The Word becomes flesh and dwells among us.

(John 1:14)
I have always been a lover of words. So, a few months back, when a friend of mine told me about Word Genius.com. I was instantly intrigued. I signed up and now I receive daily a new word in my inbox. The word comes with a definition and is even used in a sentence. I know many of the words, or can at least figure out their meaning, but there are just as many, if not more, that are new to me. Words like propinquity (close kinship) and pulchritude (beauty) and phantasmagoria (illusion). A new word a day has caused me to reflect on the power of words and the importance of language and how we use words in written and spoken form.

This Fall/Winter issue of The Mount is often referred to as the “Christmas” issue. Christmas is when we celebrate the Incarnation of Jesus: the Word of God becoming flesh to dwell among us. God’s Word became flesh and the world was changed. It raises some important questions: How do our words become flesh? What does it mean for our words to become life for others? Are we willing to risk incarnation? Do our words change the world?

Words are not only to be spoken; to become “flesh,” words must also be lived. Words become flesh” when we act on them. Words like peace and love, truth and justice; words like mindfulness and balance, challenge and choice; words like vocation and call, commitment and faithfulness; words like giving and receiving, celebrating and mourning. These words reflect values the Benedictine Sisters of Erie hold dear. The stories of how we and our oblates, friends, and benefactors have made these words real are told throughout this magazine. While it is hoped you will find these stories inspiring and heartening, it is also hoped you will realize there are more stories to be told.

There are many words the world still needs. What good words within us are still waiting to become flesh? God’s Word became flesh and changed the world. God’s Word became flesh to empower us to do the same. Let us look into our hearts and find the words that God is calling us to enflsh so that our living can and will effect change in a world that longs for God to dwell within it.

Charlotte Anne Zalot, OSB
The Advent and Christmas seasons bring to us, among so many other gifts, the richness of tradition—family traditions and monastery traditions.

One of our liturgical traditions at this time of year is celebrating names for God that we do not hear at any other time. The prayers and prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as the readings at Sunday liturgies, give us words like these for God: Morning Star, Prince of Peace, Adonai, Root of Jesse, Rising Sun, Wonderful Counselor, Light of the World and Emmanuel.

It seems as if the Scriptures take on a poetic twist and these names for God bring strong and warm, comforting yet challenging messages to us. In them, the Scripture writers call us to think bigger, to let God be born anew in us, to let our imaginations be stretched by these names that we only hear at this time of year.

Another tradition that especially excites children uses numbers to build anticipation for the coming of the Word made flesh: Advent calendars. We loved the large calendar with the beautiful Christmas scene dotted with little windows, each with a date on it, December 1 to 25, to be opened only on the appropriate day. Behind each of those windows was part of a manger scene or the Christmas story: a star, a shepherd, a snowflake or an evergreen tree. We anxiously awaited opening that final window on Christmas Day. Today Advent calendars come in many more styles, often with candy behind the surprise windows—but the focus of waiting is still longing for the Christ child to be born.

At the monastery we have “surprise windows” opening for us when we sing Morning and Evening Prayer during Advent and the two-week Christmas season that follows. Sometimes a word appears in a song, sometimes in a reading or in the one-line antiphon of the day, especially the O Antiphons that we sing from December 17-23. (You can listen to them on our website, eriebenedictines.org, beginning December 17.) But wherever the surprise is, whatever word it offers and on whatever day it falls, it brings an image of God into this special season.

I hope that the names of God we use at this time of year, the surprises you find behind little Advent windows, and the Word we welcome on December 25 enhance your image of God and deepen your relationship with God now and always.

Anne Wambach, OSB
Prioress, Benedictine Sisters of Erie

We invite you to join us in celebration:
Christmas Liturgy, Monastery Chapel
Christmas Eve, 8:30 p.m.
Christmas Day, 9:30 a.m.
Some years ago, at the beginning of a linguistics course that I took as an undergrad, the professor told the class this legend: In the 15th century, King James (of the King James Bible fame) wanted to determine what language was spoken by God. He reasoned that this would also be the tongue spoken by the first people, lost after the Tower of Babel. He had the idea to seize two infants from peasant families and have them raised in silence, in isolation, under the care of a woman who was deaf and mute. He expected that, without hearing anyone speak to them, they would begin to speak the divine original language.

You can imagine what happened to those babies. With no songs or rhymes or chatter directed toward them, they grew sickly, miserable. They never learned to speak at all.

The point, the professor said, is that human beings need language. We need to listen to others to learn about the world and our place in it, and we need to have our own voices heard to explore who we are and make connection.

If she had been teaching a theology class, the professor might have added that the story also illustrates the idea that, as Thomas Keating said, “God’s first language is silence.” And she might have gone on to say that this underscores how significant it is that God, who speaks perfectly clearly through the gathering and crashing of waves, or the still glow of a sanctuary candle, or the firm, strong grip of an elderly woman, also chooses to reach us verbal, wordy creatures through language: in kind and prophetic conversations, and in poetry, and in holy writings.

For a long time, I was taught to fear God’s presence in the Word. The extremely conservative sect of Catholicism in which I was raised held that Scripture should only be read by clergy. Whenever I snuck a peek at a Bible, some well-meaning adult would snatch it away. “If you read this,” they said, “you’ll want to know what it means. And then you’ll start interpreting it on your own. That’s a job for the priests. You’ll lead yourself astray, and anyone who listens to you will be led astray too.”

And so, a little bit like those 15th century babies, I was raised without much language for God or for my own experiences of prayer and faith. The words I picked up—king, judge, vengeful, jealous—didn’t square with the God I suspected was at work in sunrises and in hospital waiting rooms and in the embraces of friends, but I had no way to explain that. For years, I described myself as Catholic but agnostic. How else could I account for faith in the Eucharist and in saints and my grandmother’s rosaries, and a lack of connection with the God I was told created it all?

In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, we read, “Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.” But a different way to read the Hebrew is, “Surely Your goodness and astonishing love chase after me day after day.”
Enter the Erie Benedictines. By the time I met this community, I had started questioning, searching for a more meaningful spirituality—studying Hebrew and Greek, dabbling in Quaker worship and Shabbat services, going to seminary—but I had never encountered any group of people with such a devotion to, and understanding of, the Word.

The gender-inclusive language used in the community’s worship was a revelation to me: not a trick of political correctness, not a hostile reaction to misogyny, but a clear, simple way to say, “This is another way to think of God, to think of human beings. This is a way we can see ourselves reflected in the Scriptures, and see God’s message reflected in our lives.” It was hard to fathom where this confidence with language came from until I began to practice lectio divina, the ancient Benedictine tradition of slow, prayerful reading. Sisters and oblates told me that daily immersion in the Word, time spent pondering and praying with short lines from the Scriptures, was the cornerstone of their spiritual practice, one of their meeting places with God. For someone who had been told to fear that kind of engagement with the Bible, this took some getting used to. But I was amazed at the God I found in Scripture when I began to look closely, especially when I went to the Hebrew texts and let myself pray with those words, considering different possibilities for translating them into English and asking what they might mean for us.

Take Psalm 23, for example. In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, we read, “Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.” But a different way to read the Hebrew is, “Surely Your goodness and astonishing love chase after me day after day.” Isn’t that a different image of God? It makes me imagine God as persistent in love, not just constant, and reconsider my own fears—do they ever steer me to try to outrun blessings?

Psalm 63, too, holds surprising ideas of God. Verse 7 is often translated, “In the shadow of your wings I rejoice,” but another way to piece that Hebrew together is, “With you, I am a child, safe in the folds of her mother’s skirt.” When I read those words, I remember how it felt to cling to my own parents, and think of the strength and love that I feel when a frightened child reaches to me for comfort.

I’m able, then, to think of God differently, and to imagine the author of that Scripture as a person who found God’s love in small, natural moments.

But perhaps one of the most surprising moments that I’ve had while doing lectio with translation came when I sat to pray with Psalm 46, which is essentially a prayer for peace. Like many psalms, 46 has a short Hebrew epigraph with musical instructions for the performers who sang it in the Temple, and it is particularly tricky to translate. But one possibility is: “For women’s voices.” Seeing that spelled out on the pages of my Bible changed me.

It did away with the fear that had still lurked within me, doubting whether I had a right to read and translate Scripture. I saw then how primal the need to use words is: it has nothing to do with learning the original language, or translating, or finding something new to say about God. It’s a need instilled in us by God, who may dwell in silence, but gave us—every one of us—voices to use and ears to hear.
Vocation Ministry
By Marilyn Schauble, OSB, Vocation Director

We have a new postulant. Colleen Leathley, a former participant in the Benedicta Riepp Monastic Experience program began her postulancy on September 16. Her willingness to seek God in community is a blessing for us. Sister Anne Wambach, prioress, spoke for the community when she said, “This is an exciting day for us. We are grateful to welcome another seeker in our midst.”

Colleen, a psychologist and academic with dual citizenship in New Zealand and Australia, shared: “From my experience, and what I know of the community’s history and values, I fully believe that joining the Benedictine Sisters of Erie will enable me to deepen and respond more fully to God’s presence and call in my life in a positive way, not just for myself but also the community and greater good … I welcome this opportunity, as well as the prospect of being further inspired and enabled to advance the valuable role that women have to play in our Church and world, while promoting Gospel values of inclusivity, human development and peace.”

The Entrance Ritual began at the front door of the monastery. As Vocation Director, I accompanied Colleen to the entrance where she knocked on the door as a sign of her desire to enter the monastery. After Colleen expressed that she wishes to continue to discern her vocation in community, Sister Anne presented her with a Benedictine cross: “Receive this cross as a sign of your willingness to follow Christ in this monastic community.”

Colleen joins postulants Jen Frazer and Jacqueline Small. Sister Stephanie Schmidt, the Director of Postulants who will guide Colleen in this first phase of initial monastic formation, explained: “Colleen will participate fully in the life of the community as a postulant and live the communal life of prayer and ministry. As her discernment process continues to unfold, she will learn community history, vision and values and have classes on Benedictine spirituality.”

The postulancy is a time to become more familiar with Benedictine spirituality as it is lived daily. It is also a time to discern the authenticity of the call to be a member of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. For information about becoming a Benedictine Sister of Erie you can contact me, Sister Marilyn Schauble, either by email at vocations@mtstbenedict.org or by calling 814-899-0614, ext. 2424.

Word Clouds
I have become fascinated with creating word clouds. Google says a word cloud is “an image composed of words used in a particular text or subject, in which the size of each word indicates its frequency or importance.” I use word cloud images in my vocation work. The word pictures I create speak to the monastic way of life and Benedictine values. Sometimes, I decorate a welcome card for a vocation visitor with a word picture, other times I might email one to a person interested in learning about Benedictinism. I have found this novel visual representation of monastic values and Benedictine buzz words to be meaningful and a fast and fun way to engage a seeker’s interest. They say a picture is worth a thousand words. I have found pictures of words to be just as inspiring.
Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ.
– Rule of Benedict 72:11

Mount Saint Benedict Monastery
Erie, Pennsylvania

Sister Justina Gutowski, OSB
November 9, 1936 – June 30, 2019

In Memoriam
The lives of our sisters, the faithfulness they lived so well, the seeking of God in which they persevered until their last breath, remain with us in memory and call us to be present in the here and now, to live fully alive so that we, too, may live into the fullness of life with God who seeks us even as we seek. Complete obituaries are available online at www.eriebenedictines.org/obituary-sisters.

Our sister, Justina, died as she lived: quietly and peacefully, surrounded by community and encircled with love.

Throughout her monastic life
Justina was faithful and wholehearted.
She embraced the Rule of Benedict
with sincerity and integrity
and carried out ministry
with trustworthiness and reliability.

Care for family, friends, animals and all of creation
guided her living and sustained the steadfast presence
for which she was known and will be remembered.

God of all blessing, we rejoice in gratitude
for the fullness of life that Justina now enjoys.
May the memory of this kind, humble woman inspire us to live life simply and well
so that you will be forever glorified. Amen.

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The Community Bids Farewell
By Stephanie Schmidt, OSB, Director of Monastic Formation

After six months of living the monastic life, Katlyn Ward completed her commitment in the Benedicta Riepp Monastic Experience program on September 25. That evening the community gathered to celebrate with her, thank her for her service and give her a farewell blessing.

Katlyn, a 24-year-old New York native, came to live with the Benedictine community after living with other millennials for the previous six years. She expressed a desire for intergenerational living where she could learn from her elders…something we could easily provide!

She also came to learn more about God through the experience of a religious tradition not her own. Although she is not Catholic and this was her first exposure to our tradition, Katlyn’s faithfulness to daily communal prayer was an important part of her experience.

During the six months she lived in the monastery Katlyn met weekly with her mentor, Sister Miriam Mashank, and worked in a variety of Benedictine ministries. The various ministry directors praised Katlyn’s flexibility and generosity in serving wherever she was needed.

Katlyn has decided to stay in the Erie area, so we count on her frequent visits.

For more information about the Benedicta Riepp Monastic Experience Program, email Sister Stephanie: formation@mtstbenedict.org.

(L-R): Sisters Miriam Mashank and Diane Rabe, Katlyn Ward, Sisters Stephanie Schmidt, Anne McCarthy, Anne Wambach

Sister Justina Gutowski, OSB
November 9, 1936 – June 30, 2019

Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ.
– Rule of Benedict 72:11

Perpetual Monastic Profession
August 14, 1961

(L-R): Sisters Miriam Mashank and Diane Rabe, Katlyn Ward, Sisters Stephanie Schmidt, Anne McCarthy, Anne Wambach

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Collective Wisdom

During my time in initial monastic formation, I have received many valuable insights from honest and wise members of the community. Their perspectives have allowed me to become more compassionate, wise, patient and understanding towards people or incidents that have unsettled me. Clearly, I am a work in progress, but through openness to new perspectives that I need – if not necessarily want – to hear, I am slowly but surely becoming wiser and more Christ-like… in my humble opinion! While individual wisdom has its value, collective wisdom, drawn from loving, honest and wise women, is priceless. I feel very blessed to have this spring of wisdom on my doorstep.

—Colleen Leathley, Postulant

Importance

My first “monastery death” happened shortly after I moved in. The ceremonies and remembrances were touching and overwhelming. A short time later I was talking with a sister with quite an important job in the monastery. I mentioned my surprise that while the ceremonies were touching and profound, there was something about how the monastery continued to function more or less normally that was a bit unnerving. Her reply was that the community had a fair amount of practice and knew how such occasions ought to run. She also commented that no one member is irreplaceable, and that if she herself were to suddenly die, the only delay would be in trying to locate all her files. This was in a funny way quite comforting, that we are all embraced in a community and in a monastic tradition in which we play a small, brief part, and then depart the stage so another may take over. No one of us need be all that impressive to be important for that moment in time in community that is ours. Immortality, of a sort!

—Jen Frazer, Postulant

Balance

Balance is key, everyone tells you, and they’re right—but it’s a little bit more complicated than it sounds. One of the wisest things a sister has told me cast this problem in a different light. She said that balance is important to strive for, but almost impossible to achieve. You’ll never feel that you’re giving all these good pursuits the time and energy each one deserves. Instead, focus on finding harmony in your life. Let your prayer, your work, your creative outlets, your relationships all work together, flowing from the same source and guiding you toward the same end: an ever-deepening love of God. The challenge, then, as she sees it, is to be really single-hearted: not necessarily efficient, not necessarily consistent, but totally focused on one thing in every moment. As I continue to discern whether monastic life is right for me, this seems like the core question I’ll have to return to: Can I make it my priority to seek and glorify God always, and let everything else be a part of the seeking?

—Jacqueline Small, Postulant

Listen … Respond

With the death this year of Jean Vanier, founder of L’Arche, I have reflected a lot on the gifts and wisdom I received from L’Arche community, of which I was a part for many years, and the Benedictine monastic community of which I am now a member. Both teach about the call to listen “with the ear of the heart” and to respond; both teach about the importance of relationships and being open to discovering the beauty in each person, even those who may be most challenging. I’ve also learned the value of reflection, prayer and gratitude, and hospitality. We are to treat everyone and everything with reverence and respect.

—Sister Kathleen McCarthy, Scholastic
All Shall Be Well

I remember the exact moment that I knew I wanted to become a member of this community. Easter Vigil. The first few chords of All Shall Be Well began streaming from the organ, and I watched. The community’s deep belief in Paschal joy revealed itself as all sang and even a handful danced out this truth of our Christian faith: Indeed, all shall be well. It isn’t hard to feel that joy at Easter Vigil in our chapel filled with sisters and friends, but the wisdom that I frequently glean from this community is the daily and often discovered-in-small-ways truth that all shall be well. When I need a last-minute substitute to take my place on the dish-washing team and someone comes around the corner able to help me out. When I am worried about having four things to do at once, and it turns out that four people have already taken care of those things. I learn so often that everything works out when we live communally. There is no need to worry. All shall be well.

—Sister Valerie Luckey, Scholastic

Wisdom in Action

Benedict’s little rule for beginners grounds me. It helps me to know that there will be bumps and scrapes, hits and misses along the way and it explains that through daily life with others I will be nourished to grow in love of God and yes, love of those same others. Words have carried Benedict’s wisdom through the ages, yet living in community is what gives it life today. I am edified by each sister and the group as a whole. Through them I receive wisdom in ways often much more subtle than words—random acts of care and kindness—that guide and nurture and give me support. For that I am most grateful.

—Sister Karen Oprenchok, Scholastic

Interdependence

No one can do everything by themselves. In my time in community I have come to learn how important it is to be interdependent. Every one of us has unique gifts and talents that can be of service, one to the other, if we ask for help and offer help when needed. Embracing interdependence can be challenging for someone like me who lived alone and independently for many years. Chapter 7 in the Rule of Benedict is about humility. It has become my blueprint for successful community living. It continues to teach me to accept my own limitations and rely on guidance from my sisters as I pursue monastic life. Interdependence shaped by humility is showing me the way to seek God in community.

—Sister Dina Lauricella, Scholastic

Interested in learning more about how you can join these women in discerning your Benedictine vocation? Contact Sister Marilyn Schauble, Vocation Director, vocations@mtstbenedict.org.
Six protestors, including members of Benedictines for Peace (BFP), lay on the ground in the shape of a cross, in the middle of the busiest street in the city of Newark, NJ, in front of the ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) Field Office while the names of the seven children who have died while in detention in the US rang out. The response, “We will remember you,” came from over 400 people who filled the street and sidewalks as part of the September 4 Catholic Nonviolent Action for Immigrant Children, a strategic campaign to end child and family detention.

The day began with training and prayer at St. Mary’s Benedictine Abbey in Newark followed by a procession to the ICE headquarters. After a blessing by Cardinal Tobin, archbishop of Newark, the procession moved into the street, with over 70 people blocking traffic and risking arrest. After several hours, police arrested six people, including four members of Erie Benedictines for Peace.

Erie Benedictine postulant Jacqueline Small explained before she was arrested: “As a daughter and granddaughter of immigrants, I feel very strongly about this important issue and the need to make our voices heard, to proclaim as loudly as possible, that children and families belong together.”

Local and national media—traditional and social—featured the action and generated hundreds of phone calls in support of the action to the White House and senators’ offices from around the country.

At the same time, 50 people gathered in Erie outside the governor’s office, to pray and vigil in solidarity with those in Newark. The vigil asked Governor Wolf to stop accepting immigrant families in the Berks detention facility in Leesport, PA.

This was the second of three actions in the Catholic Nonviolent Action for Immigrant Children. The first phase was in Washington, DC, on July 18. The second was this direct action in Newark, NJ. The third, which took place October 11 and 12, was in El Paso, TX.

Cardinal Tobin’s statement on September 4 summarized the national Catholic campaign: “Today, I stand in solidarity with my brothers and sisters in Christ to decry the treatment of children who bear the trauma wrought by immigration enforcement raids, separation from their families and indeterminate detention. These draconian measures are not a solution to our broken immigration system. They are violations of human dignity and are contrary to all religious teachings and the sacred call to care for our most vulnerable populations.”

Sister Anne McCarthy, OSB and Postulant Jacqueline Small form the arms of a cross while blocking the street in Newark, NJ.
“Perdimos a mi abuela.” Did you say you lost your grandmother?

That’s what an eight-year-old girl told me in the children’s playroom at Casa del Refugiado, a shelter at the border in El Paso, TX, where I volunteered from September 7 – 15. Her family had traveled for days to escape violence in Central America. Asking for asylum, they were taken to a detention center, her father separated from his wife and girls, the grandmother separated from them all. When the family was released, the grandmother was missing. We huddled together praying for her return.

Abysmal newscasts led me to animate my Benedictine charism: to travel to El Paso to put faces on statistics of refugees and asylum-seekers; to offer help. At the border, immigration policy debates quickly cede to the realities of helping migrants. My jobs included monitoring the children’s playroom, disinfecting toys and doorknobs, deep cleaning everywhere, laundering blankets and towels, fixing child and infant car seats, making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, serving food, sorting donations of clothes and toiletries, assembling hygiene kits and driving families to the bus station or airport to travel to family members elsewhere in the U.S.

Our team from California included volunteers from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, an Intentional Eucharistic Community, the National Catholic Reporter Publishing Company, and Nuns and Nones. We heard so many heart-wrenching stories. For example, when a man asked a nurse volunteer if she would check his wounds, she found five untreated bullet holes in his torso. He told of collecting his children at school, then getting caught in cross-fire between rival drug gangs. His young daughter had died. The next day, he took his wife and son, left everything behind and headed north.

The detention center, called “the ice box” for its cold temperatures, housed them for days. At Casa del Refugiado, things were different. In a large room, intake volunteers processed them, gave them water, sandwiches, fruit, and a warm greeting, “You are safe, and you are free. Welcome.” Then volunteers removed the identification bracelets from the detention center. Again, “You are free!”

They were given new underwear, socks, clean clothes, and toiletries—including toothpaste and a toothbrush. A huge semi-truck held 10-12 private showers for their use. They also received towels, blankets, and as needed, diapers, wipes and formula for infants.

Upon arrival, our guests were somber, often confused. But soon, the kindness, food, and welcome dissolved their fears and we saw frowns replaced with smiles and gratitude. Remember the TV ad, “What happens in Las Vegas, stays in Las Vegas?” At the border, it’s, “What happens in El Paso stays in the heart.”

Do you, too, long to help? To learn more, I recommend Sand and Blood: America’s Stealth War on the Mexico Border by John Carlos Frey. Then consider volunteering, opportunities to contribute abound, just do some research.

What became of the family without a grandmother? When a loudspeaker announced another bus, the family ran to see if grandma was there. Shortly after, they returned, grateful and exuberant. “Abuela” was a tiny, indigenous woman with silver teeth, wearing the clothing of her village, face stained from dirt and cooking smoke. There she was, the most beautiful face in the world. We wept.
The annual Oblate Commitment Ceremony was celebrated at Mount St. Benedict Monastery on Saturday, October 26. More than 100 of the 250+ oblates were present for the commitment ceremony that took place at Evening Prayer. During the ceremony six people became initiates (the initial commitment that leads to becoming an oblate). They received a copy of the Rule of Benedict. This year’s new oblates (2018 Initiates) received a Benedictine pin as a sign of their commitment to the Oblate Way of Life. Together with the renewing oblates they proclaimed their commitment statement expressing a desire to seek God and respond in prayer and ministry, and to support the community’s Corporate Commitment: 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. “It is always so moving to witness the sincerity and intention with which our oblates make their commitment,” said Sister Dianne Sabol, Oblate Director. “I am humbled and honored to have the role of directing this program. The Oblate Way of life is a blessing for the women and men that choose to be in this relationship with the Erie Benedictines and it is equally a blessing for the community.”

New Oblates
Standing (L-R): Sr. Anne Wambach (Prioress), Suzanne Hudson (Harborcreek, Pennsylvania), Judith Davis (Brevard, North Carolina), Joan Martter (Erie, Pennsylvania), Sr. Dianne Sabol (Oblate Director), Priscilla Richter (Erie, Pennsylvania)
Seated (L-R): Cathy Courtice (Delaware, Ohio), Sandy Selby (Akron, Ohio), Breanna Mekuly (Erie, Pennsylvania)
Unable to be present:
Beth Jordan (Santa Rosa, California)

Initiates
Patrick Bradley (Lewiston, New York) and Ann Vogan (Venus, Pennsylvania)
Unable to be present:
Teri Bays (Sedona, Arizona), Christine Guarnieri (Grove City, Pennsylvania), Christine Lutz (Greensboro, North Carolina) Sarah Rieth (Southern Pines, North Carolina)

Congratulations are in order
Each year, Sewanee, The University of the South School of Theology bestows the DuBose Award on worthy people who have been serving the Church and their communities in a number of ways. This year Oblate Ginny Slichter was recognized and honored for making a significant difference in transforming the lives of prison inmates and promoting peace and well-being in their community. Ginny is the mentor of an Education for Ministry (EFM) seminar group in State Correctional Institute (SCI) Phoenix (formally SCI Graterford), a maximum-security prison for men in Collegeville, Pennsylvania, just outside Philadelphia. She has mentored there for more than 13 years, and the men who have been in her groups (where there is always a waiting list) describe her as one who embodies for them the Love of God.
CALLED TO BE COMMUNITY, CALLED TO BE TRANSFORMED
By Mary Ann Matlock, Oblate

Months of planning, dozens of emails and a multitude of revisions along with hope and prayer brought forth our second day long oblate gathering on October 25, 2019. Our core committee of six welcomed over 80 oblates from near and far as they took residence at the Monastery, hotels and private homes in answer to the Call to be Community, Called to be Transformed. We shared our personal stories of making a commitment to be Oblates of Mount St. Benedict Monastery. Sister Anne McCarthy shared with us examples of living a life of prayer and a life of love in action that transforms us from self to others. We prayed together and shared with each other. Meeting new oblates and renewing old friendships reminded us to listen to the call to be community with all people and all creation, as we transform ourselves and the world.

Planning Committee
Standing (L-R): Oblates Rose Anne Jesenovec, Malinda Bostick, Mary Ann Matlock
Seated (L-R): Sr. Dianne Sabol (Oblate Director), Oblates Karen and Paul Groucutt

The theme of “Called to be Community, Called to be Transformed” was represented in this alabaster carving done by Oblate Eileen Gross who graciously allowed it to be exhibited as part of the Oblate Day of Reflection. In her words: “Carving is my preferred way of working. In the carving process I look to reveal the color and energy inherent in the material. This piece is titled “Celtic Inspired” and was carved after a period of studying Celtic knot* patterns. Unlike many of the Celtic patterns that are very regular and symmetrical, this carving adapted itself to the shape of the alabaster.”

Four Oblates formed a panel and shared how they live the Oblate Way of Life.

Elizabeth Lynch
Lima, OH
I seek to remain present in the moment, acting out of love for God and living Benedictine values . . .

Tom LeBeau
Lancaster, NY
The gentle discipline of daily prayer sustains me . . .

Sarah Signorino
Buffalo, NY
The radical sense of hospitality and prayer that I experience here has been a huge gift . . .

Marlene Trambley
Erie, PA
Prayer and discernment are the key to recognizing new opportunities for me to serve the communities of which I am a part . . .

And to this we say: Amen!
The wonderful thing about stories is that they are more accurate about life than any “factual” presentation. And a really good story gives insight into the human adventure and expands our hearts. This story is a treasure and tells you more about the Joan Chittister Fund for Prisoners and the prison chaplains with whom we work than any set of statistics could. I hope you agree.

The paper hearts pictured here are part of a project initiated by prison volunteers Barbara Redmond and Jane Eggleston, who have been ministering to women in the California Institute for Women for over 18 years. The Fund for Prisoners has given many of the women incarcerated at CIW, as well as 8,000 prisoners across the country, The Monastic Way, a Joan Chittister Calendar, journals, and other spirituality materials from Benetvision each year.

When she received the 2018 calendars for the prisoners, Barbara described her reaction as “Speechless. I loved, loved, loved the calendars—the artwork, the colors, the quotes as always but most especially, I was ecstatic for the theme—‘Everywoman’—because it spoke directly to the women prisoners with whom we interact in our ministry.” More than ever, Barbara told us, the women treasured these particular calendars.

So, at the end of 2018, Barbara and Jane asked the women from their reflection groups if any of them wanted to donate their used calendars for a special project. Barbara and Jane took them home and cut strips from the calendars and folded them into these beautiful hearts. The next time Barbara and Jane met with the groups they invited the women to take several paper hearts and give them away freely. “We encouraged them ‘to pass love around,’” said Barbara.

In July 2019, Cheryl Bough, one of our oblates, brought these hearts with her on a visit to Erie, to complete the journey—a gift from the prisoners to share with the staff at Benetvision and Monasteries of the Heart. They represent for all of us a true circle of love.

In the prison in California, the women got so involved in “giving away their hearts” that they were inspired to write a name, a prayer, or a prayer intention on the paper strips before folding them. Prayerful message hearts!

Sandra, part of Barbara’s group, says that one of the hardest parts of living in prison is that you have nothing to give away or share—the little hearts allow them to extend a gift, a blessing, a symbol of love and hope and caring and comfort to another.

The women have no privacy in prison. Even when they are given very limited phone time, it is in a public hallway and others can hear the conversation. Now, if someone overhears a woman crying because she has received devastating news, or if it’s clear that something good has happened and congratulations are in order, or if the woman is sad after talking to her children whom she can’t visit, the word carries, and tiny hearts appear to bring comfort or celebration or understanding. It is “a way to say what words cannot say.”

The women share their hearts with volunteers and teachers at the prison as well as with those who volunteer in administration roles. The hearts cross boundaries and become a legitimate way to uphold one another, even if there are wide gaps in between the life experiences of those who give or receive them.

Often the hearts are shared secretly—a woman will find a heart in a pocket or at her place at the cafeteria table or they are left in a public spot for all to share. The women have no idea who reached out to them that day and they experience a sense of wonder and surprise that is so rare behind prison walls. And community is created.
One night at their group meeting, a woman came with the good news that the parole board was going to recommend her release in 120 days - over the next few hours and days, hearts appeared wherever she went, congratulating her, wishing her well, hoping the best for her with no words at all exchanged.

When is a calendar more than a calendar? When it is woven into a loving gesture, a connection, an expression of love and care without words. Amanda, in thanking Barbara and Jane for the hearts, said it best, “This reminds me that someone knows I am here and is ‘with’ me - and I have never felt that before.”

If you’d like to make your own hearts to share, Barbara created a how-to video that you can access here: www.joanchittister.org/make-hearts.

Joan Chittister, OSB, Honored by Communicators for Women Religious

In October 2019 Joan Chittister, OSB, was presented with the inaugural AIM (Advancing Image and Mission) Award by Communicators for Women Religious (CWR) at the organization’s 25th Anniversary Conference in Mesa, Arizona. The award recognizes Sister Joan’s significant contributions to advancing the image and mission of Catholic sisters through her extensive work as an international lecturer, author, and courageous advocate of justice, especially, for women, in both church and society for more than 40 years.

Sister Joan also delivered the conference keynote address. Based on her recent publication, *The Time is Now: A Call to Uncommon Courage*, she defined what it means to be a prophet in today’s world and issued a challenge to combat complacency and apathy in our own lives. Rather than wait for others to solve the problems of inequality, injustice, and poverty, Sister Joan explained why it is our moral and spiritual responsibility to take action and make the world a better place for all.

In May of this year Sister Joan appeared on Super Soul Sunday with Oprah Winfrey. In a powerful conversation they, too, discussed *The Time is Now: A Call to Uncommon Courage*. In addition to defining being a prophet in today’s world, Sister Joan outlined the key steps we can all take to lift America (and the world) out of its current state of polarization and political disarray.

Contributed Photo
SBCC GOES TO THE EMPIRE STATE GAMES FOR THE PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED

“I almost cried when they introduced Henry Moss from St. Benedict Community Center (SBCC) to lead the Pledge of Allegiance,” said Sister Dianne Sabol, SBCC Director. She was referring to the Opening Ceremonies of the Camp Smile Empire State Games for the Physically Challenged held on October 18-19, 2019 and hosted by The College at Brockport. The goals of the games are to introduce the concept of adapted sports for physically challenged youth, encourage promotion of sports for physically challenged individuals of all ages, and to enable juniors to learn and develop skills required for a successful experience in sports competition and fitness. This year marked 33 years of celebrating ability by offering a variety of competitive sports games for young athletes (ages 5-21) with physical challenges. For SBCC, it was a first because, as Sister Dianne explains: “This is the first year we have had an Adapted Sports Program.” In February of 2019 an eight week long Adapted Sports Program was initiated at St. Benedict Community Center. It featured wheelchair basketball—a sport played by people with different levels of physical challenges that prevent running, jumping and pivoting and it fostered healthy competition, constructive use of time, positive social interactions and valuable life skills.

The SBCC team included Jamie Downey, Henry Moss, Henry Mullett, and Matt Serafin. At the Empire State Games they participated in a variety of games including club throw, soft ring throw, precision throw, discus, shot put, long jump, slalom/obstacle course, running, and swimming. Every member of the team won gold medals in multiple events. “I can’t even begin to tell you how proud and grateful I was,” shared Sister Dianne. “The focus was not on disability but rather, on ability. It was all about what they can do, not what they can’t do.”

At its most basic level, St. Benedict Community Center (SBCC), located at 320 E. 10th Street in Erie, aims to provide a recreational facility inclusive of peoples of all races and challenges. But what it actually provides are opportunities for team building and mentoring, friendship and hope. It provides security and stability and consistency, appreciation for neatness and order, and it challenges its patrons—young as well as old—to become their best selves. The presence of SBCC on Erie’s East Side helps provide beauty in a part of the city where it’s most needed and gives donors the chance to support the revitalization of the inner-city with their contributions to its programs and services. To learn more visit https://www.eriebenedictines.org/communitycenter.
As part of Erie’s Youth Climate Strike, held at Perry Square on September 20, 2019, students from the Neighborhood Art House (NAH) shared their thoughts in a moving presentation. It was presented by Yeslian 12, Teajanae 12, Anjali 13, Nhu 12 who wrote it with Olga 10, Lucinda 10, Aaralyn 10 and Jennifer 12. In addition, the NAH Hoop Dancers under the direction of Jennifer Dennehy also performed as part of the program.

**This is a Climate Emergency!**
Our House is on Fire!

We are Striking for Climate!

You, our government and leaders, need to do something. We are dealing with a system change not a climate change. As our leaders you need to unite behind the Science. Our scientists have been telling you for decades that our Earth is in trouble. In fact, Our House is on fire!

We are here today because like young people all over the world, the young people in our schools and at the Neighborhood Art House deserve a future. Do you understand? WE DESERVE A FUTURE!

Do you understand? “My house is on fire!” Where will the people live when our earth can’t support them? We are from the Art House and we want to help but we need your help. We need you to listen to the Earth…to listen to us…to ACT.

And yes, we NEED YOU TO Go Green before the Green Goes! Here in Erie we are calling on all our local leaders but especially on our Mayor Joe Schember and our County Executive Kathy Dahlkemper to lead the charge for Climate Change!

In some parts of the world, many people have a miserable life and life will change for all of us. Please don’t let the lives of the future generations be miserable because you chose to do nothing. Act Now! Do something with your lives to improve the lives of your children and grandchildren.
May we be in this world a ray of that light which shone forth from Bethlehem, bringing joy and peace to the hearts of all men and women. —Pope Francis

Every day I try to go through the mail that arrives in the Development Office and often, written on the inside of a remittance envelope, a post it note, or a line in a card, I read the stories of people who have been touched by the mission and ministry of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie.

Invariably, when I sit down for coffee in the monastery dining room after a Sunday liturgy, I hear anecdotes from alumnae, retreatants, and oblates, about sisters who were central to the paths they chose on their life’s journey.

When I visit the community’s ministries, I hear touching accounts of how a sister, staff member, or volunteer helped to turn someone’s life around — a very mixed group of people all supported and helped by these faith-filled, strong women who are the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. You, too, must have been touched in some way by these sisters otherwise you would not be reading this magazine.

The sisters have been part of the lives of families in Erie, PA, and beyond for 163 years. From the one-and-a-half-story frame house that was the first school for girls which opened in 1869, to the many inner-city ministries today, the sisters remain committed to assist those in need, especially women and children.

It’s easy to imagine that the first sisters who traveled to Erie in 1856 really didn’t know what to expect. While they must have prepared as best they could for the difficulties they would face, they took a leap of faith, trusting that the Holy Spirit would strengthen them for whatever came their way. Today this community faces new challenges: Providing for the elder sisters, meeting the rising costs of healthcare, and maintaining the...
monastery that welcomes hundreds of guests each year, all while continuing to operate numerous ministries.

This Benedictine community depends on your generous financial support. While the average age of the sisters is 76, the 92-member community has young women who are considering the life of a vowed sister. Presently the sisters range in age from 26 to 102, including three postulants who entered this year, one from as far away as Australia.

As an oblate of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, my life and dreams are intertwined with this community that looks to create a world of peace and justice for all. I also know that it’s only with the support of you, our oblates, alumnae, donors, staff, volunteers, family, and friends that the journey of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie will continue. Please open your hearts to the needs of these sisters and all they serve.

With such a diverse group of seekers comes new perspectives, vision, and possibilities. One of the blessings of the sisters is that they have attracted women, from millennials to seniors, who have relocated to Erie seeking community. Some work in Benedictine ministries while others volunteer; some work for organizations helping to raise up those in poverty while others are a presence in the inner city and are exploring alternative community. These women bring new ideas, new talents, and new ways of living community. Like those first sisters who faced such uncertainty, there are others who want to follow in the sisters’ footsteps…so the journey continues and evolves!

Help us continue the journey.

Please consider a financial gift to our Christmas Appeal

There are many immediate needs, there are many future needs, and there are many ways you can continue to partner with the sisters! This magazine tells stories about some of the things that happen because of your support.
We would be enormously grateful for any financial gift that you choose to give. Send your gift in the remittance envelope included in this magazine or go to our secure website, ErieBenedictines.org, and click on DONATE. Feel free to contact me if you have any questions, comments, or need anything. Call me at 814-899-0614 Ext. 2281 or email me at joclarke@mtsbenedict.org. You can make a onetime gift or choose to make a recurring monthly gift by joining our Monthly Companions Program.

**Monthly Companions Program**

A recurring gift is easy and convenient because you can preauthorize your gifts to be charged automatically to your credit or debit card each month. You can also arrange for your gift to be sent to us directly from your bank. This is efficient, convenient, and cost-effective for both you, the donor, and for us, the recipient of your generosity. You don’t have to write a check and put it in the mail or remember each month to charge your gift. It’s cost-effective for us because we save postage and time asking you to renew your annual commitment. It’s also money that we know that we can count on.

For more information call Patti Eichen at 814-899-0614 Ext. 2442 or email her at peichen@mtsbenedict.org.

**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, even when you do not 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 can help to pay for unforeseen emergencies. Your generosity is an expression of your hopes and dreams for the future of the Benedictine Sisters and their ministries. Our legal title is *Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Inc.* Please let us know if you decide to include the sisters in your will or, if you have questions, contact Mary Jane Vergotz, OSB, Director of Development, at 814-899-0614, Ext 2409.

Together we CAN “be in this world a ray of that light which shone forth from Bethlehem, bringing joy and peace to the hearts of all men and women.”

We are all woven into the fabric of this diverse group of seekers… thank you for joining us in this adventure.

We wish you a peace-filled Christmas and a new year filled with hope and kind words.
ALTERNATIVE GIFTS
By Patti Eichen, Development Associate

The tradition of giving presents at Christmas has roots that go back as far as the Nativity story in which the three Magi gave gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the Christ child in the manger.

Today, in our fast-paced world, we witness others, as well as ourselves, often scurrying at the last minute to find special Christmas gifts for those who are dear to us.

In your search for that special present, why not slow down and consider an alternative gift to the Benedictine Sisters? This is a financial donation given in honor or celebration of an important person in your life, or in memory of a deceased loved one. It doesn’t get more special than that, and besides it’s easy!

When an alternative gift is given to the Benedictine Sisters, a Christmas card is sent to the person or family member of the individual in whose name the gift is given. Your gift amount will not be included. You, the donor, will receive a separate acknowledgment for your records.

Your offering will help the sisters maintain their home, Mount St. Benedict Monastery. It will help meet the needs of the elder sisters, and also touch the lives of people are served daily in the sisters’ ministries.

Gifts can be made using the enclosed remittance envelope. You can also visit our secure website, ErieBenedictines.org, and designate a gift.

Make someone’s Christmas a little more special with an alternative gift to the Benedictine Sisters of Erie.

For more information on the Alternative Gift Giving program, please contact Patti Eichen, Development Associate, at 814-899-0614 Ext 2442, or at peichen@mtstbenedict.org

You can consider this form of gift giving not only at Christmas but also throughout the year to acknowledge birthdays, anniversaries, and other special life events.
Benedict writes in his 6th century rule for monks that daily meals should consist of “…two kinds of cooked food…fruit or fresh vegetables…a generous pound of bread… half a bottle of wine…” —Rule of Benedict, Chapters 39 and 40

Although our diets today are not exactly what they were in the 6th century, the very fact that Benedict included chapters on variety in the food and drink served at monastery meals—as well as chapters on special diets for the sick and the young and the times and frequency of meals—indicates that sustenance as well as attention to individual differences matter to those who seek a balanced and holy life. And that hasn’t changed.

In our world of supersized portions, half-gallon cups, and eating on the run, what can this ancient wisdom offer us? A nurse, a dietitian and two modern monks decided to find out.

Two years ago, Mary Beth Peterseim, RN, monastery infirmarian, Sharon Piano, registered dietitian nutritionist, and Sisters Val Luckey and Linda Romey began looking for ways to bring greater mindfulness to monastery eating.

“Our bodies are what we eat,” said Mary Beth. “Our diets affect our health, our energy, our mental acuity, our sleep. We wanted to creatively offer the sisters education about healthy eating choices—and help them see that healthy doesn’t mean blah, tasteless food.”

Education and healthy choices were only part of the experiment. Sister Val, who espouses a philosophy of generous cooking, wanted to offer new taste adventures to her sisters. “Eating mindfully means savoring not only new tastes and textures, but also taking some slow time together,” she said.

So, the group of four friends created Mindful Eating, serving their first meal to more than 30 sisters in October 2017. Called “The Joy of Taste,” the inaugural meal featured a succulent array of herbs and roots to sample followed by several simple courses to introduce new taste combinations. About every 10 weeks since that first dinner, an invitation goes up on the monastery bulletin board advertising another creatively themed dinner. Themes have included Dressing Food Differently, Power Up: Protein, Savvy Snacking, Herbs to You, Oktoberfest or Octoberfeast, Serving Up Summer.

The Mindful Eating team plans a menu that always includes new tastes or food combinations to highlight a particular piece of dietary or health education. Because this effort is not just about food, but also about the communal experience, the dinner slowly unfolds in a restaurant-style atmosphere created in the large meeting space on the monastery ground floor. Sometimes twinkle lights suspended from the ceiling, sometimes dozens of candles, always extensive table decorations or creative placemats and themed music create a special décor.

One-hundred-two-year-old Sister Placida Anheuser brings her iPad and photographs her way through dinner—the photos on these pages are hers. “It’s a mighty display of creative energy and a most delicious experience!” she says.
The preparation is intense but not without help. Sisters Marcia Sigler and Cindy Hoover regularly add their baking and cooking expertise. And everyone helps with clean-up, carting dishes upstairs to wash, breaking down tables, vacuuming and taking out compost and trash.

What began as an experiment has become, for the planners and executers, an exercise in creativity that is both exhilarating and stretching, and for the sisters, a feast of taste and a taste of mindfulness. “Our planning meetings are adventures into great taste and healthy food,” said Sharon. “The ideas just keep coming and it’s hard to narrow down each menu. And of course, we want to make the educational piece relevant and do everything we can to create a truly mindful eating experience.”

Benedict would be pleased.

Assorted sweeteners ready for taste testing. Almost every meal includes some form of tasting activity.

Photos contributed by Sister Placida Anheuser
Earlier this year Country Fair Stores, whose corporate offices are located in Erie, approached Second Harvest Food Bank of Northwest Pennsylvania with a proposition: We want to partner with you to put good food into the hands of hungry people in need. After much conversation and discernment about serving those who are food insecure in the area, and the mission and strengths of each organization, the Country Fair Cares Food Rescue Program was born.

Beginning as a pilot project in January of this year, three Country Fair stores were matched with nearby Second Harvest agencies to receive donated food. Up to three times a week store staff bundled ready-to-eat products that agencies picked up for distribution to their guests. Soon more stores and more agencies were matched to provide sandwiches, wraps, subs, dairy, soups, portable meals and the like to those who are hungry today.

Lisa Luben, Food Service Sales Manager of Country Fair Stores, shepherded the idea from its inception. Lisa recounts, "We saw a need in the community and wanted to find a way to help – in fact, we were determined to find a way to help. There were challenges along the way: some systems needed to be modified, [details] needed to be worked out." Country Fair saw the opportunity to expand the reach of their corporate mission statement in a fresh way.

Sister Karen Kosin, OSB, Product Resource Manager at Second Harvest, was a part of those early conversations. Sister Karen states that the program gradually expanded to where it now includes about 40 stores and 40-plus agencies. She reports that during the first nine months 228,840 pounds of food have been donated to hungry people in need. That’s over 114 tons! When the program was highlighted at the annual agency conference this fall, more agencies were quick to sign up. As a result Sister Karen expects the amount of food Country Fair donates to increase significantly.

One of the agencies that joined this fall was Benetwood Apartments, a provider of low income housing to the elderly and people with disabilities and a ministry of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. Sister Pat Hause, OSB, Property Administrator, says that residents are grateful to be a part of the program and are appreciative of all they receive. As a Benetwood staff member who is helping to facilitate this project, I’ve seen the gratitude personally. I’ve also seen how a little determination and a collaborative mindset can make a difference in Northwest PA.

Every little bit helps.
Did you hear the one about the nun who needed absolution after playing a round of golf? Or the one where the nun is beating the priest in a round of golf until God intervenes? Or the one where…. Though it’s true that nun golf jokes abound, the first Benedictine Sisters of Erie Golf Charity Fundraiser was no joke. Rather, it was a day of fun and shared friendship, filled with lots of laughter.

More than 50 sponsors made it a financial success; a maximum number of 144 golfers registered; and close to 70 sisters, oblates, SBA alum, and friends volunteered for the event. Following the tournament over 200 participants gathered in the Lake Shore Country Club ballroom for a 5-star dinner and program that began with the Sisters Schola singing a blessing.

“It turned into a communal experience for everyone present,” said Sister Anne Wambach, prioress. “Not only was it a financial success, but a spiritual one as well. We are so grateful to everyone who supported our golf outing.”

Success at its best

By Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB

Benedictine Sisters of Erie Charity Fundraiser
Golf Tournament

P.S. SAVE THE DATE:
Monday, June 15, 2020
2nd Annual Benedictine Sisters of Erie Golf Fundraiser
If it is true that learning is not so much about obtaining new facts as it is discovering new ways of thinking about them, then it can be safely said that no one has consistently impacted learning both within and outside our church more than Sister Joan Chittister. Her books, speeches, and events, such as the Joan Chittister Institute for Contemporary Spirituality held at Mount St. Benedict Monastery, July 12-19, bear witness to her extraordinary gift as teacher, learner, prophet, and living prayer.

In an age when we are flooded with information but parched for wisdom and respectful dialogue, Sister Joan’s week-long institute was a welcome and much needed gift to our wounded world. Sister Joan, a teacher par excellence, encourages and consecrates the art of thoughtful conversation with unbridled energy, wonder and curiosity.

Participants in the Institute gathered at the table with Sister Joan several hours a day to discuss her books and their application to daily life. These discussion forums took place in the heart of the Benedictine community, where all guests were invited to enter into the life of prayer that infuses community life. We joined the sisters for worship twice a day in the monastery’s breathtakingly beautiful chapel, where we were introduced to the inclusive language prayer of the community. “Sister Joan and the Benedictine sisters have created an ethos of trust, safety, welcoming and love. Through meaningful dialogue, deep reading, lectio divina and silence, the seeker in each of us was encouraged to find and nurture the center of our souls—a lasting gift that we can continue to cultivate for the rest of our lives,” said Tracy Finnegan, M.A., M.A.T, Assistant Director for Education and At-Risk Youth at Williams College.

Kathy Nolan, RSM, came from Long Island to attend the Institute, which she described as both challenging and inspiring. “The group discussions, individual conversations, story sharing, and this time with Joan were powerful. I am also in awe of the ways in which some participants have altered their lives in order to respond to the suffering in our world.”

Carolyn Johnson, Ed.D., from New Jersey commented that, “I have been learning from Joan Chittister for nearly 30 years. Her unique perspective and model of tremendous strength and courage have shaped my education and formation, my work in Catholic and secular education, and my efforts to cultivate agency and voice in young adults, especially women. Spending time with Joan and her Benedictine community was such a gift. I was most grateful to be immersed in their monastic rhythms, the “holy leisure” and camaraderie shared with strong women of faith from all over the country.”

When we took leave of what had been our spiritual home for the week, a sanctuary shared so generously by the Benedictines, we had nurtured the seeds of self-knowledge that will sustain our spiritual growth far past the walls of this holy place. Our task now is to delve more deeply into Benedictine spirituality and create within ourselves a monastery of the heart.

Pat McDonough, Long Island, N.Y., was one of 26 women from across the country who attended the week-long Joan Chittister Institute for Contemporary Spirituality at Mount St. Benedict Monastery, Erie, PA.
Imagine a world where individuals understand that there are multiple approaches to every question.

Ask any ten people their thoughts on the virtue of humility and you will receive an amazing array of answers and reactions to the inquiry.

Unless you ask a Benedictine.

For Benedictine monastics, humility is the cornerstone of the Rule of Benedict and the foundation of our life.

The central premise of humility is that right relationships are the foundation of justice and peace. Joan Chittister, OSB, in her book on the virtue of humility, *Radical Spirit: 12 ways to live a free and authentic life*, sparked my imagination enough to envision a world, our world, steeped in humility.

Imagine a world where individuals acknowledge in real and daily ways the existence of God, whomever they believe God to be, and uphold all paths to spirituality, even those not their own.

Imagine a world where individuals understand that there are multiple approaches to every question, every situation, and are open, even delighted, to learn from the wisdom of others.

Imagine a world where individuals are honest about themselves, acknowledge their gifts and their flaws in equal measure and actively seek to grow toward their fullest human selves.

Imagine a world where individuals hold every good thing they have been given, including the earth itself, with reverent care and an open, generous hand.

Imagine a world where individuals refuse to ridicule or diminish anyone, anytime, for any reason and intentionally communicate as reasonable and righteous people and demand the same of others.

Imagine a world where individuals consciously strive to become a peaceful and serene presence that leads anyone they encounter to a sense of the sacred in life.

For the simple and humble monk, Benedict, who lived in the 6th century, such humility was an antidote to the corrupt world in which he lived. I hope, I dream, I imagine that humility, in this 21st century, might do the same for our broken world.

Imagine with me. Choose any image I’ve offered and carry it around with you for a week, intentionally working to make it real. Add images of your own. Imagine with me and we, together, can shout with integrity: Welcome to the heart of God!

This article was originally published in the Erie Times-News, October 2019. Reflections is a column by religious leaders in the region. Sister Mary Ellen Plumb, staff member at Monasteries of the Heart, has been a contributor for the past seven years.
Happenings...

Jubilees

The celebration of faithfulness to the monastic way of life is a beautiful happening to witness. The summer was alive with jubilee celebrations filled with deep joy. We are grateful for our jubilarians—each one of them is a blessing to the community and the Church.

(Sister Placida celebrates her 102\textsuperscript{nd} Birthday)

Sister Placida was the first sister in the history of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie to reach the age of 100. On October 15, 2019 she celebrated her 102\textsuperscript{nd} birthday. We are grateful for her presence among us, a true gift and inspiration. Maybe someday she will share her secret to living a long and meaningful life. It seems to have something to do with faithfulness to the monastic way. (NB: Sister Placida was the photographer for the photos that accompany the Mindful Eating article on p 22-23. She continues to zip around the monastery taking photos on her iPad.)
Justice and Equality for All

Sister Jeannine Gramick is a Sister of Loretto who has been involved in a pastoral ministry for lesbian and gay Catholics since 1971. She co-founded New Ways Ministry, a Catholic social justice center working for justice and equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Catholics, and reconciliation within the larger church and civil communities. The Erie Benedictines welcomed Sister Jeannine as speaker and teacher for August Community Days. Sister Jeannine shared the history and the story of her ministry of education and advocacy on behalf of lesbian and gay people, a ministry that she pioneered and in which she has been engaged for more than 30 years.

Why Poetry Matters: Poetry of Protest and Prayer

Bonnie Thurston is a unique combination of theologian, poet and author and the Erie Benedictines were pleased to have her present ‘Why Poetry Matters: Poetry of Protest and Prayer’ as part of their ongoing Enrichment Series at the monastery. The presentation highlighted the importance of poetry and language, especially in the times in which we are living. “Poetry is a tool for seeing beyond . . . it helps us see what is and what could be . . . what is doesn’t have to be,” shared Dr. Thurston who also read a selection of her protest poems on such topics as war, economy, too much talk, and too many gadgets. In transitioning to poetry as prayer she suggested that poetry and prayer both challenge and comfort; she explained that “Protest and prayer drive one another into the arms of the other.”

Intercultural Living: A Call to Transformation

The Benedictine Sisters of Erie welcomed Teresa Maya, CCVI, MA, PhD as the speaker for October Community Days. Sister Teresa, Past-President of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, is a member of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, San Antonio, TX, who is currently serving as Congregational Leader for her religious community. The topic, Intercultural Living: A Call to Transformation, came alive in her very capable hands as she explored with sisters and oblates the transformational and conversion process that intercultural living requires. The future of religious life in the United States will depend on our capacity to embrace intercultural living. According to Sister Teresa: “While diversity has always been part of the Catholic story, the opportunities it presents today are unique. Men and women religious are called to embrace the journey of intercultural living with gentleness, joy, and intentionality.”

Renewed Hope for Ministry

Dr. Greg Baker, Vice-President for Mission at Mercyhurst University, was the speaker for the November Enrichment Series at the Mount. His topic was: Renewed Hope for Ministry in an Age of Diminishing Religious Practices. Dr. Baker reviewed current trends of religious disaffiliation and shifting ways of holding on to religious identity and practice. He argued that there are clear signs of hope to encourage those involved in church ministry. Statistics show that people are searching for community and a religion with porous fences. Dr. Baker suggested that the Benedictine charism of seeking God in the communal life and responding in prayer and ministry offers direction and stability to those who are searching. “Those involved in pastoral ministry are called to accompany those on the faith journey rather than imposing a direction on them that does not respect needs and questions.”
Mayor and County Executive welcomed to the monastery

At the invitation of the Erie Benedictines, Joe Schember, Mayor of Erie, and Kathy Dahlkemper, County Executive, along with their spouses, joined the community for prayer, dinner and conversation early in September. We decided on a “Q&A” style of dialog,” said Sister Susan Doubet, subprioress. “It allowed the sisters and Joe and Kathy to converse on issues and values that we hold in common: poverty, oppression, violence, and the welcome of new Americans and refugees, to mention a few.” Sister Anne Wambach, prioress, added: “If the evening was any indication of how we will work together into the future to continue to serve the city and county of Erie, then it is clear we are moving in the right direction. It was a wonderful and informative few hours marked by honesty, sincerity, and shared care and concern.”

Benedictine Ministries Day

Staff, volunteers and board members of the Benedictine ministries were invited to attend an information session about the Benedictine way of life and the Benedictine values that underlie the community’s works. It was an opportunity for participants to see a bigger picture as a result of spending some time with others who work in Benedictine ministries as well as with the sisters. The program was organized by a designated committee which included Nancy Sabol, oblate and Director of St. Benedict Education Center, and Sisters Patricia Hause, Rosanne Kolbas and Linda Romey. It was held at Mount St. Benedict Monastery. Sisters Dorothy Stoner, Stephanie Schmidt and Susan Doubet were the presenters of information related to Benedictine life, ministries, and monastic formation in a program that was offered on two different days to accommodate the large response that was received. Lunch and a tour of the monastery completed the experience of Benedictine hospitality.
**Annual Benetwood-Benedictine Dinner**

“This dinner is delicious,” shared Rick, one of the guests who attended the dinner hosted by the sisters for the residents of Benetwood Apartments. “It’s my first time but it won’t be my last!” Every fall the Erie Benedictines welcome their neighbors from across the way for what has become an annual event: Evening Prayer and a special dinner – a simple celebration of friendship, faith, food and fun.

**Annual Appreciation Dinner**

In a show of gratitude the Benedictine Sisters of Erie hosted members of the Fairfield Hose Company for dinner and an evening of Benedictine hospitality. Established in 1945, this volunteer fire company is all about neighbors helping neighbors and has long served the neighborhood of Mount St. Benedict Monastery. Sister Marcia Sigler, having served for 10 years (1995-2005) as an active volunteer EMT (Emergency Medical Technician), is considered an honorary member of the company and does a lot of behind-the-scenes preparation to make this yearly event a memorable one.

**Archivists meet at Mount St. Benedict during Archives Month**

Archivists for Congregations of Women Religious from Eastern Ohio and Western Pennsylvania (OH-PENN) met for their autumn meeting at Mount St. Benedict Monastery. The gathering was hosted by Sister Theresa Zoky, archivist for the Erie Benedictines, and Sister Janet Goetz, archives assistant.

Seated (L-R): Casey Bowser and Sr. Louise Grundish, Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, Greensburg, PA; Kathy Washy, Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden, Pittsburgh, PA; Lisa Gibbon, Congregation of St. Joseph, Cleveland

Standing (L-R): Sr. Theresa Zoky, Benedictine Sisters of Erie; Sarah Lubelski, Congregation of St. Joseph, Cleveland; Sr. Margie King and Sr. Joanne Gardner, Humility of Mary, Villa Maria, PA; Sr. Marie Timmons, Sisters of St. Joseph, Erie; Sr. Janet Goetz, Benedictine Sisters of Erie.
AIM USA Board Goes the Distance

Sister Ann Hoffman, Executive Director of AIM USA (Alliance for International Monasticism) and her staff, Sisters Therese Glass and Christine Kosin, who work under the direction of a Board of Trustees, hosted the Board’s 2019 annual meeting at Mount St. Benedict in Erie on October 9. “Exciting new frontiers were forged at this meeting,” shared Sister Ann. “A board member from Ecuador participated via Zoom technology, opening new horizons and bridging walls and oceans that divide.” Learn more about AIM and access A Prayer of AIM for Monastic Life by visiting their web site at http://www.aim-usa.org/.

Come to the Woods

Sunday, October 13, was the opening of the Come to the Woods Art Exhibit at Mount St. Benedict Monastery. The show extended through mid-November and featured the works of Audrey Steff, OSB, wood turner, and photographers Lucia Marie Surmik, OSB and Ann Muczynski, OSB.

Infirmary residents put on Art Show with the help of two VMA Students

Volunteering at the monastery is not new to Villa Maria Academy seniors, Lauren Belmonte and Rachel Bowen. For four summers they have come to Mount St. Benedict Monastery Infirmary to complete their service hours. Mary Rita Groucutt, co-director of Health Services, wanted the girls to interact with the sisters and an idea was born: art projects and crafts. Being that this was their last formal summer of service at the Mount, Lauren and Rachel decided to bring their ministry to completion with an Art Show featuring the work of the sisters who are residents in the infirmary. They put their heads together and came up with a plan and carried it off without a hitch, even providing the refreshments which they made themselves.
As we near the end of 2019, I would like to share with you why this was a good year for us.

We currently have 2,917 alums on our mailing list with which we share information and invitations to various events. Even as our list of SBA alumnae who have passed into eternity grows, the Alumnae Association remains strong with members who are alive and well and want to attend our many events that support the Benedictine Sisters of Erie and their many ministries.

Three new members have been added to the SBA Alumnae Executive Board and we chose a new board president. These are the SBA Alumnae Executive Board members: Darlene Kerstetter, President, Katie Young, Sue Chase, Valerie Purzycki, Cheryl Zingelewicz, Sue Zill, Sheila Warner, Rosanne Loneck OSB, Mary Ellen Plumb OSB, and Ann Comstock.

We initiated SBA Bingos at the Polish Falcons Club in Erie this year. The success of this new social event made it possible for us to increase the number of our Catholic Schools $250 Scholarships from 20 to 25.

We have encouraged alums attending the Christmas Party to bring a non-alum guest or two because attendance has decreased in each of the last five years. Why not share a good time with friends and family? It is our largest fundraiser of the year and always an outstanding event. Increasing attendance allows us to maintain our financial commitment to the Benedictine Sisters and their ministries and provide for Alumnae Association expenses.

To all who have helped our Alumnae organization to remain alive and well this past year, a big THANK YOU.

Count your blessings, sing your Christmas carols, open your gifts, and make a wish under the Christmas tree. May you have a Merry Christmas!

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Let us pray...

For our SBA alumnae who passed into eternity—

Lucille M. Gorny Murawski ..........’41
Patricia Josephine Grugin Smith ..........’42
Rose Mary Hess Koziorowski ..........’44
Frances Grygo Somolani ..........’47
Irene Hedwig Helmsinki Mizkowski ..........’48
Patricia Forrester Trejchel ..........’50
Rita A. Cote Burick ..........’51
Carolyn Gutowski DiMattio ..........’53
Marian Louise Hershelman Lafferty ..........’53
Audrey Ferrick Thomas ..........’54
Sister Justina Gutowski ..........’56
Mary Ann Minno Abramczyk ..........’57
Joan Jendrasiak Grzybowski ..........’58
Roberta C. Roach Rose ..........’58
Caroline A. Mattis Swanson ..........’58
Nancy Jean Weiser ..........’58
Geraldrine Dombrowski Marshall ..........’59
Carolyn E. Osinski Mikolajczyk ..........’59
Mary Patricia McCallion Helsel ..........’63
Rita A. Kennerknecht ..........’64
Mary B. Shauberger Fiolek ..........’65
Patricia Lorence Paparelli Guthrie ..........’67
Patricia Bowden Hazlett ..........’68
Rita A. Przepierski ..........’68
Kathleen M. Kowalski Herman ..........’82
Theresa Margaret Guzowski Ignasiak

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Save these 2020 BINGO Dates

January 12, March 22, July 12, September 20, November 8

Polish Falcons, 431 East 3rd Street, Erie
Doors open at noon.
Come with your friends and have some fun!

Notice of Cancellation: We are sorry to announce that due to scheduling difficulties we will not be holding a Spring Luncheon in 2020. We will resume the Spring Luncheon in 2021.

PLEASE NOTE:
Attention anyone who attended St. Benedict Academy between the years 1983 to 1988. If you are interested in a 1987 or 1988 Yearbook, a limited number of these books are available. Please contact Sr. Rosanne Loneck at 899-0614 or srosanne@mtstbenedict.org. Arrangements can be made to pick up the yearbook at Mount St. Benedict Monastery (6101 East Lake Road) or St. Benedict Education Center, formerly St. Benedict Academy (330 East 10th Street).
CLASS REUNIONS

This phrase from our school song: “...with friends we never can forget...,” explains why so many classes hold reunions every five years. Alums are proud of their Class, and it is important for them to identify with their classmates and regularly renew their ties with those friends they never can forget. Whether it is 30, 40, 50 or, in my case, 55 years since graduating, our classmates are friends we never can forget.

Class of 1955 Reunion

SBA class of 1955 celebrated their 64th class reunion on September 15 at the Colony Inn and Pub. Nineteen classmates from an original class of 94 attended and shared a lot of chatter and memories. The unanimous report: ‘We all look pretty good and it was wonderful to get together even though we missed the out of town gals who can no longer make the trip,’ from Barb Mattis, ’

Class of 1964 55th Reunion

Twenty-seven members of the Class of 1964 met at the Colony Pub and Grill for their 55th Class Reunion. Stories from past and present were center stage along with memories of classmates no longer with us. Though we may have grown older, we can still giggle and laugh as we did 55 years ago! Plans were made to meet again at the Christmas Party and to not wait another five years to get together again.

Class of 1967 Picnic

Members of the Class of ‘67 met at Glenwood Park for their annual picnic on August 14. A large group attended to celebrate the majority of ‘girls’ entering another decade of their lives this past year, (not mentioning which one, but do the math!). Despite the aches, pains and health issues, they had their usual good time catching up and reminiscing. The highlight was a loud rendition of the SBA school song, caught on video by Cindi Swoger Ruf, that would have made Sister Mary David very proud. It was especially nice to have a few new attendees who promised this event would be on their summer schedule next year. We look forward to our next year’s picnic, Wednesday, August 12, 2020.
Class of 1969 50th Reunion
Thirty-five girls attended the reunion at McGarrey’s Oakwood Banquet Room which was decorated with pictures and memorabilia from our high school days and previous reunions. A Memorial Board recognized classmates who are no longer with us and we read emails from those who were unable to attend. Everyone received a personalized note caddy, SBA Alumnae Association letter opener and a Kevin John print of St. Benedict Academy. Besides a 50-50 and a wine/chocolate gift basket giveaway, we collected donations for our SBA Christmas Party basket.

Class of 1979 40th Reunion
The Class of 1979 held their 40-year reunion on August 31 at the Plymouth Tavern in Erie, PA. Want proof that it was a great time? Just look at those smiling faces!

“Spirit of SBA” is alive and well.

Keep in Touch…
We want to hear from you! Class reunions every five years are a tradition with SBA alumnae. We will gladly include information regarding your reunion on our website. Send us the facts and we’ll post them as soon as we get them. Please provide us with any follow up stories and photos (digital, please) you might wish to share, and we will post them on our website (ErieBenedictines.org/sba-alum). Call Ann Comstock at 814-899-0614 ext. 2573 or contact by email: sbaalum@mtstbenedict.org.

Please visit our Website
Visit ErieBenedictines.org/sba-alum for event updates and to download sign-up forms, or send your email address to Alumnae Director Ann Comstock at sbaalum@mtstbenedict.org to receive electronic reminders and sign-ups. If you don’t use email, write to Ann at Mount St. Benedict Monastery, 6101 East Lake Road, Erie, PA, 16511. Whenever you see or hear about SBA alumnae being honored or highlighted for their achievements, let us know. Clip an article or jot down the details then call, write or email us the information so we can share the news with all our members.
Mount Saint Benedict Monastery
6101 East Lake Road
Erie, PA 16511-1599

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

“"The world always seems brighter when you’ve just made something that wasn’t there before."” (Neil Gaiman)