



Monastery of the Ascension

# THE DESERT CHRONICLE

XXX, No. 3 SEPTEMBER 2021

## History and the Pandemic

*By Maureen O'Brien, Professor of History. St. Cloud State University*

**D**URING THIS PANDEMIC I HAVE SPENT A LOT OF TIME WITH THE LIKES OF THUCYDIDES, MARCUS AURELIUS, MARY MALLON, AND RUPERT BLUE. SOME OF THEIR NAMES MIGHT be familiar to you; others you might know by other monikers; still others, this might be the first time you are seeing their names. Their experiences and writings read now like a blueprint for pandemic preparedness do's and don'ts.

I have been teaching a course on the Black Death for some time now, and have talked about recent near misses that might be meaningful to my students, such as the 2015 bird flu that meant that year poultry would be banned from the Minnesota State Fair. I would tell them about my experience being in South Korea during the 2015 MERS outbreak that saw the officials place the zoo's camel in quarantine, and the disconnection I felt watching CNN's coverage of the outbreak versus my experiences walking around Seoul. In retrospect, I was more worried about the bird flu and was pleasantly surprised by the birds' banishment as the mass movement of people in combination with a mass gathering of pigs and poultry can lead, well, to animal diseases becoming human diseases.

I should mention here that I am a specialist in medieval European history. I am not a scientist, let alone a virologist. I am a historian. History can play a critical role in times of difficulty. The historical record provides us with analogies and past precedents, but these are only of use if we know our history.

When I left my Kansas family in March, 2020 at the end of my Spring break, I had a particularly bad feeling. I had received notifications from the Minnesota State system that because of COVID-19, state employees would not be able to travel out of state and that



*SCSU Miller Center*

See "HISTORY", cont. on page 7



### INSIDE

History and the Pandemic  
page 1

Prior's Letter  
page 2

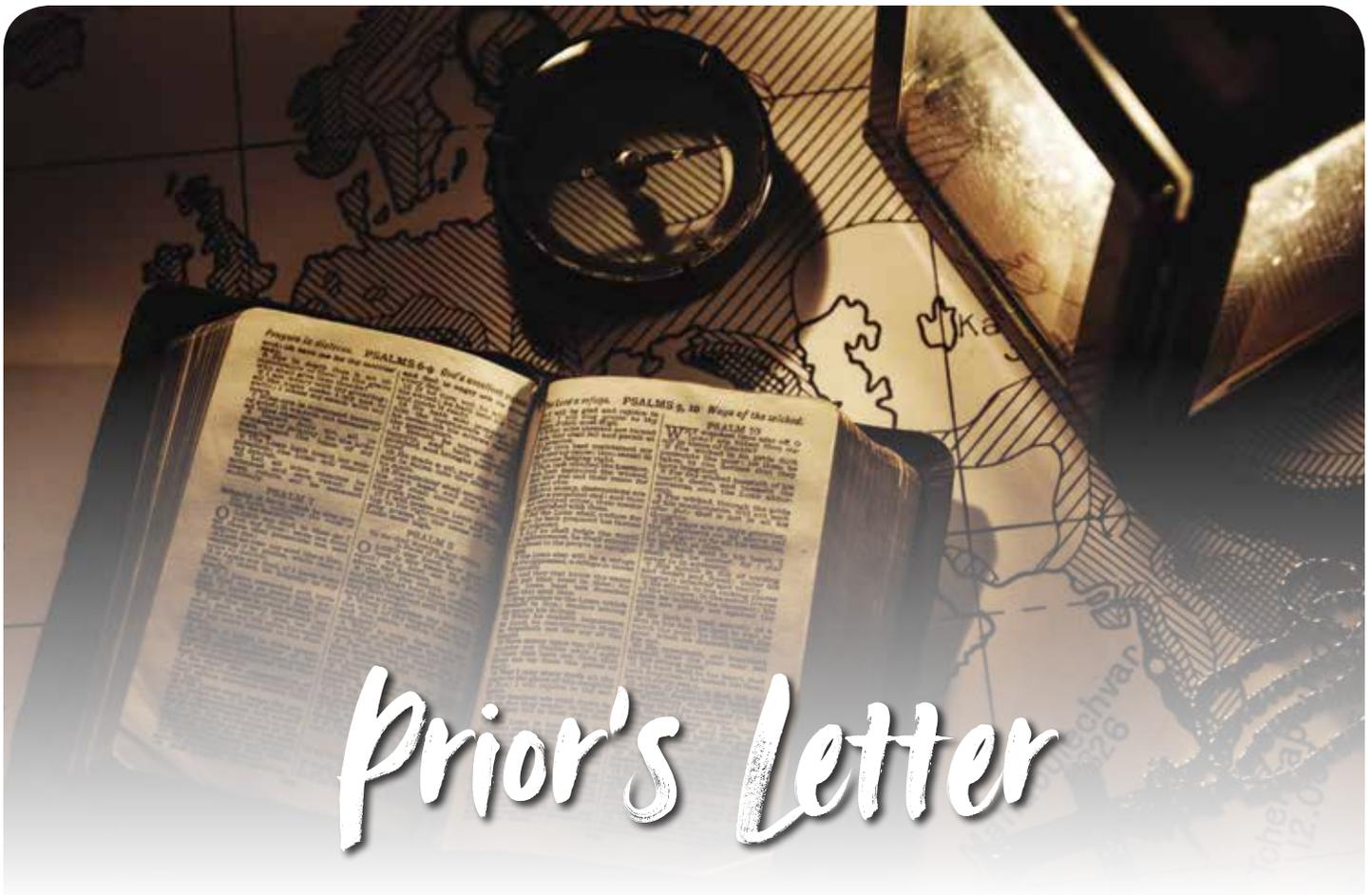
The New Me is Back  
page 3

Monastery Chronicle  
page 4

Reading and Deep Listening  
in Pandemic Times  
page 5

A Monastery Library  
in a time of COVID  
page 6

Upcoming Events  
page 8



# Prior's Letter

Dear Friends of the Monastery,

“Planning for the future is a risky business since it always has to leave room for contingencies, those unforeseen factors that even with the best of foresight can change things around. ‘Omniscience is a prerogative of the Divinity, not of humans.’ And of course, as Christians and monks we also need to live with faith and confidence in the Lord’s ability to care for us. And so it is with some humility that we face the task of planning for the future.”

I wrote those thoughts in a memo to our community on January 2, 1988. We were looking at a five year plan. Thirty-three years later we are still planning for the future, and we have to humbly testify that unforeseen factors can change things around, this time amazingly for the good.

In 2019, the report given to us by our Visitators reinforced what we had been praying and planning about for several years. “You are in a position now to make provisions for your monastery assets, both personal and material. As time goes on, you will be in that position less and less. We believe a reasonable goal would be to begin a plan of transition before your 2023 visitation.”

In our report to the General Chapter this summer, we said: “Since the time of the 2019 visitation we have been actively talking and meeting with different communities in hope there would be a community that would serve the needs

of the Church in Idaho.” By God’s grace, we now have a plan for transition.

The Missionary Servants of the Word, a religious order devoted to evangelization, has been serving in the Diocese of Boise for several years. We explored with them the possibility of their using our place as a basis for their ministry. It has turned out that they can. They will live with us and use the monastery and guest center as a place of formation for their candidates. We will give a more complete explanation of all this in a future issue of the *Desert Chronicle*.

We wanted you to know this now because they will arrive here mid-September. We will continue to live here at the Monastery and follow our monastic life for as long as the Lord wills.

We see this as an answer to our prayers. It is not an outcome that we foresaw. But as it turns out, it meets the needs of several communities and serves the Church. Indeed, “who could ask for anything more?” Keep us in your prayers and be assured of ours for you.

Peace and good things.

Fr. Boniface Lautz, O.S.B.  
Prior



# THE NEW ME<sub>(ow)</sub> IS BACK

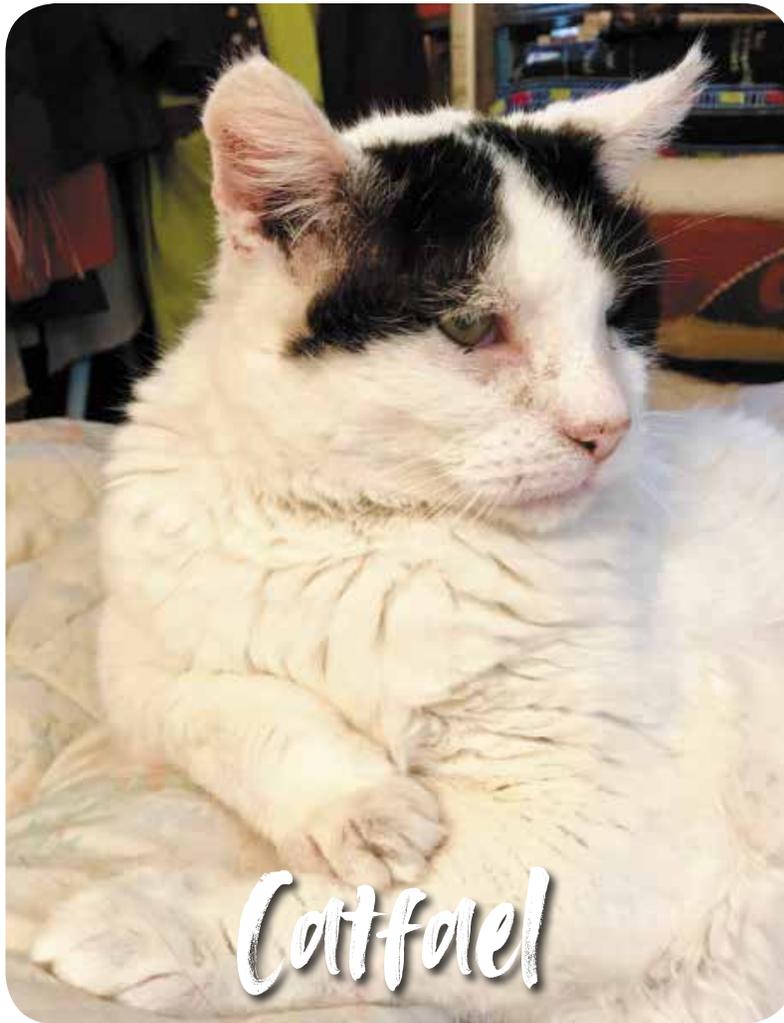
By *Catfael*

AS SOME OF YOU KNOW, I DIED A FEW YEARS AGO. MY NEW DIGS ARE EVEN NICER THAN MY RETIREMENT HOME NEAR LAKE OSWEGO, Oregon, and there is so much to do that I haven't given much thought to earth. However, I recently met the holy greyhound, Guinefort, who was unjustly killed by his master after he had defended his master's child from an attack. If people prayed to him to heal their children, it seems to me I should take some interest in the instruction of those I left behind, which includes the two-footers at the monastery and you, my devoted readers.

I note, first of all, that the two-footers have let in a bunch of riff-raff cats. They are united, as St. Augustine says, by what they love: cat food, wet and dry. What is most noticeable is their lack of manners. Of course, I am more sensitive to this now that I and my sainted colleagues no longer need to eat, even though we still like a little catnip scented dessert once in a while.

Looking over the scene at the monastery, I see that the two-footers are a bit grayer and plumper, as well as bit less agile of mind and foot. They are, in other words, moving slowly in my direction. They have also been cooped up together for sixteen months, which has offered them enhanced opportunities to be irritated. I thought about that the other day when Henri the Existential Cat and his former housemate and nemesis, the White Imbecile, invited me over for a walk in the woods. There are no irritations here – feline, human, or otherwise. In the presence of Goodness, the things in irritants and irritateds that cause irritation are dissolved.

I see that my two-footer now sleeps sprawled all over the bed. He has forgotten the four rules I taught him. (1) I get the middle of the bed; (2) He must sleep on his left side with his back toward the wall, so that I don't have to crawl over him to get up, and if he rolls over it will be away from me and not on me; (3) If at any time I want to walk across him and brace against his shins while I take a bath, he must lie still, even though the bed is shaking; (4) If it is hot, he is to open the window so I can sleep in a box near it.

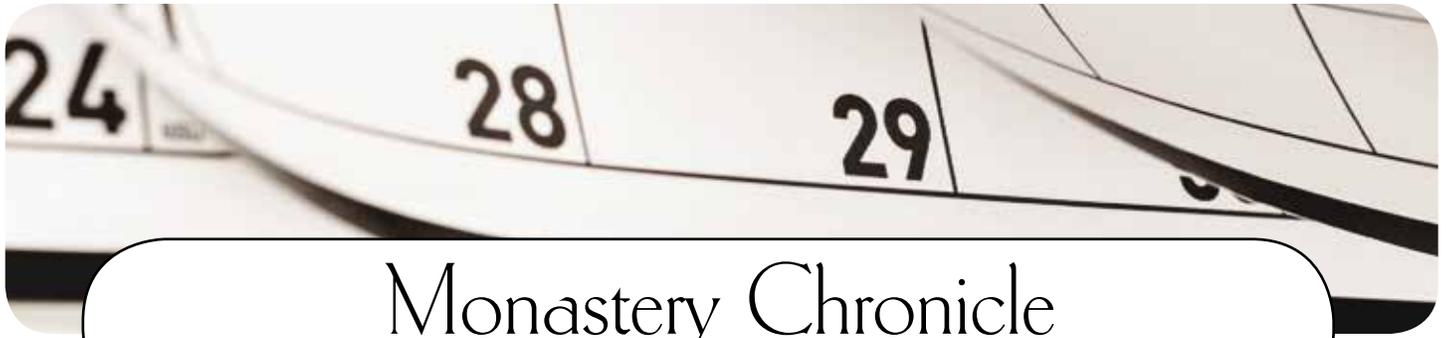


The garden is fallow this year. That's too bad. Some of my best times were when my two-footer and I went down there to farm. He weeded tomatoes and things, while I chased moths and occasionally caught a rodent. Sometimes I was able to go on wheelbarrow rides or take a nap in the shade of the allium plants.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been tough for two-footers, though less so for cats. One inconvenience for the two-footers is that it is hard for them to recognize each other when they have masks on, whereas we cats can differentiate two-footers by sounds and smell. One lesson I hope the two-footers draw from this experience of mask-wearing is to begin to look into the face of each person they meet and see an image of God, however wrinkled and pocked

by time and trouble. If they can do that, they will have an anticipation of what it is like here, where all the people are thirty years old and a transparent sacrament of the Lord, and cats are agile and given to random acts of purring. •





# Monastery Chronicle

*By Fr. Boniface Lautz, OSB*

## JUNE 2021

We're not as hot as western Oregon, but for us temperatures in the upper 90's and breaking 100 at this time of year are cause for concern. Irrigation water has been cut off for counties to the north of us. So far, our local farms have sufficient supply. We're blessed with a cooling system in the monastery.

Years ago, a rock garden was installed. Maintenance became increasingly difficult and finally largely neglected. The solution was to remove the rock and fill the space with soil. The farm crew did that on June 3.

A large limb from one of the pines out back broke off and blocked the entrance to our loading dock. Fortunately, one of our dedicated helpers had wanted to get a large tree in our courtyard, which she takes care of, trimmed. She knew a tree company and got them to do both jobs.

The path surrounding the ministry center was repaired and repaved this month. They did great work and the path is very nice.

One night some of us heard gun shots in the area. The same night others heard sounds like someone was trying to get attention by tapping on a window. There have been no further reports. The sheriff said they would run some extra nighttime surveillance.

Several of our faithful Oblates died this past month. Fr. Hugh was able to attend the funeral for Georgella Hartwell on June 18. We blessed and placed Sue Sanden's cremated remains in our columbarium on June 17.

We made an announcement about our making plans for our future. We think that our friends and supporters need to know that we are exploring the possibility of collaborating with a religious order, the Misionarios Servadores de la Palabra (Missionaries Servants of the Word) that could use our facility and allow us to continue living here. We posted that on our web site and on Facebook. So far people have expressed their gratitude and support.

It is time to draw up the new fiscal year's budget. With lots of uncertainties about the future, we'll have to rely, even more than usually, on educated guesses.

## JULY

Br. Tobiah and I were at the General Chapter meeting at Benet Lake from July 28 to August 2. Some revisions and changes of our Constitutions were adopted. The surroundings were beautiful.

Hot weather and fires have been a shared experience with much of the Northwest. We've been spared the extreme heat and fires that are troubling the West, but tinder dry conditions are a continuing concern. Smoke has made breathing difficult, and impaired visibility.

We celebrated July 4 with a monthly "social", and movies for some. On the fifth, the roofers came and repaired some leaks and cleared gutters. On the sixth, our heating and cooling company came to change filters. Both days were very hot.

On the seventh, some of us helped plant grass seed around the gazebo and some trees.

We celebrated St. Benedict on the 11th. On the 13th we had a travel blessing for Fr. Ezekiel who left the next day for a visit to Christ in the Desert. His flight was delayed and he had to spend a day and night at a way point, courtesy of the airline.

Our plan is for us to live on the second floor of the monastery and the Missionaries on the first floor. So we've been moving people and things. Moving people is relatively simple. Things are another story.

We had our first "open" Sunday Mass on July 15. About 15 people came. It was really nice to celebrate in together in person.

Fr. Jerome was here for a visit. It was good to have him. He had to return to Boise and then to Kellogg for scheduled parish commitments within three days.

Br. Sylvester traveled to Arizona with family for vacation. After only four days there, his brother Lawrence in Greencreek, Idaho, died, and Sylvester and the family had to make the three day return trip. Our condolences and prayers.

## AUGUST

We celebrated Lu Ann, our chef, on her birthday on August 4.

We've been downsizing. We have more vehicles than licensed drivers, so on August 9 we withdrew a pickup and two cars. They all still ran and had some good miles left. Our insurance costs will go down.

We painted rooms for the Missionaries on August 14. Eight wonderful volunteers came to help. Much of their time was spent preparing the rooms with floor covering and taping, but they accomplished a lot. The next big project was to steam clean the carpeting in the five newly painted rooms.

In the middle of a festive meal in honor of Mary's Assumption, Fr. Kenneth had a heart blockage and needed emergency treatment, which arrived quickly. After two days in the hospital and the insertion of a new pace maker, he was able to come home and is doing well.

The formation director of the Missionaries visited to work out some details of their coming. We happily look forward to their arrival September 18.

We live in an area where the risk of the virus is high. We're being very careful about what we can do by way of hospitality. It's hard to say "not yet" to old friends.

Fr. Hugh has returned from giving a retreat at St. Anselm's Abbey in Washington, D.C.. Fr. Ezekiel returned from a visit to Christ in the Desert Monastery in New Mexico.

Br. Tobiah turned 80. Our chef, Lu Ann visited family in Korea. •



# READING AND DEEP LISTENING IN PANDEMIC TIMES

By Ruth Saxey-Reese, Lecturer in literature, Boise State University

UNLIKE MANY PEOPLE I KNOW, I DID NOT READ A lot during the pandemic (aside from hundreds of discussion posts, essays, journal entries, and a flood of emails from my students who were navigating the most confusing and stressful time in their young lives). Sometimes, I bit my tongue in jealousy when friends rattled off the titles of the dozens of books they relished during their unexpected free time in quarantine (they weren't teachers). I missed the days when my work load and daily concerns about health and safety didn't feel so onerous, when I could easily lose myself in a thick novel instead of struggling to read a few pages from *Give Us This Day* right before bed.

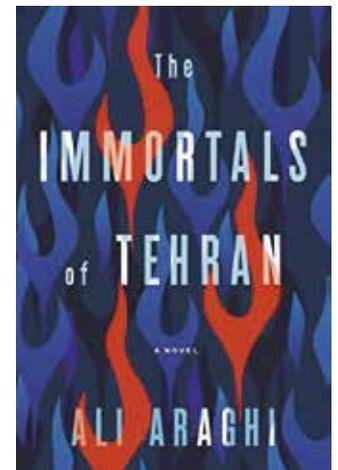
The few books that I did manage to read in sporadic snatches of downtime shared a theme: a setting in the Middle East, a region I teach about in some of my courses, and a source of family ties. I finished the exquisitely detailed *My Name is Red* (which I had started the year before), an intricate mystery unfolding within the royal artisans' workshops of Ottoman Istanbul by the Nobel Prize-winning Turkish author Orhan Pamuk. I was swept up in *The Immortals of Tebran*, the debut novel of Ali Araghi that somehow successfully combines a history of revolutionary politics with fables about murderous cats. I immersed myself in the multigenerational saga of the al-Nagi clan, captivated by each surprising twist of fate in *The Harafish* by the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz (another Nobel Prize winner).

But far more often than reading, I listened. I rediscovered audiobooks, and played them on my phone in brief segments, ten minutes as I cleaned up the kitchen or fifteen while folding laundry. Entranced by the dramatic voices of professional actors, I raced through the narrow streets of Jerusalem, trying to foil a bomb plot on the Temple Mount in Robert Stone's masterfully nuanced *Damascus Gate*. I rode invisible waves of cyber signals and explored the strange and dangerous world of Djinn in G. Willow Wilson's *Alif the Unseen*, a contemporary reimagining of *1,001 Arabian Nights*. I leaned into the grief and then the resilience and courage of a young Syrian refugee undertaking a mystical journey in Zeyn Joukhada's *The Map of Salt and Stars*.



St. Benedict offers direction for perilous times like these, calling us to “listen with the ear of the heart,” to practice an attention that goes deeper than words (or perhaps negates the need for them). During the past ten days, I have been listening as carefully as I can to the stories that friends trapped in Gaza are telling me. One is a fellow English teacher, and we share a mutual love of teaching, of learning, of books, of the power that stories transmit, even across thousands of miles via invisible electronic pathways. Yet that bond feels so tenuous, so vulnerable to permanent loss: during a recent Zoom call, his sentences were punctuated by the sounds of bombs. Right now, there is a cease-fire, a palpable exhalation of relief, but we know that cease-fires are fragile, and lasting peace must still overcome multiple threats.

I teach my students about something that can be as dangerous as a weapon: a single narrative. Trusting only one version of an historical event, of an unfolding confrontation, of someone's life story is like looking at a landscape through a pinhole. We may think we understand what we are looking at, but one leaf is not the forest, one petal is not the field of blooms. Seeking multiple viewpoints broadens and enriches our understanding while building connections we may treasure more than we can ever foresee. I am forever indebted to the storytellers who keep telling their truths, in print and aloud, in wartime and in peace. •



# A Monastery Library in a Time of COVID

By Fr. Hugh Feiss, O.S.B.

I BEGAN THIS ARTICLE AT ST. ANSELM'S ABBEY IN WASHINGTON, DC, WHICH WAS FOUNDED IN 1926 BY SOME PROFESSORS FROM THE CATHOLIC university in America, where I had gone to give a retreat. They have long outgrown their library space and have now shelved books in other rooms and in an air-conditioned trailer that houses bound journals and reference books. Their hope is to consolidate all their books in a new library someday. It is a fine collection.

Since many of the members of the monastery have been highly educated professors, the contents of the library reflect their scholarly interests. They subscribe to fewer periodicals, but more learned ones, than we do. Seeing how crowded they are, I am prodded to greater gratitude for our library facility. They appear to have converted all their catalog records to the Library of Congress system, which is used by most medium-sized and large libraries, whereas we are using the older, Dewey Decimal System.

In 2015, we dedicated the new library here at the Monastery of the Ascension. Since then, three volunteers and I have been in the process of cataloging a big backlog of books, entering them in the digital catalog, attaching labels and putting the books on the shelves. Except for a few problem books, the backlog should be eliminated in two months. At that point, the library will have about 20,000 entries, if we can trust the count given by our electronic system. That is a lot of books, collected, donated, and purchased, 1965-2021.

The books in the monastery library are more idiosyncratic than most library collections. Someone who familiarizes herself with a monastic library collection can acquire a pretty good

picture of the history of a monastery and the special interests of specific monks and their friends. For example, such an investigator will be able to trace the presence of many books to the *Benedictine Readers* (2019, 2022) I have edited, the complete collection of Br. Cadfael mysteries to the Road Scholar programs we used to offer, and some DVDs to certain donors' interest in British detective dramas. One reason for this personal stamp on monastery libraries is that they tend to keep books longer than other places, out of love for books or perhaps inertia. As the cost of dedicated space for storage goes up, there is more need to deaccession ("weed") books, but currently we have room for thousands of more books.

Peter of Celle, whose works I translated in the first book I produced (while spending my one and only sabbatical in Dublin with the Redemptorists and in Switzerland at Engelberg), wrote: "What should I say about reading? I consider a room without reading to be hell without consolation, a gibbet without belief, a prison without a light, a tomb without a vent, a ditch swarming with worms, a suffocating trap. A room without reading is the empty house of which the gospel speaks, where the nocturnal and noonday devils assault the idle hermit with as many thrusts of the useless and harmful thoughts as there are hours and moments in the day and night."

There is considerable truth to both of his assertions about the boredom of having nothing to read, and the danger of it as well. Perhaps that is why St. Benedict expected monks to be serious readers, when most people had no access to books and needed none, since they couldn't read.

Covid-19 has made reading more important and more possible. I have found time to read things I might not read otherwise: Tove Jansson's *The Summer Book* and her charming Moomin books; detective fiction by Louise Penny (Inspector Gamache) and Craig Johnson's Longmire stories; Rachel Kadish, *The Weight of Ink*; novels and children's books by the Irish author Deirdre Madden. I also have been able to help some other people in minor ways with their work: Sr. Ephrem Hollerman with her history of the first Benedictine women's monastery in North America, and Ron Pepin with his translation of Caesarius of Heisterbach's (early 13th c.) 300,000-word collection of stories, *The Dialogue on Miracles* – neither of which is published yet. I also prepared an edition and translation of Richard of St. Victor's *On the Extermination of Evil and the Promotion of Good*. It will be published in 2022: I'm expecting to see it on the *NYTimes* best seller list; who can be against the program indicated in the title?

See "LIBRARY", cont on page 7





## “HISTORY”, *from page 1*

SCSU Mississippi

spring break would be extended, first a week, then another, so that faculty could prepare to move all of their courses online. This was troubling, as I had never offered an online course (nor heard of Zoom) and had to figure out how best to serve my students whose lives were also being disrupted. I made it through the spring 2020 semester as best I could; my primary goal was to focus on what I could do to help my students. There was a lot of listening to how students were struggling; there were a lot of extensions. As I watched the COVID-19 pandemic unfold, the spring disruptions carried over into summer. For the first time in over 20 years, I would not be doing any extensive traveling in the summer. This pause allowed me to shift from being reactive to being forward looking, which for me meant looking to the past.

I realized that I had been keeping a mental checklist of situations and reactions that sounded familiar and, so, I began to note more carefully human behaviors I had witnessed before, in history. From the ancient Athenian Thucydides to Irish immigrant Mary Mallon, from the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius to the fourth surgeon general of the United States Rupert Blue, the echoes of history called us to heed. That is when I decided to transform my Fall 2020 teaching schedule. Thus was born *Global Pandemics: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, one section for lower-division students and another section for advanced and graduate students, both sections filled to capacity. I developed the courses to be very reflective. I wanted to give students space to be not only observers of their own times and their own experiences, but to allow them the opportunity to think about these in comparison to others in the past. I left essay prompts fairly open, such as how can a better understanding of

past plagues help us respond better to the current and future outbreaks.

Through the course, students began to discuss both positive and negative aspects of human behavior, all behaviors that because of COVID-19 were no longer detached history, but ever present to them. In the end, what I saw in my students was a growing development and understanding of historical empathy, that is, understanding why people in the past made the choices they did, even if the students disagreed with those choices. My students saw for themselves that people’s status in a society, their culture, their race, their religion, their gender, their economic status, their immigrant status can all impact how even a shared, global pandemic is experienced. Students came to reckon that it was possible to oppose, even vehemently, people’s choices (past and present) while having great empathy for the situation people found themselves in. My students saw how strong leadership could mitigate fear, fear that can lead to scapegoating. My students also observed that sometimes there was no comfortable reconciliation between public health and personal liberties, but, in the end, social change did often follow on the heels of widescale outbreaks.

As I write this, we are still in the midst of an ongoing global pandemic. There are signs of hope but also signs for ongoing concern. As a historian, I’m not very good about predicting the future, but if the patterns of behavior that my students observed hold true, we can look to a future of social change. Of the future, we can only ask, as one of my students asked, that “[they] look back on us with grace and understanding that some of us really tried.”•

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## “LIBRARY”, *from page 6*

This fall we will begin issuing library cards to all users. Since the Missionary Servants of the Word will be living with us, they will receive cards, as will all the members of our Benedictine community. Others are welcome to use the library. We will gladly issue them a card so they can check out books for a month at a time. Check out and check in by barcode scanner are simple.

There are two study desks in the lower floor, and one in the upper floor, a study table, and some soft chairs in the hallway to the library. I am glad to help anyone who needs assistance with anything to do with the library. We will draw up some easy-to-use directions about checking out books and how the collection is organized. We will do anything possible to keep you from “a room without reading.”•



# THE DESERT CHRONICLE

The Benedictine Monks of Idaho, Inc.  
Monastery of the Ascension  
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## Upcoming Events

November 5-7, 2021  
**Oblate Retreat**  
**with Sr. Pia Portman, OSB**

**For information or registration, contact:**  
Fr. Hugh Feiss at [hughf@idahomonks.org](mailto:hughf@idahomonks.org)  
or call 208-761-9389

November 12-14, 2021  
**Knitting Retreat**  
**with Joanne Draper**

To register, please contact the instructor,  
Joanne Draper email at [joanned23@gmail.com](mailto:joanned23@gmail.com)



*The Colorado blue spruce was the monastery's potted Christmas tree in 1980. Planted in the yard with lots of light it has grown into a mighty tree.*



*This purple plumb was cut down because it was thought to be too big and messy. It has grown back more beautiful than ever.*



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