And The Word became flesh...

I love the Angel on the front cover. In fact, I think she is beautiful—her face is lovely, her hands are captivating, her fingers are elegant. And she is holding a book! Anyone who knows me knows that I love books! This book caused me to wonder: Is it a bible? Is it a novel? Maybe it is a textbook or a book of poetry. In the end, maybe it doesn’t matter what kind of book it is.

As I thought about that I came to the conclusion that it is the “story” we hold that is most important.

I agree with Isak Dinesen (pseudonym of the author Karen Blixen) who said, “To be a person is to have a story to tell.” Each of us has a story. We contain stories. We are a story. Story is what connects us to one another. And, according to an ancient Indian proverb, stories have “staying” power: “Tell me a fact and I’ll learn. Tell me a truth and I’ll believe. But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever.”

The Mount is filled with stories of who we are and what we are about as Benedictine Sisters of Erie. I hope one of the stories or even an idea, word, phrase or picture will delight, teach, inspire, motivate, challenge or touch you.

As we move into the holiday season let us remember what John’s Gospel tells us: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1: 1) . . . The Word became flesh and made a dwelling among us, and we saw the glory of God’s only Son, full of grace and truth (John 1: 14).” This is the heart of the Christmas story—it is the reality of God’s gracious love in which we can come to understand and embrace our own stories. May the Word, the fullness of grace and truth, live in your heart forever!

Charlotte Anne Zalot, OSB

Angel with Book in Hand

Cover Photo by Jo Clarke, Oblate

This angel is one of four worshipping angels depicted in stained glass and designed for the sanctuary of the 1915 expanded chapel in the first mother house on East Ninth Street. It was donated by the Grotzinger Family, relatives of our deceased Sister Benedict Grotzinger, OSB (+2002). All four angel windows were preserved when the chapel was demolished in 1973. After being restored in 1987-88 by Marcie Bircher, Oblate, this window was installed on the second floor south wing of the Monastery. No one knows if the book in the Angel’s hand is a prayer book, a bible, a book of poetry or scholarly material. Left to the imagination, one sees the Angel reflecting, and possibly being inspired to vision anew the world upon which she gazes as a result of the word that she reads.

BENEDICTINE CHARISM STATEMENT

The Benedictine way is to seek God in cenobitic life and to respond in prayer and ministry.
Many stories begin, “Once upon a time,” but our Christmas story opens with, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1:1)

This Word who was with God from the beginning would come to live with us on earth in human flesh. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us...” (John 1:14). The Word, God, became human, crossing from eternity into time in the person of Jesus, the Christ.

The Christmas story is a story of birth and life, the birth and life of Jesus, of all humanity and of all creation. Many stories that could be versions of our Christian Christmas story of a long-awaited messiah coming to save the people can be found in the literature of various cultures.

What makes our Christmas story different for me is the impact that it has on my life and therefore on the people that I encounter in daily living.

Jesus is born of a woman, of Mary, into the human community to be more fully in relationship with us, to proclaim the good news that it is good to be human and that humanity is intrinsically good. The Christmas story, the Christmas mystery, celebrates that the Word, Jesus, became human and in this act our humanity was infused with the breath of God.

We celebrate the birth of Jesus each Christmas but we are also invited to enter the whole story of Jesus’ life and his teaching. The good news that we share with others is not that Jesus lived long ago in history but that Jesus is born within each of us and lives with us here and now.

In our families, communities, in the work place, and as we meet the stranger and those in need, we are called to give of ourselves for the good of others. Gift giving and presents abound at Christmas time but gospel living, following the example of Jesus, challenges us to give of ourselves, of God’s life within us, every day.

Jesus is the gift totally and freely given. Jesus brought people into the light, into truth and revealed the nature of God through his works and life. When we believe that we are born in the likeness of Christ, we cannot contain the good news but must tell all whom we meet. The angels, the shepherds and we feel compelled to go in haste to announce the good news.

We have heard the story and we continue to announce and to live the birth, life, death and glory of Jesus, the Christ. To paraphrase St. Irenaeus, the glory of God is the human being fully alive.

May you be fully alive this Christmas Season and all through the year.

May you give of the fullness that has been given to you.

May the Word of God help you to know more deeply what God has done and is doing in your life, and may you be open to what is yet to come.

Anne Wambach, OSB
Prioress, Benedictine Sisters of Erie
NEW LOOK INTO 
an Ancient Life

By Linda Romey, OSB

Imagine, it sometimes took monks of old years to painstakingly copy a single manuscript that shed even minimal light on their lives behind thick monastery walls. Hence, consider it great progress that it only took a small committee of modern-day monks just over a year to plan, design and build a new website that invites seekers around the world right into their lives.

So, you can’t visit the monastery anytime soon? Haven’t ever been? Wish you knew more about Benedictine prayer or liturgy or what life is like in a monastery? The door is always open and the light on at ErieBenedictines.org. Even for those of you who regularly visit Mount St. Benedict Monastery, the new site will make it easier for you to stay in touch and stay on top of events and celebrations that you’d like to participate in with us.

As Sister Anne Wambach, prioress of the Benedictine Sisters, says of the website in her online welcome message, “The site offers a window into the heart and soul of a community of women who have committed themselves to seek God in the communal life and to respond in prayer and ministry.” Hear the rest of her message by scanning the QR code (that funny-looking box in the bottom right) into your smartphone or go to ErieBenedictines.org—her welcome video is right on the front page.

The web committee—Sisters Charlotte Anne Zalot, communications director, and Linda Romey, web tech, along with Oblate Jo Clarke (videographer) and Sisters Susan Doubet, Maureen Tobin and Judith Trambley—has created a website that enhances and expands the Internet presence of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie so that visitors can more simply and effectively access information.

What’s New:
We’ve added event calendars—for oblates, SBA alum, retreats, and general community events. Guest accommodations can be reserved online. Request prayers for a special intention and choose to have your request private for the sisters only or have it appear on the oblate page or SBA alum page so that other members of our Benedictine family can pray with you. Tell all site visitors about your experience after a stay in eriebenedictines.org

“Run, while you have the light of life . . .”
the hermitage or at the Mount and find information on how you can become associated with us. If you’d like to financially support the community, make a secure online donation. Sign up to receive regular emails from us. And, most importantly, join us in daily prayer with the psalms, the Rule of Benedict and the singing of our sisters.

Our hope is that this website with its pictures and stories, prayers and blogs, testimonials and songs, allows you to be touched by God and enriched in surprising and new ways so that you may, as Benedict says so well in the Prologue to the Rule: “Run, while you have the light of life . . .”
Having looked around the inner city, a place where they had deep roots and many arms of outreach, the Benedictine Sisters of Erie realized that something was missing: There was no accessible facility to provide for the recreation needs of the physically and emotionally challenged and the developmentally disabled. The sisters put their heads and hearts together and Saint Benedict Community Center (SBCC) was born. Sister Dianne Sabol, OSB was appointed director. The story begins.

“Sister Di, are we going to play basketball today? Can we have teams? Do you think our team will win? Can I go first?” The array of questions is endless as Sister Dianne prepares to work with the children who attend the after school program at a neighboring Benedictine ministry, Sister Gus’ Kids Cafe. For them SBCC is a safe environment. Sister Dianne coordinates activities for them, organizes teams and referees flag football, dodge ball, and basketball. In addition to the benefits of the physical activity, the children learn other important lessons. “I put a lot of emphasis on respect,” says Sister Dianne, “respect for self, others, property and equipment because when we are all able to respect each other and accept our diversity, love has a chance to grow. I also put...
The Story of Saint Benedict Community Center

a lot of emphasis on fun. Recreation is meant to re-create mind, body and spirit and it should be fun! As Dr. Seuss said so well: ‘If you never did, you should. These things are fun, and fun is good.’ I couldn’t agree more!”

The mission of St. Benedict Community Center is to provide a recreational facility inclusive of peoples of all races and challenges. SBCC has become home to a number of organizations, many with the desire to provide physical education for their clients. The benefits of physical activity are universal for all people, not least among them children with challenges. Sports and recreational activities nurture the well-being of challenged children; skills are developed, creativity is expressed, and life takes on new and important meaning. No one knows this better than Sister Dianne: “I’ve been involved in sports all my life. Sports taught me social skills, gave me self-esteem, and taught me how to work with others to reach a goal. As a young girl, I would have given anything to have a gym to go to everyday after school.”

Currently SBCC’s client list includes Abraxis Learning Center, Achievement Center, Erie Homes for Children and Adults (EHCA), Sarah Reed Center, and the Lake Erie Soccer Club. In the span of one year more than 4,000 guests participate in a variety of programs including wheelchair basketball, team practice and EHCA dance classes. Sister Dianne reflects, “Nothing touches the heart more than to see the excitement of the young women and men who are able to participate in wheelchair sports and wheelchair dancing. Smiling faces light up the gym, laughter and spontaneous sounds of joy echo loudly, and a new kind of happiness colors the world of teachers, parents and students alike.”

Now moving into its 13th year, SBCC could use a new gym floor and an upgraded security system. Although the wish list is a constant, just as constant is the Benedictine value of good stewardship. Along with Sister Dianne, staff members Maureen Sabol and Bob Kempisty apply tender loving care to keeping the building clean and in good repair. A welcoming space, a welcoming staff: this is Benedictine hospitality at its best. Sister Joan Chittister writes, “Benedictine hospitality demands the extra effort, the extra time, the extra care that stretches beyond and above the order of the day.” An important principle of success is that very thing: doing the extra. SBCC is what it is today because Sister Dianne and her staff do the “extra.” The words of Ralph Waldo Emerson sum up their recipe for success: “To laugh often and much; to win the respect of people and the affection of children . . . to leave the world a better place . . . to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded.”
PRAYER FOR Vocations

Loving God,
we believe that Benedictine monasticism
bears fruit for the world.

We are grateful for the witness
of the Benedictine sisters among us.

May their faithfulness to the monastic way of life
awaken women to the stirrings of the Spirit.

Bless others with the courage
to accept the invitation
to seek you in community
through prayer and ministry.

May these seekers find fulfillment
for the longing in their hearts:
in the communal life well-lived and
in loving attention to the needs of your people.

May they be upheld as we are upheld
by your constancy and steadfast love.

We ask this with confidence
in your goodness and grace,
now and evermore.
Amen.

Vocation Ministry

By Marilyn Schauble, OSB

Vocation ministry is both an interesting and necessary one. Some people may think it has everything to do with recruitment. I am learning that it has everything to do with accompanying others as they seek to discern God’s call in their lives. I communicate daily with women who are searching for that which will give their lives deeper meaning. Whether it is by phone call, email or visit, my encounters always leave me in awe of the intention and the desire of these women to seek God.

Recently, as Vocation Director, I shared in two different but equally important events. First was the Benedictine Vocation Directors’ Conference. It was an opportunity to share stories and ideas, to build relationships and renew my commitment to vocation ministry. I found the experience invaluable. I joined the ranks of Benedictine women and men doing vocation work by companioning others on their journeys and offering time and presence to help them along their way.

The second event involved a road trip to Ohio Wesleyan University. I was one of 300 people in attendance at an ecumenical conference entitled: Radical Gospel Living: Monasticism Today. I wasn’t the only community member present. Sister Joan Chittister was one of the two keynote speakers; Sister Mary Ellen Plumb led one of the break-out sessions. Two of our Benedicta Riepp year-long monastic experience program participants, Carrie Parsons and Alyssa Harpst, sold Benetvision print materials. And I hosted a Benedictine Sisters of Erie information table. This was a first for me but if it did nothing else, it assured me that interest in Benedictine monasticism is alive and well.

Of all the materials I had at my table, the one thing everyone wanted to be sure they got was a simple bookmark that read, “Listen with the ear of your heart” (Rule of Benedict, Prologue). This interest caused me to revisit that phrase for myself. Yes, those discerning vocations must listen with the ear of the heart. More importantly, so, too, must vocation directors. I am glad that card was so popular. Without a doubt, its message is timeless. And I am hoping everyone who took one will turn it over, see my contact information and get in touch. Those who do will give me an opportunity to listen with the ear of my heart and do what vocation directors are called to do: walk with those who are searching for the way they can best seek God with their lives.
Once upon a time...God created humans and placed in their hearts a deep longing, an inner restlessness that would draw them into ever-deeper union with the Divine.

This inner longing led three women to travel to Erie and come to know the Benedictine Sisters. In their search for a deeper spirituality they decided to participate in the Benedicta Riepp monastic experience program and have moved into the monastery and immersed themselves in our monastic life.

In August Alyssa Harpst and Carrie Parsons, new graduates of Canisius College, Buffalo, New York, began their year-long experience. The first month at the monastery they visited various Benedictine ministries and adjusted to community life and the rhythm of daily prayer. After a commitment ceremony on September 17, they settled into daily routines that include volunteer work at community ministries. Alyssa chose to work with the toddlers at St. Benedict Child Development Center and Carrie is tutoring refugees at St. Benedict Education Center and helping at Sister Gus’ Kids Café where children receive daily meals after school.

A third seeker responded to the call in her heart and, after a month at the monastery, made her commitment on November 1. Glory Piovarcy moved from Cleveland to spend a year living, working and praying with the community. She brings with her a wealth of ministry experiences and while in the program will be a receptionist at St. Benedict Education Center and also help with Emmaus Ministries’ Christmas gift distribution.

As part of the year-long program, all three women will engage in monastic and scripture studies as well as contribute to the daily life at the monastery. They participate fully in the prayer and liturgical life of the community and are each paired with a sister mentor who will accompany them through their journey.

“I know the coming months will be full of ups, and downs,” writes Carrie on her blog. “I know some days I’m going to really wonder what I got myself into, yet other days I’m going to look at it all and know I’m exactly where I’m meant to be. I know that no matter what, I’ve got a lot of people standing beside me as I take on this adventure. God is with me every step of the way.” Both Carrie and Alyssa are documenting their monastic lives in personal blogs. Visit Carrie’s at carrieann2589.blogspot.com and Alyssa’s at oneyearmountstbenedict.blogspot.com.

“The presence of these three women among us enriches the life of our community,” says Sister Anne Wambach, prioress. “They pray, play and work with us, sharing hopes, desires, questions and dreams. Their sincere seeking for something more in life reminds each of us of that deep longing within, that inner restlessness that calls us daily to spend time with our Creator, the Source of all love.”
OBLATE COMMITMENT 2011

By Marilyn Schauble, OSB

Seated, left to right: Glory Piovarcy, transfer, Erie, PA, Kimberly Joy-Pacos, Fredonia, NY, Jeannette DeCorpo, Cleveland, OH, Georganne Witter, Arden NC, Janice Panzica, Buffalo, NY


Absent: Tony Bruno, Erie, PA, Rita Orinko, Erie, PA, Arlene Zawadski, Tonawanda, NY

Seeking workers in a multitude of people, God calls out and says again: “Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days (Ps 34:12)?” If you hear this and your answer is “I do,” God then directs these words to you...

—Rule of Benedict: Prologue

More than 260 women and men renewed their annual commitment to live as Oblates of Mount Saint Benedict Monastery in a ceremony at Evening Praise on Saturday, October 29. During the ceremony 18 new oblates and one transferring oblate 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 received a copy of the Rule from Sister Anne Wambach, prioress.

“Erie Benedictine Oblates are Christian people from all walks of life from across the United States and abroad,” says Sister Marilyn Schauble, OSB, Oblate Director. “They are seeking a deeper relationship with God, with others and with themselves. They bring the values of Benedictine spirituality: simplicity, respect, hospitality, and reverence of all life, to their families, neighborhoods and work places, truly making a difference in the world. Erie oblates follow the Benedictine way of life that fosters a rhythm of work, study and prayer.”

Some oblates who live in the Erie area 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. Sister Marilyn stays in contact with all oblates through the oblate page at eriebenedictines.org.
Monasteries of the Heart Update

By Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB

Friday Morning Muffins Monastery. Care of Creation Monastery. Ora et Labora Monastery. These are three of the 40 on-site and online monasteries now affiliated with Monasteries of the Heart, a new form of Benedictine monastic life for our time. “We’ve experienced a significant surge in group memberships over a four-month period,” explained Anne McCarthy, OSB, online group coordinator of MOH, “and it attests to the reality that people everywhere are thirsting for a genuine spiritual life, the reason the Benedictine Sisters of Erie began this experiment.”

“Monasteries of the Heart” enables community groups to form through both online groups (www.monasteriesoftheheart.org) and by the formation of small on-site communities of those seeking Benedictine values.

Groups determine their own meeting schedule and communal “good work” and are encouraged to begin studies with *The Monastery of the Heart: An Invitation to a Meaningful Life* by Joan Chittister and use the website for spiritual development. For example, The “Heart of Miami” community in Florida consists of Catholic women who meet twice a month; in Washington, DC., “The Sunday Journey Group,” both an on-site and online community, is composed of young adults who meet twice a month in person and have an online meeting in between; “Stepping Stone Monastery” has a weekly gathering on Wednesday at Mount Saviour Monastery.

MOH groups are even forming in prisons. Erie Benedictine Sister Marian Wehler had 22 men incarcerated at Forest State Correctional Institute respond to her invitation to begin a MOH community.

Visit our website, www.monasteriesoftheheart.org, to learn more about Monasteries of the Heart or for information on ordering the book *The Monastery of the Heart: An Invitation to a Meaningful Life* by Joan Chittister.
The Erie Benedictines along with their oblates, family and friends met and surpassed the definition of jubilee in celebrating with sister jubilarians the weekend of October 7-8. Golden Jubilarians, Sisters Mary Lou Kownacki, Audrey Steff and Rose Ann Kolbas, along with Silver Jubilarian, Sister Judith Trambley, renewed their monastic vows chanting the *Susciepe*, “Uphold me, O God, according to your word and I shall be saved and do not fail me in my hope,” during Saturday's Vigil Prayer in a packed chapel. On an extraordinarily warm and sunny fall day, the reception that followed the ceremony spilled onto the monastery patio as guests enjoyed reconnecting and reminiscing about life and love shared over many years with these sisters.
Sisters Marlene Bertke, Miriam Mashank and Patricia McGreevy celebrated 60 years of monastic profession on Friday, October 7. The community honored them at Evening Prayer during which they renewed their vows. A festive community dinner honoring all the jubilarians of 60, 50, and 25 years followed with a kaleidoscope of memories shared by many of the sisters providing the evening’s entertainment.
In 1984 I went to a camp called Bradford Woods Outdoor Education Center, the enterprise owned and operated by Indiana University, Martinsville, Indiana. It was located on a piece of land fashioned by a glacier years ago that left 2,400 acres of mountain ridge and thick forest. There was a person-made lake called Old Swimmin’ Hole Lake. A lot of the trails on this side of the lake were paved so that campers using adaptive equipment could more easily participate in the outdoor activities. The camp was fully accessible. Their motto was “Accessibility for All.” The experiential education model was “Act to Learn and Learn to Act.”

I was asked to give a wellness presentation for the Benedictine Sisters’ Summer Community Days and since I am the Wellness Coordinator, I wrote seven wellness principles that I thought were pertinent and then I delivered them in the form of dramatizations. Dramatization #7 wasn’t needed as time ran out.

With the hubbub of the up and coming season, I now present #7 here for your holiday musing, an inspiration perhaps, to carry you through part of the dark winter:

Wellness Principle #7: You know you’re lost if you’re going in circles. Look for an angel.

Across and around Old Swimmin’ Hole Lake, there appeared a huge panorama of thick old growth trees and I was thinking that walking way over yonder would undoubtedly be rough terrain and a rougher trek. They told me that there were logging roads and logging going on over there and up there.

While it was winter, there were hints of early spring a-coming. It was a beautiful day. There was a group of young adults given to me to traverse around the lake, around the mountain ridges. Yes, over there. It happened. The very thing I feared manifested itself. Yes, we’re going to the other side. Snakes and bears, oh my! Yes, the group had physical and cognitive challenges. And so did I, as I heard the news!

Each of us could walk, let’s just say that.

Up mud roads, there were ditches made by tire tracks, that while standing in them, we were up to our thighs trudging along the steep trail roads. Over squishy meadows and through tall pine tree patches, we went. Growing tired, I noticed that we were coming back to the same meadow. You know you’re lost if you’re going in circles. We were too far out for the walkie talkies to work, so when in doubt eat. We ate the bag lunches prepared for us. Manna from heaven!

I can still see us all sprawled out on the soft meadow moss, eating, talking, and resting. A camper cozied up to me and said, “Are we lost, Miss Helen?” “Yes,” I said. She continued saying, “Send someone ahead of us to see if anything shows up.” On this day hike, I wondered who was challenged and who was not?!
There was a parent of one of the camper participants with us and I asked him if he’d scout around a little bit and come back and give us some direction... hopefully. Off he went, happy to go, I noticed. The girl beside me said, “Miss Helen, you are very tired and worried. Now let’s just take a nap, so we’ll be ready for the rest of our trip.” We hummed a little bit of “The Happy Wanderer” Scout song, also known by the chorus as “Valderi, Valdera.” If you know it, give it a hum:

I love to go a-wandering,
Along the mountain track,
And as I go, I love to sing,
My knapsack on my back.

Val-deri, Val-deri,
Val-deri-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha
Val-deri, Val-deri.
My knapsack on my back.

The parent came back and said there was a promising trail ahead and of course the trail ran up and over, and into and through. Eureka! We’ll take it. “Get up, everyone; time to go,” I yelled excitedly.

From some distance we began to see a wooden wall that led to a familiar campground trail. We were pulled up by several camp staffers who were waiting for us and actually worrying about us. No rescue was needed. We made it. Good thing!

I am grateful for that angel girl. I am grateful for that parent scout.

Wellness Principle #7: You know you’re lost if you’re going in circles. Look for an angel.

Read aloud with me:

A Little Girl’s Prayer
by Katherine Mansfield

Grant me the moment, the lovely moment
That I may lean forth to see
The other buds, the other blooms,
The other leaves on the tree:
That I may take into my bosom
The breeze that is like a brother,
But stiller, lighter, whose faint laughter
Echoes the joy of the other.

Above on the blue and white cloud-spaces
There are small clouds at play.
I watch their remote, mysterious play-time
In the other far-away.

Grant I may hear the small birds singing
The song that the silence knows…
(The Light and the Shadow whisper together,
The lovely moment grows.

Ripples into the air like water
Away and away without sound,
And the little girl gets up from her praying
On the cold ground.)

If we see ourselves running around in circles this holy, happy, holiday time, let us look for an angel — she or he cometh from the realms of glory even?!
Thanksgiving dinner is barely cleared away now before the great secular feast of this age—Christmas shopping, our civic adoration at the shrine of the local economy—begins in blaring frenzy. In the West, at least, it has become a time of frenetic buying, fairy-tale delights, commercial excess, and child-centered fantasy. Santa Claus becomes the “reason for the season” even in Christian homes, and “Merry Christmas” has become “Happy Holidays.”

The Christmas season has morphed into the secularization of the salvation of the soul. It has become the secular Advent. We shop and wrap and carry and, in a single moment, rip open packages and cart the torn boxes and ribbons and paper away to wait for the same time next year. But not for the Christian. For the Christian, the Christmas season is a great deal more than that.

To the Christian steeped in the spirituality of the liturgical year, Christmas is not a single event. It is an entire season of feasts, from December 25 to the Sunday after Epiphany in mid-January. Each of them is designed to take us deeper and deeper into commitment, into understanding, into faith—and most of all, perhaps, into hope. It is a season that puts a glow on the soul. These are feasts that take us into the mystical insights that characterized the First Coming of Jesus and are at least as important to our own faith in the Second Coming of Jesus. Suddenly, in the outpost of Jerusalem, in an empire given to tax collecting and riot control, in a Hebrew community oppressed by a foreign power but nourished by ancient prophecies of hope and liberation, little by little there stirred the awareness among many that somehow the foundations of heaven and earth had been shaken. The world had changed. The pregnancy of human hope and the conviction of divine possibility were in the air.

It’s to the three aspects of Christmas itself—the Vigil Mass, Midnight Mass, and the Mass at Dawn—that we are drawn. But Christmas Day is not the whole of the Christmas season. The full scope of Christmas is only experienced in the feasts of the holy family, Mary the mother of God, the Epiphany, and the baptism of Jesus. It is to these other layers of the birth of Jesus that the Christmas season points us. It is not simply the birth of the Child that the season celebrates; it is the awareness of the ongoing work of God within Him, the foundation of our own hope for liberation that marks our lives and lifts our hearts. We are not left wondering, with John the Baptist, whether this is the “one who is to come” (Luke 7:20). We can watch His growth into God, more and more, every step of the way.

Each of the feasts of Christmastide is another star on the horizon of the soul, confirming what our hearts already know: God is with us. The Radiant Dawn has swallowed up the darkness. It is, indeed, the Season of Light.
But light is more elusive than we like to remember. When the ancients observed the winter solstice, it was with thousands of years of fear that once gone, the light might not come back. It might not, this time, return to warm the earth or grow the seeds or prod the harvests upon which they depended for life. The great ancient monuments—Stonehenge in England, or New Grange, even older, in Ireland—were built to function in the midst of wet, cold, black winter, when darkness was its deepest, its longest, its cruelest. Then the light was tenuous. Then even the days were gray. The monuments were built to catch the first gleam of light after the longest night in the year. When the days were darkest, then the light came. But you couldn’t be sure it would. You had to be patient, be hopeful, be strong. It was the return of the light you were celebrating. It was the return of the light that gave reason for hope in another year.

For the chosen people, too, at the time of the birth of Jesus, this was a world in darkness.

By the time Emperor Aurelian first worshipped the Sol Invictus, the “invincible sun” in 274—and then, in 321, declared the day an official “day of rest,” the whole world knew what, in this age, we might be more inclined to take for granted. They knew the meaning of light, the impact of its presence, the fact that we cannot live without it. And the Christians of the empire knew that the light of the soul far transcended the light of the sun.

This small Christian community at the heart of the empire a few hundred years later knew that, for them, the Light that was Jesus had conquered the darkness that had threatened to obliterate them totally.

Now it was for them to live in this light, to fear no darkness ever again, to understand that “the people who walked in darkness” had, indeed, “seen a great light” (Isaiah 9:2). These were, after all, the people of the cross and the tomb as well as of the light. They knew, as did no other, that the two events were really one. No manger, no cross. No cross, no empty tomb. It was all of a piece.

In ancient times, the church thought of Christmas as the Passover of Jesus from heaven to earth because of which the Great Pasch, the Passover of Jesus from earth to heaven, was really possible.

Now it was for them to make the Light known, to bring it to others, to bask in its certainty, however dark the nights ahead.

Christmas is meant to take us to the level of spiritual maturity where we are capable of seeing in a manger the meaning of an empty tomb. The Christmas season, if we see it as a whole rather than as an isolated event (and, in our age, a totally distorted and even misleading conception of the feast) can ignite the spark that will lead us through the darkness of our own lives every day of the year. It is the light of Christmas within us that will take us, if we have the insight to cling to it, beyond a fairy-tale rendering of the great truths of the faith to an understanding of what all the dark days of life are about.

Christmas is not meant to leave us with nothing more than a child’s perception of what it means to see a baby in a manger scene. It is meant to take us to the level of spiritual maturity where we are capable of seeing in a manger the meaning of an empty tomb. It is meant to enable us to see through the dark days of life to the stars beyond them.

I’m not a huge fan of Christmas decorations. It’s not a bah humbug sort of thing, it’s just more work than I want to do. Lugging boxes out of a damp basement, gingerly unwrapping the same ornaments once again, untangling the hangers and prioritizing placement. And all the while knowing that in just a few weeks the process will be reversed as we pack up to put away for yet another year.

But then it occurred to me as I started working on this article on upcycling that creating a Christmas atmosphere anew each year with the same old decorations is really nothing but a variation on the upcycling theme. Old ornaments, of no value to anyone else, become a meaningful new display each year.

Upcycling, as defined by Wikipedia, is the process of converting waste materials or useless products into new materials or products of better quality or a higher environmental value. I think it’s also plain old resourcefulness paired with human ingenuity and creativity. Those of a certain generation might snicker at the new word for what was simply their way of life: old shirts became quilt patches, rags became braided rugs, grocery bags became book covers, empty thread spools made great bubble pipes.

With our raised environmental consciousness, creative resourcefulness is once again in demand and part of our Benedictine corporate commitment includes working for sustainability. That’s good because it helps me justify my inability to reject any generous offer of half-full cones of weaving yarn, leftover scraps of fabric, already-been-used supplies and gadgets, bits of old lace and on and on. I will eventually (if I live to be 120) get around to creating new and beautiful things with all those cast-offs that otherwise might have ended up in a landfill. Or at least would have been collecting dust on someone else’s shelf.

So, the same basement where the Christmas ornaments are stored is where I also have my looms and sewing machine, store my stuff and work on my projects, many of which involve upcycling. It’s there where I cut old, worn jeans into strips and weave them into fabric that then becomes bags, lined with odd pieces of fabric and maybe sporting a zipper cut from an old pair of pants.

Or where “vintage” fabric scraps become a book cover. And mixed and matched threads make a great warp for fabric-strip weft that ends up being placemats and table runners. Maybe it’s a good
thing my salary goes to my community. If my salary were mine to spend, I wouldn’t just look and drool when I go into weaving stores, I’d buy beautiful new yarns. But in the end, that wouldn’t be near as fun—nor as challenging—as taking the mismatched leftovers I’m given and making them new.

I’ve looked around the community for upcycling projects and found that the idea seems to be a fit in a Benedictine community: Sister Marcia Sigler turned blouses worn by our recently deceased Sister Mary Margaret Kraus into pillows that allow us to cherish her memory. She also reworked her own unneeded uniform scrubs into a couple quilts for soup kitchen guests.

An avid wood-turner, Sister Audrey Steff keeps her eyes on the ground for dead or dying trees—especially those with burls—from which she creates wooden bowls, candle holders and other gift items.

Wooden delivery pallets as well as other pieces of wood from discarded items also find their way to her lathe for transformation.

Sister Susan Freitag makes beautiful new candles out of old wax and old lampshades have become angels at the hands of Sister Margaret Ann Pilewski. And no one can outdo the environments set by Sister Carolyn Gorny-Kopkowski for her retreats—outdated calendar photos, scraps of fabric, pieces of this and that. The old becomes new.

And isn’t that the Christmas story, too? Same outdated story, year after year. We’ll soon hear it again. But in the hearing, if we open ourselves to life’s resourcefulness, to its creative energy within us, we are made new, too.

OK, time to get those Christmas boxes out of the basement...

Tell us about your upcycling at eriebenedictines.org/i-upcycle-too

Sister Marcia Sigler
The Word Became Flesh and Made a Dwelling Among Us  

(John 1:14)

Ed. Note: As the Spring/Summer 2011 issue of THE MOUNT went to press the Benedictine Sisters of Erie and many family and friends mourned the death of former prioress, Sister Mary Margaret Kraus. In this issue we pay tribute to her legacy.

On the afternoon of May 15 as community members held vigil with Mary Margaret, a spontaneous outburst of songs of praise and peace rang from her room and drew the sisters to her bedside to uphold her as she journeyed to God. When the prayer bell rang the sisters moved to chapel. As the community’s Evening Prayer was drawing to an end, Mary Margaret’s new life began. Her death left a hole in the heart of the community but memories of her life quickly filled the emptiness and though she is dearly missed, her legacy of unconditional love lives on.

Last December Sister Mary Margaret, the sister eldest in community rank (based on date of entrance into the community), embraced the tradition of the eldest among us lighting the Christmas tree. On that night she not only brought light to the tree; she brought light to the community. In the glow of that moment she told the community how much she loved them: “Nothing is more special than the years I have been a member of this community; nothing is more special than the life I have shared with you. I love you.” Shortly after the New Year, and right before her 89th birthday, Mary Margaret was diagnosed with mesothelioma.

Mary Margaret remained fully engaged in community life and ministry throughout her illness. She continued her weekly visits to the prison where she prayed with and was present to the women inmates on Sunday afternoons. The story is told of one of her last visits when she no longer had the strength to stand and offer the women a blessing. Instead, the women approached her and knelt at her feet to receive the blessing of love that she gave so freely.

That was the thing about Mary Margaret—her love knew no bounds. As prioress during the tumultuous years of the renewal of religious life after Vatican II, Mary Margaret exhibited the deep, simple and beautiful faith for which she was well known. Her listening heart and loving manner led the way. At the memory service honoring Mary Margaret, Sister Miriam Mashank shared: “It will be as a woman of prayer, compassion, humanness, understanding, humility and courage that Sister Mary Margaret Kraus will long be remembered as one who led the community through 14 of the most challenging years in our history.”
Prison ministry was especially dear to the heart of Sister Mary Margaret Kraus. She took great pride in knowing that Benetvision, a ministry of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, has a special outreach to prisoners.

LaVette has spent most of her life in prison. A few years ago, volunteer prison chaplain Sister Patricia Schlosser began meeting with her and discussing the writings of Erie Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister, especially *The Monastic Way*. “I finally started to grow in freedom,” she told Sister Joan when LaVette and four other ex-prisoners met with her following a lecture that Sister Joan gave in Chicago. “I’m free now,” she said, “inside of myself as well as being outside of prison.” LaVette now speaks to groups and works with women and girls, especially those who have been raped, supporting and encouraging them.

The meeting was extremely emotional for both the women and Sister Joan—lots of tears, hugs, laughter, and thank yous. “It’s an encounter that moved me deeply,” said Sister Joan, “one that I will carry the rest of my life.” The five women represent thousands of prisoners around the country who receive free materials through the Joan Chittister Fund for Prisoners. Close to 4,000 prisoners receive *The Monastic Way* monthly and $65,000 a year in materials are sent to the 90 prison chaplains and volunteers who work with Benetvision, sponsor of the Fund.
In memoriam

In memoriam announces the death of two members of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie and offers information about their lives and accomplishments. More importantly, it shares with you, our extended family, one of the special traditions of the Erie Benedictines—a memorial prayer that is individual and distinctive for each sister, written upon her death. These prayers, written with the deep love that comes from sharing life for many years, offer a sacred glimpse into the soul-life of each one of these Benedictine sisters.

Both Sisters Mary Margaret Kraus and Margaret Mary Nielsen died on Sunday afternoons, Mary Margaret in May and Margaret Mary in October. They died peacefully in the presence of their sisters who had held vigil with them and prayed for their passage from this life to the next. While not unexpected, the reality of their deaths was nonetheless poignant. The community mourned the loss of two members who had lived among them and been faithful Benedictines for many years.

In keeping with Benedictine tradition, community and church rituals commemorated and celebrated the gift that these sisters were to community, family, church, and world. The services were rich and memorable, comforting and consoling. Without a doubt, these sisters are missed but in the words of St. John Chrysostom: “Those whom we love and lose are no longer where they were before. They are now wherever we are.”

Sister Mary Margaret Kraus, OSB

Sister Mary Margaret Kraus, OSB, former prioress, spiritual leader, gentle friend and compassionate presence to all, died peacefully on Sunday, May 15, 2011, at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery in Erie, PA.

Sister Mary Margaret, the 7th of ten children, was born to John and Helen Kraus on January 17, 1922. She grew up in St. Mary’s Parish and became a member of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, entering the community in 1939 and pronouncing her perpetual vows on August 18, 1944. Her silver, golden and diamond jubilees were celebrated respectively in 1966, 1991, and 2001. Holding a B.S. in Education from Villa Maria College, Sister Mary Margaret ministered in the field of education for 22 years, both as elementary teacher and principal. In 1964 she was elected prioress and served in that role for 14 years. Among her many accomplishments was the planning and building of the new mother house on East Lake Road. While leading the community through the challenging period of renewal after Vatican II Sister Mary Margaret was active in the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the National Assembly of Women Religious, and the Sisters’ Council of the Diocese of Erie.

Following her years as prioress she served a term on the Monastic Council.

In 1979 Sister Mary Margaret earned an M.A. in Creation Spirituality from Mundelein College before becoming the administrator of (Camp) Glinodo Center. After completing 13 years in this position, Sister Mary Margaret continued her service to God’s people in a variety of ways. For more than 10 years she made regular visits to the Mission of Friendship, the mission program of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Erie in Mérida, Yucatán, Mexico. She embraced volunteerism and for many years participated in the “Hooked On Books!” program at the Inner City Neighborhood Art House, volunteered at the House of Healing by assisting women who had been in the criminal justice system.
system as they attempted to make major changes in their life style, and worked for Hospice of Metropolitan Erie as a certified hospice volunteer.

From 1982 until shortly before her death, Sister Mary Margaret was a member of the Pennsylvania Prison Society, serving the people of Erie through prison ministry at the Erie County prison. She conducted a Communion service at the facility each Sunday, visited and corresponded with inmates regularly, and was a strong advocate for their humane treatment.

Sister Mary Margaret was a board member for Ecclesia Center and L’Arche Federation. In 1982, she received a Humanitarian Award from the Migration and Refugee Services department of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The Pennsylvania House of Representatives recognized her for outstanding dedication and performance in assisting in the ministry to women at the Erie County Jail in 1995, and in 2005 Sister Mary Margaret was one of Erie’s “Women Making History,” an annual event sponsored by the Mercy Center for Women.

Sister Mary Margaret is survived by her Benedictine community, one brother, John and his wife, Dorothy, two sisters, Dorothy Green and Claire Weber and her husband, Paul, sister-in-law Virginia Kraus, and many cousins, nieces and nephews.

Sister Margaret Mary Nielsen, OSB

Sister Margaret Mary Nielsen, OSB, 90, died on October 23, 2011, at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery in Erie, PA.

Born in Chicago, IL and baptized Helen Frances, Sister Margaret Mary was one of six children born to the late Joseph and Mary (Ruminski) Drzewiecki. She entered the Benedictine Sisters of Holy Family Priory, Benet Lake, WI on September 15, 1951. She lived as an Oblate until beginning her canonical novitiate in 1956 and pronounced her perpetual vows in 1960. In 1968 she was elected the first prioress of Holy Family Priory and held this office for 12 years. Sister Margaret Mary celebrated her Silver Jubilee in 1982. In 1986, the Benedictine Sisters of Benet Lake began a merger process with the Benedictine Sisters of Erie which was completed in 1991. Sister Margaret Mary celebrated her Golden Jubilee in 2007.

Sister Margaret Mary held a B.A. in Sociology with an emphasis in Social Work and a Social Service certification in Health Care. She was a member of the Omega Chapter of the National Scholastic Honor Society, Delta Epsilon Sigma, and did extensive studies in Theology.

During her years of ministry at Benet Lake she did clerical work at Our Faith Press in St. Benedict’s Abbey, worked in Religious Education both as teacher and director, and was a parish volunteer coordinator. In addition to serving three terms as prioress, Sister Margaret Mary served the community as Formation Director, elected council member and general secretary. She also worked in Public Relations for a number of years. After transferring to the Erie Benedictines, Sister Margaret Mary worked on the staff of Chapter 57, the monastery’s fine art gift shop. Most recently, as an infirmary resident Sister Margaret Mary was engaged in the ministry of prayer and presence at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery.

Sister Margaret Mary is survived by her Benedictine community, her sisters, Emilia Pavich and Dorothy Bojanowski, as well as cousins, nieces and nephews.

Memorials in honor of Sisters Mary Margaret Kraus and Margaret Mary Nielsen can be made to the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, 6101 East Lake Road, Erie, PA 16511 at ErieBenedictines.org.
The Story Continues

Special Honor
The Northwest Pennsylvania Workforce Investment Board (NWPA WB), the Regional Center for Workforce Excellence, honored Sister Miriam Mashank for her 22 years of dedication, leadership and service to workforce development in the Northwest Pennsylvania region through her work as executive director of St. Benedict Education Center. She was recognized at the organization’s eighth annual dinner held at the Ambassador Conference Center in Erie, PA, on September 30. Although she has recently retired from the position of executive director, Sister Miriam is staying connected with SBEC as director emerita.

Japanese Translation Completed
Between Two Souls: Conversations with Ryokan by Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB, published by Eerdmans, has been translated into Japanese. Ryokan’s original poems and Sister Mary Lou’s English originals precede the translated versions in the Japanese edition. The translators wrote to Sister Mary Lou: “Your poems go straight to the heart. Thank you for letting us translate your beautiful poems and share them with Japanese readers.”

Prophet of Peace Award, 2011
As Benedictine Sisters of Erie we commit ourselves to be a healing presence and prophetic witness for peace by working for sustainability and justice, especially for women and children.
—Corporate Commitment of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie

The Benedictine Sisters of Erie Prophet of Peace Award allows the community to affirm individuals or groups whose peace and justice efforts embody some aspect of the community’s

Relay for Life Success
Team Benedictine Sisters, Family and Friends participated in their 18th Annual American Cancer Society Relay for Life and came in as the second highest fundraising team with more than $8,900 in donations. Sister Dianne Sabol, in her 15th year as team captain, was honored as the highest individual fundraiser with a total of $3,185 in donations.
corporate commitment. This year the award was given to Al and Peggy Richardson of Erie in a special Evening Prayer service on August 3. In the words of Sister Anne Wambach, prioress: “The Prophet of Peace award is given in recognition of the Richardson’s efforts, leadership and commitment to nonviolence and peace, justice and equality for all in whatever forms it may take. The true value of their efforts, lies in their many contributions and ever-deepening dedication to the underserved and disadvantaged of Erie, as well as in the example they give each one of us to follow.”

The Richardsons received an engraved plaque to mark the occasion. The Benedictine motto of PAX, peace, was captured in the brief inscription: “Seek Peace and Pursue It.” The presentation concluded with these sentiments: “We honor you. We applaud your life’s work. We pray for the courage to follow your example.” A reception followed.

**Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum**

The staff, board and residents of Benetwood Apartments celebrated the 30th Anniversary of Benetwood’s being home to low-income seniors and mobility-impaired individuals on September 8. “The staff and board decided to celebrate by offering residents a pancake dinner,” explained Sister Patricia Hause, OSB, Benetwood administrator. “We—the sisters on staff—bring our Benedictine spirit of community to our ministry at Benetwood and what better way to celebrate than with a community meal. More than 80 of us gathered for the dinner, sharing stories and enjoying one another’s friendship.” A lively game of bingo that followed dinner was made more exciting by the generosity of local vendors who donated prizes for the winners.

In keeping with a long-standing tradition, the Benedictine Sisters of Erie hosted the residents of Benetwood Apartments for prayer and dinner later in the month. This year, the sister-staff at Benetwood and the Benedictine community welcomed more than 65 of their neighbors for the celebration. The 75-unit Benetwood apartment building sits on property adjacent to the monastery and is administered by the community.

Though West Africa is French speaking the language that united the 24 delegates with our African sisters and brothers was the heritage and legacy we share as Benedictines,” said Sister Mary Jane. In Africa, as elsewhere, women Benedictines express their solidarity through their presence to each other and their support in stewarding the charism in diverse cultures and into the future.

**Benetwood Apartments Celebrates 30th Anniversary**

This year, 2011, marks the 10th anniversary of Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum (CIB), an international conference of Benedictine women. Its annual conference of delegates met in West Africa September 1 – 16. Sister Christine Vladimiroff, who as President of the Conference of Benedictine Prioresses served as a delegate, and Sister Mary Jane Vergotz, secretary for the CIB, attended the conference. “Our sister and brother Benedictines in Africa extended warm and gracious hospitality to us in Burkina Faso, Togo, Benin and Ghana.左至右：Christine Vladimiroff, OSB (CIB Coordinator), Thomas Dougherty (US Ambassador to Burkina Faso), Mary Jane Vergotz, OSB.

Sister Marla Bleil, Benetwood staff and Sister Patricia Hause, administrator.
So… What are you getting for Christmas? A glimpse of the light of the star? A vision of peace and welcome in a broken and divided world? The certainty that you, just as you are, are welcomed and loved by God? The gift has been given. Those who are wise continue to receive it with thanks.”

— Rev. Patricia Gillespie

As you can tell from the engaged and committed faces that surround these pages, the sisters give thanks to each and every one of you for your gift of true friendship.

Friendship means that we are dependent on one another and vulnerable in our humanity, just like the baby Jesus at Christmas. We call on our friends when we need help and we count on them to respond unconditionally.

This is exactly what happened when the sisters asked for help to fix a 46-year-old elevator here at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery. Some of the elderly sisters, who never “retire,” rely on the elevators to go to chapel, the dining room and out the door to work. You, our friends and supporters, gave immediately when we explained the hardship caused by this sudden emergency. The new elevator is now up and running, as are the sisters who continue to serve the community through hospitality, ministry, and prayer.

Whatever the nature of your gift — be it financial, volunteering your time or offering your skills — you make many things happen.

For example, your gifts of kindness to the sisters make it possible:

- for 99 sisters to live in community, a life that provides them the strength and support needed to respond in prayer and ministry to many needs.
- for Mount Saint Benedict Monastery to be a center of hospitality and spirituality where the sisters “welcome all as Christ” by offering retreats, spiritual sustenance and a true haven of peace in a world of high stress.
- for children, families, the disadvantaged, the elderly, the hungry, and those with special needs to be helped through the community’s social service ministries.

There are many immediate needs, there are many future needs, and there are many ways you can continue to partner with the sisters!
Be a part of Annual Giving

This magazine tells many stories about what happens at the Monastery and in the ministries of the sisters because of the support we receive from you, our donors and friends. If you can make any financial gift at this time to our annual Christmas Appeal we would be enormously grateful.

Choose to give an Alternative Gift this Christmas

Do you want to make a truly meaningful gift this Christmas? Give a charitable gift to the Benedictine Sisters to honor an important person in your life, or remember a loved one who is deceased. We sometimes forget to tell our friends and family how much they mean to us, so this is the perfect way to let them know that we appreciate them.

This is a great gift for the person who has everything and, in addition, it’s easy for you to get.

A card will be sent to the person, or family of the person, in whose name the gift was given. This card does not include the amount of your gift. You, the donor, will receive a separate acknowledgement for your records.

Give the Gift of Hope to Future Generations: Join the Benedictine Sisters of Erie Legacy Society

This is a wonderful way to make a substantial gift whether or not you have the disposable assets to do so at this time. By remembering the Benedictine Sisters of Erie in your will, you can ensure that part of your estate will continue to benefit others. Such a gift helps support regular outreach to those in need as well as responding to unforeseen emergencies, like repairing the 46-year-old elevator. Your generosity is an expression of your hopes and dreams for the future of the Benedictine Sisters and their ministries.

THANK YOU!

THANK YOU for continuing to journey with the sisters and for being a part of the Benedictine family.

The sisters remember their friends and benefactors every Sunday at Liturgy and give thanks for your support. Together with you they build a world where all will be able to see a glimpse of the light of the star, a vision of peace and welcome in a broken and divided world, the certainty that you, just as you are, are welcomed and loved by God. Not just for Christmas Day, but for all 365 days of the year.

If you would like to give a gift today or want more information on ways to partner with the sisters, complete the remittance envelope enclosed with this magazine or visit ErieBenedictines.org.

May you and your family have a peace-filled Christmas and hope-filled New Year.
The Gift

By Patti Eichen, Development Staff

Have you ever received a gift and thought, “Oh no, not another one!” or, “What am I ever going to do with this?”
Some time ago, while working on an inpatient oncology unit, I received a gift from a co-worker. It was a pewter pin with a cat symbol etched on it. I graciously accepted the gift and honestly thought to myself, “Not another cat pin!” A passionate cat lover, I have received many cat-themed gifts through the years. Showing my gratitude, I put on the pin and thanked her. I was caught off guard when she asked, “Do you know what this pin symbolizes?” I had no clue. I took it for just another cat pin to add to my collection. She shared that it was a “hobo” pin and the cat symbolized “a kind hearted woman.” This person was giving me a message.

I came to learn that in the Great Depression era, hobos developed a system of symbols to provide directions, information and warnings to other hobos during their travels. They would draw these symbols with chalk, paint or coal on walls, fences, and mailbox posts to communicate to other travelers what was ahead. A cat symbol signified that a kind lady lived there and that the hobos could count on receiving a meal or friendship at that house.

The Benedictine Sisters have a long history of being “kind hearted women.” In the early days, the sisters would prepare sandwiches or gather leftover food for the needy men in Erie’s inner city. Those of you who were students at Saint Benedict Academy may remember the table in the cafeteria where you left a cookie, a piece of fruit or part of a sandwich from your own lunch that would later be given to them. In the foyer at the former mother house on East 9th Street, every night, same time, they would tap on a window to announce their arrival. Through that window the sisters passed to them what was most likely their only nourishment for the day.

Out of respect and compassion for these men, and in honor of Saint Joseph, the sisters referred to these men as the “Josephs.” Scripture tells us that Joseph was a compassionate, caring man. When we look back on the story of Christmas and the plight of Joseph and Mary, it was a time of great despair and, also, of great hope. It was because Joseph belonged to the house and family of David that Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem to be counted in the Roman census. There the infant Jesus was born in a stable. An angel appeared to the shepherds who were watching over their flocks in the fields near Bethlehem and gave them the good news that a Savior had been born. As the news spread, Wise Men from the East came to worship the Babe, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

As we prepare for the coming of Jesus this Christmas season, have you given thought to the plight of Mary and Joseph and how to keep the love and spirit of Christ in your life? We remind ourselves that we are part of the mystery that we celebrate. How will you welcome family, friends, neighbors, and even strangers into your life not only during this holiday season but every day of your life? Think about what symbol you would wear or place at your door to show that Christ lives in you, or to show your hospitality.

As I begin to ponder the task of holiday shopping and gift-giving, I reflect on the “hobo” pin that was given to me and what a profound message it carried. What gift can you or I give that will bring the meaning of God’s unending love and compassion to those with whom we come into contact each and every day? Food for the hungry, companionship for the lonely, a kind act shown to a stranger or a reason for hope to those in desperation are the gifts that we can give.

“Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see,” wrote Mark Twain. As we move into this holiday season, let us open our hearts and our doors to celebrate the generosity and kindness God has bestowed upon each and every one of us.

Wishing you and your family a blessed holiday season.
“We’ll always come to thee again, when Alma Mater calls”

Reunions...

Classes planning reunions next year are eligible to receive a $35 check to help defray mailing costs. Also provided will be an updated class list from our database as well as a set of labels. All we ask is that you provide us with new or updated addresses for the database. It is one of the best ways we have to keep in touch with friends and classmates. Please contact Ann Comstock at sbaalum@mtstbenedict.org or call 814-899-0614, ext. 2573.

Annual Appeal 2011

This year’s annual appeal supports our Alumnae Association, Catholic education, the sisters and their ministries. In a letter to Alumnae members, the Association President, Mary Rita Groucutt ’72, thanked alumnae members by saying, “…you have helped preserve our tradition and our mission that means so much to us. We help others and keep alive our spirit through relationships that last a lifetime…relationships with each other, with the sisters and with those who benefit through our donations. The spirit of SBA will always live on through us and those we help.”

A gift from an alumnae member could help to finance a $200 scholarship for a child to attend Catholic School, help an at-risk child receive classes in the Arts, or provide day care for low-income families. These are just some of the programs that a gift can help support. If you have not yet given, please consider doing so. Check our website at eriebenedictines.org or contact Ann Comstock at sbaalum@mtstbenedict.org or 814-899-0614 ext. 2573. The spirit of SBA will always live on through us and those we help.

Let us pray...

For our SBA alumnae who passed into eternity—

Mary Margaret Kraus, OSB ’39
Janet Bossart Guth ’40
Veronica Alexandra Lukasiewicz ’40
Blanche Kirkpatrick Connor ’41
Elizabeth Brumboy Burgoyne ’54
Rosemarie Tatara Bruno ’55
Therese M. Sitterle Kaval ’59
Evelyn Szymanski Edmonds ’65
Cheryl A. Pitcavage Norcross ’65
Patricia Watson Trocki ’65
Cynthia Louise Nantes ’71
Kathleen M. Steiner Vincent ’72
Beverlee Ann Bielanin Bayhurst Maxson
Dorothy Ruef Petersen

Visit 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 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.
Christmas with the Alumnae Association

The Alumnae Association of Saint Benedict Academy is an active spirited organization. It sponsors events, socials and fundraisers to support the ministries of the Benedictine Sisters, promote Catholic education and support and encourage its members in their involvement in service to ministries that promote Benedictine values and traditions.

Our BIGGEST social event by far is the Annual SBA Christmas Party. For over 20 years local SBA graduates along with faculty members have gathered during the first week in December to renew old friendships, celebrate the season and raise funds to support an Erie Benedictine ministry.

We began with 75 attendees and have grown to last year’s record-breaking number of 476! As soon as the word gets out how much fun it is, the number grows and every few years we have to look for larger venues at which to hold the party.

Money is raised with a Gift Basket Raffle, a 50-50 drawing and local donations solicited by the Party Committee on behalf of the Alumnae Association. Over the years we have helped to support the Inner City Neighborhood Art House, Glinodo Center, Sister Gus’ Kids Cafe, St. Benedict Child Development Center, St. Benedict Education Center, St. Benedict Community Center, Benetwood Apartments and Catholic School Education. At last year’s party, we raised $6,000 for the ministries.

And …we do it all with a party, the kind of party only SBA graduates understand. We laugh, we sing, and we tell stories about our days at SBA. We visit with the sisters, talk with former teachers, renew old friendships and make new ones. WE HAVE FUN!!! We cheer when our friends win a basket and groan if they win more than one. (That’s entirely possible as we usually have over 60 gift baskets to raffle.) We celebrate with a fine dinner and great company. We have a wonderful time and look forward to next year’s event. Our only true regret is that so many of our fellow graduates live out of town and never have the chance to experience Christmas with the SBA Alumnae Association.

Visit our website, ErieBenedictines.org and click on the SBA tab to view pictures and an accounting of this year’s party – Starry Starry Night 2011.
The Benedictine Sisters of Erie will honor Christmas by remembering:
“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1:1)

This Word has indeed become flesh among us in the blessing of friendship and care that you so generously extend.

For this we are grateful and we welcome you to share in our gratitude at Christmas liturgy in the Monastery Chapel:
Christmas Eve at 8:30 p.m. and Christmas Day at 9:30 a.m.