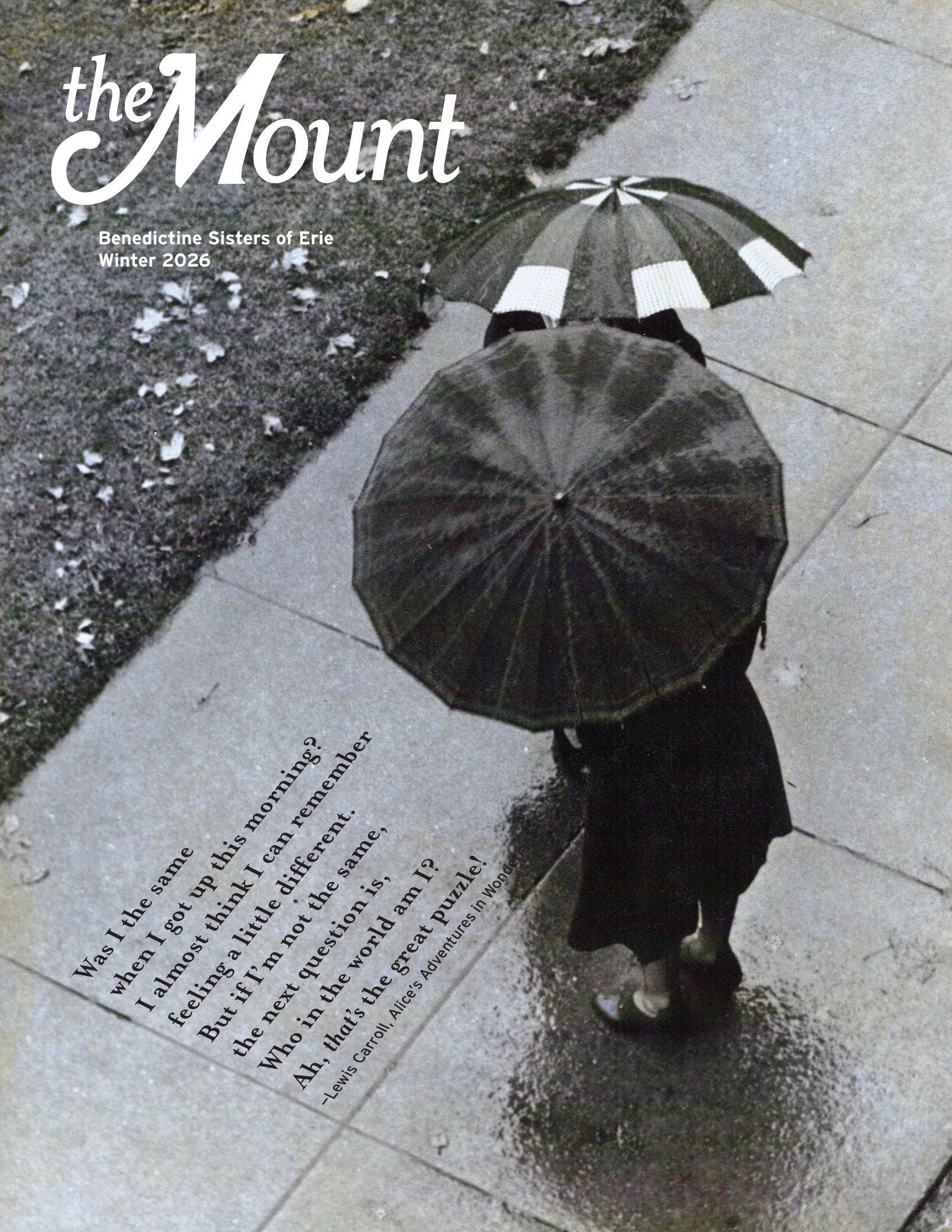
the Mount

Benedictine Sisters of Erie
Winter 2026



Was I the same
when I got up this morning?
I almost think I can remember
feeling a little different.
But if I'm not the same,
the next question is,
Who in the world am I?
Ah, that's the great puzzle!

–Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

the Mount

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Saved By Beauty 3
Monasticism Today.....4
Ears to Hear 8
Prophet of Peace 10
Sometimes there are no words.....12
Meant to Bee 16
Sisters in the Family 19
Monasteries of the Heart 20
Requiescat in Pace.....21
Calling for Policy Change 21
Gift of Community 23
Oblates 24
That God May Be Glorified 26
SBA Alumnae Newsletter 29
Glinodo 32

Cover Artwork: *Weather Report* by Marcella Meisinger, OSB

Photography and artwork: Michelle Basista, Linda Romey, OSB, Katie Gordon, Marian Wehler, OSB, Mount St. Benedict Monastery archives, contributed photos, and Dreamstime.com

Editor, layout, and design: Linda Romey, OSB

Proofreaders: Susan Doubet, OSB, Michelle Basista, CFRE, Michelle Scully

Editorial Committee: Susan Doubet, OSB, Joanne Cahill, Oblate, Katie Gordon, Annette Marshall, OSB, Michelle Basista, CFRE, and Michelle Scully

The Benedictine Charism is to seek God in the communal life and to respond in prayer and ministry.

Corporate Commitment: The Benedictine Sisters of Erie and Oblates commit to being a healing presence and a prophetic witness for peace and justice and to climate conscious living. We will decrease harmful patterns of consumerism and work with others to create systemic change needed to meaningfully address the climate crisis.

Thank you to **McCarty Printing**, for the printing of this issue of *The Mount* in Erie, PA.

So who in the world are you today? Putting this issue of *The Mount* together and looking at how we get to be who in the world we are certainly made me different than I was yesterday!

Timeless beauty and intergenerational relationships, brought together in Benedictine monasticism, form the tripod on which this issue stands. On the facing page Sister Joan Chittister starts us off with a challenge: "To live life fully, we must learn to take time out for beauty." Potter Brother Thomas Bezanson contributes beauty through words with his essay, "Adam's Secret," reprinted on page 13. Reflecting on scripture, he reminds us that no one does anything alone—including figuring out who we are. A younger monastic, Sister Jacqueline Sanchez-Small, offers her perspective with a wide-angle look at monasticism that begins on page 4.



Sister Marcella and photography students in 1947.

Other features take different angles: the photography of Sister Marcella Meisinger, who died in 1962, graces our cover and is featured on page 8 in the reflection by Sophie Trusty, a summer communications intern who lived at the monastery. What a contrast between the photographic technology Sister Marcella taught at SBA in the 1940s and 1950s, using film, chemicals, and exposure to create effects that can now be achieved by tapping a phone screen. Sophie transcends time and technology to connect with Sister Marcella.

We highlight two beautiful women, Mary Nelson on page 10 and Terri Drzewiecki Witherell, SBA '81, on page 16. Mary, a Secular Franciscan, was honored as our 2026 Prophet of Peace. Terri, an SBA alumna and flower farmer-florist, will be part of the team decorating the White House for the holiday season. Both Mary and Terri have, in intriguing ways, lived into the daily answering of the question Alice posed in Wonderland: "So who in the world are you today?" We are grateful they form part of our Benedictine base bringing beauty and good to our human and earth communities.

On page 19 we share another intergenerational story—six generations of the Kecer family, to be exact. And then there's our online monastery, Monasteries of the Heart, celebrating fifteen years of bringing thousands of seekers together in a virtual monastery. Our regular features are here, too, to tell you about our growing Benedictine family and the many ways we are working to make our world a better place. We thank you for being part of that family, too!

Sitting in silence
Breathing in holy stillness
Deeply listening
—Sister Marcia Sigler, OSB

Linda Romey OSB

Saved By Beauty

By Joan Chittister, OSB



One night, bandits came to the hermitage of an old monastic and said, "We have come to take away everything in your cell."

The monastic said, "Take whatever you want, my sons."

The bandits gathered up everything they found and went away. But they left behind a little bag with silver candlesticks. When the monastic saw it, he picked it up and ran after them, shouting, "Take these, take these! You forgot them and they are the most beautiful of all."

Beauty does not stand alone in the universe, isolated and remote, under glass and precious for its rarity. Beauty is the bridge to justice. It's the beauty of nature that warns us against pollution. It's the beauty of a child that urges us to work against the racism and sexism that would harm her. It's the beauty of life that brings us to rage against the injustice that obstructs it for anyone. Beauty is the glue that holds the world together.

We may well be spending far too much time teaching skills and productivity and efficiency and far too little time on music and art and poetry and flowers and literary appreciation. To raise a child well, we must seed a place in their souls for beauty. To live life fully, we must learn to take time out for beauty.

Beauty is the most provocative promise we have of the Beautiful. Beauty lures us and calls us and leads us on to seek the glory of the face of God in the here and now. Souls thirst for beauty and thrive on it, and by it nourish hope. It is Beauty that magnetizes the contemplative and it is the duty of the contemplative to give beauty away so that the rest of the world may, in the middle of squalor, ugliness, and pain, remember that beauty is possible.

What we do not nourish within ourselves cannot exist in the world around us, because we are its microcosm. We cannot moan about the loss of quality in our world and not ourselves seed the beautiful in our wake. We cannot decry the loss of the spiritual and continue ourselves to function only at the level of the vulgar. We cannot hope for fullness of life without nurturing fullness of soul. We must seek beauty, study beauty, surround ourselves with beauty.

To be contemplative, we must remove the clutter from our lives, surround ourselves with beauty, and consciously, relentlessly, persistently, give it away—like the monastic offers it to the thieves—until the tiny world for which we ourselves are responsible begins to reflect the raw beauty that is God.

Excerpt from *Following the Path: The Search for a Life of Passion, Purpose, and Joy*, by Joan Chittister (Random House), reprinted in *The Monastic Way*, February 2026. *The Monastic Way* is a free, monthly, online publication. Scan QR code or visit joanchittister.org to read more and subscribe.

MONASTICISM TO

Finding friendship with God, with your community, with yourself.

Interview with Jacqueline Sanchez-Small, OSB
By Linda Romey, OSB

In 2025 Erie Benedictine Sister Jacqueline Sanchez-Small joined the board of Monastic Inter-Religious Dialogue (MID), an organization that follows the Vatican's charge for Benedictines to work to promote conversations and understanding between monastics of different religions, especially between Catholics and Buddhists. This past August, she became the Director of the North American Secretariat of the Association for International Monasticism (AIM-USA), part of an international effort to connect with more than 450 Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries around the world, helping to meet their educational, financial, and spiritual needs, and raising awareness of the work they do in their local communities. Sister Jacqueline also contributes to the sharing of monastic spirituality through Benetvision and Emmaus Ministries. She will complete a master's degree in Monastic Studies at St. John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, next spring. As she builds relationships with monastics across traditions and cultures, we asked her a few questions about how she sees monasticism today.

How do you explain monasticism in a society that is increasingly unfamiliar with traditional religions and religious language? Can you briefly speak to the relationship between the various expressions of monasticism that you encounter through MID?

I generally don't try very hard to explain monasticism, because I'm not sure that monasticism can be explained! Even people who are familiar with traditional religious practices and institutions have misconceptions about monastic life, about who monks and nuns are. Unlike so much of Christianity–or Buddhism, and other religious traditions–monasticism is not theoretical or credal. It's practical, it's lived; all ideas about it are a little wrong.

Buddhist monasticism, of course, has significant differences from Christian monasticism, but both are about radically embracing the core of the religion. Both are about living a good life, free from the need to chase after success, wealth, attention, a good reputation, being loved. Monasticism is about finding and building joy and peace in every circumstance.

ODAY



Sister Jacqueline and a Buddhist monk admire the windows in the St. John's Abbey church. They joined other monks at St. John's in Collegeville, Minnesota, for the July Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) meeting.

Speaking as a Catholic nun, that means praying and contemplation, studying Scripture, doing meaningful work, and accompanying my sisters and the rest of my community. When people ask about monasticism, that's what I try to illustrate for them: a life of seeking God in a very counter-cultural way, not for our own sake or as an independent project, but with and for other people.

When I was at my first MID conference last summer and got to talk about monasticism with some Buddhist monks, there was a very touching moment when one of them began to share a story of the life of the Buddha. "Ananda said, 'Buddha, is friendship half of the spiritual life?'"

Recognizing the story, I gave the punchline. "Buddha said, 'No, Ananda, friendship is the whole of the spiritual life."

The monk I was talking with was very happy, moved to know that Christian monastics were taught that story and its wisdom in novitiate. And it reminded me that in a society that's so lonely, so individualistic, and so focused on what you can get, monasticism offers a life about friendship: being friends with God, with your community, with yourself.

Thomas Merton wrote in 1968 that a monk "is a marginal person who withdraws deliberately to the margin of society with a view to deepening fundamental human experience." Would you agree? What does a choice to be on the margin of society look like for you in your new ministry with AIM-USA?

You know, I love Thomas Merton, and that line about "deepening fundamental human experience," is right on point, but this is not my favorite definition of a monk. In a sense, yes, we withdraw, from power and from some of the conventional practices of social life, like marriage. And we're called to seek the common good, rather than prioritizing ourselves. I suppose it's "marginalizing" ourselves in some ways to de-center our personal wishes and agendas. There is wisdom in this quote; I think especially in the U.S., we monastics still have some degree of prestige. It's not always easy to determine when we should use it, while holding it lightly.

Still, I think this quote is largely a reflection of Merton's experience as an educated, well-to-do European male literary star who felt called to step

away from privilege and embrace a kind of powerless state by entering a cloistered monastery in rural Kentucky. It's not universally true for monastics across cultures and continents.

AIM-USA has helped me to realize that many monasteries are hubs of their societies, especially in places where social services are few. There are monastics raising chickens to feed their communities, educating and sheltering children, offering job training for vulnerable people, counseling their traumatized neighbors. They may be, in some ways, "marginal"–they are not, probably, considered important by politicians, influencers, and billionaires–but I would hardly describe them as "withdrawing," or "marginal," in the sense of having little effect on their world. Because of where they are living, they have very little for themselves, sometimes not even basic needs like water and healthcare, but they're not meekly settling for that unjust reality. They're building the Reign of God on earth and bringing their local communities into it with them as best they can. U.S. monastics have a lot to learn from them.



Sister Jacqueline and her coworkers at AIM USA, Sisters Dianne Sabol (back) and Christine Kosin.

You recently wrote an essay titled "'Not as this World Gives': Peace in the Rule of Benedict" which was published in* Tjurunga*, the Australian Benedictine Review. How does peace in the Benedictine tradition differ from what the world offers as peace?

People confuse peace with bliss, and conflate peace with quiet.

If you're calm, happy, chanting your mantra, while your neighbor is out of food stamps, or being abused, or afraid of deportation, guess what: you're calm and happy and chanting, but you're not living in peace.

The Rule only mentions peace a handful of times, and never in its teachings on prayer or silence. Peace is called "our quest and aim," and Benedict tells us to "never give a false greeting of peace," and to "make peace before the sun goes down" during conflicts. He teaches that if everyone is given everything they personally need, whether that's a lot or a little, "all the members will be at peace." Twice, Benedict says monastics should give the "kiss of peace," to guests and to one another. Finally, he designates the leader of the monastery as the ultimate decision maker, for "the preservation of peace and love."

What do we make of all this? Peace is an urgent matter, not something we'll experience when we go on retreat, but something we have to work on right now. Peace is incompatible with injustice, with both deprivation and greed. Peace is shared with people around us, rather than an inner feeling. Peace demands safety, demands leaders who can be trusted to make decisions for the common good.

Does that mean that in a cold, capitalistic, corrupt world, we never experience peace? No. There is peace in the moments and interactions that challenge our violent normality. There's peace when children come to Emmaus Soup Kitchen and get as many second helpings as they want and people make a big fuss over how tall they're getting. There's peace when I apologize to my friend and know she forgives me. There's peace when people take nonviolence trainings or volunteer with environmental projects. That's the peace Jesus gave us at the Last Supper: love and community coexisting with fear and pain.

In an interview about a year before her death in January 2023, Sister Mary Lou Kownacki, with whom you shared a close relationship, said that one of the questions monks should be asking today is, "Patriarchy, sexism, misogyny—it is the original sin of the church and needs to be repented. If that is not done, nothing will change. How can we eradicate it?" How would you answer her question?

Below, Sister María Antonia Pérez, OCSO, of the Trappist Monastery of Our Lady of Coromoto in Humocaro Alto, Venezuela, meets with children in the abbey church.

Associatio Internationalis Monastica (AIM) is an organization of Benedictine and Cistercian Monasteries of men and women around the world who follow the Rule of Benedict. AIM USA is the United States Secretariat of the organization which provides spiritual, educational, and financial assistance to monasteries in developing countries to enable them to be centers of life for others.



One thing is that we all need to claim our full humanity, irrespective of gender roles. In some ways, I think monastics are well-positioned for this, because we generally live in single-sex environments, and our members do all the "male" and all the "female" tasks. To really oversimplify it, for example, a woman is always the leader in a women's monastery, though the stereotype is that men are natural leaders. And a man is always going to be infirmarian in a men's monastery, though the stereotype is that women are natural caregivers. We have a little more space to be our real complicated selves, I think. But do we claim that publicly? Are we able to convey to the rest of the Church, the rest of the world, that preaching, teaching, nurturing, directing, gardening, researching, and loving are totally genderless? We could make that message clearer, I think.

Personally, I don't think women's ordination would solve the fundamental abuse of power in the Church, any more than women enlisting in the army converts the military to nonviolence. I think an end to sexism in the Church can't happen within a rigid hierarchy, where one person handles liturgy, finances and administration, pastoral care, and preaching. A new system has to emerge, more like Christ's way of relating to people.

Still, it's difficult to imagine what would lead those currently in power to loosen their grip, or how many generations of increased equality it would take for sexist ideology to die out. As long as we live under sexism, we have to laugh at its ridiculousness, and have joy in our lives, encourage each other, and believe totally in our own inherent dignity and worth.

What are the questions you think monks should be asking today in the US? Around the world?

What does our monastic promise of stability call us to, especially in regard to climate change and care for our land? What does obedience mean in a time of rising fascism? We promise "conversion to the manner of a monastic," so how can we help ourselves and others commit to building peace and living simply? Mostly, we have to ask the same questions everyone else does: Can I face myself in the mirror? What's the next right thing to do? Am I extending God's love to my neighbors?

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Ears to Hear, a Heart to Listen

By Sophie Trusty



Sister Marcella Meisinger, OSB, art and photography teacher at St. Benedict Academy, pictured in 1953.



Sophie Trusty, a recent graduate of Grace College in Winona Lake, Indiana and a summer communications intern at Mount St. Benedict Monastery.

I recently realized that a life with all of its complexity can be reduced to an astonishingly few pages. In Sister Marcella Meisinger's section of the Benedictine community archive, a baptismal certificate, newspaper clippings, and an obituary, tell the basic facts about her life. She was born Anna J. Meisinger in 1894, she entered the Benedictine community in 1910, and served for decades as an educator, eventually teaching art at St. Benedict Academy. She learned the basics of photography in a two-hour workshop hosted at the YMCA. These documents tell me when she was born, where she served, and that she died in 1962, but convey very little about how she lived. Her photographs however, provide a different kind of record. They highlight not only what she saw, but also what she chose to notice.

Sister Marcella's photographs stopped me for a moment when I walked to the guest wing on the day that I moved into the monastery for the summer. The black and white pieces evoked a curiosity about the process of the artist herself. I admired her work for a moment, then quickly returned to unpacking and checking tasks off of my list, giving her pieces the kind of hurried attention that they quietly try to resist.

One month into my communications internship here at the monastery, I looked through Sister Marcella's section of the archives. As I observed in silence and stillness, I realized that I had overlooked the very thing her work had been asking of me: to slow down, stop, and pay attention.

One sequence of photographs particularly caught my attention. In this collection, three photographs of the same church tower gradually move from shadow into clarity. Looking at the progression between the photographs I realized how they display the process of focus. Not as something innate, like the automatic adjustments that modern cameras offer. Rather, as something that takes time, patience, and remaining in one place until the picture becomes clearer. Clarity did not come through finding a different angle, or through giving up on the shot, but through a commitment to stillness as the subject settled into focus.

Looking at Sister Marcella's work I found myself



St. Mary's Church Tower by Marcella Meisinger, OSB

thinking more about my own habits and attention to the spaces around me. I have grown accustomed to filling quiet moments with music, podcasts, or whatever else can keep silence at a distance. I also have a tendency to turn moments set aside for rest into opportunities to multi-task. In the depths of these habits, I often find myself wishing that the world around me would quiet down and stop spinning for a second so I can find a moment of peace. I assume that when the world quiets down, I will finally be able to do the same.



Feeding Station by Marcella Meisinger, OSB

Looking through Sister Marcella's photographs, I was drawn in by the ordinary subjects that she often focused on: butterflies, flowers, cars, the same creek again and again. None of these subjects of themselves demand deep attention or directed focus, yet she highlighted them anyway. Her work made me question how often I have rushed past, or through, similar beauty while trying to complete a task or reach a destination. More recently, though, I have found myself exploring the world around me without leaning as often into my tendency to fill the silence, therefore refraining from barreling over the beauty that is rewarded through the very same silence.

As I walk through the trails on the monastery grounds with less self-chatter, I listen to the birds. I've become interested in their conversations rather than becoming overwhelmed by their songs. Sitting by the creek, which was once fairly still and small to me, I notice a depth to the water, subtle harmony in the babble of the waterfall, the insects and fish that move about through their world stopping to greet me as I sit stationary. I've noticed the way that some leaves whisper, and others dance. The primary thing that I notice is that the world has not become quieter, I have, and as a result of listening I am able to hear more.

The Rule of St. Benedict invites us to listen. Through listening more I have come to realize that the practice is not just about hearing. It is also about the habit of being present. Sister Marcella's photographs opened my mind to this sort of listening. They helped me see that we can't always force clarity, neither can we silence or block out distractions in the world, but we can focus on what matters within it. Coming to the end of my journey with Sister Marcella's work, my stay at the monastery, and with my college education, I have discovered that peace is not the absence of noise, responsibility, and chaos. Perhaps, it is the steadiness that comes through patiently persevering with aligned focus, and as Benedict says, listening with the ear of the heart.



Close Shave by Marcella Meisinger, OSB

What is a Prophet of Peace, and why would a monastery honor one each year?

By Linda Romey, OSB

Maybe because the word "Pax," peace, has been chiseled into the lintels above monastery entrances since the Middle Ages. Or it could be more about the role of a monastery in the 21st century. I suppose how we understand what it means to be a modern prophet also has something to do with it. In truth, it's a combination of all three.

The Benedictine Sisters of Erie 2026 Prophet of Peace, Secular Franciscan Mary Nelson, makes choices that challenge us to see the world different. As a leader, organizer, and a spiritually-grounded advocate for peace and justice, she sees what is, holds reality with compassion, and then works for positive change. Her life is a prophetic message that challenges us to see different, too. To live different. To be compassion and peace.

The role of a prophet is to call us to face ourselves—and to not turn away when we don't like what we see. Rather, the prophet calls us to go deeper and confront the hard questions that we prefer to ignore because they make us realize that we are not islands unto ourselves, that we are part of—and accountable to—a much bigger reality. And that every choice we make reverberates either in ways that bring us closer to the fullness of God or that takes us further astray. As the monk Thomas Merton wrote in a circular letter to friends in September 1968 just a few months before his death, "Our real journey in life is interior; it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts. Never was it more necessary for us to respond to that action." (As quoted in the forward to *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, edited by Br. Patrick Hart)

A prophet sees the whole of life and explores its depths in their search for truth and meaning while most of us prefer the relative comfort and security of living on the surface. Listening to a prophet can be life-altering, dangerous even, if we choose to abandon the safety of the surface to go into the depths of what it means to truly be human.

As for a monastery, it can be both a breeding ground for prophets and a spiritual community for those who want to heed the prophet's words. The Rule of Benedict, which guides the lives of those who call Erie's Mount St. Benedict Monastery their actual home—or those for whom it is their spiritual home—is simply a guide for living life well with self, God, and all creation. The good news is that the deeper we grow in our sense of who we are and what it means to live an interconnected, evolutionary life, we find ourselves "running on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love," as St. Benedict wrote in his Rule.

A monastery also must be a vehicle of social change rooted in that core monastic value of Pax, peace. We are saved in this world, not in the next. God is not somewhere out there; God is in this world waiting to be seen. Those for whom a monastery

The prophet calls us to go deeper and confront the hard questions that we prefer to ignore because they make us realize that we are not islands unto ourselves, that we are part of—and accountable to —a much bigger reality.

—Linda Romey, OSB

Mary Nelson 2026 Prophet of Peace



is home choose not to blindly accept what the systems and structures of this world dictate, built as they are on insatiable greed and lust for power and ego aggrandizement. They know the world as God's ongoing creation whose beginning and end are beyond our knowing but to which we are accountable during our brief lifetimes. That is the deep peace to which a prophet calls us and for which those who call a monastery home must work.

In a recent essay, after listing the many crises we face today, theologian Ilia Delio explained, "humanity has become a planetary force without acquiring a planetary consciousness. We operate globally and think tribally, we wield planetary power with provincial minds. Writing in the 1940s, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin already saw the gap—our technical capacity had outrun our moral and spiritual development. We learned to reshape Earth before we grew wise enough to do it well."

And that is why we need prophets yet today. That is why we need a monastery to be what it is called to be—a spiritual center that calls us to our full potential as co-creators with God on our journey into Oneness with God. It is why monasteries have been communities centered in seeking peace for more than fifteen hundred years. And the end goal, of the prophet and of the monastery, as Ilia continues, is to lead us to "love—genuine commitment to communion and to the flourishing of all conscious beings."

"We are so grateful to be able to honor Mary as a Prophet of Peace. She is a long-time friend of our Benedictine community and shares our commitment to peace, hospitality, and compassion nurtured by a deep spirituality," said Sister Diane Rabe, administrator of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie.

Mary is a leader, organizer, and advocate who can be found wherever she is needed, rolling up her sleeves and working for the common good. She was professed into the Secular Franciscan Order in 2009, and received the Regional "Contardo Ferrini Service Award" in 2026 and is a member of the Franciscan Action Network (FAN) Justice Circle.

Benedictines for Peace is happy to have Mary on their steering committee; she is also a team leader for NETWORK Advocates of Western Pennsylvania, advocating for Catholic Social Justice issues on the federal level. One of the efforts she currently supports is the monthly prayer gathering to pray for immigrants, migrants, and refugees, "You Are Not Alone," based on the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops 2025 Special Message on Immigration.

She is a member of Our Lady of Peace Catholic parish and a weekly volunteer at Emmaus Soup Kitchen. During the winter, she also serves at the overflow shelter, Our Neighbors' Place.

Sometimes ther

Beauty simply overwhelms.

"Safe to say, if not for the concepts of welcome the stranger and speak to the stranger, I would not be sitting here," David Bloom, a recent visitor to the monastery, told a handful of friends of world-renowned potter Brother Thomas Bezanson. The group had gathered to remember Brother Thomas and share stories about him with David, whose family knew Thomas well. It was David's first time in Erie.

Brother Thomas, who died in 2007, was artist-in-residence at Mount St. Benedict Monastery for twenty-two years. A former monk at Weston Priory in Vermont, he moved to Erie to take up residence with the Benedictine community in 1984 at the invitation of then-prioress Sister Joan Chittister. While Brother Thomas's work is held in museums around the world, the collection at Mount St. Benedict Monastery is one of the largest, with more than a hundred pieces—and David wanted to see it.



Mary Ellen Dahlkemper, David Bloom, Sister Pat Lupo, Sister Carolyn Gorny-Kopkowski, and Sandy Bock in front of a display of Brother Thomas's pottery at the monastery.

David's fortuitous Erie connection was made about ten years ago at a concert at Cathedral of John the Divine in his home of New York City—when he greeted the stranger sitting next to him and engaged her in conversation. Turns out the stranger was Mary Ellen Dahlkemper who was in New York with her husband. When she began, "We're from Erie, Pennsylvania…" David had to ask, "Is there any chance you've ever heard of Brother Thomas Bezanson…" Mary Ellen, a friend of the Benedictine community, took it from there.

Recently, David was elected to the board of the U.S. Committee for Refugees

e are no words

and Immigrants. He wanted to visit a local office and noticed there was an active and engaged office in Erie. And he thought, "That nice couple I met from Erie…I wonder…"

He hadn't kept in touch with Mary Ellen, but her contact was still in his phone. They connected and she told him about her work in Erie related to welcoming the stranger and immigrants. "We're a great, welcoming community," she told him. "And the Benedictines have been long involved in this work."

Mary Ellen brought David to the monastery where Sisters Carolyn Gorny-Kopkowski, Pat Lupo, and Linda Romey and dear friend Sandra Bock were gathered in the front parlor where the largest assortment of Thomas's work is displayed.

David first shared his story, how his parents came across Thomas's work in a shop in Vermont and were directed to the priory to meet him. They became friends and later introduced Thomas to Bernie and Sue Pucker whose Pucker Gallery in Boston eventually became home to Thomas's work.

"You saved his life," David told the sisters. "It's not clear that he would have been a great artist if it weren't for the Benedictine Sisters." When he left Weston Priory, he was unable to create art. It took some time, Sister Carolyn remembered. She and another sister shared a home with Thomas on the Glinodo Summer Camp property, and one day he called to her with a little more energy. "I did it! I made a pot," he told her. That was after a year of not doing anything, of making excuses. After that, the creativity never stopped.

"He worked solo, but he needed us all for different reasons," remembered Sandy. "I think he found joy in a lot of things but being that brilliant and that gifted, maybe it's difficult to be really happy." She explained that he set high standards for himself which could have made happiness harder to achieve—but also helped him be so accepting of others. "He was a truly fascinating, and very intense, human being," she said.

Yet he was also very down-to-earth. "He always wore jeans and sweatshirts, and when the children at camp saw him going in the back door, they thought he was the janitor," said Carolyn. "He was just Thomas. He was our brother."

Sandy remembers running into Thomas at the end of a firing. "I'm opening the kiln," he told her. "Would you like to come?" As she looked into the large kiln and its shelves filled with the beauty of glazes and shapes seeing light for the first time, she couldn't speak. "I was overwhelmed by the beauty," she said. In reply, Thomas said, "Sometimes there are no words."

Adam's Secret

The following essay was written by Brother Thomas Bezanson twenty years ago for an exhibition of his work when the Benedictine Sisters of Erie celebrated the 150th anniversary of their founding. It is reprinted here with the permission of Pucker Gallery as the sisters' 170th anniversary year comes to a close. Scan the QR code to view the gallery magazine.

[This exhibition] is significant for another reason: the awareness that no one does anything alone. I am very conscious of this life principle, for without others there would not be all of this, there would be only silence.

I offer the following brief stories from scripture that have touched me, made me deeply aware that giving-and-receiving and receiving-and-giving are of one piece. There are no heroes, there are no stars, there are no loners, there are no lords of all — save One.

Moses, Aaron and Joshua

There are images in scripture that never seem to fade from illuminating the daily, although the chapter and verse very well might. Some of them come around frequently for me, enfolding the same principle: no one does anything alone.

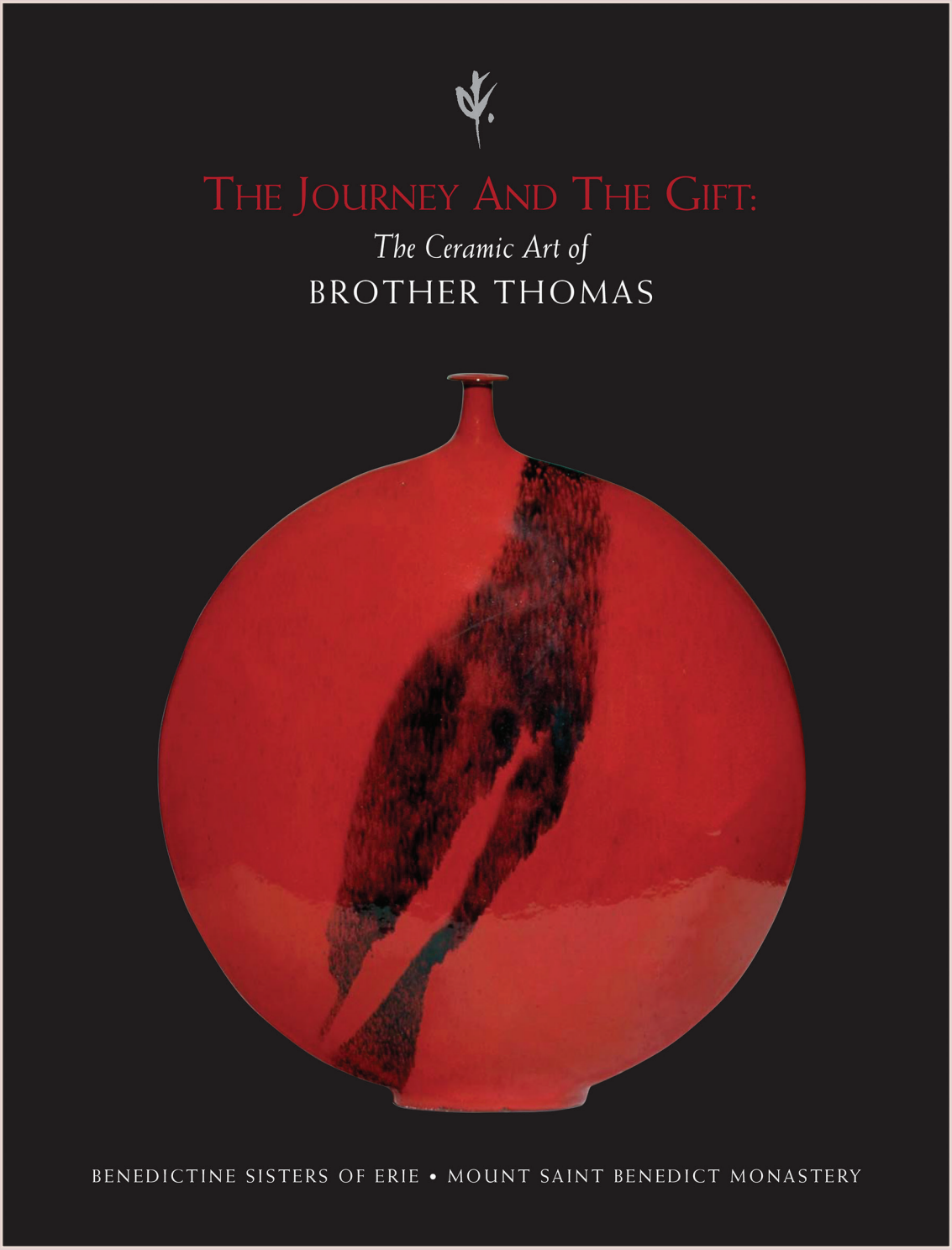
There is the story in Exodus of Moses standing on a hill, his arms raised in purposeful prayer. On the plain below him, the Israelites are battling with the Amelekites. As long as Moses' arms are raised in prayer, the Israelites are winning the battle but as Moses's arms tire and begin to fall, the Amelekites begin winning. With the ups and downs of those arms, the tide of winning changes from one side to the other.

It is obvious that Moses needs help. Aaron arrives to support one arm; Joshua comes to support the other. The Israelites are winning again. At this point the voice of God is heard, "... do not say that by the might of your own right arm alone, you have done these things."

Why is it in our day, in our culture, that we admire and tend to emulate the "strong right arm" that does it alone, or thinks it does, the hero who goes it alone, victorious against all adversity? We have welfare help for those that can't "make it." But it is a begrudged assistance, a reluctant help that grows meaner with each new government administration. Justice is defined as giving others what they "deserve," rather than the scriptural justice of giving others what they "need."

Individualism and hyper-specialization have come to be the purpose of our life's goals, e.g., to be masters, unmindful that something doses down when we know it all, or think we do. Abandoning the way of beginner's mind is to wander off the path of openness and become closed both to what is and to what can be. Our beliefs determine our actions.

Individualism has infected the ancient unity of the extended family, once the model of responsibility for others, but now replaced by the isolating nuclear family model. Individualism is a pervasive illusion and a formula for isolation. No one does anything alone, not even Moses.



Moses and the Burning Bush

There is another story in scripture that articulates the life principle that we do not and can not go it alone. It is about Moses again. It is the familiar story of Moses standing before the burning bush on Mt. Horeb. The "voice" of God comes out of the burning bush and orders Moses to go to Pharaoh to demand the release of the Israelites from Egypt. It is an awesome situation in which one hardly expects Moses to question, much less refuse, God's directive! It is not like talking back to an old man with a long white beard, it is more like talking back to an earthquake!

But, long buried in the exegesis of this story is an inner story with an important value. "I cannot go to Pharaoh," Moses replies, "I have a speech defect." (It

is speculated that Moses probably stuttered.) "Go," says God. "No," says Moses. The argument is brief, God backs off a bit, rethinks the honesty of Moses and comes up with a surprising solution to the stand-off. "Aaron," he said, "I will send Aaron your brother with you; he will speak for you." In a word, Aaron became the prophet's prophet.

Here we probably resist the possibility that it was not Moses, but Aaron, who declaimed those famous words, "... let my people go." We resist defrocking a hero. But this scenario is no more surprising than the possibility that the solution to Moses' speech defect was simply for God to cure it. But God did not. Why?

> We can open the gates of possibility and creativity within ourselves and transcend the illusions of isolation with its figures of stardom, heroes and genius. —Brother Thomas

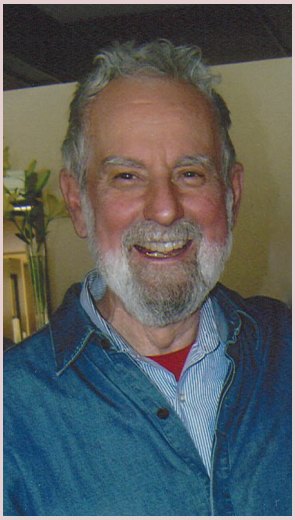
Today Aaron would be considered second best. But "second best" does not exist except that we create second best. We create the illusion that a silver medal is a failure to get the gold. We "go for the gold." Yet, there could be no gold without the silver and the bronze — and even the also ran. There can be no best without the better and neither without the good, which unifies them all. No one does anything alone. The reality is relationship and oneness is the basis of all relationships. To think otherwise is an illusion, to act otherwise is folly.

> "Anyone who does not understand that God desires oneness, does not know the living God."
> — Abraham Joshua Heschel

There is a mystery in this experience of existential interdependence, or as the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh phrases it: the awareness of interbeing, a term I like better because it is less worn and more spiritual than the psychology-coined term interdependence, for we cannot escape the negative connotation that goes with that term, i.e., dependency. Dependency is the bane of a society whose radio is tuned to independence.

Thich Nhat Hanh's word "interbeing" creates a pragmatic shift in our consciousness, opening our hearts to the radical reality of oneness. "I am sad," he writes:

> *"I have lost my smile.*
> *But don't worry.*
> *The dandelion has it."*[1]



Brother Thomas Bezanson

The dandelion belongs to the oneness, our inter-being with all that is. There it is, quite faithfully keeping your smiles for you while hope sustains you, until the sadness passes and you return to claim it.

It is given the human spirit to change from sadness to joy; we are not fixed in our being, we are an open substance. We can open the gates of possibility and creativity within ourselves and transcend the illusions of isolation with its figures of stardom, heroes and genius. I do not know how the alchemy of changing a spirit works, but I do observe it happening and I do experience that it does not happen in isolation — no one does anything alone.

Adam and Eve

And finally, for now in this limited space, the well-worn story of Adam and Eve where I find something not oft spoken of: "Adam's Secret."

So much has been written about the original sin of Adam and Eve, largely hung on Eve. But, it should be noticed that while they may have "messed-up" royally, they did not split-up. Adam did not seek a divorce or go his separate way. They remained as one. Who could think of Adam without Eve, or Eve without Adam? They rode out of the Garden on the current of one heart. The same sap of existence flowed between them, that God-given gift to humanity was not withdrawn, not then and, save for forgetfulness, not now.

So, they left the Garden together, banished. It is not written, but I offer for your heart-felt consideration, that this was Adam's Secret: Where there is Eve, there is Eden.

—Brother Thomas

[1] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace in Every Step· The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 7.

Meant to Bee

Flower farmer and SBA alumna Terri Drzewiecki Witherell '81 will be one of the florists decorating the White House for the holidays.



When Terri Drzewiecki Witherell, St. Benedict Academy Class of 1981, was walking through the SBA building during the July open house celebrating the 170th anniversary of the sisters' arrival in Erie, we struck up a conversation. As Terri reminisced, her reflections going beyond the ordinary retelling of fond memories, I recognized a life lived intentionally, even in the face of challenge. In a recorded follow-up conversation, I asked Terri to reflect on, "How would my life be different if I hadn't attended St. Benedict Academy?" Here is what she told me. —Linda Romey, OSB

High school experiences

I remember when English teacher Sister Margaret Ann [Pilewski] announced that our all-female school would present *Jesus Christ Superstar*—a musical with mostly male roles—with few resources for staging and basically no budget!

At SBA there was a sense of no matter the resources available or conditions, you and those who were with you could make it happen—you were going to pull it off. We performed the musical, all of us, and it was great fun. St. Ben's fostered that kind of confidence and fearlessness.

I taught twenty-five years in public education, and because I never went to public school, I looked through a different filter. SBA made me see differently than if I had not had that all-girls experience. Every leadership role at St. Ben's was filled by a girl. There weren't certain roles that males should fulfill. It influenced how I raised my children and the way I treated my students, not having the filter of "this is a female role, that is a male role."

In terms of excellence, there was Sister Mary David [Callahan], directing choral with the requirement of "hose and heels." We sang all over the city and if you forgot to bring pantyhose and high heels to school that day, you didn't get to go. Her standard was that "you're going to represent St. Ben's and you are going to be at your finest."

Sister Roseanne [Loneck], too, taught us how to set a table—the simplest of tasks, but there was a correct way to do it. Fifty years later I'm telling my five-year-old granddaughter, "the fork goes on the left, on the napkin, the blade of the knife goes towards the plate." One morning we made a big breakfast for visiting family and I asked her to



Terri and her husband, Chuck, enjoy a walk on their farm. "Bloom where you're planted," is one of Terri's favorite quotes and she and Chuck have taken it to heart.

set the table. She did it right away, and correctly, not because I was hovering over her, but because she knew the correct way. Family members were commenting, "How does she know how to do this?" It's a legacy of caring and excellence and of doing it right. The details do need to matter, and the excellence needs to matter. And those are definitely lessons from SBA. No doubt about it.

And then knowing that the sisters were also working at national levels, or maybe even international levels. We were aware through them that there was a whole big world out there that the Benedictine community was involved in. We knew that they came every day and instructed us in English class or science class, but that they also had another whole life and a commitment to bigger issues, world issues. We were aware of that. And I think that was a really good balance, to see both worlds.

Charlotte's Web and a house fire

Since reading *Charlotte's Web* as a kid, I was totally fascinated with the romantic version of farm life. Then I went to college and became a teacher. I got married, we had kids, we were a military family and I lived all over the country.

But I kept thinking, "Someday I'm going to be on a farm." And there I am in my late forties and our home in Oil City burned down. I thought, "This is it, Terri, this is your chance." We bought an 1870s farmhouse on sixty acres, gutted and renovated it over ten years, living in it the whole time.

We decided to have an apple orchard, make apple cider and start a cidery. We planted flowers to attract pollinator bees for the apple trees—I'd never grown anything and I had no idea just how many flowers would come up. There were so many, so I took the mason jars left behind in the farmhouse and cut flowers for everybody on our road.

The reaction was, it stirred something in people. Everybody has memories of flowers. And so, I kind of got hooked and the next year we had six little beds and we went to farmer's market with our flowers. Then three of our five kids got married in one year and we did their weddings. And then my niece's wedding. So the flower farm and business just sort of found us.

Meant to Bee Flower Farm

Just like we made it happen at SBA with very few resources but with that sense that possibilities are endless, that there aren't so many boundaries in life, we made it happen with our little flower farm and named it, "Meant to Bee Flower Farm." After doing my kids' weddings, a lady at work asked, could we do her daughter's wedding? So then we were in a beautiful country club in Pittsburgh. And now our team doesn't think anything of walking into

these incredible venues with people with wonderful budgets, and tackling anything they request. We go in and we do it with excellence.

In fact, we applied to decorate the White House this year. The sky's the limit. Why not? Why not us? Why can't I take my talent to the White House and be in historic rooms and be a part of a team that gets to bring somebody's vision to life? That kind of confidence was from St. Ben's. That kind of fearlessness is from St. Ben's. [Editor's Note: A few days after our conversation, Terri emailed to tell me she was chosen to be one of the florists decorating the White House this year!]

We did have to learn a lot. I started taking classes at Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens in Pittsburgh and watching YouTube videos. No matter what somebody asked me to do, I would say, "Yes, we can do that." And then I'd get on my computer and figure out how.

I've learned QuickBooks, all the accounting and finances and taxes. This venture is one of unlimited growth, whether it's working with people, staff, brides, technology, doing Zoom meetings and learning technology, using AI to devise plans.

We try to grow flowers that you can't get anywhere else. I recently took a bouquet to a wedding, and they said, "Those aren't real, are they?" They had never seen such flowers. My husband engineers the watering systems and the infrastructure, every stake that gets pounded into the ground. When I promise people ceiling installations, he figures out the mechanics. In the winter, we get a break and do all our business planning and training. We learn new techniques, attend educational conferences, bring back books and videos. We just started drying flowers because bouquet preservation is a really big thing.

We start in the greenhouse in March, and by April, we're in the hoop house, which is basically an unheated greenhouse. Weddings start in April even though we're not outside until May.

Run while you have the light of life. —Rule of Benedict

You know, we could be retiring. But we love what we're doing. We really started another whole new life in our sixties after we raised our family. Now our kids are grown and they have wonderful lives. In our social network, everybody is retiring and not understanding why we started this adventure! We have no intention of putting an end date to it at this point.

I don't remember where I saw this, but "flowers" were referred to as "flow-ers." They're not flowers, they are flow-ers, energy flows through them. And I thought, wow, that's what happens when we pick, it's what happens when we walk into a venue: we bring the beauty of these flowers, their energy. You just get out of your own way and quit worrying and just let it be.

My high school teachers, they had no idea the impact they had on me. So many things that ended up in my classroom when I was teaching, came through as I raised my family, what is now here on my farm, or the way we treat people. It's like it trickled down from all those women, you know, those Benedictines, those women.



Terri and Sister Rosanne Loneck visit at the July Open House.



Meant to Bee Flower Farm & Wedding Design Studio
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Sisters in the Family...

Remembering the generations that came before.

What difference does a century make? Apparently very little if you ask five-year-old preschooler Jaelyn Tupper who enjoys talking to her two great, great, great aunts who were born about one hundred years before her own birth.

"Going down my hallway is a picture of them and Jaelyn is always walking around with it talking to them—she's heard us remembering them, she asks about them," says her great-grandmother, Sandra Jeffery. Sandra is talking about Sister Helen Kecer and Sister Elaine Kecer, her two aunts who were Erie Benedictines. Sister Helen died in 1996, Sister Elaine in 2005.

Sisters Helen and Elaine were already Benedictine sisters by the time Sandra was born—her father, Bob, was their brother. "Back in the day, we would visit them on Sundays when it was allowed, I would have been about six, and we'd go to the monastery on East Ninth Street. We walked up the huge staircase and then right into the sitting room where we visited—we were not allowed past the first floor. It was scary, we had to behave, we were afraid not to behave," Sandra recalled. This would have been the early 1950s, and the sisters were in their long, traditional Benedictine habit with only their faces visible. Going through those big wooden doors meant entering a world of silence and mystery nothing like the day-to-day life of people outside the monastery. Black-robed women moved slowly and deliberately, with decorum that demanded respect even from the children.

Sometimes when they were allowed, Sandra added, they would pick up her grandmother and the sisters and take them to Camp Glinodo. "We're going back about seventy years, but I remember walking in the creek and having picnics. We wore dresses with our black patent leather shoes and socks. And we behaved!

"I loved them dearly, but they were stern and I was a bit scared of them until later years. They mellowed after the 1970s when the community became less strict and they started wearing regular clothes," said Sandra. "When I was in high school, one time I was in Kresge's and walked by a couple women. Then they called my name! It was Sisters Helen and Elaine in regular clothes and I didn't recognize them," said Cheryl, Sandra's sister. Nothing was more fun than to go over to the Mount (Mount St. Benedict Monastery on East Lake Road where the community moved in the early 1970s) and make cookies with them. "My girls loved that," Sandra said.



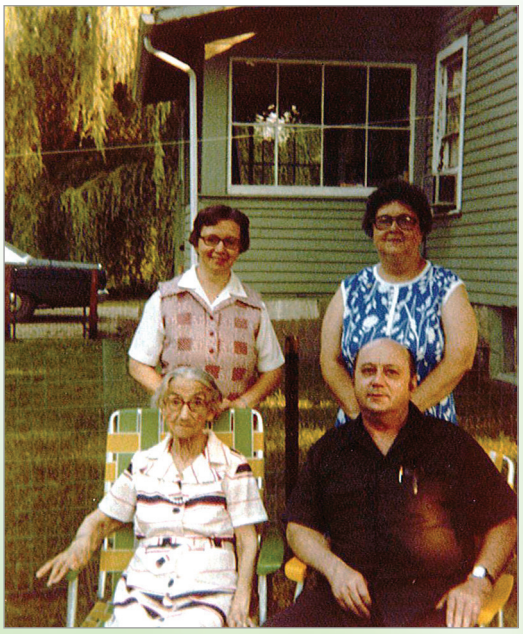
Kecer descendants at Goat Fest: (left to right) Cheryl Faycheck and Sandra Jeffery, nieces of Sisters Helen and Elaine Kecer; Amber Jeffery, Sandra's daughter and a great niece of the sisters; and in front, Jaelyn Tupper, granddaughter of Amber and great, great, great niece of Sister Helen and Sister Elaine.



Sisters Elaine and Helen on either side of their brother Mike at the original monastery on East Ninth Street in Erie.

Like many Catholic high school girls in the late 1950s and early 60s, Sandra did consider "becoming a nun." Ready to enter the convent after eighth grade, her mother told her to wait until she finished high school. By then she saw a much bigger world and chose to find a job and then to marry and raise a family.

"We come to Goat Fest every year," she said. "We like our memories of the sisters and Glinodo. It's special that Jaelyn knows them through our memories."



Sisters Elaine and Helen with their mother, Virginia, and brother, Bob, Sandra and Cheryl's dad. It's six generations from Virginia to Jaelyn.

"Monasteries of the Heart Is a Lifeline"

Celebrating Fifteen Years of an Online Monastery

By Katie Gordon

"Monasteries of the Heart is a lifeline." Working with our online monastery over the last several years, I have heard this sentiment again and again. What began as an idea of Sisters Mary Lou Kownacki and Joan Chittister and later supported by the Erie Benedictine community has become a global monastic online community. Since its founding in 2011, over 30,000 online memberships have been created. People join our "monastery without walls," with its roots in the Benedictine way of life, from across the world. Each eCourse and retreat offers monastic formation for contemporary seekers and draws together hundreds of participants on a shared journey. Weekly emailed monastic practices reach thousands of followers as they try to bring Benedictine practice into their daily lives.



Sisters Joan Chittister and Mary Lou Kownacki celebrate the release of *Joan Chittister Essential Writings*. Sister Mary Lou, who died in January 2023, was a co-editor of the book.

Seekers are hungry for spiritual wisdom, yet the search looks different now than it did for previous generations. While many still flock to physical monasteries for retreat, even more are exploring in new ways, too. Recognizing changing realities, Sister Joan wrote *The Monastery of the Heart: An invitation to the meaningful life*. Her guide followed the ancient Rule of Benedict and offered a new way to live a meaningful spiritual life in a rapidly changing world.

Why did her book spark this online community and global movement? Because it offered something essential. And it offered something different.

Something Essential: Seeking God

Sister Joan wrote in *The Monastery of the Heart*, "The search for God is an eternal one. It plagues every generation. It stalks every soul. It is the insistent, eternal cry for meaning, for answers to the questions, Why? And what? And for what purpose? … The search for God is the attempt to complete the incomplete in each of us."

This search for God and pursuit of wholeness manifests uniquely for each of us. Monasteries of the Heart was founded as an online space to meet seekers where they are, offering a gentle invitation into the core of their search that could take them deeper. On the website, there is a proverbial "knock on the door" in which people who are hungry for spiritual growth can enter and pursue their own unique and universal journey of seeking God.

Something Different: Bringing Depth

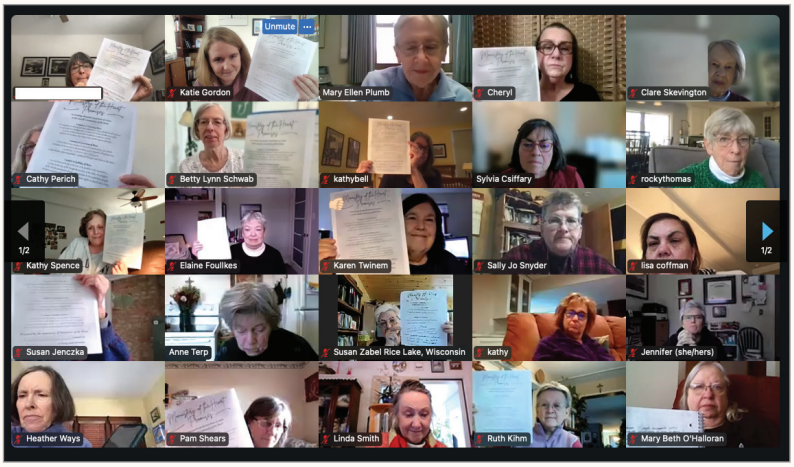
In Sister Joan's words, "...instead of setting out to reform the decadence of sixth-century Italy, Benedict of Nursia simply ignored the cheap and chaotic superficiality of it all to live according to different standards, to walk a different path, to live the life everyone else lived—but differently."

Our monastic presence in the current, online, world feels similar. In this digital age especially, we are inundated with disingenuous "AI slop." Social media sites are designed to monetize our attention and polarize our relationships. In this time of hyper-speed technological change, at Monasteries of the Heart we ask for something radically different. We invite members into slow reading and prayerful presence. We invite transformation rather than transaction; connection rather than consumption. We exist not to build up "subscribers" but rather help people find soul-friends. On the internet, we can't think of much more radical—and Benedictine—connection than this.

The Next Fifteen Years

As technology has evolved in the last fifteen years, so have we. This past year, we rebuilt and updated our website, allowing us to add new features to better cultivate a sense of connection across our global membership while also enabling the possibility for small groups to form based on shared location or interest.

One of the continued longings we



hear from members is for more sharing of the beauty and struggles of living with a monastic heart in the world today. Emilia Otte, a participant in the Benedictine Peacemakers Program on staff at Monasteries of the Heart this year, has been collecting stories from these edges of our online community: the in-person small groups that began on the website over a decade ago; the book discussions that are off-shoots from previous eCourses; and even a Beguine-inspired community of women with an international membership that meets on Zoom.

In these glimpses of monastic community, we invite you to see the beauty in the monastic tradition as our future unfolds before our eyes.

◆

***Anna Jane Yank**, a former member of a Monasteries of the Heart small group, created the online Community of St. Anna. She based the group on the Beguine tradition that began in the twelfth century and brought together unmarried women who chose to live lives of prayer and service independent of a religious order. Anna's group now includes fourteen women from around the world who commit themselves to praying for the world and performing some type of service. They take the honorific "Anna" before their names in honor of St. Anna. Yank said the group made her feel as though she had "a purpose in the body of Christ."*

◆

***The Heart to Heart small group**, which began through Monasteries of the Heart, has met in person for fifteen years to read and discuss spiritual books. All but one are oblates of Mount St. Benedict Monastery. Many of the members said that the group helped to shift their faith from the legalistic mindset they were raised with toward what Mary Sullivan called the "spirit of the law." The group, they said, has become their spiritual community, and they likened it to early Christianity, when people worshiped in their homes. Member Neil Himber said that the group gave him courage to speak out on social issues, to "act and make a difference in the world."*

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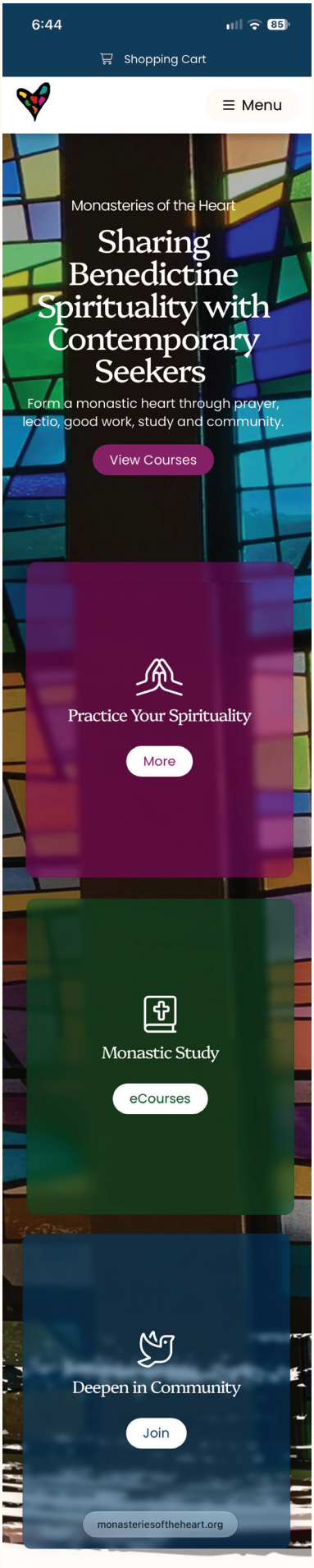
***Marilyn Mayry and Dorothy Krawchuk**, originally members of a group reading Sister Joan's book* The Radical Spirit: Twelve Ways to Live a Free & Authentic Life, *decided to continue meeting outside of Monasteries of the Heart. They meet monthly on Zoom. Marilyn, in Duluth, Minnesota, and Dorothy, on Long Island in New York, say the friendship they've developed while co-facilitating the group "runs deep across these thousand miles plus." The group has read other of Sister Joan's books. Marilyn said that joining "little communities of love and concern" allowed people the opportunity to take action, which so many of them crave. She said she hoped the group could provide support and community for the people involved.*



Sister Mary Ellen Plumb and Katie Gordon, animators of Monasteries of the Heart.

Scan QR code or visit monasteriesoftheheart.org

Katie Gordon is a spiritual seeker inspired by the counter-cultural wisdom of the Christian monastic tradition. She is the Coordinator of Monasteries of the Heart, and writes personal reflections about her monastic journey for her Substack, "Following the Monastic Impulse."



Requiescat in Pace

Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." — John 8:12

Sister Michelle Wilwohl, OSB
Perpetual Monastic Profession January 3, 1959
Died October 6, 2026



Sister Michelle was born in Pittsburgh on March 13, 1936, to Catherine Donohue and Edward Wilwohl, who named their daughter Catherine Marie. The family moved to Erie where she graduated from St. Benedict Academy in 1954 and entered the Benedictine Sisters after graduation.

Sister Michelle loved being a primary school teacher and taught at schools throughout the diocese from 1956 to 1968. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in elementary education at Mercyhurst College (now University). Sister Michelle became a Licensed Practical Nurse in 1969 through the Erie County School District and went into nursing, first as an LPN at Hamot Hospital for six years and then as an LPN in the Special Care Nursery at St. Vincent Health Center. In the 1980s Sister Michelle spent several years as an extern sister at the former Carmel of the Holy Family Monastery, considering, and deciding against, the possibility of a Carmelite vocation.

Throughout the 1990s Sister Michelle served in a number of community and other ministries. Most recently, she has spent her days offering kind words around the monastery and remembering everyone in prayer.

Sister Michelle was devoted to the Liturgy of the Hours prayed daily with her Benedictine community, and she loved the Eucharist. She regularly attended daily Mass at St. Peter's Cathedral where she also sang in the choir. She was a member of the sisters' schola and was a black belt in karate. Sister Michelle delighted in being outside, walking the monastery grounds, admiring the beauty around her, and praying for others.

Calling for policy change

Working for regulation of data center construction and an end to fracking

Area environmental and faith-based organizations including Benedictines for Peace organized a rally and a prayer service on September 22-23, outside the Bayfront Convention Center to protest Shale Insight, the annual convention of the fossil fuel lobby that wants to increase fracking and build mega data centers in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia. "Pennsylvania is a leader in promoting data centers and new natural gas infrastructure. Stopping this new infrastructure is crucial," said Sister Anne McCarthy. The environmental movement is focused on policy and system change because the actions of individuals, while important, cannot stop the looming climate disaster.

A prayer service at the site was part of Season of Creation, an annual ecumenical period of prayer and action for the environment observed by Christians worldwide from September 1 to October 4. Deb Seng, Justice Coordinator for the Sisters of St Joseph, said, "As people of faith, a prayer expression for creation outside the Shale Insight Convention is an act of lament for the suffering of the earth, a witness to the change needed in our hearts and in our society, and a profound act of hope for a different future." This prayer witness was co-sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy of Erie, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Northwest Pennsylvania Justice Team, Benedictines for Peace, the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Paul, Third Act Faith Ohio and Pennsylvania, and Gannon University Center for Social Concerns.



The Gift of Community

Grant supports Care for the Earth

With generous support from the Ray and Kay Eckstein Charitable Trust, the sisters capped the natural gas well that they had drilled on the monastery grounds in 1980. The well's output was projected to significantly decrease the cost of heating the monastery for about twenty-five years. Now long depleted, environmental responsibility necessitated capping the well.

Forty-five years ago, natural gas was thought to be a cleaner alternative to oil, with fewer greenhouse gas emissions. We know now that natural gas with its invisible methane is a major greenhouse gas emitter as well as a polluter of air, water, and soil, responsible for increases in childhood diseases and cancers. Older and abandoned gas wells are an especially potent source of methane pollution which is why they must be safely and securely capped. We also know that renewable wind and solar energy are the best climate solution and are cheaper, cleaner, and more easily available than other options.

"As Benedictines, with a strong commitment to addressing the climate crisis, we are grateful that the Ray and Kay Eckstein Charitable Trust made it possible to cap our well. We hope that sharing the actions we take in response to the climate crisis will encourage others to take action. In 1980 we thought drilling for natural gas would be part of the climate solution; we now know that capping wells and moving to renewables is crucial," said Sister Annette Marshall, co-chair of Care for the Earth, the Erie Benedictines environmental ministry.

Golf Tournament wrap up

The 8th annual Sister Mary Lou Kownacki Memorial Golf Tournament raised over $54,000, after expenses, to support the sisters and their work.

2026 winners: **1st place womens**: Kathy Danch, Irene Harrington, Sue Minarich, Tina Delio; **1st place mens**: Nick Askins, Joe Askins, Don Sayban, Cooper Fox; **1st place mixed**: Charlotte Kneidinger, Kirk Kneidinger, Michael Kneidinger, Nathan Kneidinger; **2nd place womens**: Mary Hoffman, Char Neizmik, Beth Sesler, Marlene Smith; **2nd place mens**: Bob Jackson, Shawn Cerne, Jerrett Kawski, Jeremy Lynch; **2nd place mixed**: Rick Clayton, Lucas Olszewski, Leo Olszewski, Rachel Olszewski.

Next year's tournament is Aug 9, 2027.



Leaving a Lasting Legacy

A bequest is not the only way to leave a planned gift to the Benedictine Sisters—you can consider making the Benedictines Sisters of Erie a beneficiary of your retirement account. Several years ago SBA alumna Alice Moomy, '68, told us that she had remembered the sisters in her estate plans by designating them to receive a percentage of her IRA. When Alice died in 2026, her sister Ruthann connected us to complete the gift process. The Benedictine community appreciates this planned gift and Alice's thoughtfulness. Her obituary highlighted Alice's commitment. It read: "Alice devoted herself to causes and activities that reflected her generosity, creativity and belief in education." The Benedictine Sisters are grateful to Alice for remembering her former SBA teachers and the sisters' ongoing commitment to many forms of education.

If you'd like to discuss any gift or donation option, please contact Michelle Basista, CFRE.



Every planned gift, large or small, strengthens our Benedictine impact. To learn more, contact:
Michelle Basista, CFRE
814-899-0614 x2281
mbasista@eriebenedictines.org

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oblates@eriebenedictines.org

Oblate Retreat: Corporate Commitment and Charism



At the September oblate retreat, "Corporate Commitment and Charism," Sister Anne McCarthy (right) shared the history of the corporate commitment that today is: *The Benedictine Sisters of Erie and Oblates commit to being a healing presence and a prophetic witness for peace and justice and to climate conscious living. We will decrease harmful patterns of consumerism and work with others to create systemic change needed to meaningfully address the climate crisis.* Sisters Rose Ann Kolbas and Margaret Ann Pilewski presented on the Benedictine charism: *To seek God in the communal life and to respond in prayer and ministry.* About twenty-five oblates and initiates attended along with some sisters.

Initiate Jane Wagner, who is a St. Benedict Academy alumna and on staff at Emmaus Ministries, shared a thought from Sister Rose Ann that said it all for her: "We learn the way to God by walking with others." Jane's aunt, Oblate Colleen Ahearn, who died earlier this year at 94, was responsible for introducing Jane to this particular way of walking to God in community.

The walking together of sisters and oblates has blended over the years in terms of what it means to seek God according to the way of Benedict while at the same time honoring the unique vocations of each.



Oblates plan "You Are Not Alone" immigration vigil

Erie Benedictine oblates planned the October You Are Not Alone Immigration Vigil, "Listen with the ear of your heart." Pictured are oblates Suzanne Hudson, Susan Jenczka, Deni Howley, Paul and Karen Groucutt, Kathleen Kutz, and Cynthia Legin-Bucell. Rita Scrimenti is not pictured but was one of the planners. Sister Pat Lupo was asked to offer a short reflection at the vigil, scan QR code to read her thoughts. The vigils are held the second Friday of each month on the steps of the Federal Courthouse in downtown Erie from 12:15 to 12:45 pm.

Community Weekend



The 2026 October Community Weekend was designed to bring oblates and sisters together in conversation around shared Benedictine values. In coordination with oblate co-directors Darcy Johnson (pictured) and Susan Jenczka and liaison Sister Dianne Sabol, the monastic council planned the day around themes oblates discussed in breakout groups on Friday's Oblate Day.

On Saturday, Oblate Leadership Team members presented summaries of the oblate conversations to the full group of sisters and oblates who then had an opportunity to discuss the topics. The four sessions were: Humility, Living into Practices, Rhythms of Prayer, and Spirituality of Aging. The final afternoon session was a recorded presentation from Jeremias Schröder, OSB, Abbot Primate of the Benedictine Confederation who introduced preparations for the 1,500th anniversary of Benedictinism in 2029. Visist jubilee.osb.org to learn more.

Saturday evening more than sixty-five oblates gathered with sisters in the monastery chapel, with another thirty online, for the annual Oblate Commitment Ceremony. Three new oblates made their first commitment and six initiates were welcomed into the formation process.

Oblate commitments and anniversaries



Oblates making their first commitment in 2026: Shannon McHenry-Miller, Powell, OH; Laurie Smith, Erie, PA; Mary Bojan, State College, PA. They completed the two-year formation program and received a Benedictine Oblate pin as a symbol of their commitment.

Eight oblates celebrate 25 years as oblates.
Toni Allen, Ellicott City, MD; **Carolyn Jarmin**, Lyons, CO; **Terrie Doboze**, Euclid, OH; **Charlene Serfozo**, Erie, PA; **Harry Finkbone**, North Ridgeville, OH; **Eileen Grimaldi**, West Seneca, NY; **Judy McPherson**, Grand Ledge, MI; **Mary Anne Pressler**, Avon Lake, OH

Welcome, and Congratulations!



Initiates, front row: Julia Jenkins, Erie, PA; Mary Gavacs, Harborcreek, PA; Melissa Bellew, Saratoga Springs, NY; Jane Wagner, Erie, PA; and Liz Allen, Erie, PA. Back row, Susan Jenczka, Oblate Co-director, Sister Dianne Sabol, Oblate Liaison, Sister Diane Rabe, Benedictine Community Administrator, and Darcy Johnson, Oblate Co-director. Not pictured, Sarah Orner, Morgantown, WV.

Requiescant in Pace

Rita Marcoux
Lima OH
Died October 8, 2026

Diane Hoover
Erie PA
Died August 3, 2026

Lola Ellison
Erie PA
Died July 4, 2026

Colleen Ahearn
Erie PA
Died May 13, 2026

Dolores Prestay
Marquette MI
Died February 23, 2026

John Bosich
Wallingford CT
Died November 11, 2025

Christina Nord
Philadelphia PA
Died October 26, 2025

That in all things God may be glorified.

Pennsylvania Secretary of State visits monastery

Pennsylvania Secretary of State Al Schmidt visited the Benedictine Sisters of Erie to celebrate their Margaret Chase Smith American Democracy Award from the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) and to induct Sister Marcia Sigler and Sister Rosanne Loneck into the Pennsylvania Voter Hall of Fame. The two sisters have voted in fifty consecutive November elections.

"I nominated the sisters for this national award for their courage in refuting false voter fraud claims against them and using their time in the spotlight to encourage people to be conscientious consumers of social media," Schmidt said. "They're true role models of civic engagement. They vote faithfully, carpooling to the polls on Election Day or casting their ballots by mail."

Two weeks before the 2024 presidential election, a post on X went viral claiming that a political operative had gone to the sisters' monastery, where fifty-three voters were registered, and found that "NO ONE lives there." The sisters issued a press release and were innundated wtih news coverage, grateful for the opportunity to remind readers not to believe everything posted online. They were shocked when they learned that NASS was recognizing them for standing up to voter fraud. Scan the QR code above right for program video and pictures.



Back row: Terry Scutella, Erie County Council, Erie Mayor Daria Devlin, Sister Diane Rabe, Sister Linda Romey, Pennsylvania Representative Bob Merski, Secretary of State Al Schmidt. Front row: Sister Marcia Sigler and Sister Rosanne Loneck, PA Voter Hall of Fame inductees, Sister Ann Hoffman, former poll worker.

Divine Presence is everywhere

The Erie Benedictines were among the 3,000 persons at the 2026 Pride on the Bay event at Liberty Park the end of June. Quoting the Rule of St. Benedict, "... we believe the divine presence is everywhere," Communications intern Sophie, Sister Linda Romey, and Miriam, Benedictine Peacemakers Program, greeted attendees throughout the afternoon. "This event is a great place to have good conversations, connect with friends, and meet new people," said Sister Linda.



Fifty-five and under gathering

Erie Benedictines Sisters Jen Frazer, Jacqueline Sanchez-Small, and Val Luckey were participants in the Benedictine 55 and Under gathering that took place at St. Scholastica Monastery in Duluth, Minnesota, in early July. Sister Anne McCarthy, far right, presented at the conference where forty-five Benedictines under the age of fifty-five gathered for a weekend of prayer, input, reflection, and socializing.

"What a gift it was to hear our own Sister Anne reflect on the beautiful way of life we share. Through her reflections on prayer, stability, and adaptability we were renewed in our appreciation for living life interdependently—a true gift in our world today," said Sister Val. Sister Anne's sessions were Cenobitic Gifts in Divisive Times, Choral Chanting as Singing Resistance, and The Hemina as Model for Adaptation.





Benedictine study and pilgrimage

Erie Benedictines Cindy Hoover, Marian Wehler, and Pat Witulski were among twenty Benedictine sisters who traveled to Rome to experience both the history of the Benedictine wisdom tradition and the ongoing presence of the teaching and example of Benedict and Scholastica in today's world. From May 26 to June 11, the sisters visited Norcia, Pesinula in Rome, Subiaco, Monte Casino, and Assisi among other sites. They met with Benedictine sisters and monks in Norcia, saw St. Frances of Rome Monastery, met the Bastia Sisters near Monte Casino and the Bastia Sisters near Assisi. The trip was an immersion in Benedictine life and in the church culture in and around Rome. They stayed with the Missionary Benedictine Sisters at the Casa just outside of Rome.

Congregation of St. Scholastica Chapter

The Congregation of St. Scholastica recently held their Congregation Chapter meeting. Pictured are Sisters Susan Doubet, secretary, Charlotte Anne Zalot, Anne McCarthy, and Diane Rabe, delegates, and Sister Anne Wambach, Congregation Council. Each delegation was asked to choose one of their sisters who made a significant contribution in her lifetime to fostering monastic life. Sister Anne holds Erie's choice, Sister Mary Lou Kownacki, who was a face of peace and justice for her community, the Congregation, and beyond.

At the meeting, Sister Charlotte was elected to the Congregation Council. Sister Anne Wambach has completed twelve years on the Council.



Sister Ann Hoffman leaves AIM USA



Sister Ann Hoffman recently retired from AIM USA after fifteen years on staff and then as director. She reflects, "I had the opportunity to communicate with men and women, Benedictine and Cistercian monastics throughout the world. It was treasured time. A special memory is that of Sister Tumani from Tanzania. AIM-USA helped fund her tuition for doctoral studies in the U.S." Ann is pictured with the AIM USA Board of Directors in 2022. See page 4 to learn more about AIM.

That in all things God may be glorified.



St. Joseph Monastery in St. Marys, Pennsylvania, the first community in the U.S. founded by sisters from St. Walburg Monastery in Eichstätt, Bavaria in 1852, ceased to exist in 2014. More than ten years after its closing, most of the monastery buildings are now gone and the few remaining sisters are settled in other monasteries. St. Mary Parish took over the property and there is now a permanent memorial that lists all the Benedictine women who served in St. Marys for more than 160 years. Three sisters who entered St. Joseph Monastery are now Erie Benedictines: Sisters Marian Wehler, Jacinta Conklin, and Joachim Frey. Three others died since moving to Erie: Sisters Rosie Rice, Kathleen Warner, and Mary Bernard Lander.

Monastery move-ins

In June, three women moved into the monastery, two with the Benedictine Peacemakers Program and one as an intern in the Communications Office. Sister Diane Rabe, administrator, and the community welcomed and offered a blessing to Peacemakers Miriam Frey and Emilia Otte and intern Sophie Trusty. It is with gratitude that the sisters welcome guests, short or long term, to the monastery.



Endings and beginnings

Since 2007 Sister Marian Wehler has lived in Oil City, Pennsylvania, and ministered to local communities through Catholic Rural Ministry. This past summer she and Sister Tina Geiger, RSM, closed the Catholic Rural Ministry office and each returned to their communities. Although she now lives at the monastery in Erie, Sister Marian plans to mentor lay women in the area who will continue to offer prayer and retreat opportunities.

The sisters were a pastoral presence whose ministry served spiritual, social, and physical needs in mostly rural parish communities. "There have been many avenues of outreach, and it's been such a beautiful part of my life," Sister Marian said. "Sister Tina and I are going to miss each other, and we're going to miss everyone else too. The people have been wonderful ... they have enriched us so much."



Sisters from Erie traveled to Oil City for a farewell celebration for Sisters Marian and Tina. Left to right, Sisters Anne McCarthy, Pat Lupo, Marian, Tina, Rosanne Lindal-Hynes, Phyllis Schleicher, and Therese Glass.

St. Benedict Academy
Alumnae Association
Newsletter
Winter 2026

St. Benedict Academy: a legacy of women's empowerment

"With friends we never can forget."

SBA Open House draws 200 alumnae

The Benedictine Sisters 170th Anniversary celebrations would not have been complete without highlighting women who have been carrying Benedictine values into the world for nearly the entire history of the community—St. Benedict Academy Alumnae. The sisters arrived in Erie in 1856 and opened the St. Benedict Academy on East Ninth Street in 1869. The school closed in 1988 but the Alumnae Association is still strong.

To honor this legacy of empowering young women, the community hosted an open house in the former SBA building on East Tenth Street on July 26 and about 200 alumnae along with Benedictine sisters walked the halls once again. Former teacher Sister Rosanne Loneck spent the afternoon in one conversation after another: "I heard amazing stories of how the years at SBA shaped the lives of these women. They spoke of the importance of learning to believe in themselves, of being trusted to take initiative and to lead, of knowing that the sisters loved them and wanted them to excel as women. And we did love them, we still love them. We showed them the value of a spiritual community by how we lived our Benedictine life. I am so grateful for those years and also for who the alum have become."



Marie Tarasovitch Peterson '82, takes a selfie with members of the Class of 1983, Chris Scalise, Maryanne Feyas Mulligan, Becky Wojtasik Swigonski, Alisa Miller, and Jane Winarski London, in the SBA library.

Classes from the 1950s through the 1980s were represented and their voices echoed through the halls, classrooms, and stairwells as they reconnected, gathered for photos, told stories, and tried to remember which was their locker. While some changes have been made in the building to accommodate the needs of its current use as St. Benedict Education Center, most everything was recognizable and very well maintained.

Marie Peterson '82, Lisa Manendo '74, Julie Scheppner '87, Judy Allison '61, and the SBA Alumnae Association Board planned the open house and provided cookies. Michelle Basista, CFRE, Benedictine Sisters Development Associate and board member, coordinated the event. Scan QR code for a full photo gallery.



Cecilia (Leah) Popp '63, was one of many alum who visited with Sister Rosanne Loneck.



Alum wandered through hallways, looked for their lockers, went into classrooms, took selfies in the well-worn—and unchanged—stairwells. At times it looked like the changing of classes!





Class of 1976 50th Reunion

The Class of '76 celebrated their 50th Class Reunion at Lake Shore Country Club on September 19. The following morning several class members joined the sisters for Sunday Liturgy at the monastery. Sisters Carolyn Gorny-Kopkowski, Pat Lupo, Rosanne Loneck, and Dorothy Stoner joined them for a picture.

Class of 1967 annual picnic



Good weather, food, and friends came together for the Class of '67 annual picnic. The lassies enjoyed catching up with their classmates, remembering those not present, and praying in gratitude for the many blessings in their lives. The annual picnics started in 2017 after their 50th reunion. Plans are underway for their 60th reunion next year.

Class Reunions—let us know when your class is gathering and we will help you share the invitations! Email lromey@eriebenedictines.org

Let us pray for SBA alumnae who have passed into eternity.

Sheila Coe Luba '66
Therese Schroeck Rhineberger '82
Frances Gentile Rizzo '51
Mary Stephany Lyons '62
Therese Allgeier Husted '55
Rayetta Belott Bulos '65
Margaret Haraburda Nowak '51
Elizabeth Zimmerman Schessler '66
Laurie Rupczewski Desser '80
Margaret Somjai Harkness '51
Laurie Jargiello Mathews '82
Cheryl Tobin '79
Dorothy Plonski '51
Darcie Wetherbee Vargo '59
Susan Mehalko Roehrl '64
Karen Armanini Feikls '76
Alice Moomy '68
Judith Lackovic '64
Karen Ivan '65
Marlene Hahn Anderson '57
Michelle Wilwohl, OSB, '54

New SBA Alumnae Association Board member

The SBA Alumnae Association Board asked Michelle Basista, CFRE, Benedictine Sisters Development Associate, to join the Board. Although Michelle is not an SBA alum, she did attend St. Benedict Child Development Center. "I am honored to work with the SBA alumnae board and their efforts to promote Catholic education, support the ministries of the Benedictine sisters, and encourage the alumnae to stay connected," said Michelle, who has been working with the board since she began working with the Benedictine Sisters in 2021.



SBA Alumnae Board members at the Christmas in July bingo: Sue Chase '82, Valerie Purzycki '88, Katie Young '87, Darlene Kerstetter '82, and Cheryl Zingelewicz '65, and Michelle Basista. Not pictured are Sister Rosanne Loneck '61, Sue Zill '65, and Sheila Warner '73.

Class of 1966 60th Reunion



The St. Benedict Academy Class of 1966 celebrated their 60th class reunion on June 6 at the Lake View Golf Club in North East. The following Sunday morning, members gathered at the monastery for Sunday liturgy followed by a gathering in the monastery dining room. Sisters and other guests enjoyed visiting with alumnae, some of whom now live out of town and hadn't visited recently.

2026 Scholarship Winners

The SBA Alumnae Association is pleased to announce 40 scholarships of $300 each awarded to relatives of alumnae who will be attending Catholic grade or high schools for the 2026-2027 school year. Funding comes from monies raised at the Annual Spring Luncheon, Cash Bingos, and donations to the Association. The SBA Alumnae Association began awarding these scholarships in 1991.

Cathedral Prep: Alex Kamholz by Susan Custer '69 • Casey Wagner by Nancy Ruffa '73 • Madison Van Scoter by Bridget Wickles • Bentley Vereb by Catherine Kupniewski '72 • Breese Stoeger by Nancy Stoeger '66 • Kylie Carutis by Constance Watt '74 • **Mercyhurst Prep:** Sophia Pitcher by Karen Sonney '76 • Kate Comstock-Cote by Ann Comstock '64 • Macy Bowes by Anne Shiel '79 • James Swoger by Kryss Craig '68 • Laina Drabic by Mary Chimenti '74 • Luca Pelkowski by Patricia Flagella '65 • Jaxon Mhya by Mary Roderman '72 • **Our Lady of Peace:** Ryan Weigold by Michele Pellegrino '81 • Eliza & Jorge Zaczyk by Judith Malcolm '81 • Nora Karns by Robin Holby '82 • **St George:** Claire Pintea by Sarah Flatley '89 • Cameron Odorisio by Kathy Grisier '79 • Frank Marz by Rosemary Niebauer '72 • David Rose by Regina Lintelman '82 • Brennan Kulbacki by Maryann Sullivan '73 • **St James:** Noah Mazanowski by Amelia Ranowiecki '84 • **St Jude:** Ryder Roach by Margaret Hinkle '74 • Callum Bender by Lisa Kelleher '82 • Liam Bramwell by Tina Delio '73 • Sofia Skelton by Becky Grab '77 • Sophie Hilling by Mary Spaeder '82 • **St Luke:** Parker Peterson by Cheryl Chrzanowski '82 • Addison Claire Johnson by Patty Johnson '73 • Charlie Campbell by Cynthia Belczyk '73 • Liam & Lucas Thomas by Deborah Konieczki '72 • Noah & Madison Criscione by Cynthia Ruf '67 • **Schools outside of Erie:** Theodore Groucutt by Mary Rita Groucutt '72 • Anna Patterson by Anne DeLuca '72 • Jonathan Patton by Joanne Cargioli '66 • Louisa & Nicholas Field by Mary Lou Albertson '67 • Andrew Barczynski by Jeannette Barczynski '65 • Audrey Binder by Cynthia Patalita '66 • Tanner Catrabone by Kathy Wozniak '72 • Dane Stemmler by Catherine Stemmler '64 • Juliet Dombrowski by Karen Krahe '66

"We are very grateful for an SBA Alumnae Scholarship for my great nephew, Callum Bender who is starting Kindergarten at St. Jude's. This generous support will help us provide him with a strong Catholic education, where faith, kindness, and learning are nurtured every day. Thank you for believing in the importance of Catholic education and for investing in the future of children like Callum." —with heartfelt gratitude, Lisa Kelleher, class of 1982.

Next year the SBA Alumnae Association will award twenty **$500 scholarships** and, to reduce costs, will move the application process online. Applications are accepted from December 1 – June 30. Recipients are determined by lottery. **Visit eriebenedictines.org/good-work/sba-alum or scan the QR code to access the online application** or make a donation to support the mission of the SBA Alumnae Association. Contact Michelle Basista 814-899-0614 x2281 or email mbasista@eriebenedictines.org if you have questions.

Benedictine Sisters of Erie
Mount Saint Benedict Monastery
6101 East Lake Road
Erie, PA 16511

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Please alert Heather Cloutier, Benedictine Sisters Development Office, of any address changes. Call 814-899-0614, ext. 2573, or email hcloutier@eriebenedictines.org. If you prefer not to receive a print copy of *The Mount*, please let Heather know. Current and past issues of *The Mount* are available on our website at **eriebenedictines.org/good-work/mount-magazine.html**.

GLINODO

In omnibus glorificetur Deus —
That in all things God may be glorified.



Glinodo Center, whose name is an acronym of the Latin phrase *In omnibus glorificetur Deus*, found in Chapter 57 of the Rule of Benedict, is an appropriate place for gatherings that remind us that we live in God's glory.



In June, "Mother Ignatia's Ban the Bootleggers Bash" fundraiser brought 200 people out to enjoy local drink and generous appetizers prepared by the monastery kitchen staff.





In August we welcomed our goat friends and their goatherds to clear invasive species safely and offer an educational opportunity.





Tennessee Back Porch, a popular local band whose members are friends of the community, provided entertainment.





Goat Fest attracted 300 people who learned about "goatscaping" and enjoyed goat antics. Arts and science activities entertained and educated guests; a story book trail wound through the woods; local artist Elizabeth Nawrocki created a logo she printed on t-shirts brought by visitors.