LIGHT HAS BROKEN
THROUGH THE DARKNESS
LIGHT HAS BROKEN THROUGH THE DARKNESS...

Is a photo really worth a thousand words? If you look at the photos sprinkled throughout this issue of the magazine, you might answer yes. They capture the spirit of joy that comes from giving and receiving, celebrating and affirming, encouraging and envisioning — the essence of the meaning of Christmas captured, not just at this time of the year but all through the year.

The cover photo perhaps says it best of all. This photo of Ceramic Art by Brother Thomas Bezanson (1929 – 2007), a world-renowned potter and artist-in-residence with the Benedictine Sisters of Erie from 1985 until his death, is based on a sacred symbol in Zen Buddhism: “Ensō.”

The ensō (circle) is a universal symbol of wholeness and completion. It is a symbol that combines the visible and the hidden, the simple and the profound, the empty and the full. I chose this piece from the monastery collection to remind us that Christmas celebrates Jesus, who is all of that and more: Jesus, the Light that broke through the darkness to bring the fullness of God and the gift of joy to a waiting world.

The cover photo, like all the photos in the magazine, is meant to open the human heart to truth and beauty, goodness and unity. Brother Thomas said, “Art is like a finger pointing to the moon. It is not the finger that is important, it is the moon.”

It is our hope that this issue of The Mount will bring you deeper into the glory of God revealed through the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, the ministries that we embrace and the relationships in which we are engaged. We are the “finger pointing to the moon”— it is not the finger that is important, it is the moon. May God be glorified in all things and all manner of being!

Charlotte Anne Zalot, OSB
From the Prioress

The Joy of Christmas

In this issue of The Mount you will find many photographs that make up this year’s “community Christmas photo.” You will see groups of us scattered around the monastery grounds, usually beside or under a special tree, holding wrapped presents, dangling tinsel in our hands, and wearing Santa hats (and some sunglasses) as we entered into the Christmas spirit four months ago!

I know that the sisters have really come to enjoy this “necessity” of anticipating the preparation of a holiday publication by conjuring up the spirit of Christmas months early. But, by the time the holidays get here many of us have almost forgotten these photo sessions so the smiles and surprises that accompany the sight of the final product do indeed increase the joys of the Christmas season for all.

“Christmas is happiness because we see joy in people,” Thomas Monson wrote. “It is forgetting self and finding time for others.”

I would add that “forgetting self and finding time for others” is part of the definition of “community.” Christmas, therefore, must be the feast of community. Jesus, in the way he preached, in the choices he made and in the very way he lived his life shows us the way to live with each other, to form community in all of our group interactions. Those interactions can be in our families, among friends, in our workplace, places of worship, in our cities, nations and in our world.

People who live in what is called a community will admit that “making community” is very challenging. It is hard work. Wishing won’t make it happen. No formula exists for its assurance. Perhaps the more one lives being the best they can be, (for Christians it’s following the Gospel message of Jesus), modeling a respectful life, calling each other to that also, the better the chance that true community will form.

As a group of Benedictine women, we are most blessed to live a community life that is grace-filled and lovin—as you can tell, I hope, by the Christmas poses you’ll see in our photographs. Life isn’t always easy, but with the help and mercy of God and the dedication of the members happiness can be a reality and, as Monson wrote, it can be manifested in joy and commitment to others.

During these weeks of the Advent and Christmas seasons, I pray for God’s blessings for you and for all your family and friends as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, our long-awaited Messiah and savior.

Anne Wambach, OSB
Prioress, Benedictine Sisters of Erie
Celebrations

Glorify God: Reaffirmation of Sister Anne Wambach, Prioress

Sister Anne Wambach’s election to a second term as prioress was celebrated on July 11, the feast of Benedict, at the Liturgy of the Hours. “It was a wonderful day for all of us,” said Sister Susan Doubet, subprioress. “From beginning to end the spirit of Benedictine community and the reverence and love we have for one another told the story of who we are.”

The celebration included the Rite of Reaffirmation of Prioress and the commissioning of the Monastic Council: Sisters Mary Lou Kownacki, Charlotte Anne Zalot, Susan Doubet (subprioress), Annette Marshall and Diane Cook. The many oblates, family members and guests who attended were invited to a reception after the ceremony.

Sister Jubilarians Celebrate 70 and 60 Years of Monastic Profession

The Benedictine Sisters of Erie opened their annual August community gathering with a special evening prayer that included a renewal of vows by this year’s jubilarians. Sisters Jean Lavin and Jerome Eustace celebrated 70 years of profession and

Sisters Mary Bernadette Ladner, Paula Burke, Michelle Wilwohl and Veronica Mirage celebrated 60 years. During a festive dinner honoring the six jubilarians community members told stories and shared memories. “It was a great evening,” said Sister Jerome. Sister Mary Bernadette added, “This celebration was so special. The outpouring of love and happiness for all of the jubilarians is something I will never forget.”

In Honor of Sister Mary Louis Eichenlaub

Inter-Church Ministries of Erie (ICM) established a “Moral Leadership Award” in the name of Sister Mary Louis Eichenlaub to honor her 20 years of service on the ICM board.

Diane Edwards, ICM Executive Director, made a special visit to Sister Mary Louis, who is now retired. “Sister Mary Louis is an example of dedication and commitment,” said Diane. “It is with great gratitude that we honor her in this most meaningful way.” When Sister Mary Louis recovered from her surprise she responded, “I would never have dreamed of anything like this. I am so touched and very humbled to be acknowledged in this way. I extend my thanks to Inter-Church Ministries.”

The award, established in conjunction with ICM’s 40th Anniversary (1975-2015), will provide educational scholarships to graduating high school seniors who have demonstrated leadership qualities.

Sister Norma Jean Kingsley, OSB, Benevolent Fund

In recognition of Sister Norma Jean Kingsley’s years of service, Lakeland Area Hospice established the “Sister Norma Jean Kingsley, OSB, Benevolent Fund” to assist individuals in need of financial and material goods.

Sister Norma Jean served as chaplain in the spiritual care and bereavement departments at Lakeland since it began in 2009 until her recent retirement.
“Lakeland Area Hospice-Palliative Care was a wonderful experience for me,” said Sister Norma Jean. “To be with folks as they attend to their own personal leave-taking from this earth to move toward fullness of life with God was very special.”

Lakeland Area Hospice is located at 221 Peninsula Drive in Erie.

**Employee Picnic**

Employees and their families joined the sisters for the annual appreciation event on a perfect summer day in July. Food, fun and friendship were shared; games and swimming were enjoyed.

“Our employees are very special people and we are happy to tell them how much we appreciate them with this picnic,” said Sister Anne Wambach, prioress. “They do so much for us and we are very grateful.”

One of the highlights of the event is the Chinese Auction. “I love to see the faces as the winners are announced for each prize,” said Sister Susan Doubet, subprioress. “It is especially fun when the prize is for a child. There is nothing better than those little beaming faces when they realize their mom or dad won something just for them.”

**Sisters Host Fairfield Hose Co. for Annual Appreciation Dinner**

“Saying thank you to the Fairfield Hose Company has always been important to our community and this pleasant, fun-filled evening is a small gesture on our part to do just that,” said Sister Marcia Sigler, organizer of the appreciation dinner for the local volunteer fire company and their families.

The annual gathering is an expression of gratitude to the volunteer fire company that has been serving the monastery and its neighborhood since 1945. Sister Marcia served for 10 years as an active volunteer EMT (Emergency Medical Technician) and is now an honorary member of the company.

After dinner the Fairfield volunteers traditionally provide an educational demonstration and this year they demonstrated how first responders help people who have fallen and the procedures that are followed to prevent further injury by stabilizing the patient’s neck and back.

**Annual Benedictine-Benetwood Dinner**

The Benedictine Sisters of Erie welcomed their neighbors from Benetwood Apartments for their annual Evening Prayer and dinner event— a simple celebration of friendship, faith, food and fun.

Benetwood resident Colleen, who often joins the sisters for prayer said, “The dinner was delicious. It is a special evening for all of us.” Another guest added, “This is one of my favorite events. It’s always nice to connect with the sisters I know.”

Benetwood Apartments, a housing ministry for low-income elderly and handicapped persons, is located on property adjacent to the monastery. The building is a government subsidized non-profit facility administrated by the community with Sister Patricia Hause as director. Her staff includes Wendy Wallace and Benedictine Sisters Marla Bleil and Ann Hoffman.
Early on in my 15 years at St. Benedict Community Center there were times when I questioned what I was doing here. Why had I left a ministry I loved for one that was new, uncertain, and very challenging? And then, one evening as I waited for students from the Achievement Center to arrive, I got my answer. It had been a long day. I was sitting alone in the gym wondering what this was all for when suddenly I heard the automatic front doors open and a child in a motorized wheelchair came zooming in yelling at the top of her lungs, “I’m here to play soccer!” Okay, God, now I know why I’m here...

It was June of 1999 when the Benedictine Sisters purchased the former St. Mary’s Auditorium. The building is adjacent to the former St. Benedict Academy on East 10th Street, which had used it as a gym, and the former St. Mary’s School where many sisters taught. In other words, we had connections with the space. But that didn’t mean we knew exactly what to do with it.

My background is in therapeutic recreation and I saw possibilities. I contacted some of my colleagues to come and take a look to see if it could serve their programs in some way. The answer was yes. Sister Christine Vladimiroff was prioress at the time and when I shared my findings with her she asked me to administer the project. I became full-time director in August and after intense renovation and committed effort the building was rededicated in 2000 as St. Benedict Community Center, a much-needed accessible facility to provide for the recreation needs of the physically and emotionally challenged and the developmentally disabled. It has been serving as a recreational facility inclusive of all races and challenges ever since.

Despite the challenges of major repair and of beginning a new program from scratch, there was something wonderful about seeing an old building come to life. With the help of Jack Rinderle, the long-time caretaker, the work began. It did my heart good to see an 80-year-old man so excited about this revitalization; one of the hardest days of my tenure was when he came to turn in his keys. Jack has a permanent place in my heart for the love and care he gave to this space for so many years.

My sister, Maureen Sabol, has worked at the Center since 2001 and Bob Kempisty since 2007. We are motivated by Benedictine stewardship and hospitality and do all we can to make the space warm, inviting and safe, a place where body, mind
and spirit can be re-created. Our grateful guests comment often on the overall maintenance, cleanliness and beauty of the space.

Since 2000 many groups have used St. Benedict Community Center facilities including: Abraxis Learning Center, Achievement Center, Erie Homes for Children and Adults (EHCA), Kids Cafe, Lake Erie Soccer Club and Sarah Reed. While some users have changed over the years, the Achievement Center and Kids Cafe have come since the beginning. It does my heart good to know that our space allows kids with physical challenges to just be kids and play like anyone else; to know that children and young people from the Kids Cafe have a place to come after school to run and play and a place to visit when they become adults.

We have played volleyball and soccer, hosted competitive cheer and women’s football, along with numerous basketball groups. Crossover Basketball uses the space as a practice facility for a few of their teams. Their mission is “to use basketball as a vehicle for change, creating a Christ-centered environment that transforms youth into elite athletes who believe in self and Christ.” Watch the evening news and you will see how vital these types of programs in a place like St. Benedict Community Center are to the Erie community.

I don’t know where the last 15 years have gone but I do know the ministry at St. Benedict Community Center is a needed one. Through their many ministries the Benedictine Sisters of Erie demonstrate that the inner-city can be a place of beauty and strength and we will continue to do what we can to make it so. Our commitment remains strong and with the continued help of donors and the organizations that use St. Benedict Community Center for their programs we will hopefully be able to serve inner-city of Erie at SBCC for another 15 years…and more.

**Financial donations are vital to the ministry at St. Benedict Community Center. We also need to spread the word about the facility. There are two gyms for a variety of sports and two all-purpose rooms for activities like yoga or Zumba or for use as classrooms or meeting space. If you or someone you know is looking for such space please encourage them to call Sister Dianne Sabol at 814-459-2406.**
Donors make Pickle-ball® possible at SBCC

Thanks to Oblates Betsy and Marco Monsalve Pickle-ball® has come to St. Benedict Community Center. A donation from the Monsalves made it possible to purchase quality Pickle-ball® equipment for both the lower and upper gyms and lines were painted on both floors. “I used to play racquetball,” said Betsy, “but I haven’t been able to play for years. Then I learned of pickle-ball and I love it. It’s awakening my buried competitive spirit while simultaneously helping me to move more. When I move more I feel better in body, mind and spirit.”

Pickle-ball® is a paddle sport created for all ages and skill levels and combines elements of tennis, badminton and ping-pong. It started in 1965 when three dads set out to create a game that would answer their children’s boredom and engage them through the summer. It continued to gain popularity among players of all ages and in 1972 Pickle-ball® was officially incorporated.

We are in the process of making pickle-ball available. If you are interested, call Sister Dianne Sabol at 814-459-2406.

Sister Dianne Sabol, Betsy and Marco Monsalve, Maureen Sabol
The Inner-City Neighborhood Art House began with a dream in 1995. It was a dream about inner-city children experiencing beauty, growing in positive self-expression and self-discipline, and developing into full and productive human beings.

When St. Benedict Academy and then St. Mary’s School closed, the Benedictine Sisters did not want to abandon the children on Erie’s east side where they had taught since 1856. “Beauty, life and hope nourished each of us and brought us to the point where we are today. Now it is our time to bring beauty, life and hope to others,” noted Sister Mary Lou Kownacki, Art House founder, when she spoke of her vision of a safe place where children would be surrounded by beauty. That vision led to the transformation of the former Goodyear building at 10th and Holland Streets into the Neighborhood Art House and to the vibrant program we celebrated this year.

Twenty years later more than 10,000 children have realized dreams at the Art House. Children who live in some of Erie’s poorest and most violent neighborhoods have gained new levels of self-esteem and self-confidence as they created amazing art in a wide variety of media: painting, drawing, weaving, printmaking and clay. They have expressed their thoughts and feelings through poetry, found their inner rhythm in music, enjoyed the fruits of patient perseverance in dance, and embraced new possibilities in technology through digital photography and writing and video production.

Hundreds of volunteers over the past 20 years have read to the children, helped them understand their schoolwork, taken them on field trips and decorated holiday cookies with them. The Art House has published books of poetry written by students and celebrated with children whose art and photography have won awards. Students have collaborated in environmental efforts, planting trees and beautifying vacant lots. And every year students have performed for friends and family members during open house events and music recitals.

We have former students who now return to tell us about their own children, to share their career and education successes and, as one former student said, to thank us for providing a “happy place” during their childhood.
Members of the Women’s Core Committee, the Development Committee, and the Neighborhood Art House faculty and administration formed the 20th Anniversary Celebration Committee that planned the events that took place throughout our anniversary year. Here’s a pictorial review of the many special events that commemorated a dream brought to life by the hard work and wonderful support of hundreds of loving people whose hearts reach out to the children of our city.

Sister Annette Marshall opened the year of celebration with a reception for the current faculty, staff and volunteers. She presented each one with an Art House golf shirt to mark this special year. Recognition awards were presented for 5, 10 and 20 years of service.

**ARTfully yours**, a monthly evening get-together for adults to explore a variety of media, was a year-long series held on the 20th of each month. These **ARTfully yours** participants liked what they saw as their acrylic painting came to life. Other offerings included flower arranging; creating a scarf: marbling; drawing; jewelry making; polymer clay tiles; ceramic tile plaques; and mini-terrariums.

In commemoration of National Poetry Month in April, as part of the year of celebration every child who presented a poem received an Art House t-shirt. Program director Sister Margaret Ann Pilewski, better known to the children as Sister Peg, made sure each child had a chance to earn a shirt.
A “block party,” replete with an old-fashioned ice cream social, was held on July 12 at the Neighborhood Art House to celebrate the 20th Anniversary. It was free and open to everyone.

Over these past two decades, hundreds of supporters and volunteers have made the Art House a destination for children. It was very fitting that our celebration should embrace all our families, our neighborhood and the city of Erie itself.

The popular Erie band, Tennessee Backporch, provided music for the nearly 400 guests.

Guests at the Neighborhood Art House Community Celebration assembled mosaic pieces in the Community Project – one of two large pavers that have since been installed in the Art House Garden of Memories.

Sister Mary Lou Kownacki, founder and first executive director of the Neighborhood Art House, originally brought together a group of women to determine the feasibility this ministry. Now, 20 years later, her message to NAH supporters remains strong: “Hold fast to this Neighborhood Art House dream,” she said. “Keep believing in the children. You are the kind of dreamers the children of Erie need.”
God’s gift of grace and light blesses us and fills us with joy
By Marilyn Schauble, OSB, Vocation Director

New Postulant

Valerie Luckey became a postulant on Sunday, August 30 in a ritual that began with her knocking on the outside door of the monastery. As vocation director, I accompanied Valerie in her discernment process and it was an honor to walk with her into the monastery as part of the entrance ritual. The community greeted Valerie as she came in the front door and Sister Anne Wambach, prioress, asked her, “What is it that you seek?” Valerie replied, “I seek to live the monastic way of life in this community and continue my spiritual journey.”

Valerie, a 27-year old elementary school teacher from Emmaus, PA, is a graduate of St. Joseph’s University in Philadelphia. She taught fourth grade in Philadelphia schools prior to her move to Erie. After discernment that included visiting the Erie Benedictines several times over the past few years Valerie requested entrance to the postulancy. “Since my first visit to Mount St. Benedict Monastery in August 2013, I have come to know the spirit of the community and recognize that my individual journey toward God aligns with that spirit,” shared Valerie. “I seek to root myself in the heart of God first and foremost through the prayer life of the community and sharing the Word of God together. The rhythm and centering of monastic prayer will strengthen my journey and focus my ministry.”

Valerie’s parents, Denise and Thomas Luckey, and her grandmother, Rose Marie Doney, were present for the ceremony. “It’s very special when family members are able to come for the ritual of entrance,” said Sister Stephanie Schmidt, postulant director. “We are always happy when they can experience the community first hand.”

At the conclusion of the ritual Sister Anne welcomed Valerie, telling her, “We thank you for responding to God’s call. May you serve God with the gifts you have been given so that in all things God may be glorified.”

Postulancy is the first phase of monastic formation. As a postulant Valerie will participate fully in the life of the community and live the communal life of prayer and ministry. She will learn community history, vision and values and have classes on Benedictine spirituality as she continues to discern her vocation.

New Blog

Postulant Valerie Luckey is the newest blogger among the Erie Benedictines. She named her new blog “Walking in the Holy Presence” because it is a chronicle of her journey into monastic life. “I decided to blog because I wanted my family and friends to know what I was doing here in Erie,” Valerie said. “After I started writing it, and even though I already

Valerie, shown with her parents, Denise and Thomas Luckey, and her grandmother, Rose Marie Doney.
enjoyed journaling, I realized how helpful the blog is for my reflection. I hope readers can learn about and appreciate everything that monastic life in this community offers.” A link to Valerie’s blog is on the Become a Benedictine page of the Erie Benedictines web site: eriebenedictines.org/become-benedictine.

Other blogs on our website are Sister Susan Doubet’s “Light through Stained Glass Windows” and “Living the Zeal of Benedict,” a blog that I write as vocation director. Members of Monasteries of the Heart (membership is free) can access Sister Mary Lou Kownacki’s blog, “Old Monk’s Journal,” and “A Seeker’s Path,” a blog by Sister Joan Chittister. Find links to all of these blogs on the Sister Blogs page of our website: eriebenedictines.org/sister-blogs.

Transfer of Vows

God’s gift of grace and light blesses us and fills us with joy . . .

“God’s constancy and your faithfulness in response bring us to this very special moment,” said Sister Anne Wambach, prioress, to Sisters Kathleen Warner, Mary Bernard Lander and Joachim Frey on the occasion of their final incorporation into the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. The three sisters from St. Joseph Monastery in St. Marys, PA, moved to Erie when it became clear that their monastery would be closing as a result of a climbing median age and lack of new members. After a year of prayer and discernment the three asked to transfer their vows and become fully incorporated into the Erie Benedictine community.

Sisters, friends and family members gathered to witness and celebrate the transfer of vows. After the vows were signed and sealed, the sisters joined in singing the suscipe, the ancient song of self–offering: “Uphold me, O God, according to your word, and I shall live. And do not fail me in my hope.” The community offered a blessing and a gesture of love and acceptance as each member personally greeted Sisters Kathleen, Mary Bernard and Joachim.

Since 1856 every sister who has made final profession in the Erie Benedictine community has received a title that is unique to her. This title, chosen by the prioress, captures distinctive qualities or traits of that person. During the transfer ritual the sisters also received their titles: Sister Kathleen of the faithful love of God; Sister Mary Bernard of the joy and delight of God; Sister Joachim of the giving spirit of God.

Upcoming Events

College groups come to spend time at the monastery and experience prayer, community, ministry and Benedictine spirituality.

Canisius College
- Winter Service Experience for 8-10 students
  January 10-16, 2016
- Spring Service Experience for 8-10 administrators, faculty and staff
  March 30 – April 1, 2016
- Canisius Women’s Retreat for 20-25 women
  April 15-16, 2016

University of Dayton
- Spring Service Experience for 4 – 6 students
  May 7 – 13, 2016
ANOTHER STEP FORWARD

On November 1, the Solemnity of All Saints, postulants Dina Lauricella and Karen Oprenchok took another step on their journey of faith when they became novices with the Benedictine Sisters of Erie.

Dina, a former a motorcycle safety instructor from Lusby, MD, reflected on the past year, “I’ve learned that there are sacrifices that come with living in community but I believe that community is the best way to seek God. Living alone was easier but community gives me a greater chance to practice living the gospel. It is helping me to grow.”

“The novitiate will be challenging with many ups and downs,” added Karen, from Windsor, Ontario, Canada where she was an office worker for the Canadian Federal Government. “But I think it can also be the opportunity of a lifetime. I’m sharing a common experience, a year of intense study and prayer, with all those who have discerned vowed life before me. The support and camaraderie of centuries of religious women and men is with me.”

Monastic Formation

Compiled by Stephanie Schmidt, OSB, Director of Monastic Formation

The novitiate year is a special time in the initial monastic formation process where one is immersed in community life and fully experiences the living tradition of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. The novice has time to focus more intensely on deepening her relationship with God through prayer and study. Classes on the Rule of Benedict, monastic history and values, Scripture, liturgy, the community’s corporate commitment, human development and community living skills form a major part of her schedule. She does not work in an external ministry this year so that she can focus on these studies and also learn the essentials of monastic life. Time is spent working with sisters in the infirmary and assisting in manual labor chores necessary for the running of the monastery. In addition, the novice is encouraged to spend some time exploring the creative arts.

“We welcome these new members with great joy, grateful for their eagerness and enthusiasm for the monastic life. Their sincere and intense seeking calls all of us to a deeper living of our monastic vows,” said Sister Stephanie Schmidt, Director of Formation for the community.

BENEDICTA RIEPP PROGRAM WELCOMES JOANNE CAHILL—“O HAPPY DAY”

After four years of thinking, planning, and discussing her desire to spend some time living with the sisters at Mount St. Benedict Monastery, Joanne Cahill stood before the community on October 8 and made a statement of promise in a brief prayer service that marked her official entrance into the Benedicta Riepp Program.

Joanne wrote in her letter of request to enter the program: “I hope to deepen my prayer life, to grow in self-knowledge and in awareness of others as I enter into the daily rhythm...”
of prayer, work and community. I pray that I will be open to new relationships, new knowledge and insights and listen always with the ear of my heart. Please know that I see this opportunity as a great gift to me at this time in my life."

Started in 2000, the Benedicta Riepp Program provides an opportunity for women to deepen their spirituality by living with the Benedictine Sisters of Erie for six to twelve months. Through immersion in monastic life, participants engage in the daily rhythm of prayer, study, ministry, and community activities. They meet weekly with a personal mentor who accompanies them on the journey of seeking God, sharing lectio and readings in Benedictine spirituality. Living in community provides time and space to dialogue with other seekers and to explore life’s deep questions.

Joanne has known the Erie Benedictines for 20 years and has been a frequent visitor to the monastery. An oblate of the community, she has assisted Sister Carolyn Gorny-Kopkowski with retreat programs and deepened her own spirituality in the process. Joanne is a resident of State College, PA, where she recently retired from 25 years as Director of Leadership Gifts at Penn State University. She is the mother of three children and has five grandchildren.

During her stay Joanne will work on special projects at St. Benedict Education Center, assist at the Emmaus Food Pantry, and share her skills as a yoga teacher with interested sisters.

THE GREATEST VOCATION: BEING HUMAN

By Valerie Luckey, Postulant

The Benedictine Sisters of Erie belong to the National Religious Formation Conference, which provides periodic intercongregational weekends on a regional level for women and men in initial formation programs.

In the fall Sister Stephanie Schmidt, formation director, Sister Pat Witulski, scholastic, and postulants Dina Lauricella, Karen Oprenczok and I attended two regional weekend sessions at Villa Maria Education and Spirituality Center in Villa Maria, PA. In addition to offering pertinent topics for newer community members, the weekends also provide opportunities for men and women to meet and share experiences with others who are in the initial stages of religious formation.

At the September gathering Sister Lynn Levo, CSJ, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist, consultant and lecturer, addressed members from the seven communities in attendance about the need to live freely and fully as religious by embracing our humanity. Sister Simone Campbell, SSS, Executive Director of NETWORK, the national Catholic social justice lobby, and organizer of the “Nuns on the Bus” tours, spoke on the importance of Catholic social teaching at the November gathering.
Sister Dianne Sabol named new Oblate Co-Director

Sister Anne Wambach, prioress, appointed Sister Dianne Sabol Co-Director of Oblates when Sister Audrey Steff stepped down in July. “My three years working with the oblates have been a blessing for me,” said Sister Audrey. “I am in awe of the commitment that our oblates make to seek God and give witness to Benedictine values in their lives. They will always have my support and prayer.” Sister Dianne joins Sister Ann Hoffman who continues in her position as co-director.

“I am really excited for this opportunity,” said Sister Dianne, the director of St. Benedict Community Center. “I look forward to working with Sister Ann and to continuing the work of Sister Audrey. What I already knew has been confirmed: the oblates are very special people. I am humbled to journey with them.”

Oblate Commitment Ceremony

Nearly 300 women and men renewed their commitment to the Erie Benedictines as oblates on October 24, with 100 oblates present for the commitment rite that took place at Evening Praise. During the ceremony, new initiates joined the renewing oblates in expressing a desire to seek God and respond in prayer and ministry and to support the community’s Corporate Commitment to be a healing presence and prophetic witness for peace by working for sustainability and justice, especially for women and children. “Together with us, our oblates stand with the poor, and work to embrace justice, act with integrity and love inclusively. We are grateful,” said Sister Ann.

In her reflections during the ceremony, Sister Anne Wambach, prioress, shared an insight from Elizabeth Johnson’s book Abounding in Kindness: “When I read that Elizabeth Johnson defines ‘Communion of Saints’ as a solidarity among God-seekers, I recognized that we are celebrating something that is of the communion of saints today: a community of God-seekers seeking truth, goodness of life, and life with God through the Gospel messages of Jesus, the Rule of Benedict and the history, traditions and customs of this monastic community.”

In reflecting on his commitment, renewing oblate Harry Finkbone, OSL, told us “I have been led to join the community as an oblate because something in the lived spirituality of Benedict, of the Mount community, speaks to the deepest recesses of my soul. I have been told that if I seek the deepest desires of my soul, there I will find God. So, I suspect that being in communion with the graced ones whom I now call ‘sister’ and ‘brother’ leads me nearer to discovering God in me, God in creation ... Christ in the face of all.”

New Oblate Initiates

As part of the commitment ceremony, Sister Anne and the community welcomed 15 new initiates to the Oblate Way of Life. Sister Anne gave each initiate a copy of the Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century by Sister Joan Chittister and told each in turn, “Receive this Rule of Benedict. May it be light for your nights and hope for
your days and may light and hope continue to enliven your hearts with passion for the transformation of the world.”

“The Oblate Way of Life has become for me, at 67 years old, a call to deepening—deepening all my relationships: with the Holy One, with others, especially the poor and vulnerable, with myself, and with our precious earth,” said initiate Mary Hembrow Snyder. “My experiences of community, prayer, Eucharist, actions on behalf of justice and peace, with these brave, hospitable, loving women, have affirmed for me that this way of life, with this community, now, will surely allow me, surely challenge me, to continue such deepening. All is gratitude.” “We are blessed to have women and men who are interested in committing to a relationship with God, with our community, with all humanity, and with all creation,” said Sister Dianne.

New Web Feature: Oblate Profiles

ErieBenedictines.org recently introduced a new feature for oblates: profile pages. The new profiles provide secure access for oblates to add and edit information that will eventually replace the current oblate directory. Oblates can add pictures and write something about themselves as well as choose their level of privacy. The first step in creating a profile is to create an account at ErieBenedictines.org via the new menu item on the home page menu “Create Oblate Account.” Once your profile is established you can login and change it at any time (“Oblate Login” link on home page menu).

Oblate Profile

Robert Zinsky
Lives in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Tell us something about yourself

I am retired USAF, working now at State Level in Hbg, Pa. Passion is music, guitar practice and playing, acoustic and electric. Intermediate Bass Player and Drums. Violin and Voice, Clarinet. Liturgical Music is my ministry. Use computer extensively for music, graphic arts and photography. Read writing of modern spiritual writers, mostly women authors, to get the perspective. Pray bits of the psalms daily with God’s words of love. Try to keep up with current events via NCR and other open sources.

Why are you an oblate?

Come to the Mount for an Easter retreat and it was said to me (Claire) why don’t you become an oblate, and I was very excited to say ok, and have stayed on with a wondrous community, the journey continually changing and a jump start for growth. An opportunity for friendship, connected to a group that will change the world, what more could we want?

Contact Form
Contact by email

Oblate Way of Life

If you desire to deepen your relationship with God, with others and with yourself, ground your spirituality in values based on simplicity, respect, hospitality, and reverence for all life, and enter into a distinct relationship with others on a similar spiritual path, then consider becoming an Oblate of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. To learn more, visit ErieBenedictines.org or contact the co-directors: oblates@mtstbenedict.org or 814-899-0614.
As you read in Sister Anne’s reflections at the beginning of this issue or in her Christmas Appeal letter, the sisters did indeed celebrate Christmas this year in August when it was blazing hot!
The pictures that surround these pages testify to the fun we had when trying to keep Christmas this past summer. Fun yes, but it also made us think about the idea that the spirit of Christmas should be lived and celebrated all year.

Christmas is a time to mend broken relationships, hold out the olive branch of peace, offer hope to those who are in despair, and bring a sense of joy to all those we meet. High ideals indeed, but at Christmas many of these sentiments come to the fore and seem very natural. It’s like we can sustain this philosophy for a few days, but the entire year? — that’s another matter, particularly if we are trying to do this as individuals. However, as a community, we are inspired, supported, and confident that anything is possible.

Most of us experience Christmas as a time of warmth; time spent with family and friends; a time of good food and company, of gifts and celebration. But for many it is very hard—cold, bleak, lonely, and hopeless!

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Most of us experience Christmas as a time of warmth; time spent with family and friends; a time of good food and company, of gifts and celebration. But for many it is very hard—cold, bleak, lonely, and hopeless!
You will help this community continue to look for solutions and have the courage to speak out wherever there is injustice, poverty, and violence.

This is a small sample of the ministries that YOU make possible!

As Pope Francis said during his visit to this country, “Let us treat others with the same passion and compassion with which we want to be treated. Let us seek for others the same possibilities which we seek for ourselves. Let us help others to grow, as we would like to be helped ourselves.”

Apart from giving to our Christmas appeal, there are a number of ways that you can make a huge difference in the lives of those who need help.

You can become part of our pledge program and choose to make a gift monthly, quarterly, or semi-annually. Give up one $10 pizza and make a monthly pledge for that amount. An annual gift of $120 will go a long way in giving hope and help to those who have little.

You can remember the sisters in your will which is a wonderful way to have your philosophy and commitment to helping others live on for many years to come. If you are interested or have questions call Sister Mary Jane Vergotz, OSB, Development Director, at 814-899-0614, ext. 2409 or email her at smaryjane@mtstbenedict.org.

You can give the perfect gift this Christmas and throughout the year with an alternative gift to the sisters.

WAYS TO GIVE

Complete the form on the enclosed remittance envelope and return it to the Benedictine Sisters of Erie or give online at our secure website, ErieBenedictines.org. Click on “Donate Now.”

THANK YOU

Thanks for caring, thanks for providing the financial resources to build a world where all are valued, and thanks for being a crucial part of this community.

Wishing you a peace-filled Christmas,

Jo

P.S. Please don’t hesitate to contact us if you have any questions. You can reach me at 814-899-0614 ext. 2281, email joclarke@mtstbenedict.org, or call Patti Eichen, Development Staff, at ext. 2242, email peichen@mtstbenedict.org.

From all of us to all of you, THANK YOU!

Merry Christmas
Alternative Gift Giving
By Patti Eichen, Development Staff

Do you wonder how you can put meaning into your Christmas gift giving and use your time and money more wisely?

Maybe, Dr. Seuss said it just right in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

“What if Christmas doesn’t come from a store. What if Christmas...perhaps... means a little bit more!”

Be a part of our alternative gift giving program!

An alternative gift to the Benedictine Sisters of Erie in honor, celebration or in memory of a friend or loved one will help you to put more meaning back into your gift giving. Your gift will touch the lives of the sisters and those they serve daily through their ministry programs.

Why an alternative gift?

- It is meaningful!
- It impacts hundreds of people!
- It is appreciated by both the donor and recipient!
- It is easy!
- It is one size fits all!
- It eliminates gift wrapping!

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

*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.*

In the true meaning and spirit of Christmas, please consider an alternative gift to support the Benedictine Sisters of Erie.
Why do I give?

By Terrie Doboze, Oblate

I give out of gratitude for the angels who sent my near-death infant daughter back to me. I give because of the joy my daughter Theresa, now 35 years old, brings to me and my family.

I give because I know that not everyone is so fortunate, not all children get a second chance—many don’t even get a first chance. And I know the Benedictine Sisters and Oblates care about those children and have committed themselves to somehow, someway, making this world a better place for mothers and their children.

Theresa was critically ill at birth—she was only seven days old when the doctors told us treatment might have to stop. Our only hope was prayer. Three short days later a nurse put a little yellow shirt on her that said “Tiger.” There was no medical explanation for her recovery.

We were driving on a day near her third birthday when she asked me if she’d ever been in a tunnel. “Well,” I answered her a bit warily, “you might have been.” And then she told me that the tunnel she remembers was very light and filled with butterflies.

When we arrived at our destination, a retreat center that held very special memories for us, Theresa took off running calling me to follow, to “come see the butterfly, come see!”

I found myself standing speechless in front of a life-sized stone angel. I held my breath for a while and softly replied, “Yes, I see the butterfly.” We touched the statue as far up as she could reach and I picked her up so she could be close to the wings. I didn’t correct her; the angel was her butterfly and who was I to disagree?

I truly believe the butterflies that greeted my daughter in the tunnel were angels and the bright light was our God sending my Theresa back to me.

Now it’s my turn to give back.

SOAR Grant awarded to community

The spirit of Christmas was felt a little early for our elderly sisters residing in the healthcare living area of Mount St. Benedict Monastery.

Support Our Aging Religious (SOAR) awarded the Benedictine Sisters a grant to purchase new beds and mattresses that are more comfortable and also safer and easier to get in and out of.

“We are ever so grateful to SOAR for their support and generosity. This is truly a gift that will keep on giving for a very long time,” said Sister Anne Wambach, prioress.

SOAR, located in Washington, DC, raises funds and provides grants to help Catholic religious congregations in the United States care for their elderly and infirm members.
The Mount interviewed Sister Carolyn Gorny-Kopkowski on a new Monasteries of the Heart program for women in transition.

What is Listening Hearts?
Five years ago the Benedictine Sisters of Erie launched Monasteries of the Heart, an online movement sharing Benedictine values with contemporary seekers. Part of that effort is Listening Hearts, an experience for women in inner-city Erie who might benefit by incorporating Benedictine values into their lives. Listening Hearts resulted from a small grant given to Monasteries of the Heart to create and pilot a program for women struggling with issues of poverty or in recovery from addiction, or reclaiming their lives after prison or trauma. Basically, we are trying to see if an immersion in Benedictine spirituality can change these women’s lives.

How did you choose the women?
For the first three months we met with local social agencies and key people to share our dream, seek advice and ask them for referrals. We also gathered a Listening Circle, a small group of women advisors who were instrumental in recruiting for the information session and continue to support the program. Forty women attended the general information session in response to an invitation that read: “Do you desire a deeper life with God, a kinder life with others, a more loving sense of yourself?” Or, in the words of Benedict, do you seek God? At the end of that session, women were invited to apply to the program and those interested had individual interviews with either Sister Anne McCarthy or myself. After those interviews, we selected 15 women who we thought would benefit and had a serious commitment. These 15 women are now the Listening Hearts community.

How often do you meet?
For the first three months, we met every other week for three hours on a Saturday. Following the more intense interaction, we are meeting monthly for six consecutive months.

Give me an example of how you present two Benedictine values that matter to these women?
Since community is a Benedictine value we not only talk about it but we build community with prayer, a shared meal and small group discussions. We introduce the Benedictine way of reflection called lectio and then experience it in a multitude of ways: with scripture, art, writing. For sacred leisure, we held the session on the Benedictine sisters’ lakefront property and Sister Pat Lupo led us in a lectio with nature. To introduce the Benedictine value of Good Work we do small projects together. For example, we made banners to encourage the children at the Emmaus Kids Cafe.

Any story you’d like to share?
During one of the early sessions, the women each received a card with a message of encouragement written by women making a Monasteries of the Heart retreat in rural Pennsylvania. It gave them a sense of their connection to a broader movement. We provide childcare during our meetings and one woman’s four-year-old boy wanted to celebrate his birthday with us. So during one of the sessions we had a birthday party, with the boy’s older siblings joining us for cake and presents.

The women are sharing the impact Listening Hearts is having on their lives already: one talks about listening more deeply and responding to her young children. Another had the strength and support to...
testify against a man who robbed her at gunpoint, another felt supported when her mother-in-law in the Sudan died suddenly. One moved from a shelter to a tiny apartment with loud neighbors, but says she is grateful that this new space is better for her prayer and meditation.

**Any surprises so far?**
We are most surprised by the women’s level of commitment. All these women are dealing with serious issues so we expected uneven attendance and a high dropout rate. But that hasn’t happened. One woman called one hour before a session to say that she was headed to the emergency room because of an allergic reaction and wouldn’t make it. Then, two hours later, she showed up. She had received treatment and then came right to the program.

Another surprise is learning, at a deeper level, the challenges these women face on a day-to-day basis. One participant has been living in a shelter for over a year. In the midst of the noisy, crowded and often chaotic shelter, the program has been a beautiful haven for reflection. Others are struggling to re-unite with children or caring for sick parents while working more than full-time.

The bonds that are forming in the Listening Hearts community are encouraging. By the fifth session, when two members arrived late, the women clapped and cheered that they had made it.

**What are your hopes for this program?**

**Long and short term?**
Our short-term hope was that Benedictine spirituality could be a support to these women as they deal with their lives. And that is happening.

An emerging vision is that after these women complete the nine-month program, they stay together as a Monasteries of the Heart community. By the second session, we were already hearing from a number of the women that they wanted Listening Hearts to go on forever. When we bring together another group of women—the second Listening Hearts community—those who have already gone through the program could provide support and encouragement to those beginning a Benedictine way of life.

Another part of the vision is that this program could be refined and then replicated in other places, especially where we have committed Monasteries of the Heart members.

**Listen to my Heart Song**

**By Anne McCarthy, OSB**

Though I’ve given many retreats across the country, this one was definitely special. Sister Carolyn Gorny-Kopkowski and I were invited to give a Monasteries of the Heart retreat at the Ohio Reformatory for Women (ORW) in early October.

As staff members of Monasteries of the Heart, an online movement sharing Benedictine spirituality with contemporary seekers, Sister Carolyn and I knew that we had over a dozen fledgling monasteries in prisons around the country, but I’d never met with one face-to-face.

To prepare for this special day, I asked our online members of Monasteries of the Heart to send messages of friendship to the women in prison. When the 22 women who are members of Monasteries of the Heart ORW arrived for the retreat, Sister Carolyn and I began by reading greetings such as this:

“I pray, my sisters, that you can feel the loving prayers of your sisters in the world, and that by them you are strengthened in your walk. You are not alone, we are with you in spirit. You are loved, prayed for and hoped for,” Marian in Ontario, Canada wrote.
Marilyn at Luther Memorial Monasteries of the Heart, Erie, Pennsylvania, sent this, “When we met this past Tuesday we remembered you with open hearts—that your Monastery of the Heart journey provides a safe place for you as it does for us—to know you are not alone, to share your struggles with one another, to shine a light on your fears, to continue to be strong.”

Mary in California wrote, “I will light a candle and keep you in prayer through the day. Deepest blessings be upon you all.”

The reading of the messages was interspersed with readings from the *Rule of Benedict* and the refrain, “Listen, listen, listen to my heart song…I will never forget you, I will never forsake you…” Many of us were in tears.

It was a perfect way to start and made the women, who feel terribly alone, know that they are an integral part of the worldwide Monasteries of the Heart movement.

As we moved through the day, we heard from a number of women that Monasteries of the Heart is their safe place where they build trust and can share their fears, concerns, hopes and dreams.

At the center of the Monasteries of the Heart community is Alice, a lifer, who has invited many women to Monasteries of the Heart. They told us that she was the spiritual elder of their community. She and Sister Carolyn are now pen pals.

“To me, Alice is a ‘mystery’ and a ‘magnet.’ She gives full witness to the Gospel of Jesus! Her written word always reminds me of her welcoming physical presence. Whatever her past, Alice continues her transformation, and I am honored to receive her friendship,” said Sister Carolyn.

Following the morning retreat—our first annual community retreat with them—we spent the afternoon introducing Monasteries of the Heart to other prisoners who were interested. Close to 100 women attended the afternoon retreat.

This growing relationship between the women in prison at ORW and the Erie Benedictines was possible only because of oblate Jackie Burns, who after many years as a prison guard and then chaplain, now organizes and leads spiritual programs in the Ohio prison system. Monasteries of the Heart at ORW began when Jackie introduced it in 2012. The women meet twice a month for prayer, reflection, sharing and study. They have finished *The Monastery of the Heart* by Joan Chittister and are beginning a study of the Rule of Benedict using the video series by Sister Joan.

Jackie first invited us to ORW last January to facilitate a retreat on Joan Chittister’s book, *Scarred by Struggle Transformed by Hope* for 93 women. From that day, we were hooked. We began then making plans to return to ORW for a retreat with the Monasteries of the Heart community and to host a retreat at our monastery for women who were transitioning from prison.

The retreat at our monastery for ten women, recently released from the Ohio Reformatory for Women and the mentors and spiritual team who support them, took place in September.

Sister Mary Lou Kownacki, director of Monasteries of the Heart, expressed my hope: “What a hunger there is for a more meaningful life behind our prison bars. What potential there is for Monasteries of the Heart in prison settings.”
Inspired and Inspiring: Chittister Archives at PSU
A two-day event, “Sister Joan Chittister Symposium: Ancient Traditions, Contemporary Questions” marked the opening of her archival collection at Penn State University (PSU), University Park, PA, October 14-15. In addition to a reception and a photo exhibit, the symposium included four keynote addresses as well as four panel discussions on four of Sister Joan’s books.

“Who is God in the Evolutionary World?” was the topic of Sister Joan Chittister’s keynote address that concluded the symposium that was sponsored by The University Libraries’ Eberly Family Special Collections Library at PSU. The Special Collections library houses the Joan D. Chittister Archive in collaboration with Mercyhurst University in Erie and the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Pennsylvania.

NEW BOOKS

In God’s Holy Light
The Desert Monastics, thousands of monks and nuns who lived in the Egyptian wastelands between the third and fifth centuries, have come to be seen as the Olympians of the spiritual life. In God’s Holy Light: Wisdom from the Desert Monastics is a new publication in which Sister Joan explores the sayings of the Desert Mothers and Fathers, finding wisdom from that ancient tradition that can speak to one’s life today. In offering a selection for every week of the year it becomes a valuable companion for one’s spiritual journey.

Joan Chittister: Her Journey from Certainty to Faith
This intimate biography of Joan Chittister is beautifully written by prize-winning journalist and National Catholic Reporter editor-at-large Tom Roberts. “I love the stellar witness of this woman! A more faithful, authentic, sustained voice calling for full inclusion of women in the Catholic Church cannot be found. And what a fascinating bud-to-flower woman's life story lies within these pages. I read it deep into the night, long after good sense told me to go to sleep. That’s Chittister for you—waking us up and keeping us awake to the radical call of the Gospel.” — Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ, author of Dead Man Walking

Two Dogs and a Parrot
Sister Joan celebrates the deep bond between humans and animals in her new book, Two Dogs and a Parrot. The relationships we form with animals—with dogs, cats, horses, birds, rabbits, and other pets—are full of joys and rewards. Our companion animals draw us out of ourselves and show us what it truly means to be alive. They teach us to accept life’s struggles and to cherish its pleasures and the importance of being able to accept ourselves and respect others. They help us to find purpose and meaning in what we do, and to overcome challenges and setbacks.

SISTER JOAN CHITTISTER RECEIVES EDWARD C. DOLL COMMUNITY SERVICE AWARD
“Generosity is the attitude towards life that is the gift to the giver as well as the receiver... It is important that we know why we give not only what we give,” said Sister Joan in her keynote address at the Annual Meeting of the Erie Community Foundation (ECF) last June.

Sister Joan was presented with the Edward C. Doll Community Service Award given annually to someone whose volunteer experience and personal philanthropy mirrors the work of Edward Doll, in whose memory the honor was established after his death in 1991. Doll was an ECF trustee who also served as its president for 17 years.

(L-R) Michael Batchelor (Erie Community Foundation), Sisters Mary Lou Kownacki, Joan Chittister, Anne Wambach

Follow Sister Joan on her website, joanchittister.org, where you can sign up for her weekly email message, find her speaking schedule and review and purchase her newest publications.
“My heart is broken,” said Sister Mary Miller, Director of Emmaus Ministries, upon reaching Emmaus Soup Kitchen to find flames and smoke pouring from the rooftop and front of the building. “Who will feed our guests today?”

The day was Friday, September 25; the time 8:30 a.m. A fire was discovered at the site. It was brought under control in 45 minutes as a result of the quick-acting efforts of the Erie Fire Department.

Sister Lucia Marie Surmik, who resides with two other sisters on the second floor of the building, discovered the smoke and flames when she went downstairs to do laundry. She quickly alerted Sister Claire Marie Surmik, her sister, and both of them were able to get out of the building safely. “Lucia saved my life,” said Sister Claire, whose upper floor bedroom became involved in the fire. The other resident, Sister Karen Kosin, had already left for work at Second Harvest Food Bank and was not home when the fire was discovered.

Sisters, friends, neighbors, staff and volunteers came to the site as the news traveled and tears of sadness and disbelief flowed freely. “While this is most certainly a devastating moment for us,” said Sister Anne Wambach, prioress, “we are very grateful that all of the sisters are safe. We are likewise grateful that staff members, who had not yet arrived for their day’s work, were saved as well.”
The soup kitchen was founded in 1974. It serves 250 dinners Monday through Friday as well as lunch on Saturday. “This unexpected tragedy caused us to miss several beats, but the heart of Emmaus is still beating,” said Sister Mary. “I am overwhelmed by the kindesses that have been, and continue to be, extended to us and our guests. Words cannot begin to express our gratitude for the outpouring of concern and generous support we have received from local churches of all denominations, including the Diocese of Erie, and from other groups and individuals.”

The fire destroyed the two first-floor bathrooms, damaged part of the dining area, and caused extensive damage on the second floor. Thanks to a week of clean-up efforts staff and volunteers were able to resume their service to the city’s poor and hungry albeit in a smaller space but one that many of the guests call home on October 5. As a result of the fire, the soup kitchen will need extensive repairs. Determining the best direction in which to move as regards those repairs is still underway. The original dining space was able to accommodate 120 guests. With one-fourth of that area not available, guests standing outside will have a longer wait. “The onset of winter poses great concern,” said Sister Mary. “Just thinking about our guests waiting in below freezing temperatures worries me.”
Meeting Pope Francis and presenting him with a gift of the book, *Joan Chittister: Essential Writings*, was the highlight of my participation in a pilot Buddhist-Catholic “Dialogue and Fraternity Event” held June 22-27 at a retreat center in Castel Gondolfo, Italy.

The dialogue event was a collaboration between the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Focolare and the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID). The goal of the event, building on interreligious dialogue that began after Vatican II, was: “interreligious cooperation in order to address social ills, heal those who suffer from these ills, and reconcile divisions in society.” Buddhist and Catholic leaders from five large metropolitan areas in the United States (New York City, Washington, D.C, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco) who work in interreligious dialogue and/or social concerns were invited. I was invited as a board member of the U.S. Monastic Interreligious Dialogue and President of the International MID.

This first-of-its-kind meeting included presentations from Buddhist and Catholics on different aspects of alleviating suffering, shared times of prayer, and meetings in regional groupings to begin to shape actions. My presentation on the causes of suffering as seen through the teachings of Saints Mary Magdalene, Perpetua and Felicity, Macrina and Brigid of Kildare was a privileged moment for me and, I heard, was new information for a number of Catholics as well as the Buddhists.

I have been to a number of dialogues with MID and this one, with its focus on action, broke new ground. Interfaith action and work for justice together will be prophetic and powerful. For example, the Buddhist sanghas in the San Francisco area are exploring collaborating with Catholic Charities to address the housing crisis there.

Being invited to the Vatican to meet with Pope Francis was the strongest possible endorsement for this new ground in interreligious work. Originally scheduled for a general audience, we learned four days before our meeting that Pope Francis would meet with us privately. He gave a short, strong statement, which ended, “In this moment, which is wounded by wars and hatred, these small gestures are seeds of peace. I thank you for this, and may God bless you.”

He then greeted each person and received gifts. It was very moving to be able to thank Pope Francis for his work, and offer him the book, *Joan Chittister: Essential Writings*, edited by Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB and Mary Hembrow Snyder. It includes excerpts from Sister Joan’s books but also from her speeches and columns organized around the main themes of her life’s work. I explained to Pope Francis that Sister Joan is a woman full of the “joy of the gospel,” of passion for God and passion for women.

At the end of the greetings, Arati Tejuja, who heads Shambala Meditation Center’s vibrant youth outreach in Chicago, asked if she could give him a blessing. He agreed and accepted the shawl she placed on his shoulders. They bowed to each other. For me, it was a graced moment: an indication of how far we’ve come and also the potential for interfaith encounters taking us to a human place of mutuality which can be more difficult to reach working only in our own traditions.

The first joint interfaith action to come out of our dialogue event was synchronistic. A number of us marched together at the Climate March in Rome on Sunday, June 28. It was organized by Green Faith and 350.org to support Pope Francis’ Encyclical, *Laudato Si*’. We rallied at a plaza about a mile from the Vatican and then marched with huge banners, puppets, doves and thousands of large, green leaf-shaped posters with quotes from the new encyclical. We entered St. Peter’s Square as a sea of green posters just before Pope Francis’s Sunday noon Angelus message, chanting and singing. We were a mix of language groups, religious traditions, ages and cultures joined in celebration of this leading-edge encyclical and joined in commitment to our earth home. It was the first of hopefully many “small gestures” that are “seeds of peace.”
HAPPENINGS:

Inspiration

REALLY LIVE the Rest of your Life

Nearly 200 sisters and guests attended James Nagle’s one-person play, *Thomas Merton Alive at Fourth and Walnut*, presented last July in the monastery chapel as part of the community’s ongoing Enrichment Series. The play, written by Nagle, depicts the life and spiritual journey of Thomas Merton and its title refers to the corner of 4th and Walnut in Louisville, KY, where Merton came to a deep and full awareness that he loved all people and that none of them were, or, could be totally alien to him.

James Nagle is an actor, playwright, storyteller, and professional clown from Cleveland, OH. “He is a very special man in many ways,” said Sister Stephanie Schmidt, monastic formation director. “He is committed to using his gifts and helping people realize that they are unconditionally loved by God.”

Laudato Si’, Encyclical on the Environment: A Catalyst for Change

In September, as part of the Enrichment Series, Sister Dorothy Stoner coordinated the presentation of Pope Francis’ encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si’—On Care of Our Common Home*, to a full chapel.

Sister Dorothy, who holds an MA in Systematic Theology and a Masters of Divinity Degree, explained the encyclical’s relevance noting that, “this document is more complex than might be realized. But, it is beautiful in many ways. Throughout the encyclical there is a common theme of interconnectedness. We are called to gaze on the face of God in the face of others and all of creation.”

Following Sister Dorothy’s overview, Sister Katherine Horan offered a response from the perspective of the environmental community. Oblate Marco Monsalve, CEO of McManis and Monsalve Associates, then responded from the business and finance world perspective.

Annual Retreat

Sister Margaret Michaud, a Benedictine from St. Joseph, MN, directed the community’s annual retreat, exploring the Beatitudes as a succinct summary of Jesus’ essential teaching. “The heart of Matthew’s gospel message is both personal and deeply social,” said Sister Stephanie Schmidt, director of monastic formation. “The Beatitudes present a radical call to conversion and a journey into God’s reign of peace, justice, and mercy.”

Sister Margaret is currently on the staff of the Spirituality Center at Saint Benedict’s Monastery where her ministry includes retreats and presentations.
HAPPENINGS...

Women and the Church: Love Becoming Prophetic Voice

Elizabeth A. Dreyer, Professor Emerita of Religious Studies at Fairfield University, and adjunct professor at the Hartford Seminary, addressed sisters and oblates on, “Women and the Church: Love Becoming Prophetic Voice” at the community’s annual October weekend.

The community read and discussed Elizabeth’s book, Accidental Theologians, during Advent and Lent last year. “After reading about the history-changing effect that the theologies of the ‘accidental theologians’ – Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Sienna, Teresa of Avila and Thérèse of Lisieux – had on our Church and our world, I was really pleased to have the personal experience of Elizabeth,” said Sister Mary Ellen Plumb. “She is an excellent teacher and I believe she empowered us to continue to pursue the traditions, questions and conversations that will help us to live our faith with bold honesty.”

Panel on Religious Life

Sister Charlotte Anne Zalot was one of four religious featured in Mercyhurst University’s panel discussion: “Religious Life: Crossroads or Crisis,” held in observance of the Year of Consecrated Life designated by Pope Francis. In speaking of her vocation she explained the “pings” she has felt throughout life, that innate knowing what decision to make in a particular circumstance. Listening to those pings, the movement of the spirit, made her the woman she is today: a Benedictine sister, an accomplished musician with a doctorate in Liturgical Studies, an adjunct professor at Gannon University and the Director of Communications for the Erie Benedictines. The other three panelists, Sister Anne Curtis, RSM, Rev. Daniel P. Horan, OFM, and Brother Anthony Weber, OCSO, also shared their vocation stories.

The September 24 event was sponsored by Mercyhurst’s William C. Sennett Institute for Mercy and Catholic Studies and Office of Mission Integration under the direction of oblate Dr. Mary Hembrow Snyder, the Endowed Chair in Mercy & Catholic Studies.

The Impact of Trauma on Students

“What works for students who have not been traumatized does not work for traumatized students, and that is what I want to help you understand and learn to implement in your classrooms,” said Sister Ann Muczynski to teachers, staff and administrators of the Erie School District. In an effort to help students deal with trauma by working to make schools safe havens, Sister Ann presented a workshop, Understanding the Impact that Trauma has on Students and their Learning, as part of the district’s summer institute.

Sister Ann, a licensed clinical social worker, is also a Trauma and Loss Consultant and Specialist. Before taking on her present position in behavioral health at the Erie Veterans Affairs Medical Center, she worked primarily with children and adult victims of sexual abuse and/or domestic violence. She now works solely with veterans suffering from PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome) and/or MST (Military Sexual Trauma).
First-hand Experience of Pope Francis

With Pope-passes in hand, Sisters Katherine Horan (left) and Ann Hoffman headed to Philadelphia to see Pope Francis during his recent visit to the United States. Sisters Christine Kosin and Dorothy Stoner joined them on the trip.

"I was so excited to be able to make this trip," said Sister Katherine. "We were fortunate to have passes for two events: the Festival of Families and the Papal Mass. Sister Ann said, "I was able to get close enough to get a fairly decent photo of the Pope. It was a thrill and a blessing to see this Pope who is modeling the life that he is challenging us to live—a life of service to the poor and oppressed, of simplicity, humility, of respect for all people."

Internship is life-changing experience for Princeton graduate student

Jacqueline Small, a Master of Divinity student at Princeton Theological Seminary, chose to spend her summer in a monastery—interning with Sister Joan Chittister at Benetvision and sharing life with the Benedictine Sisters of Erie.

As she prepared to return to Princeton, Jacqueline shared, "It has been a treat to work at Benetvision and Monasteries of the Heart — I’ve enjoyed my tasks but it’s the women I’ve worked with who have made each day truly special. The same goes for my time at the monastery; I have been truly amazed by how much kindness has been shown to me, and how quickly the sisters made me feel at home. I’ve learned so much this summer, about the practicalities of how ministries operate, about Benedictine values, and about what healthy communities look and feel like. I’m grateful to each sister who has taken the time to talk with me, and I’m certain that what I’ve experienced here will influence me for a long time to come."
HAPPENINGS...

**On the Move**

Benedictines for Peace (BFP) hosted “On the Move” in September—an event that brought groups of adults and children from the north, south, east and west, playing instruments, carrying signs and chanting as they marched, to converge on Griswold Plaza in downtown Erie. Climate change, non-violence, environmental safety, public health and peace were emphasized in the presentations that followed the marches. “It was a powerful, beautiful testimony to the vision of active nonviolence,” said Janice Etchison, oblate and member of the BFP planning group.

Kathleen Kutz, BFP member and another of the organizers, shared, “Such abundant energy, joy, diversity – it was wonderful! To witness the people of our city and region come together to make a statement by their very presence gives me great hope that we can make a difference, that we can end violence and injustice. We must continue to be ‘on the move’ to repair our common home.”

On the Move was the second annual event held in conjunction with Pace e Bene’s Campaign Nonviolence, a new, long-term movement to mainstream nonviolence and to foster a culture of peace free from war, poverty, climate crisis, and the epidemic of violence.

**Medea Benjamin at the Mount**

Medea Benjamin, a social justice advocate for more than 30 years, was the featured speaker in the Benedictines for Peace annual series last October. She shared her ideas on how diplomacy works by speaking to the Iran nuclear deal and new opportunities for resolving conflicts nonviolently.

“Medea’s vast knowledge of conflict situations in the world is amazing,” said BFP member Sister Marlene Bertke. “She has endured so much and yet has stayed open to all peoples. She has no room for enemies. Her presentation made negotiation instead of war look possible, even in Syria.”

Medea, also one of the nation’s most prominent antiwar activists, co-founded the women’s-led grassroots activist group, Code Pink, that works to end U.S. wars and militarism, support peace and human rights initiatives, and redirect tax dollars into healthcare, education, green jobs and other life-affirming programs.
“We’ll always come to thee again, when Alma Mater calls”

Reunions
Two classes, 1955 and 1960, met this past summer for their reunions. Both groups had well-attended celebrations with classmates that were great fun. These two classes are faithful to a five-year reunion schedule and have stayed united through thick and thin for over 50 years. Such relationships are to be valued and admired.

Carolyn Peters McLean ’60 wrote a letter expressing her classmates’ thanks to Sister Pat McGreevy and the Benedictine community for their help in arranging for Glinodo Center to be the site of their Reunion. At the suggestion of Joyce Motty, one of her classmates, the class make a donation to the Benedictine Sisters as a Memoriam for their deceased class members. According to Carolyn, “Everyone thoroughly enjoyed the day, and we were blessed by the weather.” In the future, they have decided to use the Spring Weekend or the Christmas Party for their gatherings. So glad to hear they plan to stay in touch.

The SBA Class of 1961 will celebrate their 55-year reunion at the 2016 Alumnae Spring Luncheon:
Saturday, May 21, 2016
Ambassador Conference Center
Mark your calendar for this special event!
For more Information:
Judy Allison at 814-838-4938

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. We’ll send you an updated class list from our database and a set of mailing labels. 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). Classes who are planning reunions are eligible to receive a $35 check to help defray mailing costs. We ask 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.

Please contact Ann Comstock. Call 814-899-0614 ext. 2573 or contact by email: sbaalum@mtstbenedict.org

“SPIRIT OF SBA” IS ALIVE AND WELL.

Let us pray...
For our SBA alumnae who passed into eternity—
Constance Lipinski Sulecki ............... ’51
Joan Dolores Alamenciak Jersey ......’52
Therese Toflinski Walter ................. ’56
Rosemarie Bieniasz Mannarelli ........’59
Bernice T. Traphagen .................. ’60
Mary Jo Longo Motty .................’61
Susan K Granetto ......................’67
Margaret Riazi Kightlinger

“Spirit of SBA” is alive and well.
AN SBA Christmas

I was happy to hear that this year’s December The Mount magazine would highlight “the lived spirit of Christmas.” I say this because Christmas is a very special time for the Saint Benedict Academy Alumnae Association for so many reasons.

A goal of our Association is to promote and maintain the bond of our members. What are those bonds? The obvious one is our attendance at SBA. The not so obvious bond is the shared relationship of being a graduate of SBA. There is just something special about that. People often say to me, “I don’t get it. Why do you girls stick together the way you do? Why do you go all out at Christmas time when you don’t even have a school anymore? What’s the secret?”

Maybe the secret is our shared experiences at SBA, the fun we had, the education we received, or maybe it’s our shared Benedictine values. Perhaps it’s our joy in getting together and remembering, catching up, laughing together and partying together. It’s our sense of family. We are family when it comes to SBA. We might be the older sister or the youngest, it doesn’t matter. We are family and families stick together and celebrate together, especially at Christmas.

The Alumnae Association supports the ministries of the Benedictine Sisters. SBA was once a ministry of the sisters. We were educated by the Benedictines and schooled in Benedictine values. We see those values represented today in the Neighborhood Art House, Sister Gus’ Kids Cafe, Emmanuel Ministries, Saint Benedict Education Center, Saint Benedict Child Development Center, and the Saint Benedict Community Center. They exist today in the same geographic area where we once went to school. We have seen the values we were taught come to fruition in these ministries and we support them in any way we can.

Christmas and its celebration at our annual Christmas Party is central to renewing the bonds of our members and supporting the ministries of the Benedictine Sisters.

Every year close to 450 of us gather to celebrate the beginning of the Christmas season and each other at a huge Christmas Party. Each year we sponsor one of the ministries of the Benedictine Sisters, consistently raising over $6,000 for that ministry. Hours and hours are spent planning the event. Large groups of alumnae volunteer each year to put this party together. It’s a great big wonderful party! It is our SBA’s wonderful Christmas tradition. We miss those family members who cannot be with us but we know they celebrate with us in spirit.

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@mtsbenedict.org to receive electronic reminders and sign-ups. If you don’t use email, write to Ann at Mount Saint 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.
A new tradition has begun – the SBA Alumnae Association Spring Weekend celebration appears to be catching on with our members.

For the past few years the Alumnae Association has hosted a special celebration during the first weekend in June. The celebration begins on Saturday with a luncheon and marketplace gathering at the Ambassador Conference Center in Erie. A select group of 10 to 15 vendors are invited and alums have two hours to shop prior to lunch. It has been quite successful – for the vendors and the alums doing the buying.

At the luncheon the winners of the annual Alumnae Scholarships for Catholic Education are chosen. Twenty scholarships of $250 (totaling $5,000) are awarded to relatives of alumnae members who will be attending Catholic schools (grades K - 12) the following year.

In the past, tours of the old Academies on 9th and 10th streets have allowed alumnae members to visit and remember days spent at their school.

The celebration continues on Sunday with Liturgy at Mount St. Benedict Monastery. A social gathering following liturgy invites alumnae members and sisters to reconnect and to remember the good times spent at SBA.

Several classes have begun to use this Spring Weekend as part of their class reunions. Classes planning future reunions might want to consider this. It’s a nice way to get together, have fun, and do some serious shopping!

A SAMPLING OF VENDORS
Light has broken through the darkness.  
Joy has come to the world.  
Let us rejoice and be glad!

The Benedictine Sisters of Erie celebrate the miracle of Christmas  
in the gifts of support, friendship and care that you so generously extend to us.

You will be remembered at our Christmas Liturgy:  
Christmas Eve at 8:30 p.m.  
Christmas Day at 9:30 a.m.  
We invite you to join us.

May you and your loved ones know grace-filled blessings  
throughout this holy season and in the new year.