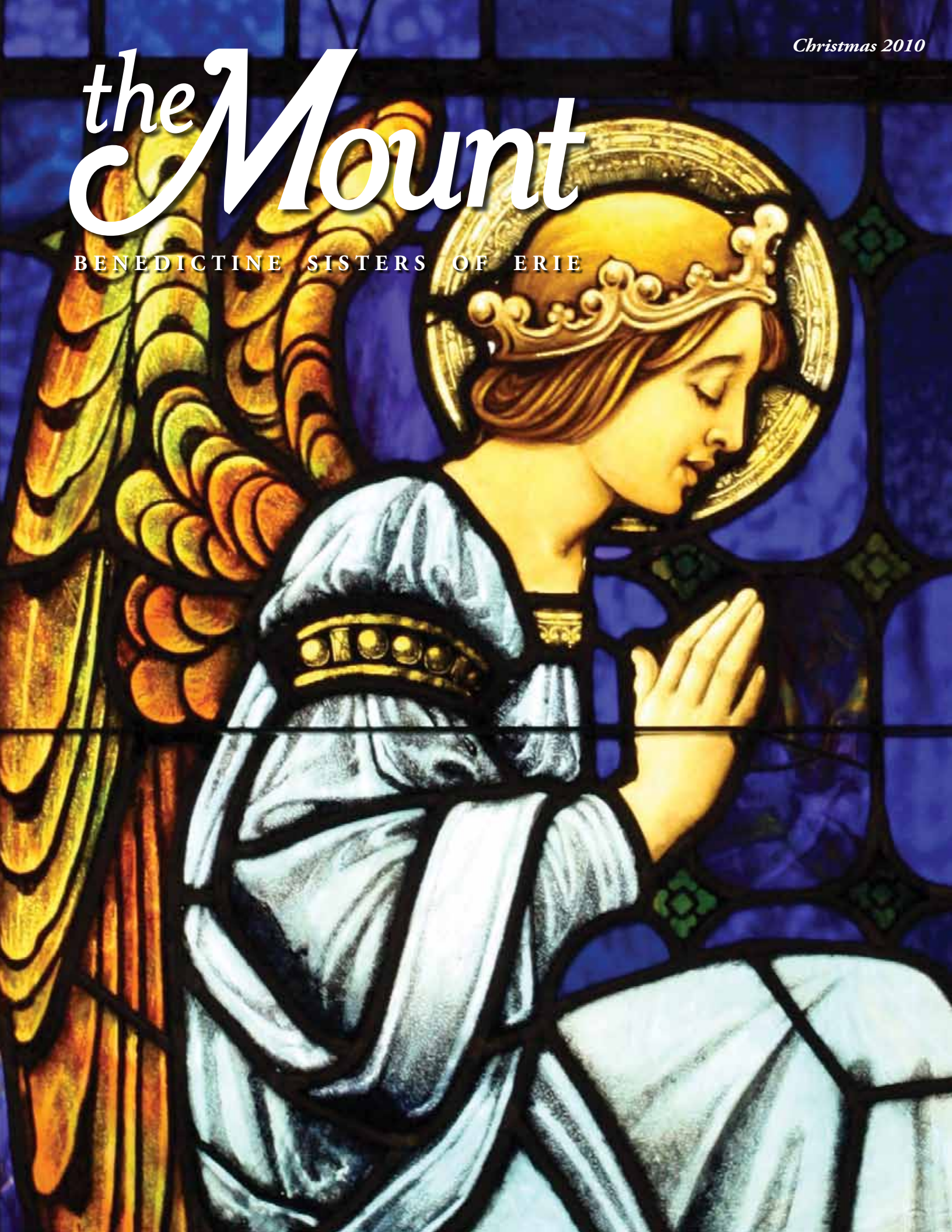


Christmas 2010

# *the Mount*

BENEDICTINE SISTERS OF ERIE





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### Credits

#### Contributors

Marlene Bertke, OSB, Jo Clarke, Oblate, Ann Comstock, Oblate, Patti Eichen, Janice Etchison, Oblate, Therese Glass, OSB, Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB, Miriam Mashank, OSB, Audrey Steff, OSB, Mary Jane Vergotz, OSB, Christine Vladimiroff, OSB, Anne Wambach, OSB

#### The Mount Photographers

Barbara Bauer, OSB, Jo Clarke, Oblate, Mary Ellen Emmett, Susan Freitag, OSB, Ann Hoffman, OSB, Mary Miller, OSB, Ann Muczynski, OSB, Margaret Ann Pilewski, OSB, Linda Romey, OSB, Lucia Marie Surmik, OSB, Charlotte Anne Zalot, OSB

Editor: Charlotte Anne Zalot, OSB

Editorial Assistant: Linda Romey, OSB

Angel Photos: Jo Clarke, Oblate

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When I was young, angels played a prominent part in the magic of Christmas. There was something about the choirs of angels that sang, “Glory to God in the highest,” that couldn’t be captured at any other time of the year. In more recent years, however, angels have become very popular all the time. Some might even call it “angel craze” or “angel mania.” There are various kinds of angel statues and knick-knacks, angel T-shirts, angel calendars, and angel jewelry. And of course, we mustn’t forget the all time TV favorite, “Touched by an Angel.”

Angel enthusiasts are quick to point out that angels do many things for us. While I may not classify myself as an angel “enthusiast” in the most literal sense of the word, I do admit to being a believer. If angels are those who guard and protect, guide and direct, inspire and heal; if angels are those who give comfort and care, are selfless and generous, inclusive and accepting; if angels are those with vision and purpose, commitment and faithfulness, perseverance and patience – then I have no doubt that you, too, will believe in angels by the time you reach the end of this magazine. You will read a sister’s reflection on angels and hear about the work of angels; you will see how angels have touched the lives of others and made them better. You might even learn how you, yourself, can be or already are an angel in ways you hadn’t realized; you might even learn that you have been touched by an angel unawares.

As Saint Thomas Aquinas said so well, “An angel can illuminate the thought and mind of [humans] by strengthening the power of vision.” May this issue of *The Mount* be an “angel” – a messenger of God that touches your heart, expands your vision, and allows you to see and feel, be and become, the very presence of angels in our world.

Charlotte Anne Zalot, OSB

### Angel Kneeling in Prayer

Cover Photo by Jo Clarke, Oblate

In 1874 the Benedictine Sisters of Erie built a chapel on East Ninth Street. It was not until 1896 that the first six stained glass windows were installed. When the chapel was expanded in 1915 to accommodate the vigorous growth of the community, eleven new windows were added, including four worshipping angels in the sanctuary. In 1973, after time and weather had taken their toll, the chapel was demolished but the windows were kept intact. The four angels stayed with the community while the rest were sent to St. Lawrence Parish, Albion, there to be placed in the new church. Today, three of the angel windows that were restored by Marcie Bircher, Oblate, reside in various parts of the Monastery. Among them is the *Angel Kneeling in Prayer*, pictured on the front cover. Originally donated by Ida Sanner, this window was mounted in the newer section of the Monastery at the end of the Ground Floor South Hall.

### BENEDICTINE CHARISM STATEMENT

The Benedictine way is to seek God in cenobitic life and to respond in prayer and ministry.





*From the Prioress*

## *Christmas Reflection*

*T*he Christmas story ushers in a new story for humankind, one that reveals the great gift of selfless love that is made possible by the mystery of the Incarnation. The gift comes through a new family: Mary, Joseph and their infant son, Jesus, and God's invitation to us to be part of that family.

As we recall that first Christmas, we remember angels appearing to bring news of great joy. They proclaimed to all generations that a savior had been born for us! Our joy cannot be contained at the wonder of the gift that God has given to us, Jesus, the savior of the world.

Jesus was born into a family, into a community where he was loved and nurtured, where he learned to give and receive, revealing God's love to his family, to the stranger, to the outcast and to each of us.

This love of God given to us through Jesus is the true meaning of Christmas and by following the life and example of Jesus, we, too, learn how to be in loving relationship with God and with others.

As we prepare to celebrate this great feast of gift-giving, Edward Hays reminds us that the word "present" originated from the French for "bringing something into someone's presence."

In a world hungry for love and fullness of life, the greatest gift that we can give, then, is the gift of ourselves to another. Looking into the eyes and heart of another, whether stranger, friend or family, and welcoming them into our heart, home or community recaptures the awe and delight of the Christmas story, Jesus, the gift of love, given fully to each of us.

With a listening heart, we can understand both the spoken and unspoken messages in the people we meet each day throughout the holiday season and respond with love.

The Christmas mystery is God's choice to live among us and in us everywhere and at all times. Jesus' birth in a stable serves to remind us that God's presence is to be found in unexpected places and in unlikely people. It's up to us to accept the gift and open our eyes to see and rejoice in the presence of God surrounding us.

God became flesh in Jesus, in you and in me and in the world.

By your kind words and healing presence you make God present to others. May you know that God truly is with you and in you, and may you share true peace, joy and love with others this Christmas season.

I wish you great joy!

*Anne Wambach, OSB*

Anne Wambach, OSB  
Prioress, Benedictine Sisters of Erie





# Angels

By Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB

I've had two life-changing encounters with angels. When I was sixteen an angel appeared to me. Granted, I had just snuck into the house after a Friday night illegal beer party. But there it was, right in the corner of my bedroom, all aglow.

I wasn't frightened, only embarrassed about drinking so much. "I'm making a real mess of my life," I told the angel. "What should I do?"

"You'd better go to the convent," the angel replied.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "I'm really not the type."

"I'm positive," the angel said.

"Okay," I answered. And that was it.

The next day I told my mother I was entering the convent and went to the Book of Saints to pick out my future sister's name (Sebastian, patron of athletes and soldiers, is what I chose. I was very patriotic then, and I was an excellent athlete.) The next Monday I joined the vocation club and the following year I entered the Benedictine Sisters of Erie.

To this day I'm not sure whether the angel was the result of too much beer, a dream, or an actual visit. Whatever, it changed my life.

The second encounter came when I visited the angel tree at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City one Christmas season. I was studying in New York, and this was my first visit to the museum. On a Sunday afternoon in mid-December it was jammed, and I just followed the crowd into a very large room. Suddenly all the holiday noise, talk, and bustle stopped, and a great silence filled the vast hall. The crowd of holiday visitors was hushed, gazing reverently at the largest Christmas tree I had ever seen. And the most breathtaking.

In front of me was a thirty-foot blue spruce covered with elegant, hand-sculptured angels. How to describe them? How to capture the divine aura, the radiance, the obvious mystical rapture? The fifty or so angels seemed in flight, their hair waving wildly as if caught in a strong wind.

Many were swinging silver-gilt censors; some were just poised in adoration. All were turned toward a tiny child in the crib, almost invisible at the foot of the tree. Under the tree, magi, shepherds, animals, townspeople, and travelers representing every corner of the earth hurried toward the manger, about two hundred figurines in all.

But it was the angels that sent me to the celestial sphere. The faces of the angels, all aglow with awe and wonder and mystery! It was a tender and terrible scene; for a moment I was suspended between heaven and earth.

And then the music began. "O Holy Night" poured out of the loudspeaker and bathed the hall with heavenly song. Truly I heard angels sing. All I wanted to do was to prostrate myself and adore.

Abraham Maslow would call my moment a peak experience; monastics might speak of a contemplative moment. I have returned to the angel tree at the Met two other times, and even though it is always a sacred moment, I haven't recaptured the peak experience of my first encounter.

Since the age of sixteen, then, I have been very fond of winged creatures bathed in light. I'm especially attracted to Christmas angels, and here's why.

**One, angels are good for my dreams.** It can be such a dull, predictable, boring world, can't it? All those rational managers in charge of everything. All those disciples of gray. Ah, but angels appearing to virgins and shepherds and magi, now that's a reason to get out of bed in the morning. If those angel visits are true, then anything is possible. I can dream dreams of no abused children, of beds for all the homeless, of food for all the hungry. Even world peace is possible.

**Two, angels teach me how to pray.** Just listen to their prayer on Christmas night, "Glory to God in the highest." No self-preoccupation here, only praise and more praise. No gloom and doom here, just song and celebration. "Peace on earth," the angels proclaim. What a wonderful blessing to shower on our world. What a way to proclaim

that all earth is holy ground. “To pray without ceasing,” the angels tell me, “is to hold both God and the world in my heart while chanting ‘holy, holy, holy.’”

**Three, angels fill me with holy terror.** Or maybe it is heart-breaking beauty and soul-stripping truth. Remember, at the sight of angels the shepherds were filled with both fear and immeasurable joy. That’s why I’m not crazy about cute, plump, cherub angels. I like pictures and statues of wild-looking ones, hair blowing in the wind, incense holders swinging wildly. “Who can see the face of God and live?” Moses asked. Well, angels have. What I see in the faces of these angels is the price paid for daring to enter the holy presence, and I am forced to my knees.

**Four, angels fill me with courage.** “Every blade of grass has an angel over it saying, ‘Grow,’” the Talmud reads. With an angel of God protecting me, I have no excuse for not imitating the shepherds and carrying God’s message to the countryside. I can speak out against injustice. I can risk welcoming strangers. I can even face myself in the mirror.

**Sister Mary Lou is pictured here with some of her students from the Neighborhood Art House where she teaches classes in creative writing. She is also the director of Benetvision, the community’s publishing ministry.**



**Five, angels call me to my better self.** Because of an angel’s call, Mary risked her reputation and became “blessed among women.” Because of an angel’s call, Joseph risked ridicule and brought hope to the world. Because of an angel’s call, the shepherds faced their fears and raced toward a star in the night. I want to run, heart overflowing, into the heart of God, too. But apathy often wins out, and I settle for being less than I am.

**Six, angels tell me something about God.** As Meister Eckhart wrote, “That’s all an angel is, an idea of God.” The main insight into God that I’ve learned from angels is to pay attention to the poor. The first to know about the birth of Jesus were the shepherds, the soup-kitchen clients of Bethlehem. And in scripture, angels often come to earth disguised as strangers.

We can never prove it, but we think Alfred A. was an angel. He appeared at our soup kitchen one day in the image of a Native American—tall, dark skin, high cheekbones, jet-black hair pulled back in a ponytail. After eating a meal, he walked up to the serving counter and asked for a table napkin. Then he took a pencil from his vest pocket, stood at the counter, and began to scribble on the napkin.

A few minutes later he handed one of the volunteers the paper napkin and said, “I feel the presence of God here.” On the napkin was a sketch of the face of Jesus. Then he walked out the door, and we haven’t seen him since. The only proof we have that he appeared is that sketch and the signature Alfred A.

What message from God did we get from our disguised angel? I think Alfred A. reminded us that to serve the stranger, the poor, is an act of worship. Wherever we treat the stranger with respect, with kindness, with unconditional love, we worship God.

If we get only one message from an angel in our lifetime, may it be the one delivered by Alfred Angel: “I feel the presence of God here.”

“Angels” is an excerpt from the book, *A Monk in the Inner City, The ABCs of a Spiritual Journey*, written by Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB, and published by Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, in 2008.



# Sister Santa



“Sister Santa,” as Sister Rosanne Lyndal-Hynes has affectionately come to be known, has been organizing a children’s Christmas gift program for more than 19 years as part of her work at Emmaus Ministries. In that time the number of children receiving gifts of clothing has soared from 200 to 2,000. In early October Sister Rosanne advertises the program at the Emmaus Soup Kitchen. Word travels quickly and she soon begins the task of interviewing families. With the help of a number of “elves,” Sister Rosanne talks with parents or guardians to get the information needed to provide clothing for their children. For many this is the only Christmas gift they receive. The information is disseminated among several local churches and organizations. People from St. Jude, St. Luke, St. George, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and Mt. Calvary Roman Catholic churches, Fairview High School, Emmanuel Presbyterian Women’s Association, and even some individuals shop for designated families and return their bag of beautifully wrapped gifts to Sister Rosanne for distribution. With the help of even more “elves,” Sister Santa makes sure the gifts reach the children’s homes in time for Christmas. As Sister Rosanne says, “Not a year goes by that I do not stand in awe of the care-filled thoughtfulness and generosity of the people of Erie.”



## A Story to Remember from Sister Rosanne

Several years ago, I received a phone call from a woman who had no money to buy Christmas gifts for her children, two girls aged six and eight. I told her that I would provide money for her to take the girls shopping. Then I received a second call. The mother told me she was too sick to take the girls shopping. She asked me to do it. In the midst of the hustle and bustle of Christmas and the organization of the children’s gift program, I agreed and off we went. When we were finished shopping I suggested to the girls that we look for a gift for their mother. They excitedly decided that it should be a pink dress, their mother’s favorite color. It took us awhile but a pink dress that met with the girls’ satisfaction was finally found and purchased. I will never forget how those little girls beamed with the anticipated pleasure of bringing their mother such a special gift. Little did I know that it would be their mother’s last dress. The mother never told me how sick she was so you can imagine my shock when I received a call the week before Christmas to tell me that she had died from cancer. She was laid to rest in that pink dress. To this day I am not sure what was more special about that experience: the mother’s urgent desire to be sure her children had a Christmas gift or the children’s eager desire to find their mother the perfect gift. What I am sure about is the power of love. It was the power of love that challenged me to find the time to help one more person; it was the power of love that brought peace to a mother’s heart in her dying days; it was the power of love that allowed two little girls to have the memory of their mother in a beautiful pink dress that they had specially picked just for her.



# Beginnings & Endings

“All glory comes from daring to begin.” — Eugene F. Ware

## Oblate Commitment

More than 250 women and men renewed their annual commitment to live as Oblates of the Erie Benedictines in a ceremony at Evening Praise on Saturday, October 30. During the same ceremony 15 new oblates made their initial commitment to the common goal of all the oblates: to seek God through a life based on the Rule of Benedict. Each new initiate also received a copy of the Rule from Sister Anne Wambach, prioress.

The sisters blessed the oblates as they received their promise to continue or begin their relationship of mutual support with the community — enabling a stronger Benedictine presence working for the transformation of the world.

Says Sister Marilyn Schauble, Oblate Director: “The Oblates of Mount Saint Benedict are truly amazing people. Their witness to the way of life that Benedict sets forth is edifying, exciting and challenging as they continue to seek God in their lives among co-workers, neighbors, family and friends. Because of who they are and how they live Benedictine values the world is a better place.”

Erie Benedictine Oblates are people from across the United States and abroad. Some live in Erie and work or volunteer in Benedictine ministries and visit the monastery frequently. Others live at a distance and travel to Erie for special gatherings, programs and celebrations. Some are unable to physically come to the monastery and they remain in contact with the oblates and sisters through an online relationship. Read more about the life of an oblate at Sister Marilyn’s blog, *Living the Zeal of Benedict* ([erieoblates.blogspot.com](http://erieoblates.blogspot.com)).

### 2010 Oblate Initiates:

(seated) Virginia Kraus (Harborcreek, PA), Paul Womack (Chautauqua, NY), Pam Gent (Meadville, PA), Mike Gent (Meadville, PA).

(standing) Sister Anne Wambach, Prioress, Bev McArthur (Willoughby, OH), Therese Ann Larson (Harborcreek, PA), Jessie Johnson (Pittsburgh, PA), Tom LeBeau (Lancaster, NY), Sister Marilyn Schauble, Oblate Director

Absent from photo: Missy Brunner (Lima, OH), Debra Duckworth (Arvada, CO), Mark Friesland (Kingsport, TN), Mary Jo Kochly (Fremont, CA), Cathy Manghelli (Lima, OH), Maureen Nealon (Sedona, AZ), Hilary West (Queretaro, Mexico)



Janice Etchison, front center, pictured with the sisters who guided her in the Benedicta Riepp Program. Row 1, l to r: Sister Christine Kosin (mentor), Janice, Sister Dorothy Stoner (past Director of Monastic Formation); Row 2, l to r: Sister Marlene Bertke (AIM staff), Sister Anne Wambach (Prioress), Sister Stephanie Schmidt (present Director of Monastic Formation).

## Benedicta Riepp Program

On Sunday, October 31, Janice Etchison completed a one-year commitment as a participant in the Benedicta Riepp Program.

During the past year Janice immersed herself in seeking God by living within community, participating in a program of study and embracing the monastic way of life together with the Benedictine Sisters. She also worked in various ministries throughout the year including St. Benedict Education Center, AIM (Alliance for International Monasticism), the community’s liturgy office and the infirmary. In addition she assisted with the preparation of the St. John’s Bible Exhibit at the monastery, belonged to Benedictines for Peace and sang in the Schola (sisters’ choir).

“I am overwhelmed by the community’s generosity and thank the sisters from the bottom of my heart for their graciousness and hospitality,” she said in her thank you to the community. Janice was celebrated at a special brunch with a blessing prayer from the community to support her as she continues to live the values of Benedictine spirituality in her daily life. She will stay in Erie and has accepted a position as Participant Coordinator at St. Benedict Education Center.

For more information about the Benedicta Riepp Program, contact Sister Stephanie Schmidt, Director of Monastic Formation, at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery ([formation@mtstbenedict.org](mailto:formation@mtstbenedict.org)).

# Receiving the Stranger as Christ

## The Refugee Program at St. Benedict Education Center

By Miriam Mashank, OSB



St. Benedict Education Center (SBEC) has been the primary contractor for Employment and Training Programs for the Department of Public Welfare (DPW) for 21 years. SBEC operates EARN (Employment Advancement and Retention Network), DPW's Welfare to Work Program, in six counties in northwest Pennsylvania. EARN enrolls parents of dependent children who are recipients of government cash assistance and provides intensive case management, academic remediation, job training, driver training, job development,

job placement and job retention services which lead to employment, increased family income, ultimate separation from government cash assistance and becoming tax paying citizens. 2,900 parents, 310 of whom were refugees, enrolled in EARN over the course of last year.

In July 2009, DPW asked SBEC to add a Refugee component to its EARN Program. Since that time a cohort of 504 refugees have been enrolled in EARN. The refugees represent 10 different counties and speak 20 different languages/dialects. Some refugees come directly from years of living in a refugee camp; many have survived years and years of war, famine, and utter destitution. Their challenges are many. Lack of English language skills, enculturation needs, economic needs, physical and emotional needs... the list is endless. Yet, the staff at St. Benedict Education Center finds this group resilient and creative and grateful and enterprising. And amazingly optimistic.



Our Refugee Program is a work in progress...ever evolving. One thing is for certain. We have learned far more from our refugees than we have taught them. And one more thing is for certain...we are determined to make sure that justice and kindness prevail for these remarkable folks.

DPW has recognized the St. Benedict Education Center Refugee program as a blue-ribbon program. We were designated to represent the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania at the June Refugee Resettlement National Consultation in Washington, DC. Ellen DiPlacido, Coordinator of the SBEC Refugee Program, served as a conference presenter; four SBEC staff members accompanied Ellen. A recent visit with Harrisburg DPW officials left us with the parting comment: "We wish we could pick this program up and drop it in every EARN Program throughout the state."



### St. Benedict Education Center REFUGEE FACT SHEET

July 1, 2009- October 31, 2010

Compiled by: Miriam Mashank, OSB

- Total EARN Program enrollment for above dates: 3,800 (enrollment continues each week)
- EARN Program refugee enrollment: 504 parents (enrollment continues each week)
- Countries Represented: Nepal, Somalia, Iraq, Ukraine, Bhutan, Sudan, Burma, Russia, Burundi, Congo

*We are each of us angels with only one wing and we can only fly by embracing one another.*

*—Luciano de Crescenzo*

# LEP Intake Reflections

By Therese Glass, OSB

Six or seven languages spoken simultaneously in one room! Persons speaking in tongues! That's the way it seems in Room 101 at St. Benedict Education Center when I, an Intake Coordinator, am privileged to greet the shy yet brave, apprehensive yet hopeful, refugees fleeing danger or persecution in their own countries who arrive to enroll in the federally funded EARN Program at SBEC. Through interpreters the refugees become aware that Benedictine Sisters came to Erie in 1856 to teach German immigrants. And now in 2010 the Benedictine Sisters as well as many lay staff and volunteers are committed to assisting refugees from over 20 countries. When I mention a Chinese proverb: "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step" and then add: "Welcome to Erie and SBEC! We want to help you take more steps on your journey!" their eyes brighten, their shoulders relax and their smiles broaden. Some have been in Erie for weeks, some for months. Some have lived in refugee camps for 15 years or more; some need assistance to make an X to indicate their signature; others are highly educated professionals. Most speak little or no English. All are seekers desiring a new beginning in Erie.



The Intake/Orientation process (about two hours in length) has no geographic or political boundaries. Whether persons are from Bhutan, the Congo or Eritrea; whether they speak Dinka, Mai-Mai or Swahili; whether they toiled in rice paddies, shepherded goats or were architects in their countries of origin they are united in their efforts to complete the required paperwork for LEP (Limited English Program) within the umbrella of EARN. The refugees respectfully and eagerly assist one another in finding the proper places for signatures on forms and the pages of the EARN handbook which are being presented. They sometimes joke that the first words they learned in America were "bills" and "garbage," for well meaning persons have told them to be sure to pay their bills and to take out their garbage!

Often they mention the desire for employment to better their own lives and the lives of others as well as to pay back the airfare for their journey to the USA. They are appreciative of the many social services available in the Erie area and for the relatively low cost of living here. However, the weather in Erie is a particular challenge for those from warmer climates.

Afterward the refugees meet the Program Coordinators and Employment Coordinators who will use a specialized phone service, the Language Line, through which interpreters can be readily available to translate for the refugees as their education begins. Throughout LEP, Benedictine hospitality thrives.

- Job Placement Rate: 85%
- 87% of the jobs offer medical benefits
- Job Retention Rate: 90%

**8 SBEC professional staff members assigned to the Refugee Program**

**8 volunteers assist on a weekly basis**

# Receiving the Stranger as Christ

## The Program

By Janice Etchison, Oblate

I was nervous about my ability to relate to people through language barriers before I began working as a volunteer with the limited-English participants at St. Benedict Education Center. But I quickly realized how easy it is to communicate. Whether their native language is Somali or Arabic or Bhutanese or Burmese, we could laugh and learn something about each other's lives: how many children we had, where we were born, how long we have lived in Erie.

For refugees with well-developed English skills, sometimes even with college degrees, we developed a job readiness program. I presented a workshop on the cultural nuances of a job interview, to make eye contact and share a strong handshake with the people you meet. We discussed appropriate clothing and attitude and rehearsed questions and answers. SBEC sponsored an "Interview Olympics" and invited owners and hiring managers from several area companies to role play job interviews with the students.

Additional training happens at SBEC's own "factory" where participants are trained in the assembly of plastic parts. The teachers at SBEC also developed workshops to provide training in housekeeping, childcare and sewing. Some refugees were chosen to participate in a 10-week training program, sponsored by the St. Martin's Center, which focused on working in the restaurant industry. Several students planted vegetable gardens near SBEC and Emmaus Soup Kitchen. They tended and harvested the vegetables and used them in preparing their own meals.

Many of the participants now work in plastic factories and as housekeepers in the many hotels in south Erie. Some are employed at a local hospital and others as cooks and busboys at restaurants and in the cafeteria of a major company. The Mending Place, developed by a teacher and a volunteer at SBEC, employs women with excellent tailoring and sewing skills.

Just when the SBEC staff was concerned about finding additional opportunities, something new appeared: a staff member at the Erie Art Museum received a grant from the National Arts Foundation to train people from other cultures as daycare workers. This unique two-month program focuses on teaching children's songs from their cultures to the English speaking children who attend the early learning centers where these interns will practice their training. Women from Sudan, Congo, Iraq and Bhutan are among the interns and hope this training will lead to future employment opportunities.

SBEC bustles with activity as it lives out its commitment to treat everyone who enters as Christ, who said,

**"I was a stranger and you welcomed me."**

(Rule of Benedict, Ch. 53)



*I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.*  
—Michelangelo

## Reflection

By Audrey Steff, OSB

Each day I am privileged to work with two small groups of refugees, many of whom have come from war torn areas in which friends and family were beaten, raped and sometimes killed. I work with people from the Congo and Somalia in Africa and Burma and Bhutan in Asia. Not only have these refugees been forced to leave their homes, but they have also had to leave behind family and friends.

Often I ask these students why they came to America. My three students from Somalia told me that there is much suffering in



Somalia and they came here to escape the civil war in their country. Their villages were in the midst of the fighting. Habiba was wounded by gun fire three times. She was very nonchalant when she showed me the scars. (I wonder what other scars she carries.) Abba was shopping in a village when gunfire

erupted near her. She saw men with guns coming toward her and so she ran to a cemetery where she hid behind grave stones. Abba crawled on her hands and knees from grave stone to grave stone to get away from the soldiers. After that, she and her husband decided to leave Somalia. Ahmed, Abba's brother-in-law, was stopped by a man with a gun who demanded money. Ahmed didn't have any money so the robber cut off part of his finger. Ahmed said he was lucky because the man could have shot him.

One would think that these refugees would be angry, frightened or depressed. But that has not been my experience with the refugees in my class. In fact, they seem very happy to come to class each day and they enjoy each other and are so eager to learn.

Sometimes there's even a bit of humor: one day Abba was learning to write her name and she started to laugh. I asked her what was so funny. Her answer, "Sister, I broke my paper." She had erased so much that she tore a hole in her paper. After all she has been through, she was still able to laugh.



## Reflection

By Marlene Bertke, OSB

As a Benedictine Sister of Erie, I share in our corporate commitment to justice for the poor, especially women and children. That's why, when I heard of the number of refugees attending class at St. Benedict Education Center, I inquired about helping as a teacher of English as a Second Language.

I began to work with a group of 15 men and women who had very little or no ability to understand or speak English. I could resonate with their language struggles since I went through—and am still going through—the same experience as I struggle to learn conversational Spanish.

After I admired their brightly-colored necklaces and tikas (a mark worn on the forehead), I was adorned with both necklaces and tikas for the next gathering. I wear them proudly.

My group is most anxious to learn English; they are cooperative, hardworking and very appreciative of my efforts. Their enthusiasm more than repays me for the time and energy I put into this endeavor.



# Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum

## BENEDICTINE WOMEN – WITNESSES OF HOPE

6th International  
CIB Symposium,  
Rome  
8-15 September,  
2010

## COMMUNIO INTERNATIONALIS BENEDICTINARUM BENEDICTINE WOMEN—WITNESSES OF HOPE

By Mary Jane Vergotz, OSB

When someone calls you on the eve of Super Bowl Sunday where the Pittsburgh Steelers are competing to become six-time champions, beware. The date was January 31, 2009, the caller, our then-prioress, Sister Christine Vladimiroff. The message: “Would you consider serving in my place as coordinator of the CIB (*Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum*) Symposium in Rome in 2010?” My response: “Yes, I would be happy to consider it.” This was the beginning of the adventure that became the Sixth International CIB Symposium entitled “Benedictine Women—Witnesses of Hope” at Sant’ Anselmo, Rome, Italy September 8-15, 2010.

Nearly two years of planning and preparation culminated in an experience of sharing our monastic heritage and life together as Benedictine women representing communities throughout the world. As coordinator of the symposium I had overall responsibility to work with the planning team to create an atmosphere of Benedictine hospitality where our 110 participants could join together in prayer, liturgy, meals, meetings and pilgrimages to intensify relationships as Benedictine women, witnesses of hope.

How does someone coordinate an international symposium in Rome while residing in Erie, PA? The answer: with patience and the help of email. My activities focused on arranging for personnel, accommodations, meals, equipment, supplies, and outings. During the early months of 2010 numerous contacts were made in Europe to secure oral translators for the five languages of the symposium, English, French, German, Italian and Spanish, and a multi-lingual secretaria staff. Accommodations were arranged at Sant’ Anselmo, site of the symposium, and the neighboring San Antonio Abate and Franca House to house the participants.

One of my avocations, travel director, served me well as I planned a variety of outings for the symposium participants. A pre-symposium pilgrimage to Subiaco and Monte Cassino provided an opportunity for 30 sisters to experience the places where Benedict established monasteries in the mountains outside of Rome. We joined the monks at the Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls for Sunday Vespers. On another evening, we visited with the Community of Sant’ Egidio, a Catholic public lay association, founded in Rome with communities throughout the world. The symposium participants listened to a presentation about the community that works to promote peace and justice and to eradicate poverty in the world; attended a reception and prayed Vespers together. A pilgrimage to Norcia provided an opportunity to visit the birthplace of Benedict and Scholastica, share in the Eucharist with the Abbot Primate and renew our monastic profession at the Church of St. Scholastica. On the final day of the symposium we took the morning off to attend the public audience with Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican.

When I reflect on experience of planning and participating in this symposium I feel blessed. The opportunity to serve the international Benedictine community has broadened my experience of the expressions of Benedictine life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and is one of the highlights of my monastic life. As we quietly left the monastery church on September 15 to return to living the monastic life envisioned by Benedict we left renewed in our commitment to be Benedictine Women—Witnesses of Hope.

## A MODEL THAT SEEKS TRUTH

By Christine Vladimiroff, OSB

**B**enedictine Women — Witnesses of Hope in 2010 was my third symposium. I was privileged to attend in 2002, 2006 and again this year. This gathering was a celebration of diversity and at the same time an event to forge an even stronger solidarity. The women came from different cultures, spoke different languages, and held different theological perspectives and views of Church. The Benedictine tradition brought us together as one family. Over the eight years, I have noticed that we have grown in our capacity to engage each other in positive ways and receive the gifts that each brings.

Much of what made the world feel so secure and reliable has come undone in our lifetime. Finding reserves of hope is a more complex task than it was in earlier generations. The September gathering with 110 Benedictine women from all over the world in Rome, Italy explored the concept, the virtue and the power of hope, that mysterious capacity to open us up to future possibilities. By hoping we give shape to our lives. To live by hope is to believe that it is worth taking the next steps. Hope is always exercised in relationship to someone other than self. It simply cannot be achieved alone. Hope is always centered on “we” not just “I.”

The constant re-shaping of hope in new situations is the prophetic task of a people of faith. Together we can redeem this time with the quality of our hope. Through the presentations, our exchange among the participants, our prayer and liturgy we found hope—that immense openness toward a promised future.

We live in a world that is divided and where the stranger, the one who does not look like me, is to be feared and excluded from my circle. We live in a world where disagreement is voiced in angry exchanges and personal attacks. Ideological positioning is offered rather than information. Anger has become a national habit. Dialogue that seeks truth so that the questions direct the conversation is not witnessed often in our exchanges whether in Church or in society.

The Benedictine Women’s symposium offered another model, one that seeks truth, builds relationships and celebrates diversity. Suspicion of the other has been replaced by trust. It is a model of Church in which what unites us is stronger and deeper than the differences on the surface. The abbesses and prioresses and sister participants offer a divided world a way to understand the other by sharing life, seeking understanding of the “other” and building relationships of acceptance.

My memories are rich, my hope is encouraged by the progress I have seen over eight years of engaging in this international forum. I am grateful.



***For more information about the 2010 symposium go to the CIB website: [benedictines-cib.org](http://benedictines-cib.org).***





# HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING...

And sing we do at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery! The Benedictine Sisters of Erie have long continued the monastic tradition of tending to the music of communal prayer and liturgy with devotion, practice and great care. We are dedicated to creating beautiful music with

which to offer praise and worship to God. Some of the sisters have formal music training; most do not. In light of that reality alone, what we accomplish together as a result of commitment and practice is just short of astonishing. Tuesday nights are normally reserved for choir and hand bell practice. The Sisters' Schola rehearses bi-monthly. Individual musicians are often heard practicing throughout the week and liturgy rehearsals on Sunday mornings are considered sacred.

Music plays a primary role in the development of our monastic identity. Whether it be singing or playing instruments together, the music unites us at a very deep level. Music has the power to foster connections between us that are hard to express with words; it urges us to reflect on the meaning of monastic community, especially one in which music is treasured. Our hymns and songs may vary in melody and rhythm but genuine harmony results when our voices unite as one in praise and worship.

Perhaps the key to the rich musical heritage that is ours, and which we hope to pass on to those who will come after us, is simply that we strive for excellence rather than perfection. This quest for excellence allows us to take risks, to be spontaneous, to find joy in the sounds that we create, to believe that music is a gift of God given to us as well as *through* us.

Week after week we offer our gift of music at Sunday Eucharist. The upcoming celebration of Christmas will allow us to share the beauty and delight of music in a special way. We invite you to join us for our liturgy on Christmas Eve, at 8:30 p.m., and Christmas Day, at 9:30 a.m. Your voice will swell the angel choirs; your presence will enrich the Benedictine Sisters of Erie.

Sisters prepare for Christmas Liturgies.



We invite you to join us for our liturgy:  
Christmas Eve, Saturday, December 24, 8:30 p.m.  
Christmas Day, Sunday, December 25, 9:30 a.m.



# ALTERNATIVE GIFTS THIS CHRISTMAS SEASON

## Benedictine Sisters of Erie



By Patti Eichen, Development Staff

The love of God given to us through Jesus is the true meaning of Christmas, as Sister Anne writes on page 3. During this season of opening our hearts to that love, let us take a moment to reflect back on the gifts we have received and the gifts that we share. Each year we put great effort into finding meaningful gifts for our loved ones. We search and search only to discover that those gifts are not to be found in a department store, but rather in our own hearts.

In the true spirit of giving, please consider an alternative Christmas gift this year: a donation to the Benedictine Sisters of Erie in honor or in memory of someone dear to your heart. Your gift in celebration of a family member or friend, or in memory of a deceased loved one, will be appreciated not only by the person so honored, but also by those served every day in the ministries of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie.

As you welcome family and friends into your home this Christmas, know that the sisters, too, provide hospitality to hundreds of people each year from across the United States and other countries. These guests come to the sisters' home, Mount Saint Benedict, seeking spiritual sustenance through participation in liturgy and retreats. But Mount Saint Benedict is more than a spiritual center: the good works of the sisters, their oblates and collaborators wherever they live reflect back into the communities in which they serve, evident in the stories and photos of the many people whose lives have changed because of your support.

### Ministries of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie

**Benetwood Apartments**

**Emmaus Ministries**

**Inner-City Neighborhood Art House**

**St. Benedict Child Development Center**

**St. Benedict Community Center**

**St. Benedict Education Center**

The needs of Mount Saint Benedict Monastery itself are ever changing. An alternative Christmas gift to help support our Benedictine Community would be gratefully received. As with all families and homes, the sisters' needs remain constant: food, transportation, utilities, and home maintenance.

Please consider an alternative Christmas gift this year to support the Benedictine Sisters. The enclosed envelope is offered for your use. *A Christmas card will be sent to the gift recipient announcing your gift. The amount given will not be mentioned in the card.* You can also go to the secure website, [eriebenedictines.org/help](http://eriebenedictines.org/help) and give on-line.



“CHRISTMAS  
IS NOT AS  
MUCH ABOUT  
OPENING OUR  
PRESENTS AS  
OPENING OUR  
HEARTS.”

~ Janice Maeditere

“MAY PEACE  
BE YOUR  
GIFT AT  
CHRISTMAS  
AND YOUR  
BLESSING  
ALL YEAR  
THROUGH!”

~ Author Unknown

# The Many Faces of Angels

By Jo Clarke, Oblate,  
Director of Annual Giving

## Sisters, Oblates, Supporters, Donors, Volunteers, Staff, Friends, Children and Families

*“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels.” —Hebrews 13:1-2*

Angels appear to all of us in many different shapes, sizes and with a multitude of faces. The many Angels presented on these pages reflect a wide variety of personalities with one thing in common: all are connected to the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. The sisters, their oblates, the staff at their ministries and their many volunteers are committed to providing Benedictine hospitality to all...as Benedict says, **“to welcome all as Christ.”** Rule of Benedict, Ch. 53

In an age of suspicion and individualism the kind of hospitality these Angels offer is at risk. The idea of welcoming the stranger into our home, opening our arms to the one who speaks a foreign language, who is different from us, who might be poor and need a little help, is as revolutionary now as it was at the time of Jesus.

You, our many supporters and friends, are Angels, too. Through your support of the sisters and staff at each of our ministries you also reach out to those in need. Your past support has changed the lives of many. A gift to the sisters this Christmas will help the work of these Angels continue through the coming year. Our community of friends, supporters, donors, staff, children and families is a true microcosm of a world where equality and justice for all is possible, where Angels who are messengers of God’s blessings abound...“Let mutual love continue.”



Miranda Drzewicki

### Miranda Drzewicki 13 Inner-City Neighborhood Art House Student

#### Coming to the Art House for her third year

I am lucky to come here. I learn how to crochet, knit, and make pots on the wheel. The Art House is a good place to be. It keeps people out of trouble because it’s after school. I come to the Art House because it’s fun and there are neat things to do. One of the things I’ve learned is that violence is not always the answer to things.



Sister Dianne Sabol (center)

### Diane Sabol, OSB, Director St. Benedict Community Center

It has been eleven years since I began my ministry at St. Benedict Community Center and over the years the building has been transformed into a warm, clean, welcoming space. So many wonderful agencies utilize this space to provide recreational opportunities for the people they serve. This could not go on without the support of faithful donors... my family, contractors, friends. For me it is all about relationships.



Margaret Kloecker

### Margaret Kloecker, Oblate, SBA Class of '68

Emmaus Ministries is most known as a soup kitchen and a food pantry. What most people don’t see is what happens in addition to the meals and the emergency food. When I was a student at St. Benedict Academy I always felt loved unconditionally and felt a strong sense of family. I get that same feeling at Emmaus every day. A plaque hangs in our office that quotes the Rule: “Listen with the ear of your heart.” We never know what the next phone call will bring. I see

Sister Mary (Miller) stop what she is doing to be present with kindness and compassion to someone needing financial assistance as well as those who just need someone to talk to. She and the other sisters minister to many others besides the hungry who come to us for food – they are there physically, emotionally and spiritually for our donors, volunteers and staff as well. That is the special gift I witness each day as administrative assistant at Emmaus Ministries.

### Jehan, Iraqi refugee, Saint Benedict Education Center

I have learned many things in this program... reading, writing, speaking English. Elma, Mary and Emily are not only teachers but they are like our sisters. I have learned to be punctual. We need their help to find jobs.



Jean Theis, SBA Class of '42

### Jean Theis, SBA Class of '42

I'm writing this on my birthday. I can't think of a better day to be doing it, because I am grateful to be alive and living life, just as I am grateful to be living at Benetwood Apartments. Benetwood is a wonderful place to live; it is here that I have made so many friends.

My journey to Benetwood actually started long before I came. In high school, I transferred to St. Benedict Academy in my junior year. It was there that I met the Benedictine Sisters and grew to love and admire them. I moved in to Benetwood in December, 1994, and was immediately welcomed by the sisters and also the residents. There is such warmth, kindness, caring, happiness. And the connection with the monastery! I remember my first couple of Christmases. I went to Mount Saint Benedict for Midnight Mass. It was so beautiful. Each night as I close my door and go to bed, I count my blessings. I am at home. I am loved, cared about. I know I am safe here. I know Sister Pat (Hause) or one of the other sisters is present in the event of any emergency. And I sleep well.



Sister Rita Groner

### Rita Groner, OSB, preschool teacher

Watching the children learn and grow is wonderful. It is with great pride that we send them off to Kindergarten knowing their ABC's, sounds of letters, counting, writing and recognizing numbers from 1-10 and beyond. Most importantly they grow in independence as well as interdependence in their mixed-age groupings.

### Kathy Stephens, Oblate

Jesus the Christ asks only two things of me, that I love my God with all that I am, and that I love my neighbor as myself. I have found that by trying to live life by the Rule of Benedict I am best able to follow these commandments. The sisters are the best models of living life loving God and neighbor that I've encountered. And so I try to support the ministries of the sisters with my prayers and with my time, with my energy and with my resources. And the best part is that, when I fail, as I often do, the sisters are there to help me stand back up and begin again. Donating is easy. I receive so much more than I can give!



Jenna Mitchell and son, Marcellus McClure

### Jenna Mitchell, mother of a toddler

I thought I selected St. Benedict's Child Development Center for the multi-cultural bi-lingual, educational, four-star Center they are, but soon saw it was a blessing in far more areas than just providing day care. The dedicated sisters and staff truly are one of God's many wonders. St. Benedict's has become a loving supportive family for my son and me. I am ever so grateful to them and God.

### Ruth Brenner & Carol Smith, Oblates

We first knew about the Benedictine Sisters of Erie through the writing and lectures of Sister Joan Chittister. We decided to visit the monastery and meet the rest of the community. The welcome was warm and the hospitality wonderful. Seeing the work that the monastic community performs in the Erie community caused us to want to become involved more deeply with the work and prayer life of the sisters. Even though we live far away we feel we are part of the community.



Grandmother Kate Strosser

### Kate and Walt Strosser, Donor

Kate and I and our daughter, Beth, visited the Mission of Friendship in Merida, Mexico, and that led us to becoming involved in supporting the Benedictine Sisters of Erie (several sisters have also worked at the diocesan mission in Merida). Although many religious organizations have seemingly abandoned the inner city, the Benedictines have consistently "put their money where their mouth is" as demonstrated by the Neighborhood Art House, Sister Gus' Kids Cafe, adult education services, and more. In addition, the sisters never stop saying "thank you."



*Friends are angels who lift us to our feet when our wings have trouble remembering how to fly.*

*—Anonymous*

From the  
**Director**

By Ann Comstock, Oblate

*"We'll always come to thee again,  
when Alma Mater calls"*

## Calendar of Events

|                     |                                                            |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>January 12</b>   | <b>SBA Executive Board Meeting at Mount Saint Benedict</b> |
| <b>March 23</b>     | <b>SBA Executive Board Meeting at Mount Saint Benedict</b> |
| <b>April 3</b>      | <b>Annual Communion Brunch</b>                             |
| <b>June 7</b>       | <b>SBA Executive Board Meeting at Mount Saint Benedict</b> |
| <b>June 25</b>      | <b>Summer Picnic</b>                                       |
| <b>September 13</b> | <b>SBA Executive Board Meeting at Mount Saint Benedict</b> |
| <b>November 9</b>   | <b>SBA Executive Board Meeting at Mount Saint Benedict</b> |

## Angels needed...

to provide a helping hand at the following ministries of the Benedictine Sisters:

### Benetwood Apartments

Contact:  
Pat Hause, OSB  
(814)899-0088

### Saint Benedict Education Center

Contact:  
Miriam Mashank, OSB  
(814)452-4072, Ext 234

### The Inner-City Neighborhood Art House

Contact:  
Annette Marshall, OSB  
(814)455-5508

### St. Benedict Community Center

Contact:  
Dianne Sabol, OSB  
(814)459-2406

### Emmaus Ministries

Contact:  
Mary Miller, OSB or Margaret Kloecker  
(814)459-8349

### Mount Saint Benedict Wellness Program

Contact:  
Helen Heher, OSB  
(814)899-0614, Ext 2403

## Annual Alumnae Campaign

The Saint Benedict Academy Alumnae Association is wrapping up its Annual Appeal. If you have not yet made a gift, we ask that you consider doing so. Your gift will help us support the Alumnae Association Scholarship Fund, ministries of the Benedictine Sisters or the sisters' most urgent needs. For more information, contact Ann Comstock at (814) 899-0614, Ext 2573 or visit [ErieBenedictines.org](http://ErieBenedictines.org).

## Let us pray...

For our SBA alumnae who passed into eternity—

|                                    |     |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| Jeanne Barbara Toczykowski Boyland | '46 |
| Delphine Cackowski Gostomski       | '59 |
| Janet Kownacki Ball                | '68 |
| Barbara Slomski                    | '75 |
| Jeanne Elizabeth Kraus McCarthy    | '36 |

## E-MAIL CALL!

We are now using the Constant Contact e-mail program to alert Alumnae members of upcoming events as well as timely news items. We need your e-mail address for this. Please send it, including your first, maiden and last names along with class year, to Ann Comstock at [sbaalum@mtstbenedict.org](mailto:sbaalum@mtstbenedict.org).

Visit [ErieBenedictines.org](http://ErieBenedictines.org) for event updates and to download sign-up forms, or send your e-mail address to Alumnae Director Ann Comstock at [sbaalum@mtstbenedict.org](mailto:sbaalum@mtstbenedict.org) to receive electronic reminders and sign-ups. If you don't use e-mail, write to Ann at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery, 6101 E. Lake Rd., Erie, PA, 16511. And whenever you see or hear about SBA alumnae being honored or highlighted for their achievements, let us know. Clip an article, jot it down, or call us, so we can share the news with all our members.

# Angels Among Us

**W**e have lost one of our angels. On September 4, 2010 Lavina Gertrude Haibach Graf, a kind and loving soul and our oldest living alumna died peacefully at her home in Erie, PA. Lavina was 100 years old, having celebrated her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday on May 14. She was a loving wife, mother, grandmother and great-grandmother and a dedicated and loyal member of the Class of 1927.

I recently received a copy of Lavina's memoirs, written in 1995 for her granddaughter's school assignment. Lavina's daughter, Mary Ann Graf Ehrman '60, said, "Mother dearly loved Saint Benedict Academy and her high school years lived inside its hallowed halls on 9<sup>th</sup> Street." The following words recall some of her memories of Saint Benedict's Academy:

I attended an all-girl Benedictine Catholic High School where all the teachers were nuns. Some students, probably one third, who lived out of town, were known as boarding students...the local girls were day students.

My freshman year started in September of 1923. The courses offered were either Academic or Commercial. Subjects offered included English, Algebra, Geometry, American and Ancient History, Chemistry, Latin, French, Spanish, Economics, Commercial Arithmetic, Shorthand, Bookkeeping, Typing, Business Machines, Art, China Painting and Music (piano and violin lessons).

In the spring there was a music recital involving the music students. The recital was in a large parlor. The furniture was what would now be considered gorgeous antiques. The piano on which I took my lesson was a Steinway Concert Grand!

The main sport was intra-mural basketball. The uniform for this consisted of black below the knee bloomers, black cotton knee-high socks, sneakers, and a white cotton middy-blouse.

The school had no established dress code. The mode of dress seemed to be skirts and blouses. Discipline was strict, there was no conversation in the hallways during change of classes.

In my high school class ninety percent took the Commercial course. The girls who took the Academic course were the few who went on to college to become teachers or nurses.

After finishing high school the graduates sought employment. In many cases some of the earnings were used to help out at home. After high school I earned \$18 a week as a bookkeeper. It was fun to be able to shop for clothes, perhaps take up golf or join a tennis club. The girls formed their own social groups, met to play Bridge or "500" or joined a sewing or knitting group.

Thanks Lavina, for the memories.



Lavina Haibach Graf pictured on her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, May 14, 2010.



## SBA Executive Board

*Top row: L to R*

*Mary Rita Roach Groucutt '72; Lisa Manendo '74; Ann Comstock '64; Cathy Considine Stemmler '64; Darlene Harkness Kerstetter '82*

*Bottom row: L to R*

*Katie Shewan Young '87; Cathe Piorkowski Hedderick '76; Cheryl Lenhart '89; Sister Mary Ellen Plumb '71; Paula Roseborough Medina '89; Valerie Joint '88; Sister Rosanne Loneck '61*



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Please help us to maintain an accurate mailing list and keep our costs down by contacting us with any change in mail or e-mail information. If you prefer not to receive *The Mount* please let us know. Send correspondence to: Ann Comstock, Benedictine Sisters Development Office, Mount St. Benedict Monastery, 6101 East Lake Road, Erie, PA 16511, (814) 899-0614, Ext. 2573, sbaalum@mtstbenedict.org



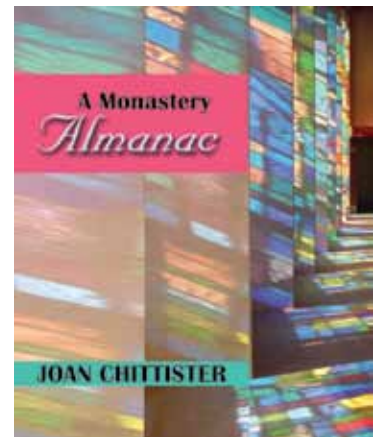
## *A Monastery Almanac*

Spend a year with a community of women dedicated to “seeking God.”

### **A Monastery Almanac**

**By Joan Chittister**

The Benedictine Sisters of Erie  
invite you to join us  
in prayer,  
in celebrating special feasts,  
in sharing our customs and rituals,  
and in learning more  
about the monastic values  
so vital to living  
a God-centered life in these times.



The Monastery Almanac offers a reflection for each day of the year and features many photos by the sisters, oblates and friends.

Available at the Monastery gift shop and at [store.benetvision.org](http://store.benetvision.org)

*You are always welcome in our home at  
Mount Saint Benedict Monastery.*