



Monastery of the Ascension

# THE DESERT CHRONICLE

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## READING DOROTHY DAY

*By Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB*

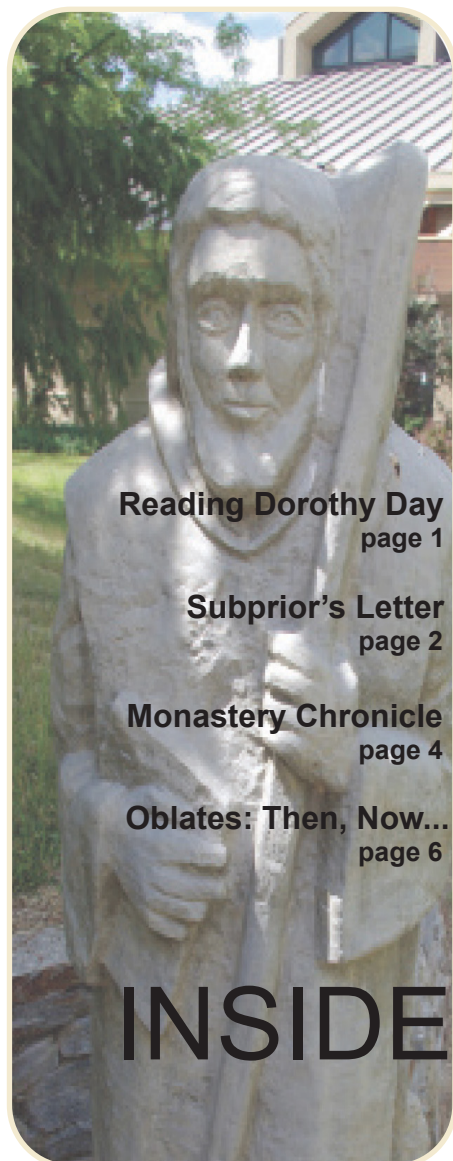
Fifteen of us in an adult faith formation group met for five weeks at the monastery to discuss *Dorothy Day: Spiritual Writings*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Orbis, 2024). We added a discussion of Pope Leo's *Dilexi te*, on the preferential love of Christ and the Church for the poor. Then we met two more times to brainstorm on what we could do for the poor.

At the last of these meetings, we heard from a Haitian immigrant to the United States, who was a teacher in Haiti. He emigrated when the Catholic school where he taught was closed because of danger from gangs. He left his family behind, hoping he could support them with money he made in America. He was able to do that for a while, but then our government's policy changed. The program that brought him to the United States was discontinued, and his work permit has run out. Now he is stranded, without work and few options.

He told his story in French; the translator, a French-speaking woman from Africa, translated for him. He spoke quietly and sincerely; she occasionally broke into tears as she related what he said. We were mesmerized. When he finished, we could not restart our conversation. We needed to process what we had just heard. Coincidentally, this happened on the day the bishops of the United States issued a statement on immigration which read in part:

We are disturbed when we see among our people a climate of fear and anxiety around questions of profiling and immigration enforcement. We are saddened by the state of contemporary debate and the vilification of immigrants. We are concerned about the conditions in detention centers and the lack of access to pastoral care. We lament that some immigrants in the United States have arbitrarily lost their legal

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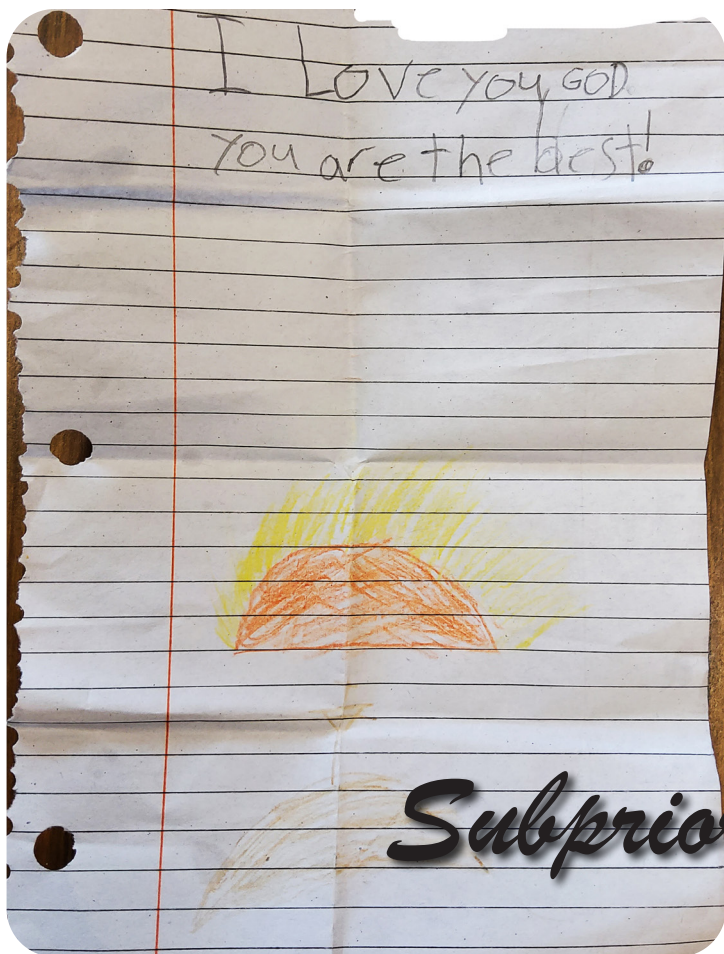

**Reading Dorothy Day**  
page 1

**Subprior's Letter**  
page 2

**Monastery Chronicle**  
page 4

**Oblates: Then, Now...**  
page 6

# INSIDE

# Monastery of the Ascension

## *Subprior's Letter*

Dear Friends of the Monastery,

During the last few weeks, several families with young children have been attending Sunday Mass. There is more energy in the chapel; they will be welcome during the Christmas season, which is about the birth of a child, the slaughter of other boys occasioned by his birth, those who visited him and his parents after his birth, and his family's flight into Egypt.

On a Sunday in November, one of the boys who came to church with his family brought us a drawing of the rising or setting sun, reminiscent of our logo. The boy inscribed his drawing, "I love you God. You are the best!" By Christmas, the winter solstice will have passed, and sunrise will begin to be earlier. We will have more time in the light, more time to see and enjoy the world God has given us to share.

That suggests a resolution for the new year: share the world with others, use only what you need, so that others will have what they need. What we share is far more important than what we have. The new poet laureate of the United States, Arthur Sze, writes:

A magpie squawks at the top of a blue spruce,  
while white-winged doves coo back and forth  
across the orchard ...on a day  
when I did nothing but search myself  
and steep in each minute of the deepening indigo sky.  
I suddenly had somewhere everywhere to be.

On Christmas day, the omnipresent Word of God, blinked awake somewhere to steep himself in our lives and us in his.

Be assured of our prayers.

Peace and good things!

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





*Continued from page 1*

status. We are troubled by threats against the sanctity of houses of worship and the special nature of hospitals and schools. We are grieved when we meet parents who fear being detained when taking their children to school and when we try to console family members who have already been separated from their loved ones.

As we spent time thinking about that man's story, what we have read of Dorothy Day's writings echoed in our heads. She was a personalist, who believed deeply in the worth and responsibility of the individual. She thought of herself as an anarchist, someone who was suspicious of the overweening power of "holy mother the state." She was a convert to Catholicism who went to Mass daily, a Benedictine oblate who prayed the Liturgy of the Hours. She embraced the most radical implications of Christ's and the Church's teachings on justice and mercy. She lived in ragged Catholic Worker establishments, but she was convinced that "the world is saved by beauty." She found that beauty in a tree on the vacant lot across the street or on a struggling Catholic Worker farm in the country. She took to heart the biblical command to love God and neighbor, even if her neighbor was Christ in his least attractive guise.

For her, the works of mercy were not something you supported by contributing money; they were things you did. Love in theory is fine - both Dostoyevsky and Day said - but love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing. One of the most memorable photos shows her in old age, sitting on a chair in a California field, there to support César Chavez's efforts to unionize farm workers.

Dorothy Day formulated her way of life during the early days of the Great Depression, when millions were out of work. Now millions, documented and undocumented, are in danger of deportation to countries from which they emigrated because of fear for their lives or lack of work to support their families. Our group of fifteen is deciding what we can do that we are not doing already. We already write letters to government officials, support agencies that help the poor, volunteer. Now, with Dorothy Day to spur us on, we are looking for new ways to help. Nothing grandiose, but as she was fond of saying, "little by little." She assures us, that if we do that, we will be heading-heavenward, and all the way to heaven is heaven.





# Monastery Chronicle

*By Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB*

## *August 2025*

August 3: Anniversary of our founding and the 20+ year stretch of our existence as an independent monastery. We adorned the day with Chinese take-out, but were out of beer. A large women's cursillo, Thursday evening to Sunday afternoon, hosted by the Missionaries.

August 4-8: Fr. Boniface continues improving with help from Visions Home Health. He and others visit doctors. LuAnn's birthday celebrated with 3 cakes, a card, and a song. We finished the book with excerpts from Cassian on how to concentrate. Sally Reed's *Night's Bright Darkness* is next.

August 9: Br. Tobiah and Diane Sparks go to Mountain Home for Missionary Seminarians Brothers Roger, Cesar and José Luis renewal of vows. They will be studying philosophy in Columbus, Ohio.

August 10: New faces at Sunday Mass. Br. Tobiah's sister was here with her husband for a visit.

August 11: Very quiet. Lay Missionaries are gone; families of Br. Sergio and Br. Giovaney have been visiting. Fr. Hugh officiated at Evelyn Lecler's graveside; went to Interfaith Meeting.

August 12: Vision's nursing assistant here for footcare. Br. Selby made cards for departing seminarians.

August 14: Both MSP priests and all four theology students here for breakfast.

August 15: Assumption. Fr. Hugh celebrant. A few people came to Mass. Fr. Hugh anoints a friend with cancer.

August 17: Sunday Mass & coffee hour well attended.

August 19: Broom corn stalk at entrance has reached 10+ feet high. MSP theology students begin classes. Br. Sylvester receives anointing of the sick.

August 20: Feast of St. Bernard. Br. Sylvester has successful procedure to help restore regular heart rhythm. Home health folks visit; new nurses introduced. Call from Abbot Justin of the Swiss-American Congregation regarding the agreement with the Missionaries.

August 21-24: Fr. Moises MSP in Mountain Home has a slight stroke. Bids organized for fixing the tile roof and the leaking windows along the ramps in the monastery wing. Schedules for oblates and Adult Faith Formation are all announced.





August 25: A digital copy of the agreement with the Missionaries is emailed to Abbot Justin.

August 28: Patrology class in English for MSPs begins. Community meeting approves bid to reroof with conglomerate shingles.

August 29: Abbot Bernhard and Fr. Daniel from Kremsmünster Abbey in Austria are here overnight. Abbot Bernhard was a student at Mount Angel Seminary before he joined Kremsmünster and later became rector of Sant' Anselmo.

August 31: Fr Hugh leaves to spend 40 restful hours at cabin in Pine, Idaho. Weather milder. We are receiving large donations of vegetables and fruit.

## September 2025

September 2: Fr Hugh returns from Pine. Oblate zoom meeting held, with a dozen oblates from all over the country discussed how they try to schedule their prayer and lectio.

September 4: Fr. Hugh continues 14-week Patrology course for the MSP theology students.

September 11-14: A Twelve-step group from Salt Lake here for retreat.

September 12: Pocatello oblates meet to discuss *Writings on the Spiritual Life* by 12th century canons regular of St. Victor in Paris.

September 14-17: Br. Selby had a rest break at Pine, Idaho.

September 16: Br. Tobiah's name's day.

September 16-19: Episcopalian clergy here for a retreat. Bishop Jos of the Episcopalian Diocese of Idaho stays here on Saturday nights for the rest of the month.

September 17: Fr. David MSP arrives for assignment here assisting Fr. Abram.

September 18: First of six Thursday afternoon adult faith sessions on new anthology, Dorothy Day, *Spiritual Writings*, with a break blessed with raspberry cobbler. 15 people attended.

September 19: Before morning prayers, the Great horned owls were serenading energetically in the trees across from the southeast corner of the monastery.

Chapter meeting. We will replace the leaking windows and the monastery roof; make some slight changes to the reading at supper. We will discuss the disposition of the farm and enlarging our board of directors, so they will be able to close the corporation when the last of the monks have died.



***Members of the Missionaries and Benedictines gather to sign the agreement transferring ownership of the monastery (pending approval).***

Vespers early, followed by signing of the letter of intent to accept the agreement whereby the Missionaries will take ownership of the buildings and the 20 surrounding acres, pending approval from Swiss-American Benedictine Congregation and the Vatican. The agreement took four years to formulate.

September 20: Fr. Hugh meets via Zoom with Theology Book Club, followed by Boise oblates gathered at Bishop Kelly High School after pausing over the summer. Missionaries host lay theology.

September 21: Monastery Oblates meet after Mass and stay for lunch with Episcopal Bishop Jos.

September 24: Community Meeting to discuss our farm. We shared opinions and agreed to meet October 1.

September 27: MSP biblical retreat and youth vigil.

September 28: Sunday Mass was full. 10 or so very quiet little people in the congregation.

September 30: Fr. Jerome's name's day. He seems to have spent it driving to Missoula to purchase a car in a complex negotiation facilitated by Diane. Fr. Hugh gives the last rites in Twin Falls.

## October 2025

October 1: Chapter meeting to discuss disposition of the farm.

October 2: Patrology class in morning; Adult Faith Formation in afternoon.

October 3: Roofers begin replacing tile roof on monastery wing and chapel with composite shingles.

*Continues on page 7*



# OBLATES: THEN, NOW AND HEREAFTER

By Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB

The oblate program at our monastery began on May 14, 1983, when thirteen oblates began their year-long “novitiate” with a ceremony at Vespers. Most of them went on to make oblation and remain connected with the monastery. Of the original group, Kate Spesard is still an active oblate in Boise. The Sassses, Sawayas, and Fritzlers were wonderful examples of Benedictine virtues during their long years of association with us. Since 1983, almost 200 people have become oblates here. Many have died; we remember them each year when their names are read in our martyrology.

On the weekend of November 1-2, four people joined the Oblate community: three sisters - Santa, Celia and Lilia Montes - and Yiska Hugo, who lives in Boise and became a candidate while those oblates taking part in the retreat watched via Zoom from the monastery library. All had previously received a copy of the *Rule of St. Benedict*; at the ceremony, they received a St. Benedict medal. Lilia, Sana and Celia have been active participants in the meetings of the local oblates, discussing the Bible. Two people who attended the retreat are planning to become candidates soon.

Oblates are lay people or clerics who choose to pattern their lives on the teaching and example of St. Benedict, who lived in the first half of the sixth century. It is estimated that there are some 25,000 Benedictine oblates in the world, most of them associated with a specific monastery. They try to live the *Rule of St. Benedict* as it applies to their vocation in the world, pray some of the Liturgy of the Hours (Opus Dei) regularly, and stay in touch with the monastery and oblate group with whom they are affiliated. Most oblate groups are more structured than ours, with a formal process of formation.

We have about forty active oblates, who meet in four locations: the monastery (in person and via Zoom), Idaho Falls (in person with Fr. Hugh attending by Zoom), Pocatello (via Zoom only), and the Treasure Valley (in person and via Zoom). The groups have developed their own character over the years. They usually decide together the topic they would like to study and discuss for the coming year. This year, three groups are discussing the Gospel of John, and a fourth

group is reading writings by a group of medieval authors.



*Fr. Hugh welcomes the Montes sisters as Oblate candidates during the Oblate retreat.*

This year, we also started a one-hour, once-a-month Zoom meeting in which we discuss prayer, reading, and other spiritual matters. We have retreats at the monastery in the Spring and Fall, and a summer potluck and social. Our membership includes non-Catholics and some people who live in other states. Most people who become oblates stay oblates with varying degrees of involvement. Over time, they bond with each other. Our oblates, like most, prioritize love of God and neighbor, fellowship, stability, and perseverance. Devotional preferences are easily tolerated. Rather than have strict rules, we try to accommodate anyone would like to join us.

The number of monks and nuns, as well as the number of monasteries, is dropping throughout the United States and Europe. Oblates will have to take more responsibility for their activities and continuance. In the worst-case scenario, the Benedictine strand of American Catholicism will diminish and trickle out. In





a more hopeful scenario, oblates will continue to meet, live by Benedict values, and nourish their Benedictine virtues and aspirations in new and creative ways. The motto of Monte Cassino, the monastery St. Benedict founded in Italy, is "Succisa virescit": "Cut down, it grows anew." What form the next new growth will take we do not know but, very likely, the tradition of local autonomy and variety will continue.

We know that our monastery is going to pass into new hands, and there will be no more Benedictine

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*Continued from Page 5*

October 4: Missionaries have busy weekend; some drive to Reno. Some of us watch as Notre Dame play Boise State on TV.

October 7: Roofing company says it would be wise to replace all the gutters and drains while we are getting a new roof. Fr. Boniface and John are handling this. Don Cersowski, a Mount Angel alumnus, and his wife visit. 6 pm Zoom meeting of oblates.

October 8: More roofing. Harvest is finishing up around us with trucks of sugar beets and chopped corn on the roads. The neighboring dairy is building a giant mound of diced corn stalks.



October 10: It is decided not to replace the drainpipes and gutters, but the roofing company will repair leaks in the skylight in the ministry center. Pocatello oblates meet by Zoom.

October 11: Idaho Falls oblates discuss Gospel of John, ch. 19.

October 12: After Sunday Mass, the Missionaries celebrate the feast of Christ the Missionary. A neighbor brings a pickup of vegetables to distribute after Mass with gospel about one thankful leper.

monks here. It is a time of letting go, but also of gratitude. Our close association with our oblates has been a great gift. The fruits of that association will live on in this world and the next, as God wills. God's providence has brought us this far, and God will take care of us in the future.

Seeds were planted; now it is harvest time. There will come new plantings and new growth, so "in all things may God be glorified."

October 13: A cold, humid day. Leaves are still mostly on, but it feels like December.

October 15: Rained almost all day. Leaves still on trees; some very nice colors, a long way from the treeless desert this was 115 years ago. A first swath has been cut in our sugar beets. Disturbed intoxicated man came during lunch; Br. Tobiah kindly talked to him. Two retired Episcopalian priests here for a retreat.

October 16: Work on new roof is in high gear. Harvest of our sugar beets begins.

October 17: Fr. Hugh interviewed on Salt and Light Radio. Sugar beets harvest continues. MSPs go to Mountain Home to celebrate feast of St. Luke.

October 18: An absolutely beautiful day. MSP host large youth retreat. Boise oblates meet.

October 19: Oblates meet here after Mass. MSP youth retreat ends with overflowing Mass at 4 pm. Rains most of the day. Leaves falling.

October 20: A sunny day. Roofers and sugar beet harvesters finishing up.

October 21: Another sunny day. Frost on the back lawn.

October 23: After class, the seminarians and most of the MSPs left for California.

October 27: MSP return from California

October 30: Meeting with the Adult Faith Formation attendees about possible actions.

31 Fr. Hugh meets with our lawyer regarding some legal questions. Two of us get Covid and flu shots. MSPs decorate for El Día de los Muertos. Fall oblate retreat begins; in person and via Zoom; presenter Dr. Christian MacIntyre. About 15 here to watch, five others elsewhere. Fr. Meinrad has pneumonia.

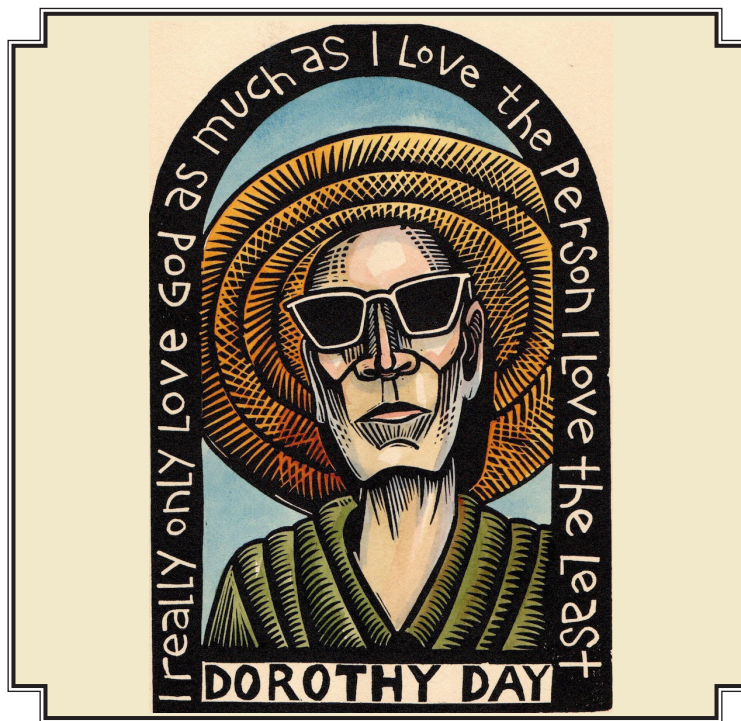




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