



Monastery of the Ascension

# THE DESERT CHRONICLE

XXX, No. 4 DECEMBER 2021

## Life is Changed NOT Taken Away

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

**T**HE MONASTERY OF THE ASCENSION WAS FOUNDED IN 1965, SO IT IS NOW 56 YEARS OLD, AN AGE YOUNGER THAN ANY OF ITS MEMBERS. DURING THOSE YEARS, THE LAND WHERE THE monastery is located has been developed into productive farmland and the buildings of the monastery have expanded to include the monastery itself (1980), the “trailer,” and the guest house (1995). The community of Benedictine monks grew, peaking at 13, and now numbers 9. However, those nine are over 60 years old and no new members have joined us for many years. So for some time, we have been considering our options.

We have decided gradually to turn over management of the buildings, and grounds upon which they sit, to a vibrant young religious order headquartered in Mexico: the Misioneros Servadores de la Palabra (Missionaries Servants of the Word), whose mission is “to evangelize the laity to evangelize with the laity.” They do that by going door to door to invite people to become active in the local parish, offering Bible studies, and forming evangelizing groups of young people and married couples. The Missionaries have three branches: priests and brothers, sisters, and lay missionaries who volunteer for a year after eight months of formation.

The Missionaries were founded by Father Luis Butera Vullo, who was born in Sicily in 1932. He joined the Comboni Missionaries in 1958 and was ordained in 1960. In 1963, he was assigned to Mexico where he served in his order in various capacities. He traveled widely, observed and admired the formation of Buddhist children in their tradition, and the work of young Mormon missionaries. In 1981, he founded an evangelizing center in the town of San José El Vidrio in the diocese of Cuautitlan, near Mexico City. In 1997, his new, rapidly growing religious community received approval from its diocesan bishop.

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# Prior's Letter

Dear Friends of the Monastery,

It is a beautiful, sunny Saturday afternoon. Thanksgiving Day is almost here. We at the Monastery of the Ascension have much for which to give thanks. The arrival of the Missionaries Servants of the Word certainly ranks high on the list. They have been with us for two months now. The five seminary students and their Rector are busy with classes and are also actively involved with the work their community is doing in the Diocese of Boise. They are a big help to us, taking on some of the maintenance and physical tasks. We are also fortunate to host two MSP Priests and three lay MSP's who are ministering in the Boise Diocese.

The *giving thanks* is not only for the men and what they do, but how it came about. Since 2018 we had been exploring possibilities of connecting with a religious community that could provide continued service when we would no longer be able to do so. Our first contact in person with the Missionaries was six months ago! They were ready to relocate part of their seminary formation program and to have a residence for the priests serving in Idaho. We were

more than ready to have some resolution to our future plans. Bishop Christensen arranged a preliminary meeting of our two communities. And it "clicked".

We and the Missionaries had been praying for guidance in our planning for the future. For our part here at Ascension, the answer to the prayers was certainly unforeseen. "Who would have thought?" The living and working together goes really well. We thank the Lord for this!

Thanks for all of you as well. We experience the many ways that your prayers and help support and encourage us. That has been from our beginning and continues.

Some of our activities over the past three months are recorded in the chronicle section of this letter. Given the many ways that the Lord has blessed us, we have good reason to look forward with trust in Him.

Christ's presence with all of us is cause for trust and thanksgiving. That is our prayer for you. Christmas and New Year blessings!

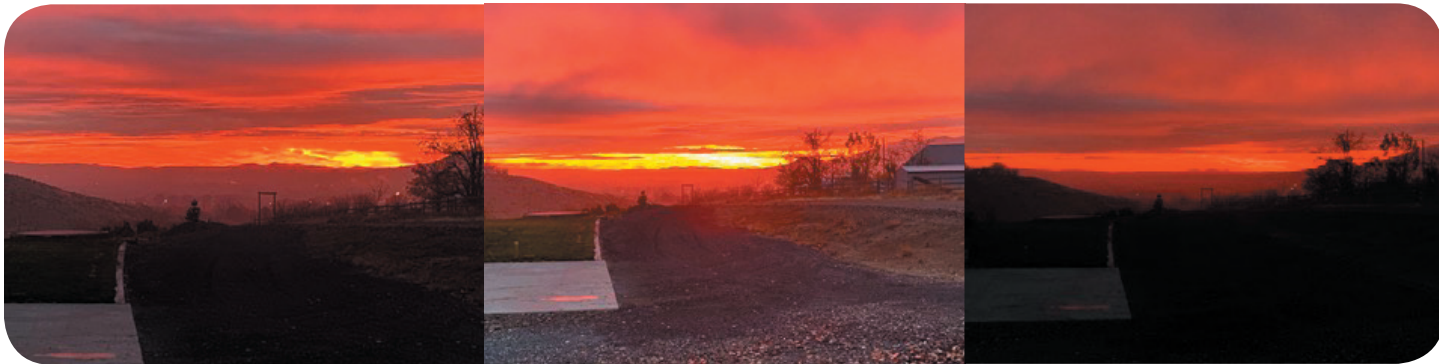
Peace and good things.

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



# Give THANKS





*Photos of Fall Sunrise, Vale, OR by Merissa Russell*

## SIGNS OF HOPE

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

**A**DVENT IS THE SEASON OF HOPE, REMINDING US WHERE OUR DEEPEST HOPE LIES: NOT IN OURSELVES, IN OUR TRIBES, OR IN OUR SCIENCE. WE AWAIT THE BLESSED HOPE, THE COMING OF OUR GREAT GOD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST, AMID THE GLOOM OF OUR WINTERY WORLD. AS A REMINDER TO MYSELF, I HAVE LISTED TEN SIGNS OF HOPE, SACRAMENTS AS IT WERE, OF WHAT WE ULTIMATELY HOPE FOR:

- Teachers committed to help their students find truth. There are those who look to literature and history to find weapons for current causes, some of them admirable in themselves, but not justifying distortion of history and neglect of the beauty of literature. There are others who want history to be a narration of the triumphant march of their particular nationalism. The teachers who inspire my hope resist both of these aberrations and honestly try to read, study and teach what has happened in the past, good and bad, and to read literature for what it is, to the benefit of their students.
- In El Salvador, after a long struggle and the loss of several local leaders to assassins, a grass roots movement has been successful in protecting the water resources of the country from foreign mining companies wanting to mine gold in ways that posed dire threats to those waters. In the end, with the support of a majority of the citizens, the country passed laws that made any extraction of underground minerals illegal. Archbishop Romero would be proud of them and of his successor, whose background in chemistry led him to embrace the water protectors' cause.
- The Paiutes of Harney County, Oregon, were unjustly forced onto a reservation and, then, deprived even of that by the government. A stubborn priest who stood up for them was suspended by his bishop, but continued to champion their cause. After many decades of struggle, members of the Paiute have regained some of their former lands, gained access to education, and stood on the side of those who rejected the ignorance and violence of the outsiders occupying the Malheur Wildlife Reservation, which - if it should be returned to anyone - should be returned to the Paiutes.
- The Friends of the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge in Oak Harbor, Ohio, on the edge of Lake Erie, support a refuge that is important for migratory birds and home to Trumpeter swans, bald eagles, yellow-headed blackbirds and many other birds and animals. They have created a community of people who love the place and fund its maintenance and expansion.
- Employees of government agencies charged with protection public lands and wildlife. Generally, they seem understaffed, hamstrung by perhaps necessarily inflexible rules, criticized by environmentalists and by those who use those lands, but work conscientiously to fulfill their mission. Also, those seeking collaboration rather than conflict regarding the use, protection, and improvement of public lands. Those lands belong to all of us and are enduring proof that private ownership is not essential to enjoyment of the world.
- Those working as immigration lawyers - especially those who work in non-profit agencies - meet many people in desperate need and, often, cannot do much to help them. The laws governing immigration and asylum are hopelessly inadequate, as are the structures in place to provide assistance. The lawyers and others committed to helping immigrants are models of persevering service in the face of heavy obstacles.
- Nurses and others in the healing professions have worked so hard to treat people sick with Covid-19. They know now most of those whom they treat are unvaccinated by their own choice, yet they continue to treat them without recrimination, caring rather than blaming.
- Libraries and all those whose lives are library-like are an inspiration. As a recent article notes: a library produces nothing

*See "HOPE", cont on page 7*







# Monastery Chronicle

*By Fr. Boniface Lautz, OSB*

## SEPTEMBER

Much of our activity this month has been related to the arrival of the Missionaries Servants of the Word (henceforward MSPs). Preparing rooms for them on the first floor and moving ourselves to the second floor has taken time and effort. Local plumbers and a locksmith helped with repairs that had gone unattended. Now we are awaiting new occupants.

On Saturday, September 18 at 10:00 AM, they arrived! Fr. Benito Rojas msp, Br. Sergio Rodriguez msp, Br. Jonathan Chichipan msp, Br. Carlos Goldamez msp, Br. Sergio Valencia msp, and Br. Geovany Gonzalez msp. They spent the day getting unpacked. At 5:00 pm Bishop Christensen accompanied by several chancery staff, celebrated Mass for both our communities. Afterwards we shared a nice meal prepared by LuAnn.

The grand piano in our lobby was transferred to members of Fr. Andrew's family. The piano was given to Fr. Andrew years ago by his parents and came with him from Mount Angel. It will be used for teaching and performance, which is "good use" indeed. We have been relocating many other things we no longer need: boxes of cucullas and albs went to Mount Angel, unneeded liturgical vestments to the diocese, and other things to thrift stores.

We've had brief visits by friends from Oregon

which is always a treat. And Sr. Mary Forman, O.S.B., Prioress of St. Gertrude's in Cottonwood was able to stop by on Sept. 9.

On September 19 we got some much needed rain. It cleared some of the smoke and dust from the atmosphere. The farm crew harvested the sugar beets, and the neighboring dairy chopped the silage corn.

A long time good friend and benefactor, Art Baily, died on September 26. Art excavated most of the basalt rock when we built the ministry center. He did so as a gift. It was my privilege to participate in his funeral in October.

## OCTOBER

On October 25. Fr. Ezekiel Lotz, O.S.B. went to the Monastery of Christ in the Desert in New Mexico where he will spend a year discerning possible transfer of stability. Our prayers go with him.

The MSPs celebrated a major feast in honor of Christ the Missionary on October 31. Over 100 participants from parishes where they are serving came to share at Mass, adoration, a meal (pot-luck from the participants), and presentations.

We are making less peanut brittle. One of the cooks (guess who) feels a little less energetic. Harold Bulcher's recipe still produces a pretty good product.

The compressors on our refrigeration and freezing units finally gave up. The new ones will work for a long time, and hopefully be quieter.

As noted elsewhere in this issue, one of the visiting rooms we use for spiritual direction and confessions has been re-decorated to make it more suitable for those activities.

Mid-month we had some major rain for several days, followed by some low temperatures. The weather reporters said it was typical for change of seasons. Over all, October brought more precipitation than it had for years. We're still in need of a lot more.

## NOVEMBER

On November 4-7 Sr. Pia Portmann, O.S.B., conducted a retreat for our Oblates (see the article elsewhere in this issue). It was a joyous and inspiring weekend, the first major use of our retreat facility since March of 2020.

Several of the MSPs are skilled craftsmen and have made some very nice liturgical furnishings for their chapel, which they built in the former workout room in the basement. They have also done some repair work that has been needed for some time. They have rearranged the carpentry shop to make it more useable.

We are looking forward to Thanksgiving with the MSPs later this week. •



# DRAWING OF IRISH MONASTERIES AND SCULPTURES

*By Jane Castelan Buccola*



I HAVE BEEN AN ARTIST MOST OF MY LIFE, BEGINNING AS A CHILD WITH CRAYONS AND coloring books. At present, I am exploring abstract painting in pastel, oil and acrylic. My adult journey as an artist began after earning a degree in Art from UC Irvine in June of 1969, when I bought a set of pastels and my husband built me an easel.

In between that beginning - many years ago - and the present, there were many stops and starts. I have worked in several media, including: pastel, oil, watercolor, acrylic, batik and pen and ink. In addition to abstracts, I have created portraits, still life, architectural drawings and landscapes. Since 2010, I have been a member of Lunaria Gallery, Silverton, Oregon. I am

also a member of Pastel Artists of Oregon, a signature member of Northwest Pastel Society and a member of Silverton Art Association. You can view my art at my website: [www.janecastelanbuccola.com](http://www.janecastelanbuccola.com).

In 1986, Fr. Hugh Feiss commissioned me to create some illustrations of ancient Irish monasteries for an article he was writing on The Order of St. Victor in Ireland. I love history and was eager to get started. He offered several photographs which he had taken on a recent visit to Ireland to be used as reference material. Since the illustrations were to be black and white, we decided pen and ink would be a good medium.

I so enjoyed the process of drawing the ancient monasteries. I felt every surface and crevice of the ancient stones as I shaded

them with fine lines. It was as though I was an insect crawling over the surface. I imagined myself visiting these ancient places of worship and experienced a real intimacy with them.

I remember sitting on the couch at home in the evening, using a pencil and a ruler to measure all

the dimensions of each cathedral. As I worked, enlarging each image to a 3:1 ratio, a pencil drawing emerged to scale. In this manner, I did the preliminary pencil drawings for all six monasteries.

I was then ready to begin the final drawings in ink. Taking each completed pencil drawing and placing it on a light table, I put a fresh sheet of drawing paper over the top and began the final drawing in black ink. With the light coming through both sheets of paper, the pencil drawing was clearly visible. If an error was made, I would have to begin again with a fresh sheet of drawing paper, and there were a few false starts. After the drawings were completed, they were framed and an exhibit was held at Mt. Angel Abbey Library. I also had notecards printed of the Irish ruins.

Because I enjoyed doing the drawings and wanted more images for printing notecards, I asked Fr. Hugh if he had more photos from the historical places he had visited in Ireland. He gave me some of several carvings, which I drew in the same method as the monasteries, enlarging them 3:1. Of the five I chose to draw, three are from the Cistercian Abbey of Jerpoint, County Kilkenny, one is from the Cistercian Abbey of Corcomroe, County Clare and one is from the ancient Celtic Abbey of Clonmacnoise, County Offaly, home to St. Ciarán.

In portraying the monasteries and sculptures, I tried to be true to the imperfections and blemishes I saw and what the sculptor intended. If there were chips or blemishes in the stone, I noted them, trying to remain honest to the passage of time, vagaries of weather and to the upheavals in human history they had witnessed over hundreds of years.

The sculpture drawings were hanging in my home for several years. But, when I moved to a new home and downsized, I thought they should be in a place where they could be enjoyed and appreciated. I offered them to Fr. Hugh at the Monastery of the Ascension and he accepted them. I am very glad they have a new home, a place where they belong and a room of their own. •





# Walking Under the Guidance of the Gospel: Learning and Trusting in God's Grace and Mercy

By Sr. Pia Portmann, O.S.B.

## Editor's NOTE:

On the weekend of November 5-7, twenty oblates attended a retreat given by Sr. Pia Portmann, a Missionary Benedictine. She was born in Switzerland, joined the Tutzing Benedictines in Germany, spent 27 years in East Africa, worked for her congregation in Rome, was superior of their monastery in Norfolk, Nebraska, and is now part of a group of four sisters working in Sioux City, Iowa. What follows is a condensed version of her final conference to the oblates.

### *Opening Prayer from St. Anselm of Canterbury*

*O my God teach my heart where and how to seek you,  
where and how to find you...  
You are my God and you are my All and I have never seen you.  
You have made me and remade me,  
You have bestowed on me all the good things I possess,  
Still I do not know you...  
I have not yet done that for which I was made...  
Teach me to seek you...  
I cannot seek you unless you teach me or find you unless  
you show yourself to me.  
Let me seek you in my desire; let me desire you in my seeking.  
Let me find you by loving you; let me love you when I find you.*

Sr. Aquinata Böckmann, O.S.B., an expert on the Rule of Benedict, suggests the heart of the Prologue to St. Benedict's Rule is found in verses 21-22, which tell us to walk on God's path under the guidance of the Gospel, in order to see Him who has called us. The Gospel is the Good News of Christ. Each of the Gospels is a summary of the faith of the early Church that, in his kindness, the Lord is showing us the path of life. As Pope Francis wrote, the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Christ with joy. He calls us to be evangelizers, to witness to the risen Lord, who is alive in our Church. Christ is our goal, but he also accompanies us with his grace. God is grace, costly grace, which must be sought. As Benedict says later in the Prologue, "What is not possible to us by nature, let us ask the Lord to supply by the help his grace." Our journey will involve setbacks and detours. We have to learn from them. As St. Benedict also wrote, "the way of salvation is narrow at the outset, but as we progress in this way of life and faith, our hearts overflow with the inexpressible delight of love," and "through patience we share in Christ's suffering so we may share in his kingdom."



Sr. Pia then invited the oblates to meditate on this illustration in a fourteenth-century prayerbook. In the middle range, we see St. Benedict and St. Paul, each of whom experienced a miraculous vision. In the top range is the radiant face of God. To the left, an angel brings the soul of Bishop Germanus to God, as Benedict saw in his vision. As the diagram of the universe in the bottom range recalls, in that vision Benedict beheld all the universe in a single ray of light. Responding to that, Roger, the owner of the prayerbook, prays: "All creation, I beg, as I hope, have mercy on Roger," and "May all things created by God be my medicine."•





*Inaugural Mass MSPs*



*MSPs Mass*

### *“LIFE”, from page 1*

In 2008, the order received papal recognition. They now serve in over a dozen countries.

In October 2021, six Missionaries took up residence in the Monastery of the Ascension: five seminarians who have been in formation for four years and their superior Fr. Benito Rojas. Two priest missionaries, who were working in Eastern Idaho, have since moved here. Over the next three years, they will gradually take over the operation of the facility, but we Benedictines will continue to live here until we die out. We have not yet decided what non-profit will be given ownership of the farmland, but whoever does take possession, provision will be made for the Marshall family to continue to farm it.

Our declining numbers and aging population are typical of most religious orders in the United States and Europe. A few very traditional communities are receiving vocations, but their long-term prospects are unknown. In this changing of the times (as Pope Francis put it), there are few religious vocations. There seems to be no obvious strategy to reverse the decline. Looking back over the last 56 years, one can see many things that we could have done differently, but it is very doubtful any of those would have brought us a sustaining number of new members. As Benedictines, we can take the long view. We have existed

for over 1500 years, in good times and bad, through the Reformation, the Suppression of the religious orders at the time of the French Revolution, in times of decline and in times of rapid expansion. Over those 1500 years, Benedictines have been adaptable, altering polity, liturgy, economics, and ministries, while trying to stay faithful to the deepest values of the Rule of St. Benedict: community, humility, liturgical prayer, prayerful reading and study, hospitality that welcomes visitors of all kinds and seeks to help those in need. The motto of Monte Cassino, founded by St. Benedict, is ours: “Cut down, it grows back fresh and green.”

One characteristic of Benedictine monasteries is that they are the center of a larger family, which includes neighbors, employees, people who ask for prayers, benefactors, and oblates. In early November, we were able, after a two-year hiatus, to welcome a group of 20 oblates back to the monastery for a retreat given by Sr. Pia Portmann, O.S.B. The joy the oblates felt at being back together, and the deep joy of Sr. Pia in her Lord, were palpable. The oblates and those they influence will be witnesses to our shared life and Gospel values long after we are gone. Life is changed, not taken away. •

### *“HOPE”, from page 3*

and sells nothing. Libraries offer their services for free; they encourage loitering; users need not demonstrate need; they are equal lending institutions. They offer multiple narratives and perspectives, just like Jesus’ parables did.

- Artists (makers) of all kinds refurbishing or creating masterpieces: old cars, sculptures and paintings, buildings, computers, gardens, poems, songs, and crayon tracings on napkins, rugs made from threads salvaged from old jeans, knitted stocking caps, well-loved children. Each is one more stone in the City of God.

- Great horned owls, northern flickers, barn swallows, mule deer, bees, and cats who live in uneasy proximity to each other near the monastery. They have persisted in spite of pesticides, smoke, habitat loss, changing weather patterns and other dangers, to hoot, hammer, fly, buzz, and be our companions in lonely times.

Our potential from Christ is astounding; if it is used rightly, it advances the Kingdom of God. •





## THE DESERT CHRONICLE

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## *An Advent Prayer*

*Near indeed is his salvation for those  
who fear him,*

*glory will dwell in his land.*

*Love and truth will meet,*

*justice and peace will kiss.*

*Truth will spring from the earth,*

*justice will look down from heaven.*

*-Psalm 85*



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