



Monastery of the Ascension

THE DESERT CHRONICLE

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The Future of Benedictine Oblates

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

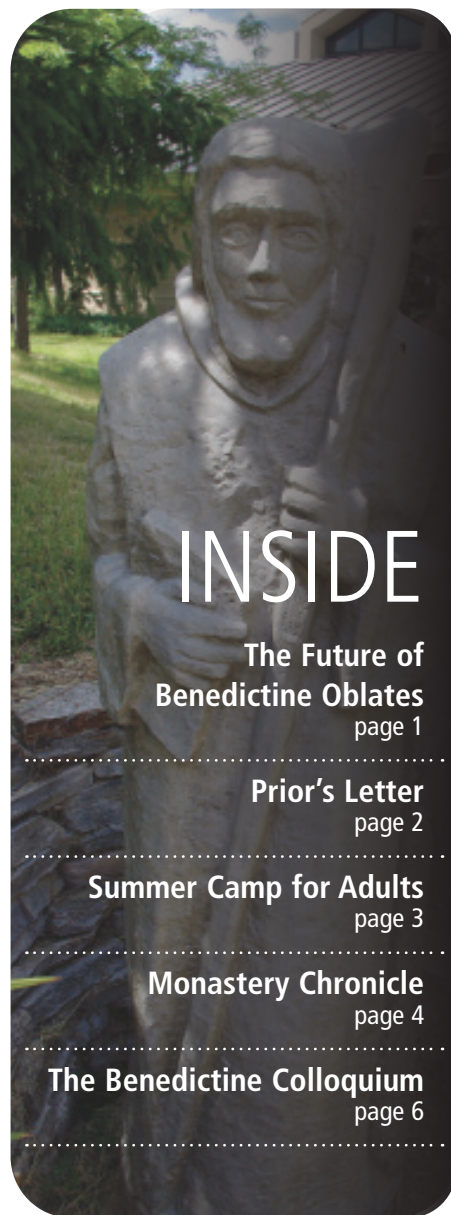
In this issue of the Desert Chronicle, our oblate Julie A. Ferraro gives a report on one of two meetings held this summer: the large conference on the future of Benedictines held at Mount St. Scholastica monastery in Atchison, Kansas. The other meeting gathered the North American Oblate Directors at St. Meinrad Archabbey in Indiana.

Religious orders are shrinking and changing. They are consolidating their membership in some places and leaving others. Benedictines cannot do that very easily because each monastery is independent in personnel, financing and governance. The result is that many Benedictine monasteries have closed or will likely close in the next few decades. The Monastery of the Ascension is one of those that are closing for want of members. Granted, due to the decline in the number of Benedictine monks and sisters, it will fall to Benedictine oblates to carry Benedictine spirituality into the

near and foreseeable future. However, traditionally, Benedictine oblates have been attached to specific monasteries. So, how do they carry on if the monastery to which they are attached has closed?

We at the monastery intend to keep supporting the oblates as long as we can. However, at some time there will be no monk here to work with them. Then, there will be at least four options: (1) disband the oblates, in which case individuals can make the request to another oblate group to let them transfer, or (2) carry on their Benedictine way of life and witness alone, or (3) continue as long as they can in their separate locales (Jerome; Idaho Falls; Pocatello; Boise; online), (4) ask for a monk or sister from another community to become chaplain to the group, but it is unlikely such a person could be found. We will need to discuss these options at our November retreat, which I hope can be hybrid, both in person and virtual.

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Prior's Letter

Dear Friends of the Monastery,

September 18 will be the anniversary of the arrival of the Missionary Servants of the Word (MSP) in 2021. The year has been a life changing time for us and for them. Considering that we had just met, learning to live and work together in the same monastic environment has been a challenge. I think it is appropriate to say it has been a year of grace. We are grateful.

The relationship between our communities continues to develop. A future issue of the Chronicle will cover that in detail. What I wanted to let you know now is the change of leadership in the MSP community. Fr. Benito Rojas Barron, MSP, came as the first superior and rector of the seminarians. He “broke new ground” and helped build some solid foundations. He has been assigned as pastor to a large parish in California. The new superior and rector is Fr. Jose Abraham Avila, MSP. He was pastor of a large parish in Mexico and was teaching philosophy to MSP students. Continuing and any new programs here will be under his leadership.

Our monastic lifestyle hasn't changed a whole lot. The daily routine of prayer and work is the same.

Things are different because we have much less guest and retreat activity. But that is due largely to Covid-19. Our limited physical ability also plays a role. Oblate and faith formation activities continue.

We've recently had three or four inurnment ceremonies (placing of ashes) of long-time good friends of our community. Family members have come and we've reminisced and renewed relationships. At the columbarium, the name plaques surrounding the site are often of family or close friends who have been connected with the monastery. Remembering the goodness of all those people, and the bonds that united us, is reason to be grateful, for they are reminders of the ways God's love has been given. I like to think of it as an expression of what we profess when we speak of the Communion of Saints. We're all still “connected”. The faith that inspires our prayers of intercession and petition is such a blessing.

Be assured of our prayers for you and please pray for us. Peace and good things.

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



The Benedictine way of life has been lived for 1500 years, through good times and bad times. It has proven remarkably adaptable. Benedictines, professed and oblates, are looking for a way to adapt in the twenty-first century. The Holy Spirit will guide us.

One way we just tried was to hold a three day (Tuesday pm to Friday pm) “reading /lectio divina retreat” at some cabins

generously provided for us in Pine, ID. Nine oblates from the Treasure and Magic Valleys attended. We ate together, prayed some of the Liturgy of the Hours, celebrated Mass in the chapel on-site, and spent the day quietly reading. We will try to hold this retreat twice in 2023, in addition to the November and Lent retreats at the monastery.

Summer Camp for Adults



August 9-12 nine oblates (from Boise, Fairfield, Twin Falls, Jerome, and Hanson, ID) spent three days on a “reading retreat” at some summer vacation cabins in Pine, ID, 27 miles as the crow flies and 43 driving miles from Fairfield, ID. Pine was a gold mining town established in the 1880s on the Boise River. It became a ghost town, and the site was buried by the waters of Anderson Ranch Reservoir, created by Anderson Dam, which was opened in 1950. The current community of Pine is located on a bluff over the point where the Boise River flows into the reservoir. From where we stayed, we could look down on the river several hundred feet below. The property was covered by Ponderosa Pine trees, which help keep the temperature down somewhat. We were outnumbered about 20 to 1 by hummingbirds.

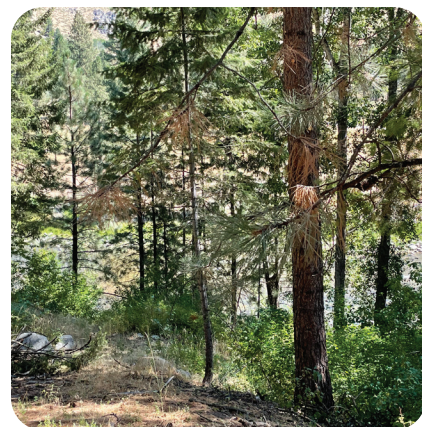
In this idyllic setting we lived a monastic life of prayer (Mass and some of the divine office in the onsite chapel), no work (except for the cooks),

and much reading. Each of the us came with one or two books to read. On two evenings we shared about what we had read that day. Books included Pascal Mercier, the novel, *Night Train to Lisbon*; Sofi Thanhauser, *Worn: A People's History of Clothing*; Syrie James, novel, *The Lost Memoirs of Jane Austen*; *Redeeming the Time*, a book of essays by Bishop Robert Barron, *Becoming Mrs.[C.S.] Lewis*; *Essays 1969-1990*, by Wendell Berry; Mary Kay Andrews, *The Newcomer*, a novel about an Englishman going to an island off the coast of Ireland; Jan-Philipp Sendker, *The Language of Solitude*, a novel about a German working for ecological justice in contemporary China; Martha Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, about Hellenistic ethical philosophy; *Hungry*, a memoir by Crystal Renn.

Some of us did without our cell phones for the retreat; no one watched TV. We spent most of our time quietly reading, often outdoors on a deck overlooking the river or in chair in front of the bird feeders, and serenaded

by crows, which outsquawked us by about the same ratio.

The group was unanimous that we should do this again, in fact do it twice a year. We would like to try



reading the same book(s) on one of the next reading retreats. We think we would like to share kitchen duty. Two people had to cancel at the last minute because they tested positive for Covid-19. Twelve seems like about the number who could be accommodated, unless some were open to a bunkhouse experience. It was a wonderful way to end the summer and a nice complement to our other oblate retreats which are usually held on the first weekend in Lent and the first weekend in November. Also, the retreat required no retreat master, a category of human that seems to be in danger of extinction.





Monastery Chronicle

By Fr. Boniface Lautz, OSB

JUNE 2022

The MSP reframed and refinished the outdoor Stations of the Cross. They now extend along the path from the cemetery to the 100 South Road. The path was cleared and can be mowed. They also repainted the front deck on the trailer. Two coats in one day!

Fr. Benito had a tree trimming friend as a guest and put him to work along with an MSP crew. Lots of work got done in two days, and there are some pretty large stacks of wood ready for use. We rented a lift trailer to help with some trimming along the entrance and washing windows.

Technicians from Brizee Heating, here for annual filter changes on the heating and cooling system, discovered a roof-top unit that will need replacement. That is in addition to another unit that had already been ordered. The cost of these things goes up with the temperature. Getting one from the east coast takes months.

Rob Leith stopped by and spent time at the columbarium. Our homeless friend Kathy was here overnight.

The MSP seminarians finished their courses and took a few days vacation to visit their families.

Mid-month, we received notice from Fr. Benito's superior in Mexico that Fr. Benito will be transferred to a new assignment in California. His replacement will be an MSP currently in Mexico. Fr. Benito's replacement has background in formation work and academic study of philosophy. Fr. Benito has been an effective and hard-working pioneer in beginning a new venture for the MSPs here. We will miss him.

On June 24, the MSP's celebrated the 25th anniversary of their official recognition as a religious order. It was a grand celebration, attended by many.

On June 28, we got word that Fr. Meinrad had some heart problems and had been life-flighted to the hospital in Lewiston. He had a stent inserted. He returned to St. Gertrude's on the second day and is "taking it easy" for a while.

JULY 2022

Br. Sylvester tested positive for Covid-19 on July 3. The MSPs have several members in isolation. As Covid spread through the community, we quarantined and didn't gather for Mass or prayers. Only Fr. Hugh and John Wasko stayed negative. They had to do all the serving of food to the rest of us. Fr. Hugh live-streamed Mass on Sunday and the Solemnity of St. Benedict. He was scheduled to make a long-awaited family trip and had to cancel that. No one had severe symptoms.

We began July with a budget meeting. This year, Diane's budget projections had to include "educated guesses" about the forthcoming changes in the MSP men who will be coming in September.

We've been involved in funeral services for close friends. Jacqueline Last of Jerome died on July 15. She and her husband (Deacon Bill) had been friends and supporters from our beginnings. Jackie's family came here for her inurnment on August 1. Leticia (Tish) Ryan's family was with us on July 30 for placing her ashes in the columbarium. Tish's son, Tim, had a place there. Tish was a committed Oblate and participated in events here for many years.

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The weather has been hot: 90+ degrees has been a regular reading for quite a few days. We've not had the extreme conditions faced by many others. Local fires have been contained.

Crops on our ground are doing well. Careful management of irrigation has kept them watered.

MSP priests from around the country gathered here for a retreat from July 17 to 22. It was a pleasure to meet them. They had been here last winter when it was cold. For them, 90+ was a welcome change. Fr. Hugh gave them three conferences about the history and character of Catholicism in the United States. The MSP seminarians were on retreat from July 25 to 29.

Our shop is now equipped with a 220 volt outlet, courtesy of professional help contacted by the MSPs.

AUGUST 2022

Fr. Abraham, MSP, was welcomed with a Mass and reception on August 4. It was also an opportunity to honor Fr. Benito, who left for California by car early the next day.

On August 9, we had a consultation on safe living spaces in the monastery for us older monks. Our friend, Diane Holly, who is also an occupational therapist, helped us. We know of some changes that can be made as the need arises.

Fr. Hugh took part with nine oblates in a shared lectio retreat in Pine, ID, August 9 to 12.

John Wasko began work on preparing to re-plant part of our lawn. He began the long process of scraping, tilling, and smoothing the ground. The final preparation was made with the

help of the Lay MSPs. Planting the new lawn is scheduled for August 29.

The MSPs made a chocolate cake for Br. Tobiah's birthday on the 17th, and surprised Linda Hurley with another cake on the 29th. LMSP Carlos turned 25 on the 25th and shared his cake with all.

A long-awaited heat pump arrived and was installed on the 11th. It was welcomed by the inhabitants on the second floor of the monastery who had been without air conditioning.

Lu Ann returned from vacation on the 11th. A week later, she quarantined with symptoms of Covid-19. She was able to return on the 24th. The MSPs cook weekly and whenever the need arises. They have acquired the necessary certificates.

The MSPs all went to California on the 13th for a renewal of vows ceremony and returned here the evening of the 15th. They brought with them four new Lay MSPs and a new seminarian. Fr. Abraham received the necessary changes in his immigration status.

A long-time good friend, Linda Henning, died on August 17th. Her funeral was at St. Edward's in Twin Falls on the 25th. Fr. Boniface concelebrated and preached.

The weekend of August 26-28 was a busy one. The family of Joan Harding was with us for Mass on August 28th. We had her inurnment service. That same weekend, Fr. Hugh went to Unity, OR, to celebrate the funeral Mass for Kathie Sullivan who died in a four-wheeler accident.

Br. Sylvester gathered a 40-year collection of decoration materials that he will no longer use and invited people to take what they wanted after Sunday Mass.



The Benedictine Colloquium

By Julie A. Ferraro

After five years of planning intended to gather religious, oblates and those with an interest in the Benedictine charism and spirituality from across the United States and around the world for a hybrid meeting – in person and virtual – hosted at Mount St. Scholastica, Atchison, Kansas, from June 21-24, Covid-19 forced a last-minute change to an all-virtual format.

The Colloquium, viewed as a “seeking, questioning, and learning process,” was sponsored by the Federation of St. Scholastica – now the Monastic Congregation of St. Scholastica, a union of 17 monasteries of Benedictine women religious – as part of the celebration of 100 years since the approval of their Constitution by the Vatican on February 25, 1922. The presentations and discussions were themed “Benedictine Life: A Vision Unfolding,” focusing on three topics – Wisdom, Witness and the Way Forward. At various times throughout the three days, participants had opportunities to join Zoom conversations or group meetings to exchange insights.

Sister Judith Sutura of Mount St. Scholastica, author of *St. Benedict’s Rule: An Inclusive Translation* (Liturgical Press, 2021), spoke first on how the history of the Benedictines – the “yesterday” – creates the essential narrative for today and tomorrow.

She explained how the beauty of the Benedictine way provides a vessel for doing what is needed at a specific time. Historically, Benedictine women have been at the forefront of implementing a broad and adaptable mandate, moving from the strict

cloisters of Europe to missionary work in the United States, while maintaining their monastic and contemplative life. Their monasteries have become centers for education, while these women have become cultural influencers, peacemakers and so much more. “History shapes how we face the future, and we must nourish ourselves with stories that fortify us,” Sister Judith said. In that light, Benedictines continue to gain an understanding of what Benedictine life is and how to live it where they are.

Debbie Asberry, senior consultant with CommunityWorks, Inc., Indianapolis, Indiana, spoke from home, offering her view of prophetic witness and witnessing presence. She cited Dorothy Day, Gloria Jean Watkins (known as bell hooks), and Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy as examples of this trait. Asberry peppered her talk with questions for reflection, including, “How is it possible to give witness to truth that lives in hope in a world filled with despair?” “Consciousness matters, my friends,” Asberry said, adding that the work of Benedictines is to be able to see the world in new ways.

Sister Edith Bogue of Sacred Heart Monastery, Cullman, Alabama, presented her paper, “Building the Next Ways Forward,” remotely.

“We are in the midst of a long journey,” Sister Edith stated. She continued that, while data shows Benedictine life is undergoing deep change – technological, ecological, existential – “many religious don’t think there’s a problem at all,” quoting Luisa Safiotti.

Sister Edith explained the way

forward for Benedictines is not determined by a road map, where it’s possible to see the destination, but through experimentation, observation, hospitality to new people and ideas, and reclaiming the monastic tradition “from the WEIRD [Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic] culture it lives in.” People often pull back because they’re anxious where life will lead them, she added.

To conclude the first day’s sessions, Benedictine oblate, author, poet and journalist Judith Valente provided a brief summary and response to the three earlier presentations. She finds great hope in those who practice Benedictine spirituality – sometimes without even being aware of the Benedictine tradition. “What we are called to do is put one foot in front of another,” Valente said, while a key component to future developments is how people react to the adventure Benedictines are living now.

Sister Linda Romey of the Erie Benedictines in Pennsylvania shared her wisdom June 23 on the necessity of consciously changing the way people see, and how history is interpreted by an individual’s past experience. An overview of human and Church history led Sister Linda to point out how the 1960s and 1970s were a time when people began questioning assumptions at all levels, from racism to the role of women, gender, climate, and so forth. “Are we called to be a people who question?” “We must detach from what distracts us from our God-quest,” Sister Linda said. “The only opportunity to love is in this moment.”

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Addressing the Way Forward, Katie Gordon, founding member of Nuns and Nones, who lives and works with the Erie Benedictines, expressed a desire to “go beyond categories of professed, oblates and seekers.” She sees how new groups gathering will create new conversations. She shared stories of new forms of Benedictine life and how these emerging paradigms will carry Benedictine spirituality into the future. The responsibility of Benedictines is to live the future now, Gordon stated. “There is an urgency of how we live into the future and live the future now.”

The day’s third presentation came all the way from Australia. Sister Patty Fawkner, congregational leader of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan of the Order of St. Benedict, Sydney, tailored her Witness talk on “What We Stand For.”

From the perspective of “down under”, Sister Patty highlighted how the First Nation peoples of Australia have a long history of dispossession and exclusion in their own country. The British, upon “discovering” Australia in 1770, declared it “terra nullius” – belonging to no one – and took it for their own, without regard to those already inhabiting it.

Sister Patty called on all those following St. Benedict – who she described as a realist and idealist – to bear witness according to the Rule, including honoring everyone, never giving a hollow greeting of peace, and testifying to the truth. She urged everyone to read the signs of the times, especially when it comes to diversity.

Another point involved recognizing how racism can be present “in subtle and insidious ways,” even in religious communities. “Jesus was amazingly comfortable with diversity,” Sister Patty said. “He went out of his way to be inclusive.” She encouraged those listening to have the eyes to see potential, and hearts big enough to

take the necessary risks to stand with those who deal with constant uncertainty in their lives, and those on the margins.

Sister Joanna Burley, prioress of the Benedictine Sisters in Bristow, Virginia, offered her review and response to the three presentations. “Essentially, we are all seekers,” she said. She warned against restricting future potential by becoming stuck in a particular story or becoming comfortable and complacent with what is seen as a certain identity and way of life.

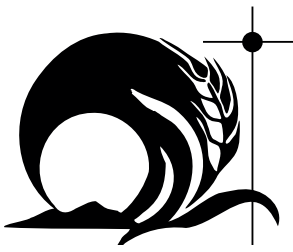
Sister Joanna emphasized the need for Benedictines to become more for a hurting world. “We must be willing to be transformed forever.” Her call to live authentically, rooted in the Gospel, and St. Benedict’s own directive from Chapter 4 of his Rule, “Your way of acting should be different from the world’s way,” provided additional food for thought.

The Colloquium organizers plan to publish the six presentations and two responses in book form, to serve as a valuable resource for future study.



Sister Joanna Burley, OSB, prioress of the Benedictine Sisters of Bristow, Virginia, gave her presentation at the Colloquium.





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