



# THE DESERT CHRONICLE

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## Reflections, Seasoned:

**BR. SYLVESTER SONNEN, OSB: GOLDEN JUBILEE**

*By Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB*

ON SEPTEMBER 29, 2016, BR. SYLVESTER SONNEN, OSB, WILL CELEBRATE FIFTY YEARS AS A BENEDICTINE MONK. HIS ITINERARY TO THIS VENERABLE DAY HAS INCLUDED FOUR MAIN STOPPING PLACES, EACH WITH ITS OWN HIGHLIGHTS.

### **Greencreek, ID (1945-1963).**

Br. Sylvester was born into a German Catholic family the fourth of eight children, on March 13, 1945. All of them married, and only his youngest brother has predeceased him. He went to St. Anthony's school in Greencreek for his eight years of grade school. His high school education took him to Mount Angel Seminary High School, Greencreek High School, and St. Gertrude's Academy in Cottonwood, ID. It is probably no doing of his, but none of these schools still exists.

The family lived on a farm. In the summer he worked in his father's butcher shop, which is now owned and operated by his nephew and is renowned for its sausage.

The parish priest who baptized him encouraged families to foster religious vocations, which certainly had something to do with his entry into religious life. The parish was very Catholic and very German (and still is), and very Democrat. It was a good place to grow up.

### **Mount Angel, OR (1963-1969).**

Br. Sylvester returned to Mount Angel Seminary for his first year of college in 1964-1964. Then he took most of a year off which he spent helping his father. Then

## INSIDE

Reflections: Seasoned  
Br. Sylvester Sonnen, OSB:  
Golden Jubilee  
page 1

Reflections, Fresh Picked  
Br. John Ugolik, OSB:  
First Profession  
page 2

Guide for the Perplexed:  
Conscience and Faithful Citizenship  
page 4

Quilting at the Monastery  
page 6

Gertrude von le Fort  
page 8



he joined the monastery as a brother, and was professed on September 29, 1966, with Br. Brian Clearman, OSB, who is still a monk at Mount Angel Abbey. His parents and grandparents attended his profession, a very moving moment in his life. Fr. Martin Pollard, OSB, received his vows. After profession he worked in the abbey butcher shop with the redoubtable brothers Boniface and Columban. Later during his time at Mount Angel he was put in charge of the cemetery.

When Mount Angel decided to found a monastery in Idaho, Br. Sylvester was at the abbot's door the next day to volunteer to join the new community. He had to wait a bit to move, but was sent over briefly in 1967-1968 and assigned to build some beds for a monastery that was designed for 20 rooms, but was never built. The extra beds were turned into prie-dieux later, and one or two of them are still at the monastery.

### **Twin Falls, ID (1969-1980).**

Br. Sylvester was assigned to Idaho permanently in August 1969. Two months later he renewed his temporary vows for two years, as was then the custom. Then he made solemn perpetual vows at the priory before Abbot Damian, Jentges, OSB. Bishop Treinen remarked in the Idaho Catholic Register that Br. Sylvester was the first religious brother to make solemn vows in Idaho.

In the brand new monastery in Twin Falls he was in charge of cleaning the building and keeping up the grounds. He helped to set up for retreats and events and worked on Cursillos and Searches for young people. He was active in the Knights of Columbus.

### **Jerome, ID (1980- ).**

Br. Sylvester then joined Fr. Stephen's work crew engaged on building the new monastery on the priory farmland near

Jerome, ID. He nailed down all the plywood sheeting for the roof of the chapel. Then till 1987 he lived the monastic life at the priory under the brief tenure of Fr. Meinrad Schallberger, OSB, and the longer priorship of Fr. Simeon Van de Voord, OSB. His duties were pretty much what they had been in Twin Falls. He continued to work on Cursillos and Searches and was active in the Knights.

In 1991, he was diagnosed as suffering from major depression, which was later specified as bi-polar disease. In 1993 he went for treatment to Southdown, on the outskirts of Toronto, ONT. He returned having covenanted to swim regularly and seek counseling, which he did.

From 1995 to 1998 he took a three-year leave of absence during which he lived and worked in Twin Falls. This leave was to test his vocation, and it tested positive so he returned to the monastery. During those three years he was involved in church decoration at St. Edward's Church in Twin Falls. He continues to love that work.

Back at the monastery he was put in charge of cleaning and maintenance of the monastery retreat house, the dishwasher ("Br. Hobart"), the sacristy, and chapel.

Looking back over these fifty (or seventy) years, Br. Sylvester regards his professions of religious vows as highpoints. Also outstanding are the people who helped with his mental illness and taught him the essential truths that he is lovable, that he can love, and helped him do just that. However, besides the highlights there have been 50 years and countless hours of working for God and the Church, praying, cleaning, and decorating in unassuming and often under-appreciated ways. For those years of devoted to the work of God, may the Lord bless him abundantly. Ad multos annos. •





# Reflections, Fresh Picked

**BR. JOHN UGOLIK, OSB: FIRST PROFESSION**

*By Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB*

**R**EADERS WITH GOOD MEMORIES KNOW (FROM THE DECEMBER 2014 DESERT CHRONICLE) THAT JOHN UGOLIK CAME TO us after volunteering for two years at Holy Trinity Abbey in Utah. He was born in Poland in 1954, came to the United States with his mother when he was 10, grew up in Chicago, graduated from college and then worked in computers and as a teacher. He made his first, three-year profession of vows on July 10, 2016. Four weeks later he was interviewed about what his covenant means to him.

**Q:** This was a fairly epic event, both for the monastery and for you. What does it mean to you?

**Br. John:** I have undertaken a whole new way of living. I now fix my eyes on Christ as the way to eternal life. To live as a monk and praise God is the culmination of my life to this point. Life is a gift, entrusted to us. I thought, Whom do I thank for it? The answer is Christ. He redeems my life from the grave.



**Q:** Monastic life involves separation from many things that are part of most people's lives? Do you feel a loss?

**Br. John:** Yes and no. This past year has situated me at a distance from the ordinary world of most people. There is loss in that, but also gain. I can celebrate the divine office, read the Word of God, and attend Mass every day. I can stand back and see my life, my world, the Benedictine community and tradition, and live in hope for the future.

**Q:** Are there other differences between the before and after?

**Br. John:** The pace of life is different. I have more time to ask and think about what is important. We live in time and over time we change physically and mentally. The change we experience points us toward the future, toward death. Awareness of death keeps you thinking about whether and where you can find a permanent place of peace in the world. There is no such place in the world, so one must decide how one can live in the world and experience a joyful death. The answer I believe is to accept Christ as he says he is and live in his Paschal Mystery. Also, monastic life gives you a certain emotional distance. Family life might have been too emotionally wrenching for someone like me, if, for example, my spouse or child were sick or died.

**Q:** What has your work been during your time in the monastery?

**Br. John:** I have worked in maintenance, assisted in the kitchen, and helped John Doerr in the garden (I have learned a lot from him). In the future I want to assist in any way I can.

**Q:** At the Monastery of the Ascension we have free time to use in constructive ways. What do you plan to do with yours?

**Br. John:** I am interested in music. I want to learn to sing better, to learn to play the guitar, and to learn about Gregorian chant. I also want to learn more about the Bible and theology and see how the Christian faith relates to our understanding of and involvement in the current world. I am also interested in learning more about other religions.

**Q:** How do you evaluate your years in the work-a-day world?

**Br. John:** They were important for me. I needed to prove myself in the workplace and to experience how competitive it can be. I learned discipline on the job. I had a regular prayer-life. I discovered there is more to life than what society expects of you. •



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# Guide for the Perplexed: Conscience and Faithful Citizenship

By Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB

IN APRIL 2016 *THE LONDON TABLET*, A CATHOLIC JOURNAL, PUBLISHED A BRIEF ARTICLE ON THE CURRENT ELECTORAL PROCESS IN THE UNITED States up to that point. They observed that fact no Democratic or Republican candidates enjoyed a favorability rating of more than 36 per cent among white Catholics, which suggested that Catholic were fairly unhappy about their choices. Whether this is still the case five months later is moot. However, for all American Catholics the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has issued a revised (2015) version of their document *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (available online and in print from the USCCB).

*Forming Consciences* begins with a discussion of the Church's role as moral teacher in matters of political life. In *The Joy of the Gospel* Pope Francis reminds Christians that the Holy Spirit is at work in each of us, which brings forth in each of us a response: "to desire, seek and protect the good of others." If the just ordering of society is a central responsibility of politics, the Church must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. The bishops point out issues facing our nation regarding the right to life, violence, affluence, poverty, and the environment. The bishops then quote Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*: "We are faced . . . with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combat poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature."

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*"Yet this is not a time for retreat or discouragement; rather, it is a time for renewed engagement."*

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The Bishops say that Catholics have a duty to listen to and act on the Church's moral teaching in their lifelong task of forming their consciences. There are four basic principles of Catholic social doctrine: the dignity of the human person, the common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity. On the basis of these

principles Catholics are better able to evaluate policy positions, party platforms, and candidates' promises and actions in the light of the gospel, make up their own minds, and fulfill their moral obligation to participate in political life. "In our country politics often can be a contest of powerful interests, partisan attacks, sound bites, and media hype." Catholic citizens need to "be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment to a political party or interest." The duty to work for the just ordering of society is "more critical than ever in today's political environment, where Catholics may feel politically disenfranchised, sensing that no party and too few candidates fully share the Church's comprehensive commitment to the life and dignity of every human being from conception to natural death. "Yet this is not a time for retreat or discouragement; rather, it is a time for renewed engagement." The formation of conscience includes openness to seek the truth that God's has given us, examination of the facts, and prayerful reflection to discern God's will in order to discern what is morally acceptable. "Catholics may choose different ways to respond to compelling social problems but we cannot differ on our moral obligation to help build a more just and peaceful world through morally acceptable means, so that the weak and vulnerable are protected and human rights and dignity are defended." Again, "the moral imperative to respond to the needs of our neighbors—basic needs such as food, shelter, health care, education, and meaningful work—is universally binding on our consciences and

may be legitimately fulfilled by a variety of means. Catholics must seek the best way to respond to these needs." The direct and intentional destruction of human life is intrinsically evil and must always be opposed. However, one must also recognize the other serious threats to human life and dignity: environmental degradation; racism; the death penalty, unjust war; failure to respond to those suffering from hunger or lack of health care; pornography; redefining civil marriage; compromising religious liberty; or an unjust immigration policy.

That leaves Catholics with difficult choices. For example, "if the voter's intent is to support such a position," one cannot



vote for a candidate who favors policies promoting abortion or racist behavior, On the other hand, “there may be times when a Catholic who rejects a candidate’s unacceptable position even on policies promoting an intrinsically evil act may reasonably decide to vote for that candidate for other morally grave

for our common home, communications and culture, and global solidarity. In these policy positions, the bishops focus, sometimes rather sharply, on specific issues. Readers can read these statements in the document, but as an example here is what the bishops say about migration:

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*Comprehensive reform is urgently necessary to fix a broken immigration system.*

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reasons. When all candidates hold a position that promotes an intrinsically evil act, the conscientious voter faces a dilemma. The voter may decide to take the extraordinary step of not voting for nay candidate or, after careful deliberation, may decide to vote for the candidate deemed less likely to advance such a morally flawed position and more like to pursue other authentic human goods.”

With these fundamentals established, the bishops’ document turns to the four basic principles mentioned earlier: dignity of the human person, the common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity. At the outset the bishops say that it is important for all citizens “to see beyond party politics, to analyze campaign rhetoric critically, and to choose their political leaders according to principle, not party affiliation or mere self-interests.” At the end of their discussion of these four principles, the bishops say, “in public life, it is important to practice the virtues of charity and justice.” They call “for a renewed kind of politics: focused more on moral principles than on the latest polls; focused more on the needs of the weak than on benefits for the strong; focused more on the pursuit of the common good than on the demands of narrow interests.”

In the final part of their document, the bishops summarize the policy positions of USCC which apply Catholic teaching to major issues in American society today: human life, promoting peace, marriage and family life, religious freedom, preferential option for the poor and economic justice, health care, migration, Catholic education, promoting justice and countering violence, combatting unjust discrimination care

“The Gospel mandate to ‘welcome the stranger’ requires Catholics to care for and stand with newcomers, authorized and unauthorized, including unaccompanied immigrant children, refugees and asylum-seekers, those unnecessarily detained, and victims of human trafficking. Comprehensive reform is urgently necessary to fix a broken immigration system and should include a broad and fair legalization program with a path to citizenship; a work program with worker protections and just wages; family reunification policies; access to legal protections, which include due process procedures; refuge for those fleeing persecution and violence; and policies to address the root causes of migration. The right and responsibility of nations to control their borders and to maintain the rule of law should be recognized but pursued in a just and humane manner. The detention of immigrants should be used to protect public safety and not for purposes of deterrence or punishment; alternatives to detention, including community-based programs, should be emphasized.”

One definition of the aim of rhetoric is that it enables good people to speak the truth persuasively. We should be grateful to the bishops for addressing us in just that way. •





# Quilting at the Monastery

*By Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB*

FROM JUNE 27 TO JUNE 30, 2016, THERE WERE 24 QUILTERS AT THE MONASTERY FOR A RETREAT SPONSORED BY “ROOM TO LEARN.” This was the 39th such gathering held at the monastery since 2007 under the direction of Julia Ziegler of Kuna, ID. Prior to 2007, Julia had been attending quilting retreats in church camps, but some of those who participated asked her if she could find a more convenient place to meet, which provided private baths, no stairs, linens and prepared meals. She heard about the monastery, and when she was in Twin Falls for a quilt show, she came to the monastery. The Monastery guest facility was just what she was looking for. This convergence of quilting and the monastery guesthouse had some prehistory on both sides.

The monastery, through the extraordinary generosity of many people, constructed the facility in 1995-1996. Its official name was the “Ministry Center.” The original vision was that the facility would be a center for ministry: educational events, retreats, and Catholic gatherings. Under the leadership of Fr. (Abbot) Joseph Wood, OSB, and Fr. Simeon Van de Voord, OSB, that was the direction it took originally. However, before long, it became clear that Catholic events would not fill the facility. Gradually the monastery began hosting programs for other Christian groups, who provided their own presenters and facilitators. Moreover, already in 1995, Fr. Boniface Lautz,

OSB, negotiated with Elderhostel (now Road Scholar) to host programs under their auspices. Both of these—Christian groups and Road Scholar programs—have continued to the present time, but there were still plenty of open weeks. Enter quilting!

Quilting experienced a resurgence in the 1970s and 1980s and is still going strong. In the early 2000s the quilting world began to change. The leaders were aging, and there were new trends in quilting, new ways to look at patterns and color. Change was not new to the craft: machine quilting joined hand quilting, and long armed-machines joined smaller machines. Now quilting is adapting to a generation that has less time and is less able or willing to devote long stretches of time to quilting. While electronic devices take up a lot of people’s time, they also make tutorials and fabrics available for people who do not have quilting facilities in their local. Another factor is the rising cost of fabrics, which now are woven and printed mostly in China and Japan, as the production of cotton cloth has declined in the United States. Nevertheless, quilting is prospering in the Magic Valley, where there are at least three quilt shops, and in the Treasure Valley where there are more than half a dozen.

Julia Ziegler notes several reasons why the monastery is a good location for quilting retreats: it provides clean, adult accommodations and excellent food (including food for people with special needs). The monastery is quiet and peaceful, so people can escape the distraction of television, radio, the





Internet, and cell phones. Quilters like the ambience, which gives them the opportunity to be creative and enjoy the camaraderie of others with the same interests. Michelle and Art Beale come early to help Julia set everything up before the quilters arrive. Many of the necessities for the retreat—chairs, ironing boards, design walls, extension cords, and other supplies—are now kept in a storage unit at the monastery. For them the monastery is a special place, which is extremely tranquil and healing. Even when someone says they need to withdraw because of a bereavement, Art, Michelle and Julia encourage the person to come anyway.

Renae Bentley of Pocatello, here for the first time at the invitation of her friend Ann Faulkner, is pleased by the lack of pressure and the opportunity to take a walk outside when she wants to. Ann has been coming for five or six years. She had never heard of them monastery until a friend invited her to come. Over time, friendships are formed and people sign up to come together for upcoming quilting retreats. To make a quilt—whether for a family member, event or charity—requires blocks of time.

The members of the monastic community and the quilters have become comfortable with each other. Quilters helped Br. José make habits for the monks and eleven quilters attended his funeral. After her thirtieth retreat, Julia donated a quilt for each of the monks, a very generous and well-received gift. The consensus of the monastic community is that the quilters are among the happiest groups who visit the monastery.

The Room to Learn retreats led by Julia Ziegler are not the only quilting retreats held at the monastery. A group from Elko, NV, used to meet here, and Carmen Geddes brings a group from Utah several times a year. The monastery itself has been sponsoring Road Scholar quilting programs for five years under the guidance of Leona Manke and Marilyn Shake of Caldwell, ID. And there are spin offs. Joanne Draper now leads a knitting retreat at the monastery, and Julia offers quilting programs at Nazareth Retreat Center in Boise. •

Quilting is craftwork, slow, careful, and creative; quilters don't get rich from their work; in fact, if they sell their work, they almost never earn enough to compensate for the time they put into their handiwork. There is not much STEM involved. Quilters quilt because they enjoy being creative, making something beautiful, and working alone in the company of others who support and affirm their work. Perhaps that explains the affinity between quilting and a monastery, where people also are engaged in non-remunerative activities that they love, trying to make something beautiful for God. •





## THE DESERT CHRONICLE

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## Gertrude von le Fort (1876-1971)

By Phillip Anglin

While working in the library I came upon the novella, *The Wife of Pilate* by Gertrude von Le Fort. I was spellbound by how she wove what little we know from Sacred Scripture about Pilate's wife into fictional account of her becoming an at first a reluctant convert to the Christian faith. The works that the library has from this important twentieth-century German Catholic author:

*The Eternal Woman, The Woman in Time [and] Timeless Woman*. Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing Company, 1962. (and original: *Ewige Frau; Die Frau in der Zeit; Die zeitlose Frau*. Munich: Pustet, 1934).

*Gedichte*. N.p.: Insel-Verlag, 1949

*Hymns to the Church*. Trans. Margaret and Terry Chanler. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1938.

*The Pope from the Ghetto*. Trans. C. Bonacina. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1935.

*The Song at the Scaffold*. Trans. Olga Marx. New York: H. Holt and Company, 1933.

*The Wife of Pilate*. Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing Company, 1957. (and French trans.

*L'Epouse de Pilate*. Paris: Saint Paul, 1965).

About: Ita O'Boyle, *Gertrude von le Fort: An Introduction to the Prose Work*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1964.



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