



Monastery of the Ascension

THE DESERT CHRONICLE

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Synodality: Journeying Together

by Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB

Pope Francis has asked the Catholic Church - world-wide and local - to become more synodal, so that all segments of the Church listen attentively, speak freely, dialogue respectfully, decide prayerfully, and act accordingly. We are guided by the Scriptures and their interpretation in the Church through the centuries; we also believe that the Spirit is at work today in all the baptized.

Twice a year at the monastery, we hold an Adult Faith Formation class. This fall, we decided to engage the synodal process that Pope Francis mandated, using materials provided by the Vatican. This synodal process was not just to think about the state of the Church, locally and nationally, but also to help us learn to listen, speak, and dialogue.

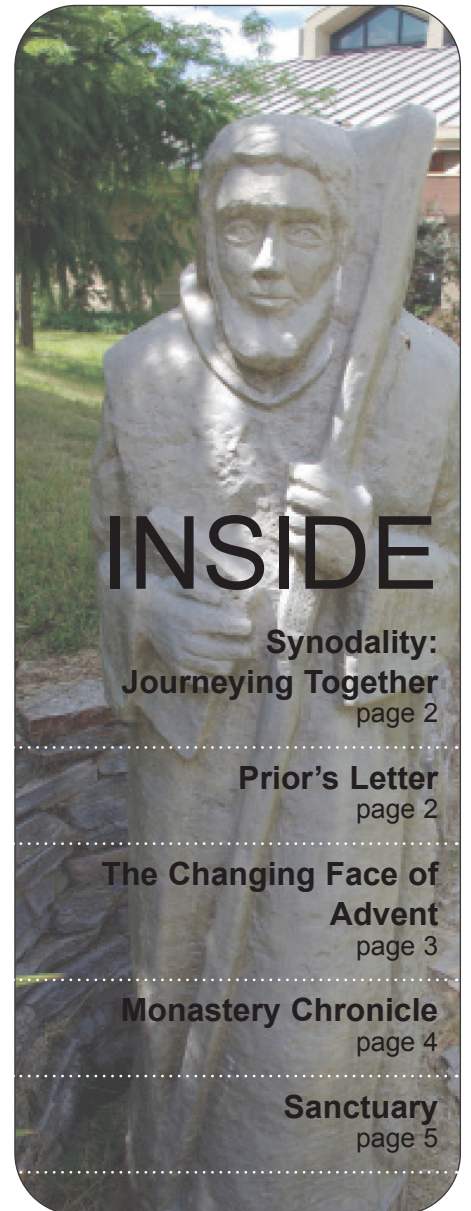
We met in person for two hours each Monday for eight weeks. We sent invitations by email and put announcements in the parish bulletins

in the area. Ten people participated, all of whom were women. Eight were Anglo, two Hispanic; none were very poor or very wealthy; all were regular churchgoers; a Protestant woman joined us for two sessions near the end.

We followed the Vatican guidelines, which suggested ten themes that served both as a training in synodality and a grid with which to think about the life of our churches today.

The first topic asked: Who is part of our local church? Who are not represented there or are on the margin? We noted the small number of young adult Anglo-Americans, people who identify as not heterosexual, the presence of a large and vibrant Hispanic membership, the aging of the Anglo population in some local churches. A theme that turned up often was the seeming rigidity in parishes regarding requirements for baptism, marriage preparation, annulments, and RCIA, which repulse some people.

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Prior's Letter

Dear Friends of the Monastery,

At the time of this writing, Thanksgiving is four days away. Between “Black Friday” and January 1, overwhelming emphasis will be to fulfill our expectations - expectations of ourselves and others. We will be deluged with advertisements on how that can be done. It happens at every other time of the year, but seems even more intense at this time.

At the time of this writing, the First Sunday of Advent is seven days away. It opens the door to a time of expectation of the coming of Jesus. In the liturgy, we will hear the expectations of the centuries longing for and hoping that God’s plan for people’s freedom and security - and His love - would be fulfilled. We will have the opportunity to ask ourselves if we are longing for the same things, and the same person. “Who could ask for anything more?”

The influence of seasonal expectations between Thanksgiving and January 1 mentioned above can sometimes overshadow the vision of Advent.

It can be a question of thinking about why we are doing what we are doing as we prepare for Christmas. It’s not a matter of doing away with Christmas, but doing things because Christ comes and influences our actions. That is a grace the Church prays for in Advent.

That is what we will here at the monastery, for you and ourselves. Peace and good things.

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



The Changing Face of Advent

by Julie A. Ferraro

As a child in the 1960s, attending Catholic school under the watchful eyes of Franciscan sisters, Advent was presented like a mini-Lent. Students were encouraged to “give up” something during the weeks prior to Christmas, a sign that we were preparing for the Lord’s coming.

The vestments were even purple, like Lent, with pink – or rose, as some describe the color – on Gaudete Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent.

In those formative years, our family’s Christmas tree was selected mid-December from the rows of blue spruce or Scots pines at a tree farm where sleighs or wagons (depending on if there was snow) hauled customers to the fields, then offered hot cocoa and treats – and the chance to feed a real deer – upon returning with our selection. Getting to help use the saw, or studying the tree from all sides to be sure there were no bare spots or a crooked trunk, was a joy.

My job, during the drive home, would be to watch that the tree didn’t shift after my father tied it to the car roof with extremely complex knots. The tree would sit in the garage for the weekend, to shed any loose needles, before being brought into the living room a few days before the holiday to be decorated. (It remained there until January 6, too.)

In the living room, however, a journey had already started: small figures of Mary and Joseph, progressing each day of Advent along a carefully measured route to the stable. It was part mathematical challenge for me, part symbolic. (After Christmas, the three kings would embark on a similar quest, from the east.)

The tough part was when my mother would accidentally knock over the figures while vacuuming the carpet.

Using a basic metal circular frame, I would clip branches from the pine tree in our front yard and create an Advent wreath for the kitchen table. My father – who could pray grace on any given day in ten seconds flat (“Bless us, O Lord...”) – would preside over the prayers in the little booklet I’d brought home from school with a gentle reverence, as we took turns lighting the proper number of candles.

Attitudes about Advent began changing as I grew older. The introduction of violet-blue vestments – and candles – became more common during Mass, to differentiate the season from Lent. Preparations for the birth of Jesus shifted



from giving up habits or sweets to following an Advent calendar which recommended acts of kindness and prayer.

Liturgically, I watched as some clerics placed more emphasis on Jesus’ second coming than on his birthday.

Other parishes began integrating traditions from varied cultures into Advent celebrations, such as St. Nicholas Day on December 6, Our Lady of Guadalupe’s feast on December 12, Saint Lucy on December 13, and Las Posadas – celebrating the journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem – from December 16 to 24.

In Benedictine monasteries, Advent continues to be that hushed, but joyful, period of expectation of Jesus’ incarnation, an opportunity to grow spiritually through silent experiences over a weekend, a series of weekly reflective days on a given theme, retreats featuring lectio divina, or conferences drawn from the latest books, or focused on ways to “incarnate” Jesus and his message to others.

This Advent, perhaps, the expectation has added significance, as well. As the process of the Synod for Synodality moves toward the gatherings in Rome next October, and in 2024, the prospect of how the Church as a whole will move forward remains at the fore, an impetus for prayer that Jesus, and the Holy Spirit that guided him, will guide those charged with listening to earnest global voices so that love, compassion and understanding will be extended to all people.





Monastery Chronicle

By Fr. Boniface Lautz, OSB

September 2022

The month began with about 100 people participating in an MSP retreat for people doing service work in their parishes as a continuation of work they began with the MSPs.

On September 6, a 1500-acre fire burned along the north side of the nearby canyon. It stopped traffic on Hwy. 93 leading to Twin Falls.

The MSPs trimmed trees and cleared ground along the front lane September 7-8. They shared produce from the garden following Mass on Thursday evening, and conducted a marriage retreat that weekend, along with attending a diocesan clergy day in Boise.

Our monthly community meeting took place on September 13; we celebrated Br. Tobiah's name day on September 14. The MSPs observed Mexican Independence Day on September 15.

A good friend and Oblate, Mark Raper, died unexpectedly on September 16. He helped us many times in his ministry as head of canonical affairs and Chancellor for the Diocese. Fr. Hugh will represent the monks at his funeral on October 1.

Fr. Hugh gave a retreat to local Catholic women on September 17 and started an 8-week Monday afternoon Adult Faith Formation program on synodality. Meetings were held about conservation easements and installing window blinds in the chapel. John Wasko installed a new television antenna, and the MSPs worked on replacing the soffits.

September 30, we celebrated Fr. Jerome's name day.

October 2022

The MSPs held a retreat for lay missionaries who help with bible studies in parishes October 1-2. The next day, Fr. Hugh participated in an interfaith forum at the College of Southern Idaho to show how people could come together and discuss their differences constructively.

Mid-month, Fr. Moises, MSP, went to California and Tijuana to renew his immigration status. Fr. Benito, MSP, visited en route to the Holy Land. Fathers Moises, Jesus and Boniface attended the Southern Deanery meeting in Buhl.

After some long-awaited rain, a cold front came through the area, leaving snow on the hills.

We enjoyed a treat on October 24, when John Wasko shucked and barbecued fresh oysters ordered from the coast.

On October 30, we celebrated the Feast of Christ the Missionary, the MSPs patronal feast, at St. Jerome's Parish, with Mass celebrated by Bishop Peter Christensen of Boise.

November 2022

Weather during the first ten days of the month impacted the monastery with rain, snow, strong winds and a power outage. The internet tower blew down, causing a loss of service.

The Oblate retreat took place November 4-6. The final Adult Faith Formation class on synodality was held on November 7.

The monks cast their votes in the mid-term election at the Jerome airport on November 8.

Our new heat pump was finally installed on November 14, and the MSPs finished repairing the soffits. Fr. Ezekiel arrived in the evening.

From November 18-20, a 12-Step Retreat was held, with Br. Selby one of the organizers.

On November 24, the monks gathered for a tasty Thanksgiving dinner.

Advent began on November 27, with the monks and MSPs prayerfully preparing for Christmas.



Sanctuary

by Ruth Saxey-Reese

Mr. Boris's cage gently swings beneath the shade canopy; he hops brightly from perch to floor, floor to perch, intently following each movement of the people and dogs on the patio with his black shiny eyes. He begins bathing in his water dish, fluttering his wings as if swimming, joyfully splashing water up and over his entire body. When his sunny feathers are sufficiently wet, he perches again, opens his conical beak, and begins singing a full-throated aria.

Below his cage are inviting chairs and a wooden slatted table plus three circling canines: two large bouncy dogs - one blond, one piebald - and one enormous but gentle gray, shaggy beast. Underneath them, smooth reddish tiles. Large earthenware pots stand nearby - orange, white, blue - filled with flourishing plants, many blooming in brilliant hues. My eyes run over a covered well with a pot of flowers atop, recessed drain grates, a coiled green hose, a small laurel hedge, and a tall, heavy iron candelabra. Striped throw rugs are scattered near the entrance to the house. Above is the endless blue Castilian sky. This courtyard is a concealed outdoor room, protecting its inhabitants within high whitewashed walls topped with curved red tiles, some beginning to crumble from age, edged in lichens.

Behind me is the glass door to a small vestibule, complete with hooks for umbrellas, walking sticks, and leashes, and a bench for pulling boots on (or off). At the other end of this antechamber is a heavy wooden door to the outside world, complete with a small trapdoor at eye level, open, its iron latch unused. A small paper sign thumbtacked to the doorframe



Gracie enjoying Rebekah's porch.

reads, "Let's see whose face God is wearing today," a reflection of the radical hospitality that Rebekah practices, a constant reminder to consider each new face as the face of God.

This conscious reframing sanctifies the relationship between resident and visitor, or, most commonly, host and pilgrim, since this house stands in the village of Moratinos on El Camino de Santiago and contains a spare room full of twin beds for travelers. The sign reminds me of the unconditional welcome I always received from the monks at the Monastery of the Ascension in Idaho, where I live. Exemplifying the perfect hospitality honed by the Benedictine order for over fifteen centuries, their guest house treats wayfarers as honored, if temporary, members of the community. At that little monastery in the high desert, I have felt at home, appreciated, secure.

Perhaps my nostalgic memories of visits to the monastery and to Rebekah's enclosure connect with an age-old human desire to construct peaceful outdoor refuges, tranquil havens replete with multisensory delights to counteract the waves of disillusionment and strife without. These kinds of spaces feel more necessary than ever. A sanctuary may be most effective when it is connected to a dwelling place, such as a monastery's courtyard or a house's garden; I certainly need a personal haven at my home, a buffer zone between the world and my private indoor areas, a place that I can enter whenever I wish, where I can choose how or whether to invite others to share.

I remember the sense of delight when I first entered the neat brightness of Rebekah's courtyard patio. The walled garden was completely invisible, unknowable from the country lane just outside, and I was immediately at ease within, contained and safe with the shiny pots, greenery, and vibrant flowers. The intentional design and obvious care in the arrangement and upkeep of the garden created a small oasis from the heat, dust, and busyness and distress of the outside world.

My small summer porch is like a younger cousin of that courtyard, containing echoes of visited Mediterranean gardens: yellow stucco walls on two sides and a privet hedge on another, potted jasmine vines, white Moroccan candle lanterns, a burbling three-tiered fountain, two blue chairs pulled near a glass table, my dove Gertrude's cage when the weather is pleasant. A place not only aesthetically pleasing but soul-nourishing and necessary for me, a place to linger at will but also a liminal space, a zone of decompression, a shelter in which to draw a deep breath and wipe away the dust of the world before stepping over the threshold to greet my loved ones within.



These are processes that require sensitivity. Do seminarians, deacon candidates, and parish ministers receive any training in pastoring? It seems that too often the way the regulations are enforced overrides the purpose of the regulations, and are not well suited to ministry.

The second session was on listening. We noted that St. Benedict's Rule begins with the word "Listen." The abbot is to consult all before making any big decision, and that one of his instruments of good work is "not to love much speaking." We noted, with numerous examples, that people feel they are not heard when their letters, phone messages, and emails are not answered promptly, or at all. This led to discussion of the role of pastors in the Church. They often seem overburdened with administration, and so do not have time to listen or respond to people. Jesus found time to listen to and be convinced by the Syro-Phoenician woman who wanted a miracle for her daughter. Some priests hold weekly listening sessions. If people feel unheard or ignored, they should take the initiative to find a way to be heard and nourished.

In the third session, on speaking out, we discussed how we become informed about the Church so we can speak out accurately? We felt it would be valuable to have a source that suggests reliable publications and media. Parish councils are important. It should be clear how people are put on the council and by whom, and who they represent. How does the parish council let people know what it is discussing? Members of this group are willing to speak up if anyone will listen, but are cautious to express their views on abortion. In

other sessions, as well as this one, the need for transparency emerged as very important.

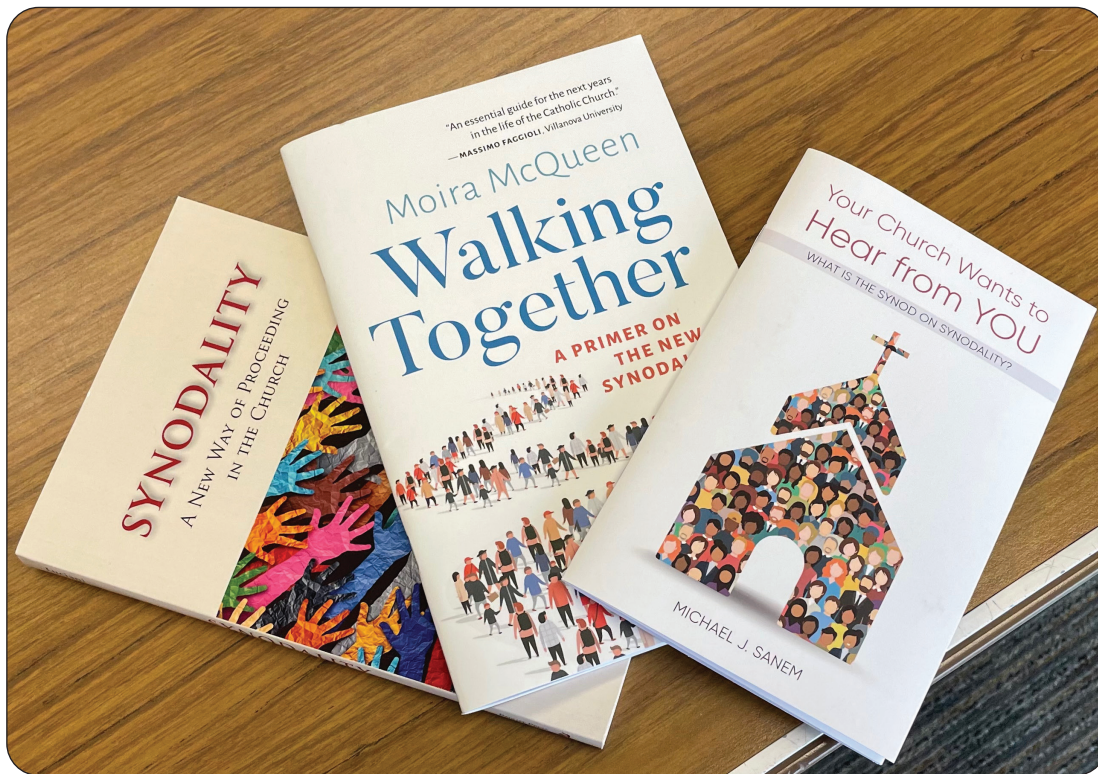
Everyone in the group has found a worship community that supports their faith and where they feel comfortable. Different aspects of the Eucharist especially appeal to different people. A buffer of silence between arrival in the church and the beginning of Mass is important. Greeters are important, especially to welcome strangers, but everyone should be alert to help newcomers. Readings are now readily available online or in written publications. Good homilies connect the readings with daily life. There needs to be a good sound system. The presentation of gifts is an important symbol of the nature of the Eucharist, enhanced when parishioners make the bread or wine. Fully conscious participation can occur without a ministerial role; young people can fulfill those roles. Music is very important; parishes need to be creative in finding musicians.

Session five considered co-responsibility for mission. By baptism, each Catholic is deputed to share in the Church's mission of evangelizing, sanctifying, and servant leadership. Social justice is worldwide and local. For example, in our area, an obvious abuse is the failure of the state to grant driving privileges to undocumented workers. Political involvement is the role of the laity. They are receiving different messages from bishops and Catholic organizations.

The Church should work harder to make the relationship of faith and science clear. It could try to support public



Fr. Hugh Feiss with some of the participants in the autumn Adult Faith Formation group: (left to right) Christine Geisel, Ann Keane, Celia Montes, Cheryl Brown, Kathryn Armstrong and Santa Montes. (Not pictured: Joanne Draper, Lori Edson, Robin Boles, Linda Henderson, and Diane Holley.)



school teachers who are under stress in Idaho. The Vatican guidelines for this section should have included not just professionals like doctors and teachers; grocery and lawn care workers also have vocations.

Pope Francis has rightly identified climate change as a very serious issue, but this does not seem to have affected parish life - uses and sources of electricity, recycling, water, soil health, and land use. A simple thing: put a notice in the parish bulletin about where the recycling centers are located. The environment is one of many areas in which there needs to be ongoing adult Catholic education.

Session six was devoted to women in the Church. Women's roles in the Church have expanded, as the role of women in society has changed. Women seem more nurturing than men. If women held authority, they might provide a more compassionate style of leadership. There is no theological reason women could not be cardinals. The case for women deacons is pending. Women are already doing diaconal tasks, e.g. serving as chaplains in hospitals. People die without the last rites because women and deacons cannot administer them (other than communion). Many Catholics are not convinced that women cannot be priests.

The decline in the number of religious women has profoundly affected the Church in the United States. Women do much of the work in parish offices and committees. There seems to be a lingering assumption that men should make up the parish building and finance committees. Women might be more suited to being confessors and spiritual directors for children who have

suffered abuse from men. Women need to speak up; men in the Church need to listen to them.

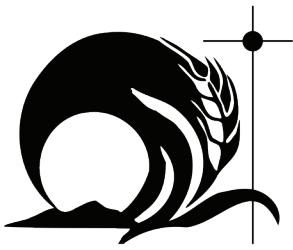
Decision making in the Church meshes listening, speaking, and dialogue with hierarchy. When there is a change of pastor, there should be dialogue between outgoing and incoming pastors, and between the new pastor and the people to avoid disruption in parish life, staff, and worship.

Who supervises priests? There needs to be regular evaluation by someone from outside the parish, and feedback from the people to help priest be more effective. The same is true of bishops. Many Catholics have had no contact with their bishop, and many more have little understanding of what a bishop is. Some bishops, and some priests and laity as well, are not on board with Pope Francis' efforts to revitalize the Church. There needs to be dialogue to deal with toxic elements in parish life.

The final session was about dialogue with other churches and religions. We noted the Magic Valley Interfaith Dialogue, which has modeled for others how civil discourse by people of very different religious beliefs can happen. We realized that there is also a great deal of ecumenical action in our parishes, where various religious groups cooperate in operating "soup kitchens" and food banks. There are also non-denominational (and not necessarily Christian) Thanksgiving gatherings.

Participating, even in a small way, in this ongoing synodal process was a marvelous opportunity to learn about each other, expand our viewpoints and grow in our faith.





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*The monks
wish
everyone
blessings
through
Advent and
Christmas
and into the
New Year!*



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