



Monastery of the Ascension

# THE DESERT CHRONICLE

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## A WRITER IN ROME

By Julie A. Ferraro

When Fr. Hugh notified me I was selected by lot to be the Monastery of the Ascension’s delegate to the Fifth World Congress of Benedictine Oblates back in February 2023, the entire process of bringing scores of Oblates September 9-16 in Rome from around the world to discuss existing models and the future exhilarated me.

These Congresses had begun in 2005, taking place every four years - 2009, 2013, 2017 - until the Covid-19 pandemic delayed the one scheduled for 2021 until this year.

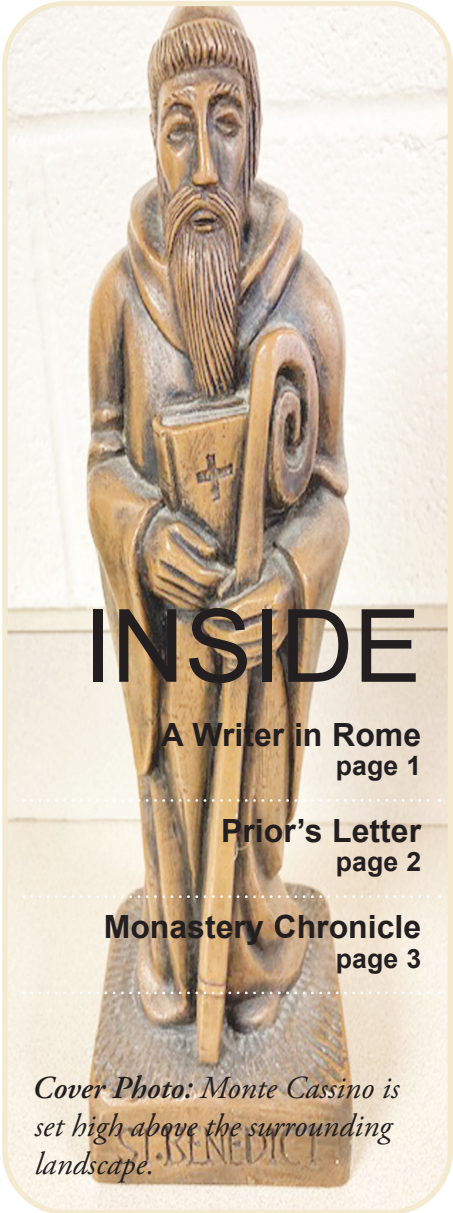
Little by little, the pieces of the trip came together - with changes in my own life impacting those plans.

By April, I had moved from a communications position with the Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas, back to Idaho, using my skills at the Center for Benedictine Life

at the Monastery of St. Gertrude in Cottonwood. By the day I was set to travel, I’d was dealing with a severely sprained ankle after a disagreement with a Harley Davidson, I was taking an online class through St. John’s University in Collegetown, and an inspiration for a writing project begged to be typed into my computer.

Flying from Pullman/Moscow Airport just over the Washington border to Seattle first, I boarded the Aer Lingus jet for a nearly 9-hour flight to Dublin and, after a day’s layover to enjoy the Irish capital, I rose early on September 9 to catch my flight to Rome. I arrived in good order at the Collegio Sant’Anselmo and got settled in - though there was no air conditioning and the temperatures were forecast to be in the high 80s and 90s the entire week.

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Cover Photo: Monte Cassino is set high above the surrounding landscape.



## Prior's Letter

Dear Friends of the Monastery,

Planning for the future is a necessary thing, as long as it is kept in the proper perspective. The readings at Sunday Mass recently have reminded us that we need to look forward and plan carefully for our readiness to receive the Lord when he comes. They have also been clear that future plans should not be concerned only with material goods. So, we try to plan for the future keeping things in proper perspective.

We're doing a lot of planning with the Missionaries, Servants of the Word. What needs to be done as we look forward to the time when they will be owners of the monastery and guest facility? Part of that plan has to do with what will need to be in place for the health care of our aging community.

We read passages from the Holy Rule during our supper every day. Currently, we've read from Chapter 36, The Sick Brothers, and Chapter 37, The Elderly and Children. Planning for our health care is exactly what we're doing in these later days of November.

The plan is that the community, small and aging as we are, will reside on the second floor of the monastery. The MSPs will take responsibility for the upkeep of the area, but we will be responsible for seeing that our health care needs are met. If we become less physically able, where will we gather for Mass and prayer?

We will need qualified medical help who can routinely care for our health status and provide service to maintain

good health. It also means having whatever is needed when we need critical or palliative care. We would prefer to have that done here at the monastery. Do we have an area set up to provide such care?

That is some of our current planning for the future. It may sound familiar to you. We're trying to keep it in proper perspective. Do Thanksgiving and Christmas fit with such serious planning?

We're grateful that we can make plans with some confidence that they will be accomplished. How many in our world can have that kind of confidence? We're grateful that we have confreres and friends who care about our future who can help us plan and pray for us.

Christmas has many aspects that give us a proper perspective. The Incarnation reminds us that taking care of our bodies is a way of serving Christ. In RB36,1, we read: "Care of the sick must rank above and before all else, so that they may truly be served as Christ." In the person of Jesus, God comes to be with us in all our human frailty.

We're doing other things besides planning for the future. The Chronicle will tell you about that. We give thanks every day for all of our friends and pray for your well being. Our Christmas prayer will be for the Lord's presence in your lives. And for blessings in the New Year.

Peace and good things!

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







# Monastery Chronicle

By Fr. Boniface Lautz, OSB

## August 2023

August 3: Foundation Day, recalled our beginnings in Idaho in 1965 and the move from Twin Falls to Jerome in 1980. The MSPs joined us at Mass, and we had a celebration in the afternoon.

August 5: we welcomed Br. Omar, MSP, and Br. Luis, MSP, as new members in Idaho.

August 8: our friends gave us fresh peaches and corn. We have been blessed by their generosity several times this month. We have enjoyed vegetables from the MSP garden. There are abundant tomatoes. The MSPs have been able to market some of them.

August 10-13: John Wasko made a short trip to Denver to be with family.

August 14: a large, new water heating tank was installed. Combining began and continued off and on until the end of the month.

August 15: Solemnity of the Assumption, we shared Mass with the MSPs.

August 16: John Wasko and the MSPs removed and cut up three dead spruce trees on the east side of the monastery. It was a big job and completed quickly.

August 17: Br. Tobiah turned 82. Other August birthdays included our chef LuAnn, and Linda, who helps in the business office.

August 26-27: we were glad to be visited by long-time friends from Oregon who helped us over many years with our summer education programs.

## September 2023

The event of the month was the triennial visitation, held September 20–25. We had the two official Visitors, Fr. Patrick Caviglia and Fr. Charles Benoit. The new president of the Swiss-American Benedictine Congregation, Abbot Justin Brown, came to learn about our relationship with the MSP Community. We were given encouragement for our work and good recommendations about steps we are taking or need to take. Fr. Ezekiel came for the visitation, then went to visit his mother.

It was great to have four additional participants for prayer and Eucharist in choir. On September 24, Abbot Justin was the principle celebrant at Sunday Mass. He and the Visitors spent the afternoon touring the area.

We started September on lockdown. Br. Sylvester was the only one not affected by Covid-19. Br. Tobiah stayed exempt long enough to take some meals to the rest of us, then he caught the bug. We were closed for one Sunday.

Two local deacons, John Hurley and John Baumbach, went to the Lord. John Hurley's remains were interred here on September 10. Both men had been our friends for many years. Their pastoral ministry in the parishes in Jerome and Twin Falls was significant.

Preparation for transition of the property is amazingly complex. Requirements from local agencies, of which there are many, need to be met. We have been fortunate to have help from our farm manager, Ben Marshall, who had gone through the process. We're not done yet.

September 7: Fr. Hugh and Br. Sylvester donated blood. They do so regularly.

September 8-10: we hosted a retreat for an AA group from Boise.

September 10: John Wasko and I attended St. Jerome's Parish fiesta.

Fr. Hugh meets regularly with an inter-faith ministerial group. One of their services is to focus attention on local issues, which took Fr. Hugh to a session on suicide prevention, September 12 and Freedom of Religion, September 19.

September 15: the MSP's observed Mexican Independence Day. A family from Nampa brought some food for celebration...we all celebrated. Viva Mexico!

September 16: Br. Tobiah's name-day. He is one of the eligible drivers in the community and helps the rest of us keep local appointments. He has been busy. Fr. Hugh met with Oblates locally, in Boise, Idaho Falls, and Pocatello, in person or via Zoom.

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*Abbot Donato Ogliari, of St. Paul Outside the Walls Abbey, gave a presentation on evangelization during the Congress.*

silence as a negative, and sharing useful information and materials on the value of silence, according to the program organizers, who presented via Zoom on Sunday afternoon. The groups also viewed the documentary film, *In Pursuit of Silence*, along with lectio-style reflections on paragraphs from Australian Trappist Michael Casey's writings on the topic, leading participants on a journey from practice to gift.

While three workshops were listed on the Congress schedule, these small group gathering were basically one workshop spread over three sessions, divided usually by language, and the same facilitator through the process. These interactive experiences touched on the four pillars of Benedictine formation: humanity, communal, intellectual and spiritual. Also discussed were seven models of formation created by Congress core team members. These models addressed the diverse approaches to formation in use by Oblate communities, such as a catechetical focus, an interactive style, even a rehabilitative model for those incarcerated in prison who are interested in becoming Oblates, yet might never be able to visit the monastery with which they will be affiliated.

The purpose of the workshops was to glean the participants' insights on the keynote presentation topics – formation, evangelization and expanding the mission of the monasteries – in order to create resources that could be carried over into the next Congress, as Benedictine spirituality continues to evolve.

My section of the workshop was led by Stephanie Smith, an oblate of Monastery Immaculate Conception,

Ferdinand, Indiana. As she read the input from the participants, she shared her excitement and enthusiasm for the Oblates' future.

Excitement also ran high on Monday, when most of the group boarded three buses for the journey to Monte Cassino. This structure - located over 1,500 feet above sea level and measuring 20,000 square meters in size - is an artistic overload, for one. It is an amalgamation of an ancient Roman/pagan temple, parts of the monastery built after St. Benedict established the community, and restorations faithfully completed after its initial destruction more than a millennium ago, and in the wake of an accidental bombing by Allied Forces during World War II (1944).

The Oblates participated in a special Mass in the basilica – which houses the tombs of both St. Benedict and St. Scholastica – with the new abbot, Dom Antonio Luca Fallica, presiding. Then, we enjoyed lunch in the monastery's refectory before visiting the gift shop.

Tuesday assembled the Oblates for a presentation by Abbot Donato Ogliari of St. Paul Outside the Walls Abbey in Rome on the topic of evangelization. Citing many references from Thomas Merton, Pope Francis, the Rule and other sources, he reiterated the concepts of discretion, silence and humility needed by all Oblates. He ended with a proposal that we all should seek to be the new St. Benedict the world needs now.



*The delegates to the Congress visited the Sacro Speco at Subiaco on Wednesday of their week in Rome. (Photo: Judith Valente)*

Sadly, the experience at the Sacro Speco in Subiaco was not as positive as the Monte Cassino trip. Large

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crowds, tour guides who couldn't be heard and rushed the groups along – seldom allowing pauses for photographs – marred the visit for some to this sacred site.



One of the Oblate delegates to the Congress prays at St. Benedict's Cave. (Photo: Judith Valente)

The last keynote presentation – on expanding the mission of the monasteries – was delivered on Thursday by Abbot Primate Gregory Polan. He cited how important showing hospitality is for all Benedictines, along with the prayer and reconciliation integral to that virtue. “If we claim the charism of hospitality,” he said, “we must also claim to be ambassadors of reconciliation.”

Abbot Polan added how, in the course of doing good works, feelings often play a role, but really shouldn't. “It's about our openness to being servants.”

That evening, a group of very talented musicians performed a “mini-concert” of 17th century sacred music, including the first modern performance of a motet titled, “O Beate Benedicte,” composed by Alessandro Grandi.

The final full day of the Congress saw the delegates boarding busses for the last time – to the Vatican for a private audience with Pope Francis. It could humorously be said that those proceeding to the inner rooms of the Vatican must “work for the privilege”: we had to climb around 200 steps to the third floor Clementine Hall!

Pope Francis gave a special, brief address to the group, summarizing the Benedictine charism “by the very beautiful expression of Saint Benedict, who invited his followers to have a ‘heart expanded by the unspeakable sweetness of love.’”

Pope Francis defined the Benedictine life as marked “first of all by a continual search for God, for his will and for the wonders he works.” He added, “A second important characteristic is that of enthusiasm for the Gospel.” The third characteristic he mentioned was hospitality.

After that, we each got to come up and shake the Pope's hand. In that brief second, I told him, “Greetings from Idaho!”

Friday evening, Mass celebrated the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, with a decidedly joyful bent due to the day's experience. During the Lord's Prayer, the abbey chapel sounded a bit like the tower of Babel, with everyone raising their voices in their mother tongue.

Abbot Primate Gregory Polan then commissioned those present to return to their home monasteries as ambassadors who will continue the process of moving forward.



It meant climbing a lot of stairs, but the chance to greet Pope Francis was worth it! (Photo: Vatican News Service)

Some potential ways to move forward originated in the workshops, primarily adding a fifth “pillar” to the four previously mentioned: on stewardship or ecology – efforts many Oblates are already leading.

The other possible development would be having regional Oblate congresses every two years – such as a Congress of the Americas (North and South), Europe, Asia, and so forth, to more effectively gather the concerns and needs of Oblates from various cultures.

A final report – including suggestions and comments made by the Oblates – will be released at a future date, as well.



*Pope Francis speaks during the private audience in the Clementine Hall at the Vatican on the Benedictine charism.*



*The Benedictine Sisters of Kylemore Abbey offer Morning Praise in their monastic chapel, near the site where their new monastery is being constructed.*

The best thing about the whole week was the interaction between Oblates from across the globe on more of a one-on-one basis. Lengthy conversations over a snack of Italian cookies and ice cold water (to offset the heat and humidity), or just relaxing in the cloister courtyard on a bench, St. Benedict’s advice to “listen” broadened everyone’s insights and perspectives.

On my way back to the States, I stopped over at Kylemore Abbey in Ireland for a couple days, where the Sisters are in the process of building a new monastery that will house guests and programs near the historic castle-style mansion that is a key tourist attraction in Connemara. I also managed to get the story I wanted to write finished. My ankle healed well, too.

The honor of representing the Monastery of the Ascension at this Congress is one I will long remember.

**A video created about the Oblate Congress is available on Youtube: <https://youtu.be/qnGXyQEbtY8>**

### *Monastery Chronicle, contined from Page 3*

Sept. 29–Oct.1: we had a group from Salt Lake City. Both groups were repeats and have made reservations for next year.

#### *October 2023*

An inspection of the fire safety mechanism on the kitchen stove set it off. At least, we know what will happen if it is needed. The clean-up was a major task. Fortunately, the MSPs were available. The same day, work began to install the new refrigeration unit, replacing the one Fr. Simeon put in 40 years ago. The new unit was up and running Oct. 4.

We had an annual insurance inspection, as well. Our policy is through the Diocese of Boise. This year the insurers sent a person who looked at all the buildings and took pictures of things we might change. The overall report was favorable. We, the MSPs and John Wasko made some of the recommended changes.

October 19: our friend Kathy visited for several days.

October 20: the Chapter met and approved some of the items given to us in the Visitation Report.

As he does every month - except in the summer - Fr. Hugh had meetings with Oblates in Boise, Pocatello, Idaho Falls, and here, in person or via Zoom.

October 22: Missionary Sunday, the MSPs had a major celebration in Gooding. Br. Tobiah and I attended to represent our community. It was a well-attended and festive event that showed appreciation for the ministry of the MSPs.

A week later most of the MSP’s went to California to celebrate their patronal feast, Christ the Missionary. The same weekend, the MSPs led a day of prayer for Hispanic men at the parish in Nampa.

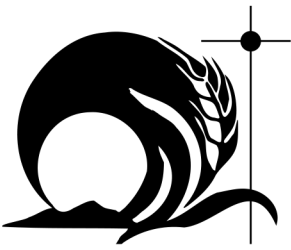
#### *November 2023*

November 3-5: more than a dozen Oblates gathered at the monastery for their fall retreat. Julie Ferraro gave a presentation on the Fifth World International Congress of Benedictine Oblates, held in Rome in September. Discussions were also held on points made by Pope Francis during his address to the Oblates at a private audience on September 15.

November 30: Fr. Ezekiel celebrated his birthday.







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*The monks and friends at the  
Monastery of the Ascension  
wish all a very blessed  
Advent Season,  
Joyous Christmas  
and Peace in the New Year!*



*“Modern Nativity” by Jean Schaffer*



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