



Monastery of the Ascension

# THE DESERT CHRONICLE

Vol. XXXII, Number 3 - SEPTEMBER 2023

## PEACE

*By Pete Espil*

*(Editor's note: Pete Espil is a counselor working at a clinic in Twin Falls. He gave this talk as part of a Lenten series presented by oblates at St. Jerome's Parish. He is married to Jaime Thietten; they recently adopted Amelia. They are planning to open a non-profit halfway house for young women. "Peace" is a Benedictine motto.)*

### Introduction

The topic of peace is not one I would have chosen, let alone been qualified to speak about until a few years ago. However, I chose this topic because I feel that, during my medical struggles a few years ago and in my work as a therapist who helps people recover from severe trauma, I have learned a thing or two about the search for peace. My views on this subject are

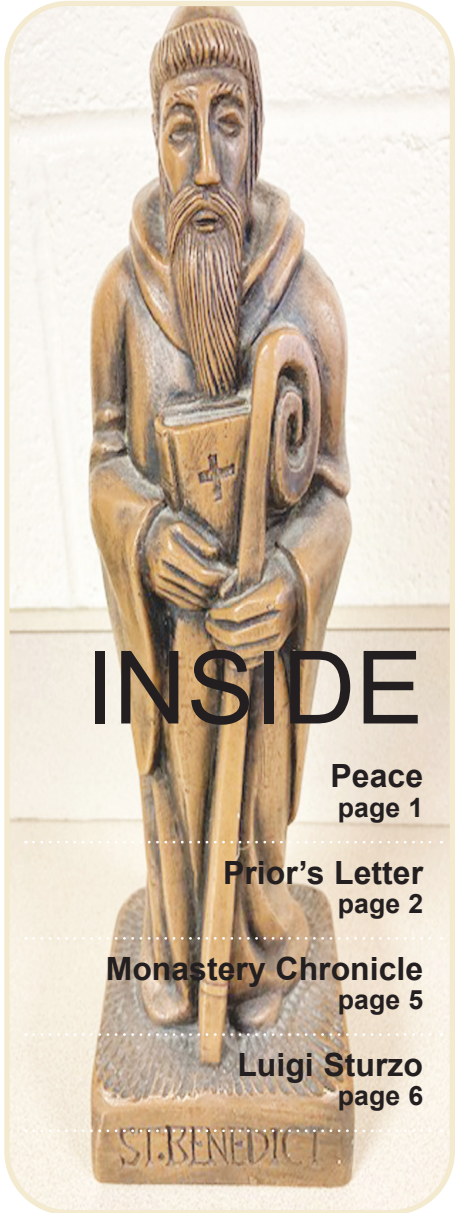
heavily influenced by my own experiences, education and journey, and my journey for peace is certainly far from complete. Nevertheless, I am further along today than I was yesterday which is, I think, the goal.

I chose to use the Serenity Prayer as an outline, dissecting the prayer line by line to draw from it some insight into the subject of peace from the perspective of an imperfect Benedictine oblate.

### God grant me the Serenity

The first word of the prayer is God. I believe peace begins and ends with God, in much the same way that the Benedictine tradition holds that all great things begin with the voice of God. The first line of the prayer is also a request for help.

*Continues on page 2*



## INSIDE

Peace  
page 1

Prior's Letter  
page 2

Monastery Chronicle  
page 5

Luigi Sturzo  
page 6

### *Introduction to September 2023 Desert Chronicle from Fr. Hugh Feiss:*

The oblates of the monastery held a retreat from February 17-19, 2023, during which they gave five conferences on key Benedictine ideas. These oblates gave the same talks at the parish in Jerome, Idaho - one each Sunday for the first five weeks of Lent. This issue offers the text of another of these talks. These are ideas that can apply to anyone's life, and they express from various angles the Benedictine way to God. We hope you find them helpful.



Dear Friends of the Monastery,

We've recently celebrated the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary. It is a feast that has significant connections for some of us here at Ascension. For one thing, the date - August 15 - was the first full day for some of us in the monastery at Mt. Angel. Postulants were admitted on the afternoon of August 14. On the 15th, we joined a pilgrimage procession to a shrine in honor of Mary. As I recall, my attention was more on the temperature and the sawdust trail. Our new black habits were not made for hot weather. Fervor was at a low level.

The intervening years since 1954 have helped me to appreciate the meaning of the Feast. Since I now have the privilege of celebrating the community Mass, my attention is more focused on the meaning of Mary's Assumption.

Pope Pius XII's declaration of Mary's Assumption as a dogma in 1950 included some important and valuable theological points. The quote from his encyclical notes: "When the course of her earthly life was finished, [she] was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, so that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son ... The Assumption of Mary is a singular participation in her Son's Resurrection and an anticipation of the resurrection of other Christians."

Pope Pius XII is connecting the Assumption of Mary to her freedom from sin and death as the result of original sin. She is assumed "body and soul," a whole person, like us, into Heaven. It is possible for us to be there, too. She is in Heaven as the Mother of her Son. She is our Mother as well, Mother of her Son's Mystical Body. Her love for Him includes love for us. And so we have a powerful intercessor in Mary. How often we say, "pray for us now and at the hour of our death."

And so, by God's grace, the years since 1954 have given me the opportunity to value and revere the faith the Church professes in the Assumption of Mary. We pray for her intercession for ourselves and for you.

Peace and good things!

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

Finding peace begins with asking for it from our Creator. Like all of God's gifts, it is free, but requires action on our part. We can't ask for peace and continue to live the same way. We need to give some things up in order to practice living with peace. Anything in our life that is destroying our peace may have to be placed on the chopping block. Hippocrates said, "Before you heal a man, ask him if he is willing to give up the things that made him sick." Once we ask for Christ's peace, we may need to take some personal inventory and do some house cleaning.

The first line also teaches us that it is ok to ask for help in our journey for peace. If we are someone who feels they must be constantly busy to feel worthy, it may be time to simplify our life. If we are a boss who can't delegate because our self-worth is too tied up in our work, it may be time to stop micromanaging. If we are a parent who thinks that love is taking care of everyone in the family at the expense of our own sanity or safety, it may be time to learn to be a partner instead of the leader.

### To accept the things I cannot change

The second line introduces the concept of acceptance. This word is often used without a clear understanding of its meaning. Acceptance means "acknowledgement of what is." When we accept things, we do not necessarily agree with them, like them or endorse them. We simply acknowledge reality.

Knowing what we can't change is more easily explained if we turn it around and identify what we can change. The only thing we can change is ourselves. This means we must let go of everything outside of our reasoned choice. When we can let go of trying to control others and focus on changing ourselves, we have found the path to peace.

### Courage to change the things I can

Courage is a virtue often defined, "when you are afraid, but you go anyway." At first, this conjures up for me memories of how I felt at times in the Marines, or before a boxing match at a Golden Gloves tournament. However, I think we do a disservice when we limit courage to those types of situations.



Continues on page 3



We can only change ourselves. Taking an honest look at ourselves and then working on changing ourselves for the better takes tremendous courage. Acceptance of difficult situations and circumstances takes courage, as well. Speaking the truth takes courage. Befriending the outcast takes courage. Doing the right thing takes courage. Even being kind takes courage. Finding peace also means having the courage to do these things and many others.

### **And the Wisdom to know the difference**

Wisdom is one of the gifts of the Spirit. A wise man once told me, “Knowledge plus experience plus maturity equals wisdom.” Many times in my life, I thought I was wise because I had knowledge and experience but, sadly, lacked maturity. Wisdom can’t exist in the absence of a mature soul.

Wisdom takes time and, thus, it is often late to come to us. Wisdom is slow, contemplative, and cautious. It requires rational thought. Wisdom does not coexist well with emotion. If we allow our emotions to control us, we cannot be wise. Additionally, if we are controlled by emotions, we won’t be at peace.

To gain control of emotion, we must learn to control our thinking. The famous Stoic, Marcus Aurelius, said, “Our life is what our thoughts make it.” Though he was not a Christian, this line, so powerful in its simplicity and wisdom, is not in contradiction with Benedictine thought or practice.

### **Living one day at a time, Enjoying one moment at a time.**

The author Laurence Gonzales, in his book *Deep Survival: Who lives, who dies and why*, wrote that the first rule of survival is to “be here now.” This is an excellent definition of mindfulness. Learning to be fully present to what is in front of us right now is a beautiful application of a peace-filled life.

When our thinking gets too far into the future, we are soon faced with fears, anxiety, and worry. When our thinking is trapped in the past, we are often besieged by depression. It is only when we practice “being here now” that we can find peace, because we are then living an engaged life that cultivates authentic relationships.

Consider those people you have encountered who are always too busy to make time for genuine connection with others and, then, do the opposite. Remember, you can only do one thing at a time. Be content with the task at hand.

### **Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace**

Practicing acceptance in the face of hardship and adversity is a challenge. Victor Frankl spoke of the “tragic triad,” which he described as the reality that we will all face suffering, guilt, and death. How can we view these things that sound so terrible as the pathway to peace?

Christ tells us in the Gospel of Matthew that we should rejoice when persecuted. One of my favorite saints, Thomas More, said that suffering is a gift that God only gives to his closest and most special friends. Many Christian communities do a disservice

*God grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot change,  
courage to change the things I can,  
and the wisdom to know the difference,  
living one day at a time;  
enjoying one moment at a time;  
taking this world as it is and not as I would have it;  
trusting that You will make all things right  
if I surrender to Your will;  
so that I may be reasonably happy in this life  
and supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen.*

to their members when they avoid the subjects of suffering and pain. Consider the difficult reality that we never grow when we are comfortable. Doing hard and uncomfortable things is when we grow the most.

I don’t think peace has much to do with comfort. I think peace has far more to do with acceptance.

Victor Frankl also said that the last of the human freedoms, that which can never be taken from us, is to decide how we respond to any given set of circumstances. We have very limited control over our circumstances. We have absolute control over our responses to our circumstances. If Dr. Frankl could be at peace in Auschwitz, surely we can cultivate peace in our daily struggles, however difficult they may seem.

### **Taking, as he did, this sinful world as it is, Not as I would like it.**

If we truly want to follow the example of Christ, we have to remember that He didn’t force anyone to change. He didn’t change everyone or the systems around Him so He could be at peace. Instead, He preached the kingdom of God and let people make their own decision.

Christ offered a way people could change their hearts. When we allow Christ to change our hearts, we start to understand real peace. The most chronically unhappy people are those who blame others for their situations, feelings, and actions. They can be recognized because they say things like, “If everyone would just do things a certain way, I wouldn’t get so angry.” This lack of maturity demonstrates the chaos that we create in our own minds and hearts when we allow attitudes and actions of others to control our own thoughts and emotions. This type of attitude is, at best, a lack of maturity and, at worst, the purest form of narcissism. Either way, there is no peace to be found.

*Continues on page 4*



Continued from page 3

**Trusting that he will make all things right,  
If I surrender to his will.**

I like to say that trust is the first cousin of faith. Trusting in God's will may not always be comfortable, but when we do, we will be at peace. Please remember that peace does not mean being comfortable. In fact, if we are comfortable, there is a good chance we are not in God's will. It may sound strange to think that we could be uncomfortable and at peace at the same time, but knowing we are doing what God asks of us brings peace even if the circumstances are less than desirable on a comfort scale.

Trusting and following God's will leaves little room for anxiety, worry, depression, anger, jealousy and attempting to control others.

**That I may be reasonably happy in this world  
And supremely happy in the next.**

I don't believe we were created to be happy. We were created to know, love and serve God, and we are promised a reward. Happiness is something we can look forward to, but it certainly is never promised to us in this life. However, when we are at peace we can feel fulfilled, which is probably a far better feeling than being happy. Certainly, at times we will feel happy and joyful, but I'm not convinced that being happy is the purpose of life, or a sign that we are in God's will.

Finally, a word on boundaries. Sometimes, we will be forced to set boundaries to guard our peace. This could mean limiting screen time, scheduling time for silence and self-care, or even limiting our work in order to avoid burnout. Boundaries will sometimes need to be set with people who disrupt our peace because of their toxic behavior. Setting boundaries is healthy and acceptable. It is what some might refer to as "tough love." Therein is the guide for how to do it. When boundaries are set with other people, it is out of love for them and for ourselves, just as Christ commanded us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Don't be afraid to say "no" sometimes. Don't let our society convince you that you must always be productive to have worth. And don't fall for the lie that you don't love someone if you set boundaries to avoid enabling their destructive behaviors.



*Pete Espil and his wife, Jaime Thietten,  
with their daughter, Amelia.*





# Monastery Chronicle

By Fr. Boniface Lautz, OSB

## June 2023

June started with a birthday for Fr. Kenneth on the 2nd, celebrated with coconut frosting and a feast day for Fr. Boniface on the 5th, celebrated with sausage.

On June 4, the MSPs led a retreat for parents and children. We had a full house with lots of inspiring activity.

From June 5 to 9, the MSP seminarians had days of retreat, led by MSP Fr. Oscar, who teaches theology at their house in Mexico. It was a pleasure to meet Fr. Oscar and learn more about the overall MSP formation program.

My cousin visited from Wisconsin; we toured Craters of the Moon and Malad Gorge.

Each evening from the 6th to the 9th, there were thunderstorms and heavy rain. There were some reports of minor crop damage but, for the most part, rain was welcome.

Throughout the month, the community has been meeting to make plans for the eventual transition of the monastery complex to the MSPs. Looking at specifics has brought some reality to our theory. We have more to do and will continue during July.

Fr. Evarist Shiyo, ALCP, who will be the new priest in Buhl in July, visited. He is known locally because he celebrates Mass for the Swahili-speakers in Twin Falls. One of the MSPs will help him with ministry to the Spanish-speaking.

John Wasako had knee surgery a second time. It went well and his recovery is going better than expected.

Our refrigeration containers will need to be replaced. Fortunately, the cost of the new units will be less than we thought. They have been ordered and will probably take a week or more to install.

Fr. Hugh presided at the funeral Mass for Bill Brockman in Buhl on June 16. Bill's ashes were placed in our columbarium by family members the next day.

Leaking return pipes in the basement and faucet repairs in the ministry center required the attention of professional plumbers and intermittent water shut offs.

From June 23 to 26, Brother Tobiah and I attended the general chapter meeting of the Swiss American Congregation at St. Meinrad's Archabbey in Indiana.

Fr. Moises, MSP, moved to his new parish assignment in Mountain Home. He will be missed here.

## July 2023

Special get-togethers get top billing for July. On Sunday, July 9, our Oblates provided a delicious potluck dinner for 40 MSPs, guests, oblates, and monks. A post-potluck Bingo game generated amazing excitement. Oblate Larry Elkins, who - with Fr. Hugh - organized the potluck, called the numbers.

More than two dozen MSP Priests, mostly from the USA, gathered here for meetings and spiritual exercises from July 17 to 21. They were joined by their Superior General, Fr. Moises Vivar Martinez, MSP. Their meals (and ours) were provided by friends of the MSP community. Most of them concelebrated Mass with us on the Friday before they left.

On July 5, we had a visit from our former bishop, now retired Bishop Brown of Orange. It was a treat to reminisce and re-connect. He came with Fr. Ron Wekerle.

We have been contracting for appraisals and surveys prior to transferring the monastery complex to the MSP. Planning for the future transfer of property has continued. We've been lucky to have help from our farm manager, who has recently had a similar experience.

Fr. Hugh went to a family gathering in Sicily. There were intense heat and long airplane rides, but he said that time with family made it all worthwhile.

July 28 to 30 was a busy weekend. The MSPs hosted the attendees at a marriage encounter at St. Jerome's. They also conducted a one-day retreat here for families trained for parish ministry attended by about 100 people.

We've had an unusually long period of hot weather; August could well be the same. We've been blessed with cooling systems that work.

*The August Chronicle will be included in the next issue!*



# LUIGI STURZO: PRIEST, POLITICIAN, AND ADVOCATE FOR JUSTICE

by Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB

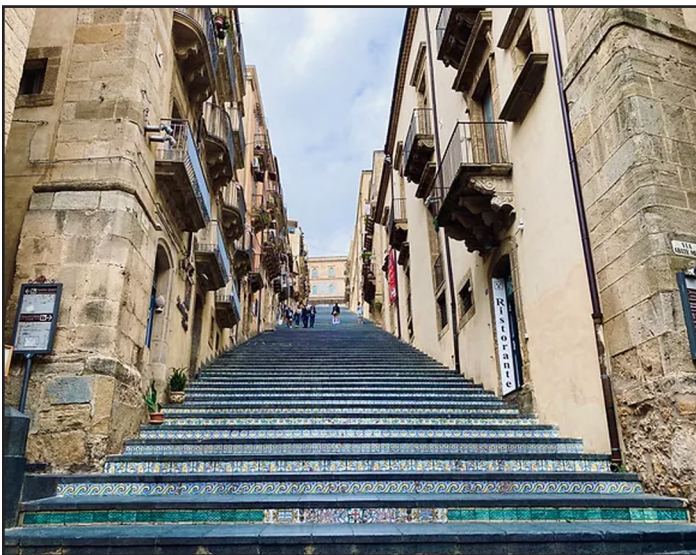
In late July 2023, while attending a family reunion near Comiso in Sicily, I visited the town of Caltagirone, where there is an interesting museum dedicated to the history of ceramics. As I walked slowly through the museum, I noted references to Luigi Sturzo. I remembered the name from my high school studies of Catholic social teaching. I wondered if this could be the political thinker and champion of democracy and the poor that we studied. After we left the museum, we took a harrowing drive through narrow streets and alleys to the base of another tourist attraction, a flight of 142 steps, built in 1606 to connect the older and newer parts of the town. After 1954, the fronts of all the steps were decorated with polychrome ceramic tiles representing various styles of ceramic art. On the bottom step was an inscription with the name “Luigi

Sturzo.” I knew by then that this was same Luigi Sturzo we heard about in our class on Catholic social teaching more than 60 years ago.

Luigi Sturzo was born in Caltagirone into a prominent Catholic family, in which music, art, religion and politics were important. His older brother became a priest and then a bishop. Luigi himself studied to be a priest and was ordained in 1894. Then, he studied at the Gregorian University in Rome, where his fellow students included Eugenio Pacelli (Pope Pius XII) and Emmanuel Suhard, who became Cardinal-Archbishop of Paris. After he earned his doctorate, Luigi returned to Sicily, where he became deeply concerned about the misery of poor people on that unhappy island. He later returned to the seminary to teach economics and sociology.

The government of Italy that formed in 1870 was dismissive and oppressive toward the Church. By the late 1890s, however, Catholic life was flourishing: Catholics sponsored 700 workers societies, 24 daily papers and 155 periodicals. Catholics - Sturzo among them - taking inspiration from Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, were championing Christian democracy and justice for the poor. Luigi helped promote cooperatives, rural banks, and mutual aid societies. When he became mayor of Caltagirone, one of his efforts was to start a school to teach ceramics, to revive a local tradition that was in danger of dying out.

After Italian nationalists had occupied Rome in 1870, Pope Pius IX remained confined to the Vatican and declared that it was not suitable (*non expedit*) for Catholics to take part in the politics of the newly formed national government. Over time, that decree was softened, and Luigi Sturzo helped found a political party, the Partito Popolare, which - although its members were Catholic - was independent of the Church. It won 100 seats in the Italian parliament in its first time on the ballot in 1919 at the end of World War I. About that time, the Fascist party of Benito Mussolini formed. Gradually, Mussolini gained appeal among Italians who felt that the country was rudderless. In 1924, the Partito Popolare was outlawed by Mussolini. The papacy did not oppose him in return for Mussolini’s agreement to recognize the independence of the Vatican from Italy.



*Above:* The Caltagirone Stairs on the island of Sicily.

*Below:* The inscription featuring Luigi Sturzo’s name on the bottom step.

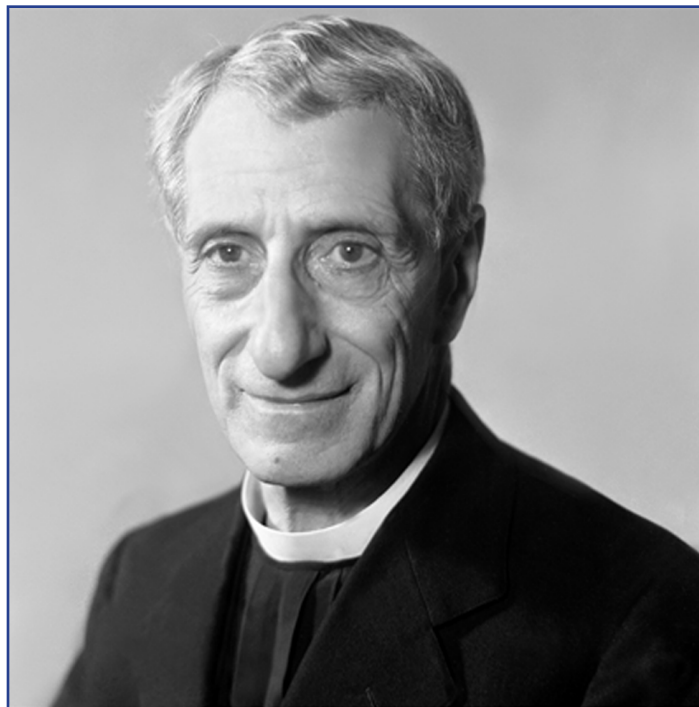


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Sturzo went into exile, passing through Paris to England, where he remained until 1940, when he went to the United States. In 1946, he returned to Italy, where - in 1952 - he received the title of “senator for life.” He died in 1959 in Rome and, in 1962, he was buried in a church in Caltagirone. Although the Partito popolare was crushed by Mussolini, many of its hopes and principles lived on in the Christian Democratic parties that emerged after the Second World War, whose leaders helped shape the European Union and the United Nations. During his exile and after his return to Italy, Sturzo continued to write on politics and related matters.

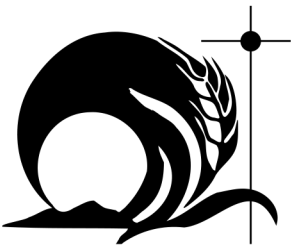
He remained a dedicated priest; one book about him called him “a priest of Christ at the service of humanity.” He is a candidate for canonization. His cause is at the same stage as Dorothy Day’s: they are officially “Servants of God.” Their writings and testimonies from people who knew them have been collected by their dioceses and now are being studied by experts in the Vatican. In 2019, on the occasion of a conference commemorating a political appeal “To all free and strong men” that Sturzo issued in 1919 (he was a supporter of women’s suffrage), Pope Francis summarized Sturzo’s bedrock beliefs, “the primacy of the person over society, society over the state and morality over politics; the centrality of the family; the defense of property with its social function as a need for freedom; the importance of work as the right and duty of every man; building a just peace through the creation of a true international community.



These values are based on the assumption that Christianity is a message of salvation that is embodied in history, which is addressed to all mankind and must positively influence both private and public moral life.”

Sturzo, opposed and exiled, priest and politician, social justice advocate passionate about justice and democracy, never lost his idealism or his core principles about how society should be. He might be a saint we need today.





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*The monks hold in prayer all those returning to school.*



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