cleaning of the dining and conference room rugs, it looks like we are ready for what the fall and winter of year fifty-one will bring, including, we pray, a new member or two with a few less years on him than most of us have. •



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First Mass on the Monastery Land, August 3, 1965

# From the Prior's Pulpit

## FIFTY YEARS YOUNG

*By Fr. Kenneth Hein, OSB*

On the third of August, 1985, the monks of Mount Angel Abbey in Oregon voted to establish monastic foundations in Mexico and in Idaho. It is not my goal here to recount the history of either of these monasteries. Instead, I will reflect a bit on the meaning of fifty years as experienced in our human situation.

When I turned fifty back in the last century, I felt overwhelmed by the thought that “Wow! I am half a century old!” Now, twenty-seven years later, I am inclined to say, “Ah, just to be fifty again!” I suspect that I am speaking for many of those reading this article at this moment. On the other hand, institutions such as businesses and monasteries readily boast of having made it through at least fifty years of existence. So it is that the Monastery of the Ascension gives thanks to God for its fifty years of existence and looks forward to the next fifty years and more, *Deo volente* (God willing).

Ah, yes! “God willing and the creek don’t rise.” A glance to the past often prompts us to speculate about the future. It is common stock in personality inventory tests to be asked to write something about one’s view of the future. My view of this monastery’s future is bright, and I don’t have any reason to say that I am just whistling in the dark. Of course, we can expect trials and ups and downs with the rest of the country and world. No monastery can be simply an institution unto itself, especially in our world of instant communication and economic interdependence.

Now that I’ve put forth the idea of interdependence, I turn to a story from the archives of monasticism: A hermit monk in the

Egyptian desert was given a lovely, juicy bunch of grapes one day. He accepted the gift very graciously. But he felt unworthy of the fine gift and gave it to the hermit to the east of him. A year later, the hermit to the west gave a cluster of raisins to the first hermit. And, oh yes, he did enjoy the raisins very much over the course of the next days and weeks.

Over the course of this coming year, the monks here will be passing around stories and tales of “blood, sweat, and tears” from our past for our present consumption and growth in appreciation. If we can boast of any success at all, it is because we are standing on the shoulders of the giants that have gone before us and, in some cases, are still with us. Our growth has been slow, but firm and healthy.

We owe much to Bishop Walsh and the Marshall family who put us on the map of Idaho. It’s rather curious, however, that many who are living right around us have yet to discover us, even as others from all corners of this country know about us for various reasons and from various sources. If you, the reader, want to view our location, Google Earth will not let you down. Just locate Twin Falls and move a bit north from there. You will soon find the tag, “Ascension Priory”; and when you click your mouse on it, lo and behold, you will get a view right into my room and of the pictures on my wall. I’m not sure how Google Earth acquired the picture; but I did store it on a Google Cloud a couple of years ago. If you decide to “google” my “digs”, you will be edified to see that my bed is made. Alleluia!•





# RECOLLECTIONS

for a Fifty Year Family Reunion



## A WALK IN THE DESERT

Br. Sylvester Sonnen, OSB

A walk in the desert is how it started. A young priest, Fr. Nicholas Walsh, liked to walk in the desert to say his prayers. The United States government owned the ground he walked. He gained the deed to this land through “desert entry” (desert entry was like “homesteading,” but was for farming). Fr. Walsh and Bishop Byrne (then Bishop of Boise) owned this land, not the Diocese of Boise. Bishop Byrne was the first to contact Mt. Angel Abbey in Oregon about starting a new “foundation” in Idaho. Before anything could be done, he was sent to a new diocese. He gave the new Bishop of Idaho, Bishop Sylvester Treinen, his share of the land. Bishop Treinen and Fr. Walsh renewed the request to Mt. Angel Abbey to found a new community in Idaho. On December 22, 1964, the monks of the Abbey voted to begin that community. (They also voted to found a new community in Mexico.)

Abbot Damian Jentges, OSB, named Fr. Patrick Meagher, OSB, the first Prior of the new monastery. Fr. Patrick was a deliberate man. That turned out to be providential. The main reason the new community was started was to begin a minor seminary. With overcrowding in the seminary at Mt. Angel, beginning a new seminary someplace else looked like a good idea. However, about the time the monastery in Idaho was founded, enrollment in seminaries slacked off and soon there was no need for a new seminary in Jerome. By moving slowly Fr. Patrick saved us from a lot of problems later.

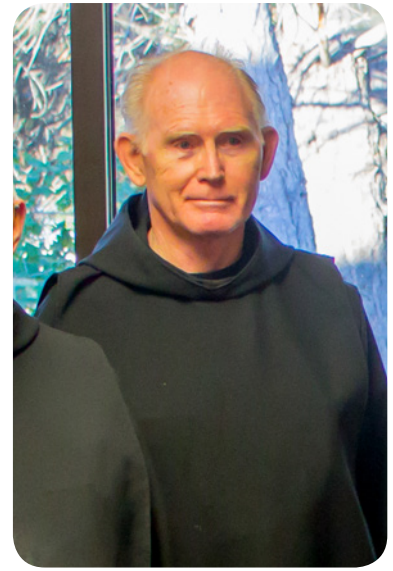
Fr. Patrick arrived in Idaho in July 1965. Bishop Sylvester Treinen, who wished to welcome the new Prior and to make known to the public the start of the new Community, said the first Mass on the property. At the mass Bishop Sylvester handed over the deed to the property to Abbot Damian and Fr. Patrick. This action was the official start of the new community. The date was August 3, 1965. Finding a place to stay was the next problem facing the new Prior. He lived with Fr. Method Korn, OSB, at the Chaplain’ House at St. Benedict’s Hospital in Jerome for a time. Even when a new chaplain, Fr. Stephen Hoffman, OSB, was assigned, the fit was not a good one. In the spring of 1967, Fr. Patrick found a temporary answer. Bishop Treinen asked him to take the parish in Buhl after



Groundbreaking for the Ministry Center, October 14, 1992: Charlie Marshall, Br. Sylvester, Bishop Nicolas Walsh.

the unexpected death of the pastor. This was very good for the later days of the new community. Fr. Patrick made many contacts and friends who became our strong supporters. During his stay in Buhl, he did not stand still. He looked at different places for the building of a lasting monastic home. Among them were The Canyon Golf Course, King Hill, Idaho, and the Hagerman Valley. At this time Fr Simeon Van de Voord joined Fr. Patrick. They found that best place was the one they already owned. They contacted an architect, Patrick Cudmore, to design a building for a monastery.

Before the final design was made, Bishop Treinen made an offer to them that was too good to pass up. He proposed the building of a student center for the Collage of Southern Idaho on land the Diocese already owned near the college. This was a welcome offer. The student center would provide them with a ministry that they could do. With a revision of the architect’s plans, they hoped to move ahead with the building. However, bids to complete the design were too costly. A new architect, Ivan Stone, was contacted. His design could be constructed within the budget. In May 1969, Fr. Patrick and Fr Simeon moved into the new St. Benedict’s Student Center and Priory. Then in August 1969, I was sent to join the community. With one more member, monastic life began in earnest and it has not stopped to this day. •



*Br. Sylvester, a native of Cottonwood, ID, is the longest-serving member of the monastery community. He is in charge of accommodations in the retreat house and decorations in the chapel. •*



**50**  
**YEARS**

Memories 1965-2015

## DUST AND BLESSINGS

Jackie Last

When I was asked about my memories of the Mass of dedication for the monastery in August 1965, what came to mind first was dust. There were dust trails along the road as a procession of cars made its way slowly to the site of the dedication. It was a hot August afternoon and dust was softly blowing across the sagebrush at the rock pile where a table was prepared for Mass and the various supplies unloaded. Helping were two teenaged boys, dressed in cassocks and surpluses, who were to serve as altar boys to the celebrants who included Abbot Damian Jentges, OSB, Bishop James Byrne of Boise, and several priests, including Father Bernard McBride who was pastor in Jerome. Several people from Boise, including some seminarians who were at Mt. Angel, joined the local people for this historic event. One of the seminarians we now know as Father Tom Faucher.

Mike Last (who along with David Chojnacky was an altar boy at the dedication Mass) recalled recently, "I remember it was warm and a bit breezy--enough to kick up a fair amount of dust throughout the proceedings. I also remember that the actual "rock pile" was about 100 yards to the west of what we later referred to as the "Bishop" pump, which is about 1/8 of a mile south of today's Monastery." Mike became familiar with "Bishop" and other pumps in his long hot summers working out there for Dick Marshall who farmed the land. Mike was a pipe setter when they moved the irrigation pipes across the fields by hand, before some of our modern day inventions.

In the years leading up to the dedication, the members of our parish in Jerome had been blessed by visits from Abbott Damian. He sometimes celebrated Sunday Mass for us and also led a women's Day of Prayer in our parish hall for the women of our deanery. When he came to take care of some of the land business, he was generous with his time and many of us knew him. Once when he and Father

McBride came to our house for breakfast after Sunday Mass, my children, some very small, gathered around to be introduced to him. I asked what the children should call him, as we didn't know any other abbots. He smiled with a twinkle in his eyes and said "Most of the little ones call me 'Fatherabbit,'" so that is how he was addressed.

What a gift was given to us all that day, with the coming of the monks to Idaho. First Father Patrick, who lived in several places in Jerome, along with Brother Sylvester and Father Simeon, as they made plans for what sort of a foundation they would build. They helped out as needed in the various parishes in our deanery. Father Simeon taught our high school DeSales group and helped with deanery activities of that group. So the parishes in our valley were blessed with the help and inspiration of these men and those who followed, as they established what is now known as The Monastery of the Ascension, fulfilling a promise made in the 1950s when our pastor, Father Walsh, was transferred to Boise to begin the Idaho Register. At the farewell party that gathered to say goodbye to him, he said to us all, "Mark my words. This valley will be blessed."•

*Jackie Last, widow of Deacon Bill Last, lives in Jerome and comes to Mass at the Monastery almost every Saturday morning.*



## NEXT-DOOR NEIGHBORS

Dick and Louise Marshall

Father (later Bishop) Nicolas Walsh and Charlie Marshall (Dick's dad) were involved in the plan to prove up the current monastery land as a farm and then deed it to the diocese to help support a minor seminary on the site. The minor seminary never materialized, but the monks eventually came to live here in 1980. Someone could file for 320 acres. Fr. Walsh and Bishop James Byrne (Boise, 1856-1962), probably filed for the land in 1957, which is the date of water rights on the land. The total acreage was 560 acres, to which Charlie added 40 acres later. They never had title to the 40 acres in the southeast corner. When the land was first brought under cultivation, the Marshalls rented the land from the monastery. Later, Charlie suggested to Bishop Treinen (Boise, 1962-1988) that he share the risks and that profits be divided ¼ and ¾ which was more profitable to the diocese and later the monastery. The first bit of ground was farmed in 1964; Louise and John Mitani were the first to work on it; Dick came out the next year when they put up a trailer on their farm. At that time the north end of the monastery property was not yet farmed. All of the farming began with sprinklers, except for 20 or 30 acres along the east edge of the property, which was watered from a ditch. It was hard work, and there were often leaks in the pipe joints, which resulted in deep mud. Louise remembers telling the pipe setters to get their muddy clothes off the sagebrush because the bishop was coming.

We remember the early monks very well: Frs. Patrick, Cosmas, Stephen, Dominic, Simeon, Eugene and Br. Sylvester. Fr. Eugene and Fr. Simeon came back to our house for the final dinner we had with them before we sold our farm. The hardest part of that was moving away from the monks who had been our neighbors for





more than three decades. Fr. Stephen's CB moniker was "The Black Bandit." He almost always wore his clerical clothes (or at least black ones), and he was always on the prowl for bargains. He was famous for his frugality. He also knew how to make do when money was short. If necessary he would straighten out bent nails so they could be reused. It was an odd quirk of his that after he left Idaho and came back to visit, he never visited the chapel at the monastery or the church at Hagerman where he had served.

There were conflicts as there will be when strong personalities interact. Fr. Stephen and Bishop Treinen did not get along, so Charlie had to be the go between. On the other hand, Fr. McBride (the pastor in Jerome) and Fr. Stephen had good rapport. Once when Fr. McBride didn't answer his door, Fr. Stephen went down the coal chute to check on him. However, Fr. McBride did not get along with Fr. Simeon, who ironically enough was the one to give him the last rites when he was dying in the hospital.

There were various options about where to build the monastery when it was decided to leave the site across from the College of Southern Idaho in Twin Falls. Fr. Eugene, who didn't like wind, opted for a site down in the Canyon, west of Twin Falls. We told him that it might be pretty depressing living with rock walls on two sides and urged them to build on the present site. Fr. Patrick liked the current spot and brought trees to plant here. (In retrospect, Fr. Eugene thinks the site where the monastery now sits was well chosen).

When the monastery was being built in 1979–1980, Fr. Dominic

saw to the landscaping and Fr. Stephen supervised the monks working on the building (Fr. Paschal, Fr. Andrew, Br. Sylvester and several young brothers). Fr. Stephen lived at the site. He came to our house for dinner (when he did there were never any leftovers), and sometimes he took home a jar of a chokecherry and vodka drink "for his cough." We were visiting once in the courtyard of the new monastery building. There was water leaking into the basement. Fr. Stephen called up the architect in Salt Lake and told him something needed fixing. A pipe was put in (though the basement still floods sometimes).

Once Fr. Patrick took us to see the Grotto in Portland, but it was just at the end of the farm season and Dick was embarrassed that he couldn't stay awake. Fr. Stephen would take us to lunch at the casino at Grand Ronde, but he wouldn't let Louise gamble there. We went to the Holy Land with Fr. Simeon.

Back in 1964, our boys were too small to help with the work. As they grew up, they became more involved in the farming. Now Steve and DeWitt are farming the monastery land, and most recently DeWitt's son Ben has been working on the land as well. So it has been a very long, four-generation relationship that has meant much to us. We hope it continues for more generations to come. •

*Dick and Louise Marshall lived next to the monastery almost from its beginning until they retired from farming recently.*

## MY STORY

Deonno Avila

My story about the monastery of the Ascension begins the summer before my seventh-grade year, a couple years before I ever set foot in the monastery. My brother, who at the time was about to enter his senior year, was going on a retreat to a monastery. It sounded cool. I was wishing that I could go, but I found out I was too young so I carried on my regular routine. Eventually he came back and told me stories about his trip and it sounded amazing. I wanted to go so bad, but then school started and I forgot about it. When I was at school I was very shy and awkward. I really didn't like being social. Because of this I got bullied badly. That year was no different. That year was probably the toughest year I had faced. I became very angry and violent and fought often and was in trouble by the end of the year. I was confused and didn't know what to do. I didn't know who I was.

The summer before my eighth-grade year my brother went to the

monastery again. Again I was jealous. I wanted to go. Eventually I dealt with my disappointment. At the beginning of my eighth grade I began to open up, but yet I was still sad. All I had was my family and God. The year ended with me feeling sad and depressed. Summer came and high school was staring me in the face.

The monastery was hosting its third year of Benedict-Teen. I was told that my brother might bring a group from Utah to the monastery that year. It was finally my chance to go.

I could go on and on about what happened but instead I'll tell you what I learned: God loves and there are people besides my family that care about me. I learned that I'm not the only person that cares about their religion. As the week ended I felt I had a second family. Talking to the monks, I finally understood my religion. I was able to finally get out of my shell and talk more. My faith was strengthened I was rebuilt anew. I feel the Monastery of the Ascension made me the man I am today.

(Deonno Avila is a high school student in Salt Lake City, UT).



## Nine Months in the Middle of Fifty Years

Fr. Andrew Baumgartner, OSB



The monks at the monastery in Twin Falls felt that it was not a conducive location to attract vocations to monastic life, and so successfully petitioned the monks at Mount Angel to move out to the farm property outside of Jerome. By the fall of 1979, the shell of the new monastery building on 100 South Road was up. Three monks were already assigned to the monastery in Twin Falls: Fr. Stephen Hoffman, OSB, Fr. Eugene Esch, OSB, and Br. Sylvester Sonnen, OSB.

Abbot Anselm Galvin, OSB, sent four additional monks from Mount Angel: a young priest, Fr. Joel Kehoe, OSB, a monk in training, Br. Samuel Hacking, OSB, Fr. Paschal Cheline, OSB, and myself. Abbot Anselm had asked monks at Mount Angel to indicate which of three descriptions fit their feelings about going to Idaho: (1) would volunteer; (2) would go if asked (3) would not go. Fr. Paschal, who grew up in the Twin Falls' area, didn't want to go to Idaho, but felt it was not monastic to say he would not go, so he checked (2). Br. Samuel and I were also from Idaho, and that may have been a factor in our being sent. Abbot Anselm's idea seems to have been to have us stay at Jerome and augment the community when it moved into the new monastery. I was given the impression that when the building work was completed I would be appointed prior.

So in October 1979 the four of us arrived in Twin Falls. Fr. Stephen quickly organized the seven of us into a work brigade. We had morning office and breakfast (cooked by Br. Sylvester) at the monastery in Twin Falls, packed a lunch, and then six of us drove

to the building site in Jerome. Fr. Stephen was waiting for us when we arrived. He slept in the new building to make sure the place was not vandalized. We worked from about 9:30 until 5:00. We took a lunch break at noon and developed the custom of saying noon office in our work clothes (hence the monks at the monastery to this day do not wear their habits to noon prayer). Then we returned to Twin Falls, prayed the office and had dinner cooked by Rosa.

Fr. Stephen was not a severe taskmaster. He took on the job of building the new monastery as a favor to Abbot Anselm and was in no rush to finish. He wanted to do things for the least amount of money, and one cannot be in a hurry when dickering over price. He probably saved about

30% by his dickering and our labor. We worked six days a week. I was Fr. Stephen's assistant, since he thought I might have inherited some of my father's construction skills. We installed the closets in the rooms and the wooden trim. Fr. Joel and Fr. Paschal painted and painted, month after month. Fr. Paschal stayed behind in Twin Falls on Saturdays to clean the monastery there. Br. Sylvester helped the electrician. Br. Samuel labored at various tasks. Fr. Stephen did not like heights, so Fr. Paschal and Br. Sylvester were assigned to put sealant on the beams in the chapel.

Fr. Dominic Broxmeyer, OSB, was here (except during the cold part of winter) and brought a tractor with which he leveled the land around the new building. Fr. Eugene helped with the landscaping. The spruce trees were planted along the lane, a laborious job, since they had to be watered by hand, but the result is quite beautiful. Currently they are occupied by over a half dozen barn and great horned owls.

The placid rhythm of our lives was jolted in June 1980. Abbot Anselm resigned, and we went to Mount Angel to vote for a new abbot. Fr. Bonaventure Zerr, OSB, was elected abbot. He had not liked the idea of sending Fr. Paschal and me to Idaho. Fr. Paschal never came back. I came back but after ten days Abbot Bonaventure told me to return to Mount Angel and there I remained until 1995, when Abbot Peter Eberle, OSB, sent me back to Idaho, where I have lived happily ever since. •

*Fr. Andrew, a native of Genesee, ID, has served as business manager both at Mt. Angel Abbey and at the Monastery of the Ascension. He is an avid backpacker.*

## I LOVE THE MONKS!

Amy Jaskowiak

I love the monks! And the monastery! Mom says one of the monks was the only person who could hold me and I would quit crying when I was a baby.

*Amy Jaskowiak, who graduated from Boise State University three years ago, is a teacher in Jerome.*







## My Association with the "Black Robes"

John Doerr

When Fr. Hugh asked me to write "something about your long association with Ascension Priory," I was at first flattered by the thought that something to which I might put my pen would grace the pages of the "Desert Chronicle" to be included among the well-authored articles by monks, oblates and prominent friends of the Abbey. On further reflection, as I started to write, I could not limit my thoughts to just Ascension, for the reason that my life's history includes a much longer association with Benedictines. And, I could not leave it just to history, but had to add the spiritual benefits to which that long association has led me.

Historically, my association with the Benedictines goes back to 1948 when my parents told me that I was heading to St. John's Prep School, a high school near St. Cloud, Minnesota, some 400 miles from home. My sister, Lori, who knew more about my life at home than I recall, told me later it was either there or reform school. So began my adventure with the "blackrobes" as we teenagers, somewhat irreverently, called the monks of St. John's Monastery. As I recall, the 400 or so monks at St. John's determined to transform me, a small town kid from Napoleon, ND, who had never heard of a monk prior to starting my new home, into an educated, upright, spiritually oriented young man. I graduated from the Prep School, and matriculated to St. John's University by merely changing dormitories. After 2 years, I moved on to the University of North Dakota, where I obtained my law degree, then back to Napoleon, to practice law with my father.

Following the old saw, "out of sight, out of mind," I somewhat dismissed the monks from my mind. Years later, after moving to Idaho, raising my family and engaged in a busy practice of law, Rosemarie, my wife, and I became acquainted with then retired

Bishop Nicholas E. Walsh, who was instrumental in bringing the Monastery of the Ascension into being. We became fast friends, frequently dined together, and it was out of conversations with the Bishop that I started to become aware of "the monks up north," as I initially called them.

At first I was slow in making their acquaintance, finding myself attending morning prayer and Mass with the monks on an infrequent basis. During one of those visits I was asked by Fr. Boniface, then Prior, to attend to some legal matters of the monastery that needed my "talents" as a lawyer. That invitation and working on some interesting projects, further encouraged me to be a more frequent visitor to the abbey.

When I was beset by some rather serious health problems during that time, one of the monks from Ascension, with the grace of God, worked a miracle on me. My surgeon admitted that my spontaneous recovery on the morning of intended surgery was not in the realm of recognized medical science.

Still, over the years, I found myself "too busy" to attend to regular spiritual matters up north. More recently I read for the third time a small book entitled "The Very Rich Hours of Jacques Maritain." I found myself reflecting on a quote of his - "the only reason for man's existence is his ultimate union with God" - and the quote of his mentor, Leon Bloy, who led Jacques and his wife Raisa from atheism to conversion to Catholicism - "the only sadness is not to become a saint." I dwelt on their joint concern that there had to be something more to life than the annihilation that comes with death and the fate of one simply being thrown into a hole in the ground and forgotten.

Despite the advice of the corporal work of mercy "bury the dead", for many years I was reluctant to attend funerals, but eventually concluded, keeping my age in mind, that I was required to attend at least one funeral, and mindful of Maritain's and Bloy's quotes, decided I needed more of the monks up north.

Recently one of the monks told me of the need for a gardener, and loving that preoccupation, I got busy killing weeds, changing out the drip-irrigation system and planting a garden, joining the monks with prayer and Mass on a regular basis. Thank God for them and the happiness and joy they have brought into my life. My concern, knowing well my history, is whether I will be like "seed thrown onto rocky soil." And thus, I seek the monk's continued prayers - and the grace of God - that I will find continued reason to rise early and pray with the monks. I am determined to make the garden a success - my desire is to also plant a garden in my soul of some permanence, one which will produce spiritual flowers and fruit - and to grow in my association with the monks of Monastery of the Ascension. The monastery is truly a oasis in the desert of southern Idaho. •

*John Doerr is an attorney in Twin Falls and an dedicated gardener.*



**50**  
**YEARS**

Memories 1965-2015



## FROM OUR FAMILY TO YOURS

Steve, Pam, Steven, Chris, Joseph, Michael, Marie, John Paul, Alex and Vincenzo Di Lucca.

Sound the trumpets! It is the golden jubilee of the foundation, and in the spirit of joyful celebration, we heartily thank God for the Benedictine monks and Ascension Monastery. This center of prayer and retreat, serenely cresting a knoll that overlooks the Magic Valley, has been a spiritual sanctuary for our family. The monks have graciously extended their Benedictine hospitality and spirituality to us, thereby enriching, strengthening and supporting our family for the 21 years we have lived in Idaho.

Broad, sky-covered fields, less complicated outdoor living, and friendlier folks first attracted us to Idaho. We had experienced a reversion to our Catholic faith, discovering the true nature of our vocation and God's purpose for the family. The provocative and pressure-laden lifestyle of urban Los Angeles was not helping us to live our calling. Southern Idaho seemed the right place to raise our expanding family and draw closer to Christ. God providentially led us to Jerome, within close proximity of Ascension Monastery.

After the first couple years getting established in our new country home, we heard about the Monastery and decided to check it out one Sunday for Mass. What struck us most was the serene and meditative praying of the liturgy in the intimate Monastery chapel, and the pervasive atmosphere of peace that welcomes and nourishes visitors and retreatants. Since then, we have returned many, many times and have been blessed and served by the monks in numerous ways.

We have shared in the rhythms of their monastic prayer life. As a home school family, frequent sacraments are a necessary element of our educational program. We have frequently been able to join the monks at their daily 7 am Mass where we sing, pray, receive the Eucharist and absorb unique insights each individual Benedictine priest brings to his homily. This has given us hope and courage for our daily life. Many times after Saturday morning Mass, we form a family line and go to the sacrament of reconciliation. When the kids got older and busier, they have stopped into the monastery on their own, and one of the monks was always available to hear their confession and sometimes offer some spiritual direction as well.

Beyond the sacramental life, the monks have helped to build up our family in extra-spiritual ways. During a time when one family member was struggling to overcome substance dependency,

we turned to the monks for guidance and help. Upon hearing of our situation, we were immediately offered prayer and assistance, particularly the counseling of Fr. Norbert. We will always be profoundly grateful to the monks for helping us to pull through this time of crisis.

Our seven sons and one daughter have been enriched by interaction with the monks. There are always friendly conversations, jokes, and catching up on their progress after Mass with Brother Tobiah, Fr. Boniface, Fr. Jerome, Fr. Meinrad, and Fr. Hugh. One unusual gift given to our home school by the Monastery has been the Math skills of Fr. Eugene. He has tutored three of our children in high school math, giving them patient and thorough explanations. Fr. Andrew has taken a couple of our sons on one of his famous epic hikes in the Sawtooth Mountains where they experienced Catholic fellowship and God's grandeur in nature.

Steve and Pam most recently got involved in bringing Catholic radio to the Magic Valley. Ascension Monastery has been a major spiritual support getting this effort off the ground and in its continuing operations. Fr. Kenneth has always responded to our pleas for help with the fundraising efforts, coming on the air with one of the monks once or twice a year for the Pledge Drive.

In preparing this article, we asked the kids for some of their favorite memories at the monastery. Some of those highlights include: "hot chocolate after Mass," "getting to know the monks better through the Benedict-teen retreat," "Br. Sylvester's creative chapel décor -- especially at Christmas," "intense homilies from Fr. Ezekiel," "getting to play the Monastery piano," "Br. Selby's mesmerizing harp playing," and last but not least, "Br. Jose's cookies."

We have benefitted profoundly from our relationship with all of the monks at Ascension Monastery, past and present. According to St. Benedict's Rule, "let them first pray together, so that they may associate in peace." They have helped us to do both, and so we gratefully offer tribute to their fifty years abiding in Southern Idaho. They have founded and maintained a sanctuary of peace, which by God's grace and providence, will continue for many more jubilees. •

*The Di Lucca family live in Jerome, but the older children are dispersing now.*



# LOCUS AMOENUS

Ron Pepin

A common motif of classical and medieval Latin poetry is the locus amoenus, “a pleasant place.” In describing these ideal landscapes, poets celebrated the natural beauty of trees and flowers, birds, streams and temperate breezes, all combining to create a pleasurable, a scene of idyllic charm. To me, the Monastery of the Ascension is a kind of locus amoenus situated in an unlikely spot: a desert.

This summer I was at the monastery from June 29 to July 5, the fifteenth straight year that I have come out from Connecticut to teach in the Road Scholars (formerly Elderhostel) program directed by Fr. Hugh Feiss. My first acquaintance with Fr. Hugh came about in 1986 when we participated in a summer seminar for college teachers sponsored by the National Endowment for Humanities at Cornell University, an earthly paradise of its own in the Finger Lakes region of New York. There, with Ellen Martin, we discovered our common interest in the Latin language, our mutual attraction to arcane texts, and our passion for amaretto ice cream. Since that time we have been friends, colleagues and collaborators.



In the early Elderhostel years at the monastery, faculty were housed “out back” in the annex. My small quarters there were perfectly comfortable and reminded me of boyhood summers at my uncle’s farm. The stercorous breezes wafting in from the nearby dairy lulled me into a gentle coma for the night, and Br. Tobiah’s roosters and hens in the coop beneath my window wakened me before dawn. I was never, ever, late for morning mass. One year a space shortage necessitated that I stay in the monks’ cloister. My room for the week belonged to Fr. Simeon (RIP), who was away on assignment at the

time. It presented a lovely view: a lush lawn bordered by apple trees, an ample field of barley beyond that, then the Magic Valley below, and a ridge of low mountains in the distance. I recall serene moments just gazing out over that vista, much like the quiet moments in the chapel before Vespers. I recall being sorely tempted in that room to try on the Benedictine habit hanging on the back of the door. I resisted that temptation. Father also had a small bottle of Scotch on his bureau.

The monastery is populated by monks, of course, and hordes of cats. The captain of the cats is Catfael (aka Dominic), a sometime author whose philosophical musings appear in the pages of *The Desert Chronicle*. This long-lived, perceptive critter clearly senses that I don’t adore felines, or fawn on them. That’s why in recent years he seems to have scheduled his vacation for the time I’m there. Or maybe he realizes that I’m charmed by a friendly newcomer named “Tom Cruise.” The property also hosts a large population of birds, from raucous magpies to doves, swallows and even kestrels. The most thrilling sightings are of owls, both Great Horned and, this summer, Barn owls.

Over the years I’ve met fascinating folks who have attended our Road Scholars courses on Medieval Murder Mysteries, and on Ancient Rome. Their curiosity and unending pursuit of knowledge have inspired me, much as their varied, often remarkable life experiences have humbled me. So too, the priests and brothers of the monastery have been unfailingly kind and generous to me and to all their visitors. They honor their pledge to “welcome guests of all faiths.” It has been a pleasure for me to spend a little time each year in such a peaceful place. •

*Ron Pepin earned a doctorate in classics from Fordham University and was a professor at a community college in Hartford, Connecticut, until his retirement.*

# BENEDICT-TEEN

Orlando Avila

I first came to the Monastery when I was 17. I went on the first ever Benedict-TEEN retreat. I was a little nervous when my Campus Minister and Oblate of the Monastery, Pete Espil, first told me about the retreat and said we were going to stay at a monastery. I never went to a monastery before and I didn’t know what to expect.

When I first got to the Monastery and went on my first tour of the monastery, I was fascinated by all of the religious art they had around the monastery, and how big the place was. I did not expect there to be a big dining room, a lobby, and rooms similar to hotel rooms for guests.

I then got to meet the monks, and I was shocked to see that they were just like normal people. They enjoyed conversation, they had hobbies, they liked to read and play games; I did not expect any of

this. I enjoyed praying with the monks, talking with the monks, and confession was amazing as well.

I met some great people with interesting stories, and I also felt peace and silence for the first time in a long while. That was 5 years ago. I’ve come every year since. I came first as a student, but now I come as a Youth Minister. I want to make sure that the kids in my youth group get the same experience that I did. I started bringing kids in my youth group 2 years ago, and every year they want come back.

I always feel at peace when I am at the Monastery, and I always get a good laugh as well. I feel that I am in God’s presence when I am praying, talking, or working with the monks. The monks have always made me feel at home, and when I start struggling on Sunday’s and start missing a few masses, the Monastery brings me back to the consistency in my faith. The Monastery has really strengthened my faith in the Catholic Church and in Christ, and I will continue to come back every year. •

*Orlando Avila is Youth Minister at St. Ann’s Parish in Salt Lake City, UT*





# MONASTERY MEMOIR

Ellen Martin

The afternoon I first arrived at Ascension Monastery, to help teach an Elderhostel in August 2001, I was met (after some bewildered wandering through a building fallen quiet in summer heat given over to private study or siesta), and shown to a room in the guest wing, by Prior Boniface. After briefly arranging my things, I emerged to find him standing 12 feet away, quite still, at a distance perfectly judged, so that I saw him immediately, but had no sense that he had been paying any attention to what I was doing or how long I'd been doing it. He wasn't even waiting. He was simply at my disposal for that moment. It was the definition of tact.

When I think of the monastery, I recall not events, but vignettes like this, of a long practiced rhythm that is made available to visitors, as something unusual in most of one's experience, but strangely familiar to the soul. Life in a monastery seems to be largely a memory already, an on-going remembering of something different from the usual stuff. It is quietly striking to find oneself privy to these brief occasions.

When walking with a monk, people form a sideways figure 8, each person proceeding within their own loop, joined at one mid-way point. One has a companion, but no particular social goal. This is the monastic hospitality that creates privacy for each person, and ushers them into a somewhat new version of their real freedom.

One summer Fr. Meinrad was in residence. I met him while walking the western line of the property. He was standing still, watching the sun go down over the barley field. He said he did this every day. I stood nearby and watched the sun go down. I did not want to do anything else.

After sunset, and when staying in the prize digs in the trailer out back, near Br. Tobiah's finessed collection of heritage breed "Martha Stewart" chickens, I am sometimes favored by a visit from Catfael, a great "C-major mass" of a cat, who has claimed Fr. Hugh as his personal property and will not be denied. I once saw him seated

upright and majestic on a great pile of weeds in a barrow, being slowly wheeled up from the vegetable garden, a king upon his barge. And then there is the inordinate number of coffee cream cuplets that I've taken from the dining room to win his notice. Though I've moderated this entertainment over the years, Catfael's big fur and dense volume remember the fats of yore and continue to check my room for whatever bit of butter or yogurt or play might be on offer. A Rule lives in its exceptions.

I try to be of use: dead-heading flowers, weeding vegetables, and this past July reshelving books in the new library. I enjoy thinking I can be useful by such small deeds, and then recall that those deeds are made possible by much larger deeds of others. I try to "fit in" – a ridiculous goal, but useful to me. At prayers in the chapel, I went from trying to enunciate clearly, to trying to merge into the voice and pace of the community. Being allowed to participate is enough privilege for a stranger – once invited, the least one can do is do less, and show up simple.

The keenest challenge has been the clanging metal hangers in the trailer's closets, ready to ring out if I just look at them, arriving late in the evening and so terribly eager not to disturb my neighbors. Putting a dress onto one of them without setting off a loud and echoing chime was an act of meditation doomed to failure. Now I drape the clothes over the furniture. Catfael appreciates this.

Teaching at the monastery has introduced me to kind and intriguing people I'd never have met otherwise, and to special places I would not have known. With other Road Scholar participants, I've relished the local stories and geological lore given during the pontoon ride up the Snake River. But the years I come with a car, I drive out to Niagara Springs, where the aquifer spurts horizontally out of the hillside into a lovely tumble of multiple cascades above the river. If you sneak around the end of the cyclone fence you find the path leading up into the shady mid-section of the watercourse, and can linger in cool greenery, taking in the varied motions of the waters. This

oasis is some 10 miles from the monastery, but I know a few monks have spent a few hours enjoying this place.

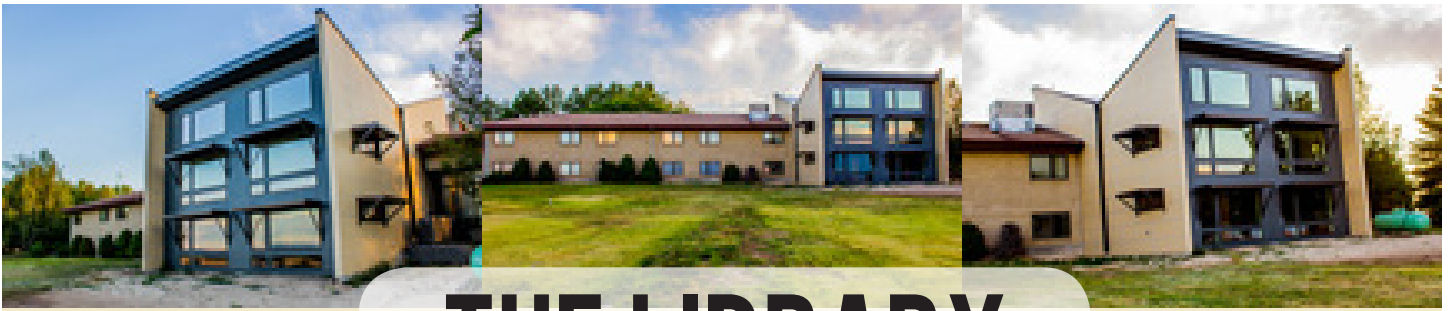
I wonder if they know how many imaginary conversations I have with them when I'm gone. Best not to tell. Or how useful the way of walking with monks proves to be for negotiating the crowds of midtown Manhattan or the aisles of a suburban grocery store.

I've wondered why I – a person who falls asleep to movies on tv – never have trouble falling asleep in the monastery. I think it is because I sense the many persons around me, correctly close, available, but not demanding, not imposing, and when interrupted, responding without leaving their reflections, and going along with me as if walking and standing still were much the same thing. •

*Dr. Ellen Martin is a retired English professor from New York and Michigan who has come annually to Ascension to teach in the Elderhostel Road Scholar courses.*







# THE LIBRARY

**The new library is now finished. All the books (including a thousand or so new books) are barcoded and on the shelves, the furniture is in place, and any day now there will be new computers and a scanner so that books can be checked out by scanning the barcode. The view from the south end is spectacular.**

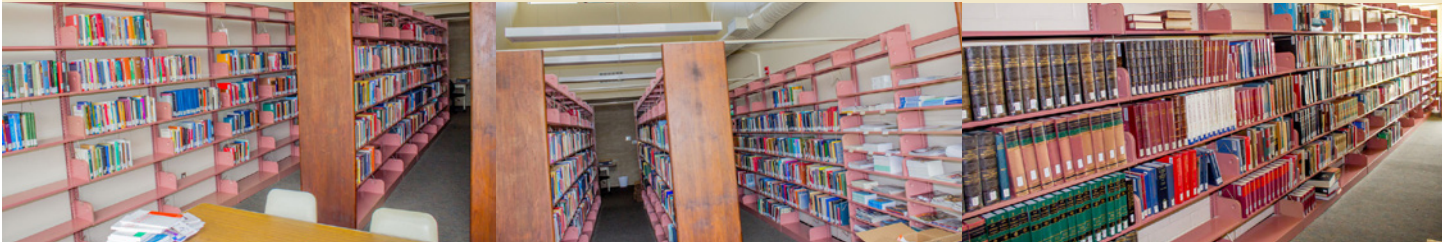
Many, many people contributed to the completion of this project. For example,

- An Anonymous donor paid for it.
- Rob Thornton was the architect; his design was partly inspired by the use of natural light in the Aalto Library at Mt. Angel Abbey..
- Brian Ellsworth of EKC Construction accepted the project.
- Mark Nearman of EKC Construction was on-site supervisor
- Br. Selby Coffman, OSB, purchased the shelving and the furniture.
- Fr. Boniface Lautz, OSB, was the liaison between the community and the contractors.
- John Wasco was in charge of assembling the shelving and the furniture.
- Our neighbors Ed and Sylvia Crumrine and Art Brown helped with the assembly.
- The Young Adult group from St Jerome’s Parish boxed books and took them to the basement.
- Baily Helsley and then Benedict-TEEN hauled books from the basement and helped shelve them.
- Fr. Boniface, Br. Selby, Fr. Ezekiel, Gloria Rice and Grace Sinclair helped shelve.
- Craig Harris barcoded 15,000+ books and cataloged and shelved hundreds.
- Microchips of Twin Falls upgraded our computers and printers.

This monastery library was begun almost from the day there was a vote at Mt. Angel Abbey to establish The Monastery of the Ascension. At Mt. Angel, Fr. Augustine DeNoble, OSB, assembled a collection for Idaho and came to set it up when he brought Br. Sylvester Sonnen, OSB, to Twin Falls on August 17, 1969. For many years it seems there was no official librarian though for some years Fr. Eugene catalogued books as they were acquired or donated. Through the years, many people donated books or volunteered to catalog books. More recently, Fr. Jude Anderson, OSB, Fr. Norbert Novak, OSB, and Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB, had the title of librarian. Currently, Gloria Rice, Linda Henderson, and Grace Sinclair are volunteering.

The library has an annual budget of \$6,000 to buy books and periodicals. Many additional books are donated. Like almost all monastic libraries its contents are idiosyncratic, representing the interests of monks and donors. However, the obvious strengths of this library are Catholic theology, Sacred Scripture and monastic studies, which are the basis for monastic lectio divina. Another strong section is Pacific Northwest history, partly as a result of a long association with Glen Adams and Ye Galleon Press, but also because history seems to be a subject that interests monks. The topics that have been covered in our Road Scholar programs are also reflected in the collection, such as detective fiction, Dante, medieval life and history, and the natural history of the local area.

Since the library is the largest Catholic theological library in Idaho, we want to invite those who are interested to use it either by coming to visit and work on projects or to check books out. The new library has three carrels and a study table for those who wish to do sustained work in the library. The catalog can be searched online via the library tab on the monastery’s website: [www.idahomonks.org](http://www.idahomonks.org). By the time this article appears in print we we hope to have figured out a way to make library cards for patrons. Thanks to all who made this possible. •





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## *Road Scholar Programs for 2016*

**May 23-29:** Geology of the Snake River Plain

**May 30-June 5:** Benedictine Life, Literature and Art, 550-1500

**June 13-19:** Quilting (Personal Story Quilts)

**July 11-17:** English History, 1066-1450 and Detective Fiction

Set in the Period

**July 18-24:** Quilting (Two Block Quilt with Variations)

**August 1-7:** Religion and the Settling of the West

**September 5-11:** Hiking the Snake River Plain

**[For information contact Fr. Hugh, 208-761-9389]**



Dedication of the Monastery Chapel  
by Bishop Treinen, August 3, 1980



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